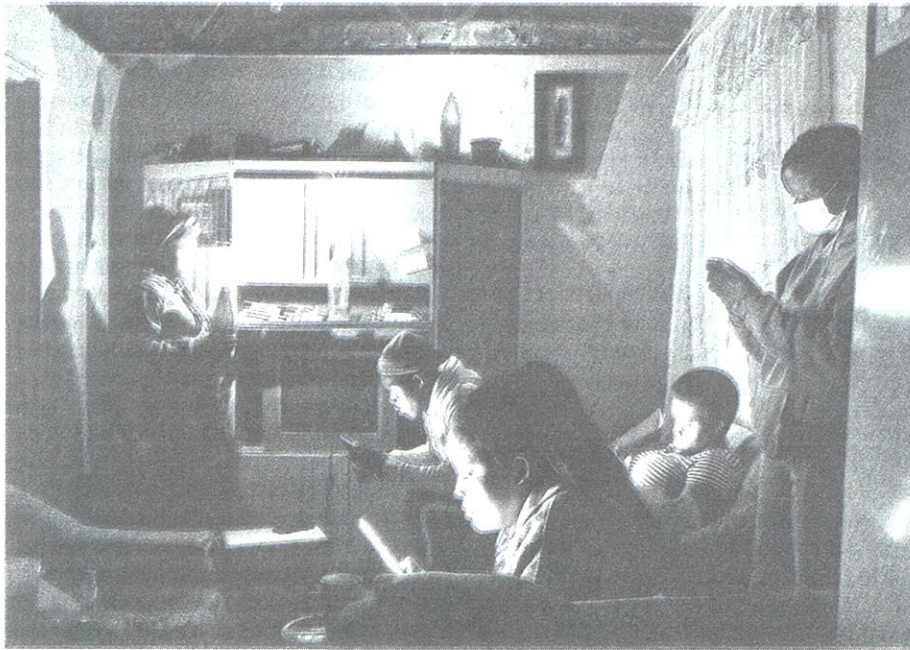


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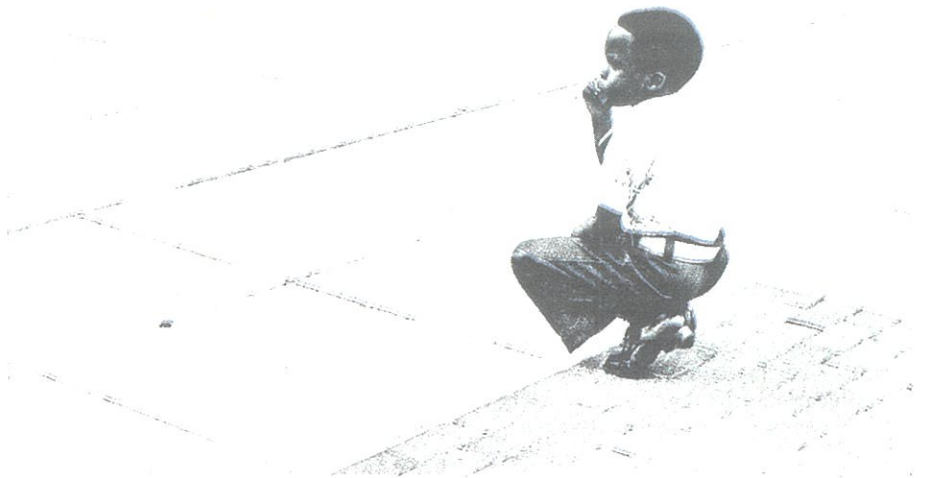
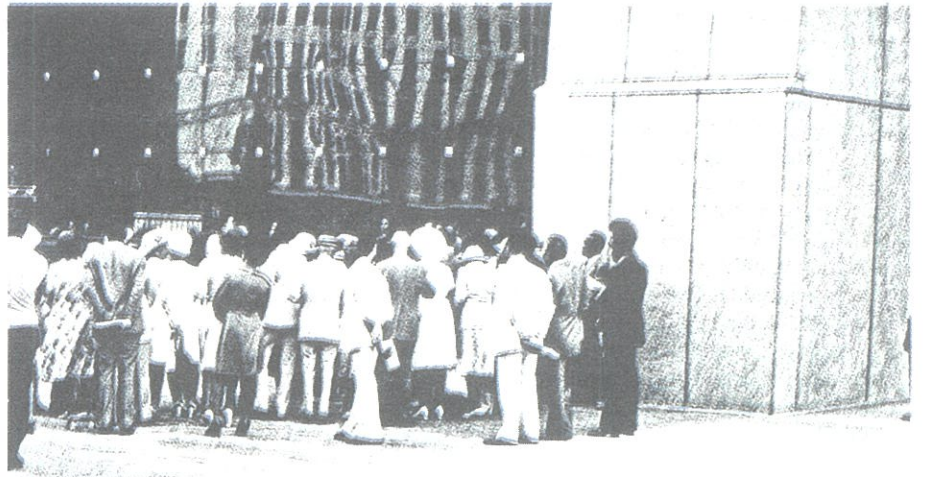
CONVERSATIONS



