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News

Mikhael Subotzky on 21 Icons



Date: Dec 4, 2015

This Sunday on 21 Icons at 19:27

Mikhael Subotzky – “Success is about pushing yourself to experiment and make better work.”

On 6 December 2015 on SABC 3 at 19h27, the acclaimed short-film series 21 ICONS will feature the 14th icon of its third season: 34-year-old contemporary visual artist and photographic social activist, Mikhael Subotzky.

The three-minute film showcases how Subotzky came to develop a series of visual and spatial constructs that capture the ideas of human segregation and incarceration of the post-apartheid era. The episode will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel.

21 ICONS traces South Africa's history over the course of its three seasons, moving from the fight for freedom to the country's growth during democracy, and concluding with a vision of the future. This season has been envisaged as a tribute to the country's future, shedding the spotlight on young South African icons.

Young South African talent Gary van Wyk (34) has stepped up as principal photographer for the third season. Adrian Steirn, who conceived the project, continues his involvement as one of the photographers capturing the behind-the-scenes images.

Subotzky has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III for communicating open-ended photo-journalistic narratives that tell the stories of characters against the backdrop of architectural structures portraying the historical, spatial, and institutional structures of the time.

The lens man grew up in Cape Town and studied at the University of Cape Town, first pursuing medicine then trying his hand at architecture before taking a gap year.

In 2000, the 18-year-old backpacker bought his first camera with the intention of documenting his travels through South East Asia. When he returned to South Africa, he shared the images with his mentor and uncle, a fellow photographer, whom encouraged Subotzky to continue taking pictures.

He says, "My uncle was a big part of my life and he uttered the words that changed everything for me. He saw some of my travelling photographs and said, 'some of these are quite good. You should take more pictures.'"

He returned to UCT and enrolled at Michaelis School of Fine Art where he developed his flair for capturing the still, unchanged moments through documentary photography.

For his thesis and first body of work, Die Vier Hoeke (The Four Corners) a photographic enquiry into crime and punishment in South Africa, he captured the public's attention with his depiction of the unseen lives of prisoners. The series debuted at an exhibition in a maximum security jail in Cape Town called Pollsmoor Prison in April 2005.

During a portrait sitting he tells Van Wyk that the question of whether those incarcerated should have the right to vote first came to his attention during the 2004 elections and the 10th year of our democracy, a time when social issues such as crime, poverty and unemployment were on the rise.

He says, "The question around whether prisoners could or couldn't vote brought together so much of what was happening in contemporary South Africa. People were realising that 10 years on we still have such huge social problems. At the same time, incarceration is so much a part of our history and many South Africans, including our political leadership, have been imprisoned. I was interested to learn how that experience shapes our society."

On a chance occasion, he met an electoral committee running the voting stations from a small penitentiary called Voorberg Prison and he obtained permission to photograph the prisoners while casting their ballots.

He says, "I enjoy engaging with people – photography is an excuse to engage with people. I'm quite a shy, reticent person so the camera becomes an excuse to engage in a different way. I'm still in touch with people I photographed ten years ago. I don't think enough photographers think about the relationship between their own internal worlds and the world that they represent."

Subotzky also obtained permission to host photographic workshops and managed to get a small group of male and female prisoners together to teach them basic photographic skills. He managed to host an exhibition in Mandela's cell at Pollsmoor and invite over 300 members of the public to the working maximum security prison to view the work.

He admits that he finds the creative process emotionally exhausting as he is required to immerse himself in the experiences and environments of his subjects to create an authentic connection between the lens, the representation of the people and spatial elements as well as the audience.

In 2007, he was accepted as a nominee member of cooperative photography agency, Magnum Photos. Subotzky describes the elements of a good photograph as, "The unseen quality of a photograph punctures through and grabs the viewer emotionally – for me the best photographs have this quality."

The photographic narratives Umjiegwana (The Outside) and Beaufort West extended this investigation to the relationship between everyday life in post-apartheid South Africa. Beaufort West was included in the exhibition New Photography 2008: Josephine Meckseper and Mikhael Subotzky at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In a conversation with Van Wyk he says, "I've always loved the spatial aspect of photography; of making an exhibition. You're asking the viewer to move in response to images and the spatial relationships that they have with each other."

For the Standard Bank Young Artist Award 2012 he produced the roving exhibition Retinal Shift. It included his first major film installation, Moses and Griffiths 2012, which contrasts the conflicting institutional and personal histories of two seventy-year-old tour guides in the small South African town of Grahamstown.

Subotzky's Pixel Interface, a multi-component video installation curated by Okwui Enwezor, was included in All The World's Futures; the main exhibition of the 56th Venice Biennale.

For the portrait 'What Meets The Eye' which will appear digitally on the Monday after his short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, "Shot inside the old, abandoned zoo below Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town, Subotzky is photographed seated and staring directly into the camera. Making a rare and brief switch to the front of camera, his stare is intense but his pose is kept simple. Chosen because of its prison-like appearance, the location is a reference to Subotzky's famed Die Vier Hoeke series."

On the future of South Africa, he comments, "I find South Africa an incredibly wonderful, dynamic and interesting place to live. It is also a difficult place to live and rightly so because of our history. But I'd rather be here, engaging with that than somewhere else."

For more information visit www.21icons.com or connect on Twitter: @21Icons using the hash-tag #OurFuturesNow or visit the Facebook page: www.facebook.com/21icons


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