

# Shootout at the old city zoo

The 21 Icons project challenged photographer Gary van Wyk, writes **Wendyl Martin**

GARY van Wyk has gone from news photography to wildlife work to human interest and portraiture.

In a recent career triumph he was appointed principal photographer on the *21 Icons* project, a portrait and short film series which profiles key figures from our country.

Today, our cover image of photographer Mikhael Subotzky has been released, shot at the abandoned zoo below Rhodes Memorial.

Tonight, the accompanying short film will screen on SABC3 at 7.27pm.

Van Wyk is coming to the end of his time with this season of the project, having recently shot his penultimate portrait.

“I’m feeling good. I have not done anything like this before. I started (as a photographer) with portraits and human interest work. I did wildlife because the agency I worked for did conservation.”

He met *21 Icons* creator Adrian Steirn while working for a company which documented Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

“He was photographing Tutu for *21 Icons*. I liked the idea of it.”

Soon after Steirn invited him join the project to document behind-the-scenes footage.

For this season they swapped roles, with Van Wyk leading the conceptualisation and shooting the portraits.

This week’s icon, Subotzky, is someone Van Wyk admires.

“We met many years ago when I was working in newspapers. He was a student at Michaelis and he shot a project on Pollsmoor prison for which he got full marks.

“I found out about him through his work on the prison.”

This background forms the theme for the portrait, with the bars of the old zoo evoking that work.

“As a photographer, I wanted him to sit for the portrait; photographers so often direct other people. I wanted him to look into the camera. This shows him confronting things as he does with his work. I did want him to be himself though.”

Van Wyk left the room for a bit during the shoot and when he returned, he found Subotzky sitting forward in the position caught in our cover shot.

“He couldn’t look smiley.”

Van Wyk felt he has been able to connect with each subject, staying in contact with many of them.

“We scheduled these back to back sometimes and by the next day the previous subject was still at the back of my mind... I think the word ‘icon’ has broadened for me. These are everyday people from different backgrounds.”

*21 Icons* was also something that thrust Van Wyk in front of the camera as we can see him working on the portraits in the short films, something he did not feel entirely comfortable with.

“It felt very weird. I felt like I can’t do this, I can’t be on camera. I did not want to be seen. This was a huge thing for me; I’m a shy person



*Photographer Gary van Wyk on set for a 21 Icons shoot.*

*Pictures: Adrian Steirn*



*Gary van Wyk with photographer Mikhael Subotzky to shoot him for the 21 Icons project at the abandoned zoo below Rhodes Memorial*

and I had to overcome that.”  
Taking on the role of principal photographer left him in the lead role of organising shoots, something that proved scary sometimes. This was evident in a recent shoot of knitwear designer Laduma Ngxokolo on Long Street

– with Ngxokolo on a horse.  
“I said we should put him on a horse to show a small town boy who made it in the city. When I told Laduma he said it was funny because he wanted to end one his fashion shows coming down the ramp on a horse. It was his first

time on a horse and the horse’s first time in the city. I had to close off Long Street and beforehand I was having nightmares about what could go wrong.”  
  
● See [www.21Icons.com](http://www.21Icons.com) or @21Icons on Twitter.