'Meadowlands Dance Group', 1992. Picture: RUTH MOTAU



'Death of George Floyd', 2020. Picture: LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA, GOODMAN GALLERY



'What's it All About?' New York City, 1976. Picture: MING SMITH, GOODMAN GALLERY

'Ungidi Kwa Masango', 2015. Picture: LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA

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ACROSS GENERATIONS

Parallels between South Africa and the US are captured in 'Against the Grain', a new exhibition of photographs by four South Africans and one American at the Goodman Gallery, writes Tymon Smith

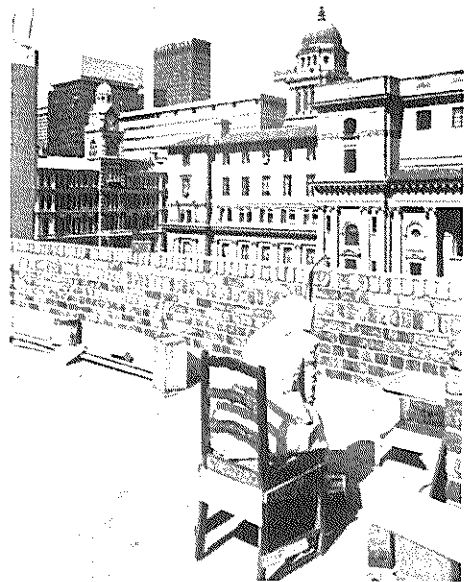


'Makhulu ehlakula egadini', 2018. Picture: LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA

The Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg's new exhibition of photographs by Ernest Cole, David Goldblatt, Ruth Motau, Lindokuhle Sobekwa and Ming Smith is aptly titled *Against the Grain*. Each photographer – four South African and one American – has in their distinctive way worked in opposition to the conventions and often wrong-headed official narratives of their time and place.

Cole famously changed his name and racial classification under apartheid law to capture the devastating images of the reality of black life, which he smuggled into exile and published as the seminal essay *House of Bondage*, which helped open the eyes of the world to the injustices of apartheid. Goldblatt chose to turn his lens not on the tumultuous political events but on the "quiet and commonplace where nothing 'happened' and yet all was contained and imminent", as he said in his final interview before his death in 2018.

Motau began her career during the turbulent transition years of the 1990s when the "Bang Bang Club" was grabbing headlines with pictures from the front lines. She instead focused on the ordinary lives and quiet power of black women, from hostel dwellers to her mother. Sobekwa, who is a member of Magnum Photo and has just won the inaugural John Kobal Foundation Award, has firmly established himself as a voice of the new generation of South African photographers. His work has been recognised for its empathetic linking of his personal

