

FRAME OF REFERENCE

James Bainbridge takes a snapshot of the African photography market and gathers advice for new investors

Rabble-rousing conceptual artist Willem Boshoff may have caused controversy in the South African Pavilion

at this year's Venice Biennale, but the work of photographer Jo Ractliffe was equally interesting. Exploring her usual themes of history, memory, erasure and dispossession, the Wits lecturer's gelatin silver prints and panels offered a view of the Northern Cape towns of Pomfret, Schmidtsdrift and Riemvasmaak, which experienced upheaval during the forced removals of apartheid. They were also used for weapons testing and, later, for resettling Border War soldiers. The recent restitution of property to the original inhabitants has raised complex issues around land, home and belonging – all classic Ractliffe territory.

Plumbing the past for potent images, Ractliffe's work represents just a single strand in the tapestry of contemporary African photography. There are inventive young practitioners, such as Kenya's Cyrus Kabiru, who capture the essence of life on the African streets and create visions of the continent's future. He is labelled an 'Afro-futurist' – a term also applied to South African artists such as musician Spoek Mathambo – for the shots of his sculptural 'C-Stunner' spectacles. Wearing these unwieldy glasses, constructed out of found objects and recycled material from the pavements of Nairobi, the 32-year-old artist presents various views of life in Africa.

Also on gallery walls are the more traditional, but no less powerful, social documentarians whose work covers the hardships and hope of day-to-day life throughout the continent. South African photographers such as Zanele Muholi, Pieter Hugo and Mikhael Subotzky all perpetuate the country's reputation for world-class photographic records, which was established by the likes of David Goldblatt, the late Ernest Cole and the Bang Bang Club.

'Goldblatt and Cole began shooting film to document what they saw around

them, but the standard of their imagery was so beyond what was comprehended as photography's ability that their work became elevated and is still considered of great value today,' says Matthew Krouse of the Goodman Gallery, which represents Goldblatt and Subotzky, as well as Hasan and Husain Essop. 'In fact, vintage prints by these masters are highly desirable – now rare and valuable as artworks themselves.'

Another trend visible in contemporary photography is the artist's incorporation of performance art and other performative practices, which are both strong elements of African culture and have even had an influence on documentary photography. 'There are so many facets to photography – such as nature, wildlife and conservation photography; documentary photography, film stills; abstract photography – which each have their rightful place within the medium as a whole,' says Sophie-Louise Fröhlich, head of auction house Stephan Welz & Co's photography department.

With African camera shutters achieving such breadth of expression, recognition has followed and the continent's many photographers are collected worldwide. Ractliffe currently has a solo show at New York's The Metropolitan Museum of Art, while Egypt's Basim Magdy and Angola's Edson Chagas feature in the 'Ocean of Images' exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Subotzky and the UK's Patrick Waterhouse jointly won this year's Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for their 'Ponte City' project, depicting life in the decaying 54-floor apartment block in Johannesburg. Muholi and Kabiru, on the other hand, are featured in the Zeitz Collection, due to fill the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) when it opens its doors at Cape Town's V&A Waterfront in 2017.

Despite such accolades, Joost Bosland of Stevenson gallery – which represents Ractliffe, Muholi, Hugo and Chagas, and exhibits at the Paris Photo fair – claims, 'The present moment is no more or less exciting than the past 60 years. After all, photography has a long and incredible history in our region, from the mid-20th century West African studio photography to David Goldblatt and his legacy locally.'



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Equally, while local photographers built a strong reputation for reportage during and after apartheid, Bosland says that the perception of photography as a fine-art medium goes back decades. 'It has long been on par with other artistic forms of expression – MoMA established its photography department in the 1940s.'

