Defiant images: photography and apartheid South Africa


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Abstract

This monograph is the first book-length historical study of photography in apartheid South Africa and a significant contribution to research on documentary photography in the twentieth century. The chapter on Ernest Cole is the first major account of the life and work of one of Africa’s most important photographers. Other chapters contribute to an understanding of the photographers Constance Stuart Larrabee and Leon Levison, the Drum magazine school of photography and the struggle photography of the 1980s. It is the outcome of substantial primary research, including interviews with photographers, editors and curators, and analysis of photographs held in collections and displayed in museums. A foreword to the book is provided by Albie Sachs, a lawyer and political activist during the apartheid period and a Judge in the Constitutional Court of South Africa (1994-2009). The research was supported by two grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (small grant 2003/4; research leave 2006/07). This research has led to invited presentations at a number of institutions and conferences, including: Jacobs University, Bremen, April 2009; Interpretations of African Images and Beauty, Museum of London Docklands, April 2009; Durham Centre for Advanced Photography Studies, Durham University, September 2009; Centre for the Study of Post-Conflict Cultures, University of Nottingham, March 2010; Photography: Medium and Method, Lancaster University, June 2010; Bonani Africa Festival and Conference, Cape Town, August 2010; Pitt-Rivers Museum University of Oxford, October 2010. The book has been reviewed in Aperture, De Arte, H-Afrarts, History of Photography, International Journal of Communication, Journal of African Media Studies, Journalism Practice, South African Historical Journal, Times Higher Education, Visual Anthropology, Visual Studies.

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South African photography existed within a complex network of international social and often restricted the images that could be shown. Photography provided an eloquent medium with which to portray the social and cultural landscape of urban black South Africa. It set the context in which photographers worked.

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observational power and moments of arresting drama – a 15-year-old boy staring straight into the camera, both arms encased in plaster following his arrest and detention by security forces – add up to an extended portrait of a place and a time. Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa. Foreword by ALbie Sachs. Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press, 2009. xxiii + 345 pp. $37.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86888-523-7. Reviewed by Pamela Allara Published on HAfrArts (September, 2012) Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti. Coding Iconic Images: Apartheid-Era Photography. Defiant Images is meticulously researched and provides the reader with a historical overview of South African documentary photography that argues for a consistent humanistic core that over time permitted a South African voice to emerge, while a foreign audience was made aware of the multiple, daily oppressions of the apartheid regime.