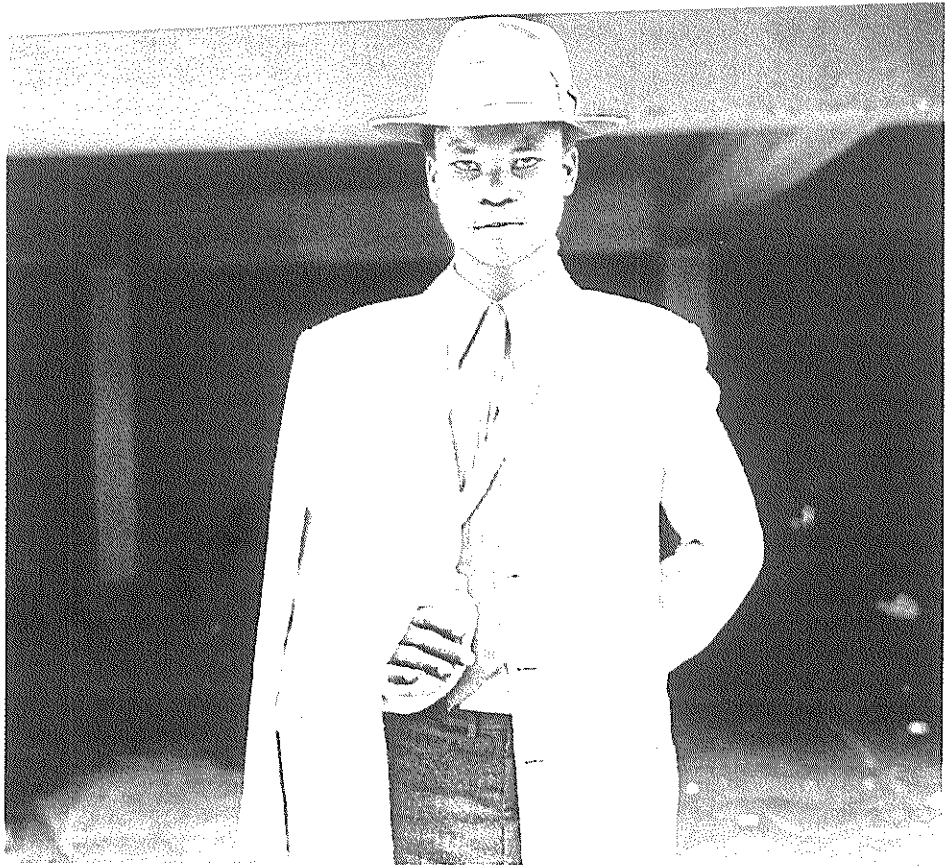


'Rooftop servants' quarters Alpheun house, with City Hall and GPO Rissik Street, Johannesburg'. 1984. Picture: DAVID GOLDBLATT

stories of family and community members' struggles in post-apartheid South Africa with broader questions about the failed promises of the democratic era.

Finally, the show includes work by the American Smith, the first female member of the Kamoinge Workshop whose decades-long project of photographing black life from a black perspective has been acknowledged with a show at MOMA in New York that opened this month.

The exhibition presents the work of the



'Man with an injured arm, Hillbrow', June 1972. Picture: DAVID GOLDBLATT, THE GOODMAN GALLERY



Untitled, (from 'House of Bondage'), 1960. Picture: ERNEST COLE, GOODMAN GALLERY

four South African photographers separately but also in conversation across generations to highlight many social ills that have persisted. It reflects on new challenges faced in the democratic era while still finding space to pay tribute to the resilience and determination of ordinary people living their lives under sometimes difficult circumstances.

You can see the influence of the pioneering work of veterans Cole and Goldblatt in the subject and aesthetic of the younger Motau and Sobekwa's output and still appreciate the style and focus that make it distinctive. The juxtaposition of Cole and Goldblatt's works also creates a space for a new consideration of their work as part of a conversation that the two never had in life but which continues, and reflects on the conditions of sections of society they found themselves drawn to in different times. Motau and Sobekwa's work, while not so evidently linked by theme or focus, still shares a deeply personal, empathetic and non-judgmental approach to the capturing of small moments that take on broader significance.

Motau's decades-long portraiture of her mother says a lot about her difficulties and triumphs as a woman living in the particular environment of South Africa and the relationship between photographer and subject/mother and daughter, prompted by little else than the way she appears in the frames.

Similarly, Sobekwa's picture of a black family staring at their phones in their small home during lockdown says everything about the transnational struggles of black people interconnected in the digital age by means of a simple caption that informs the viewer that what they are doing is following the news of the death of George Floyd at the hands of US police in May 2020.

Smith's picture of a boy squatting in thought while watching a crowd of people during the celebration in New York of the US bicentennial in 1976 is simply titled *What's it All About?* That's a question that reflects not only the possible inner thoughts of its subject but the bigger consideration of where and how black Americans thought of themselves and their place in society during a celebration that meant little to them in terms of real changes to their lives or opportunities.

By highlighting each of these different but sometimes similarly preoccupied photographers' work, *Against the Grain* offers a nuanced and compelling reconsideration of how each, in their own ways and in different times and social situations, has worked against overarching social narratives to throw out urgent questions that still often remain depressingly unresolved.

'Against the Grain' is at Goodman Gallery Johannesburg until April 15. For more information visit goodman-gallery.com