

Photography from Johannesburg at the Portrait Gallery



Two people who clearly like being behind the lens rather than in front of it, UK artist Patrick Waterhouse and photographer Mikhael Subotzky were remarkably reticent about their photographic exhibition just opening today at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

This is a huge piece of work, during which they say they took over 10,000 photographs. The subject itself is described by the (quite tall) Subotzky as a very tall building. It is Ponte City a skyscraper in Johannesburg which is the tallest residential building in Africa.

The exhibition was staged first of all at Ponte itself, then Paris and Antwerp. The exhibition has only this week been shortlisted for the Deutsche Borse Photography Prize 2015.

The photographers said: "The whole history of the building tells the story of Johannesburg. The ups and downs of the building kind of mirror what has happened there during the five years it took to take all the photographs.

Asked whether they had made friendships with the people who live in the building, they were ambivalent: "Some people we made friends with and some were people who were passing through."

"Our photography changed with the way we worked. We used different kinds of materials throughout the project and also made use of archives.

[The Edinburgh Reporter NEWS Ponte City](#) from [Phyllis Stephen](#) on [Vimeo](#).

There was a big redevelopment in 2007 and a lot of people were moved out in a hurry, leaving their photos behind them, a real archive and treasure trove for the photographers to work with.

Patrick could not pick one photograph which he favoured over others, but he did go on to mention the photos of each and every door and out of every single window in the building. You can see in one of the books which accompanies the free to enter exhibition that they created a schematic of the building and then they would tick off each window as they managed to get into each apartment and take the shot.

The former luxury apartment block became a refuge for black newcomers from the townships with the end of Apartheid. By the time the new owner bought in 2007 they evicted many residents and began refurbishing the building. This stopped with the global recession in 2008, but it was around this time that the two photographers began their work there trying to photograph a before and after scene. The building became half-derelict and the central atrium became a rubbish dump for building debris, where the waste now reaches the fifth storey. Eventually the photos they took have become a documentary record of the everyday life which is being lived there.

They took photos on film and digital media out of every single window in the towering 54 storey structure.

This is the only showing of the exhibition in the UK and it will run until 26 April 2015.

Subotzky is South African with works in MOMA New York and the Victoria and Albert.

Waterhouse is English. He works in different media and edits the magazine, Colors.

