

# New exhibition at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery opens in December



A remarkable photographic project which documents five years in the lives of the inhabitants of Ponte City, an iconic Johannesburg landmark and the tallest residential skyscraper in Africa, will have its only UK showing at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery this winter. *Ponte City* will feature the work of South African photographer Mikhael Subotzky and British artist Patrick Waterhouse, who collaborated to document the building in Johannesburg, South Africa from 2007 to 2012.

Rising 54 storeys high, Ponte City has dominated the Johannesburg skyline since 1975. It originally offered luxurious living to the wealthy white elite, but with the end of apartheid in the 1990s the building became a refuge for black newcomers from the townships and rural areas, and then immigrants from elsewhere in Africa. Ponte City entered into a period of decline; by the turn of the century it had come to symbolise urban decay and was perceived as the epicentre of crime, prostitution and drug dealing in Johannesburg. There were even plans to turn the building into a high-rise prison, until promoters bought Ponte City in 2007 and started a large scale refurbishment project for which they evicted half of the residents and gutted the empty apartments. It was during this time that Subotzky and Waterhouse began working at Ponte City, with the aim of putting together a visual “before and after” of the building. The collapse of the real estate market in 2008 put a brutal end to the renovation plans however, and the building was left in a semi-destructed state with tenants,

those who had not yet been evicted or were simply squatting, still occupying flats in the block.

Subotzky and Waterhouse continued their project to record the rise and fall of what had served as a symbol of prosperity; they interviewed the remaining tenants and recorded the half-occupied building through a series of photographs, capturing the stark contrast between the original plans and the now half-derelict structure. Striking photographs show the cylindrical building's central atrium, originally intended to allow light to enter its 500 flats from both sides, now turned into a rubbish dump by the contractors. Debris from the short-lived renovation work reaches the fifth storey and fills the space where architects had planned to build an indoor ski slope, blocking access to the bottom floors that originally offered self-sufficient living with services such as a chemist, a shopping centre and an art gallery.

Over the next five years Subotzky and Waterhouse returned repeatedly to document Ponte City. They photographed every door in the multi-level structure, the view from every window and the tenants of the half-occupied block. When they knocked on doors to ask permission to do this work, people often invited them into the flats where they were watching television, leading the artists to photograph the television screens.

Through their typologies of doors, windows, and TVs, the artists created new structures of narrative and representation for this landmark building. They also recorded the intimate lives of the many tenants through a series of remarkable portraits: a woman photographed in a lift, which often served as a make-shift studio, or a young girl on tiptoes in her kitchen all show moments from everyday life at Ponte. The photographic series will be displayed in an immersive installation of prints, many of which will be unglazed and pinned to the wall, arranged in sections that will explore the architecture of the building, the inhabitants and the personal

stories of recent immigrants.

The photographs will be complemented by archival documents, such as newspaper clippings and architectural sketches, which will be shown alongside items left behind by the evicted tenants. From haircombs and mixtapes to personal mail and family snapshots these objects will offer another dimension to this compelling documentary project.

Christopher Baker, Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, commented: *"This remarkable exhibition features images of great drama and poignancy which depict a single, monumental building and its inhabitants in order to ingeniously document recent events in South Africa. It illustrates our ambition to showcase the finest and most challenging of international photography in Edinburgh."*

The exhibition is accompanied by the Steidl publication, *Ponte City*, which is nominated for a Paris Photo-Aperture Foundation Photobook Award 2014.

The exhibition was co-produced by LE BAL, in Paris and Foto Museum, in Antwerpen.

*Ponte City: Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse* is part of IPS (Institute for Photography in Scotland) Season of Photography: a series of lively exhibitions and events taking place across Scotland from April to September 2015.

## **PONTE CITY: MIKHAEL SUBOTZKY AND PATRICK WATERHOUSE**

6 December 2014 – 26 April 2015

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

1 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JD

Admission free | 0131 624 6200

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