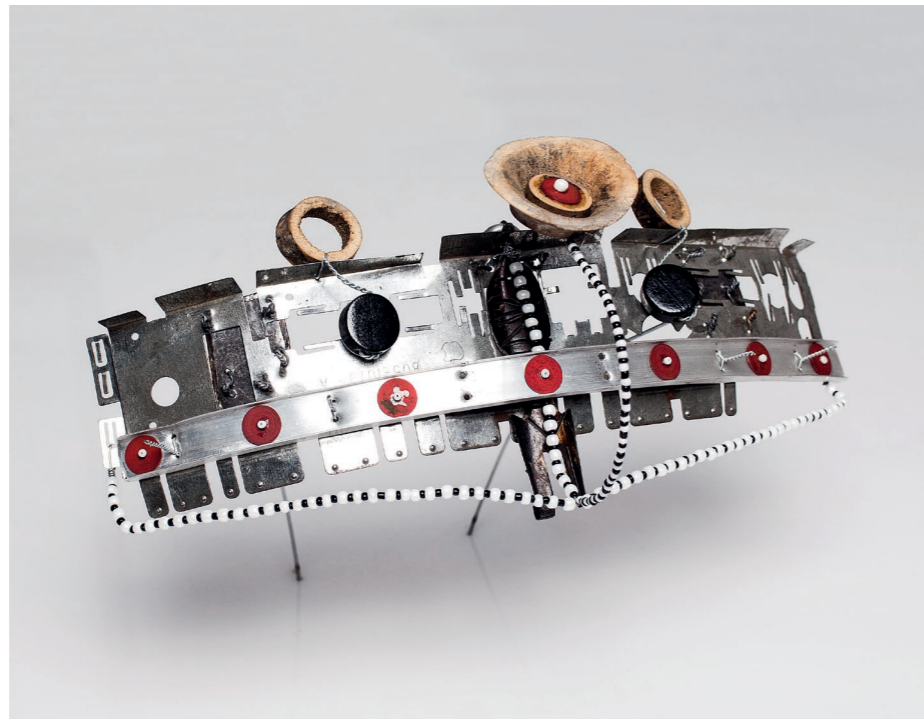
Baylon Sandri of SMAC Gallery, which represents Kabiru, as well as the Beninese photographer Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou, agrees that African photography has been exciting collectors for years. The likes of Goldblatt, Hugo, Santu Mofokeng and Zwelethu Mthethwa gained international recognition for their photographic work in the mid-2000s when the medium was de rigueur and Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky were superstars in North America and Europe.

Sandri explains, 'There was also a general re-emergence of and new appreciation for historical photographers from the African studio tradition, such as Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta and this new-found interest and validation laid the foundations for the next generation of African photographers.' He says that photography is, in fact, just one of the media benefiting from this current global interest in contemporary African art.

John Fleetwood, the head of the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg, traces the medium's popularity back 25 years, saying it had to cast off the uncomfortable issues of identity and observation.

'Colonial powers invaded the continent and then started to "see" on behalf of the Africans, which is intrinsically problematic.' This issue of the Western gaze continued into the '80s, with its many images of war and famine. However, now, at long last, young photographers from Mozambique to Senegal use their art to take ownership and authorship of Africa's representation.

Certainly, photography as an art form could have been tailor-made for Africa – both philosophically and practically, as Goodman Gallery's Krouse argues. 'It's the ideal medium for exploring the great diversity of the African experience; especially in South Africa, where our society is multifaceted, highly stratified and people still have misgivings about



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one another. Photography can explain things without being overly didactic.'

A more prosaic, but equally important, factor is the medium's portability and low financial barrier to entry, especially with the advent of digital photography. No studio is required, and people from all walks of life can record their unique perceptions of the diverse worlds that they inhabit. 'Anyone who can afford a camera can instantly turn themselves into a photographer, whereas paint and canvas, over time, will cost a lot more, and learning how to paint takes years,' says Stevenson's Bosland.

For investors, photography presents many challenges and rewards – some of which are individual to the medium, while others overlap with art collecting in general. As with any prints, smaller editions and lower numbers are prized. However, Heidi Erdmann of the Erdmann Contemporary gallery in Cape Town says, one print of 10 isn't necessarily a good buy. 'Edition size is

important, but it can't save an ill-conceived idea, printed badly – the key to a good photograph,' she says, 'is the paper it's printed on and the process employed.'

The globalisation of the South African art market has ensured consistently high standards. However, equally, unscrupulous operators have exploited the manipulative aspect of digital photography. One way of avoiding pitfalls is by collecting through reputable galleries, which can also point out works by mid-career artists – these are ideal investments, offering a balance of track record and growth potential.

Discovering a future star at the start of their ascendancy may be tempting, but Fleetwood of the Market Photo Workshop warns that young artists change their style as they develop. As a general rule, look for photographers with representation and consistency in their editions and general output – and learn the difference between the aesthetically pleasing shots by hobby photographers and fine artists. Qualities



PHOTOGRAPHY © THE ARTISTS. IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE: JO RACTLIFF, PIETER HUGO (STEVENSON GALLERY, CAPE TOWN/JOHANNESBURG), MIKHAEL SUBOTZKY AND PATRICK WATERHOUSE, CYRUS KABIRU, LEONCE RAPHAEL AGBODJÉLOU (SMAC GALLERY)

such as the lighting, technical competence, condition, the artistic execution of the idea and beauty of the moment are paramount; as is bagging a unique image or one that reflects the best of that photographer. Ensure that purchases are accompanied by a certificate of authenticity signed by the artist and gallery, keep all paperwork and – of course – hang photos well away from that sunny window.

If you get it right, says Jennifer Reynolds of Cape Town's State of the Art Gallery, you will gain a wonderful image, but not necessarily a path to wealth.

'Fine art photography has become the art form of our time, and collecting it is both accessible and affordable, but the adage "Don't buy art to make money" still rings true. Although it is possible for art at all price levels to appreciate, making money on art is challenging and the risk of losses over a short period is significant. However, investing in art is hugely enjoyable and offers great personal reward.' Ⓢ



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