

Ernest Cole Photographer—A searing look at apartheid South Africa

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A show of moving and powerful photographs of life in South Africa in the early 1960s is currently on view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery. The exhibit, continuing through this Saturday, December 6, provides a look at the remarkable work of a little known black South African, Ernest Cole (1940-1990).

As a very young man living under the apartheid regime, Cole took photos that make a lasting impression. About 120 are on view at the NYU gallery, many of them originally appearing in Cole's only book, *House of Bondage*, which was published in New York in 1967.

"Ernest Cole Photographer" was organized by the Hasselblad Foundation of Gothenburg, Sweden, an organization that was established about 35 years ago in the will of the eponymous Swedish photographer and inventor. The exhibition of Cole's work premiered in Johannesburg some four years ago and has since been seen elsewhere in South Africa, as well as in Sweden, Norway, Britain and the US.

Ernest Cole was born in a township on the edge of Pretoria. His father was a tailor and his mother a laundress, and he had five siblings. The establishment of the rigid segregation of the apartheid system in the years after the Second World War had an obvious impact on Cole's life. It provided the subject matter for his work, but it also drove him into exile, where he suffered greatly and died before his 50th birthday.

Cole discovered a passion for photography at a very young age. Precocious and determined, he had already achieved some renown by the early 1960s. In 1958, when he was only 18, he introduced himself to *Drum* magazine, based in Johannesburg, and its picture editor Jürgen Schadeberg, who hired Cole and enabled him to learn much about the field. Over the next five years the young man produced many of the impressive photos in the current exhibit.

We see miners, including their recruitment, registration and dehumanizing living conditions; the conditions of life for women who served as maids or nannies for white families; images of the razed homes and forced relocations that were carried out under the terms of the notorious Group Areas Act, and under which Cole's family was itself forced out of its home in 1960; and young people attempting to study under the most difficult conditions in school and at home.

There is nothing narrowly didactic or staged in this work. It radiates humanity and the obvious connection felt by the photographer with his subjects. Cole allows South Africans to speak for themselves.

Nor does the photographer confine himself to simply showing black South Africans as victimized. There are even some photos showing social interaction between blacks and whites, with one caption explaining that at *shebeens* (unlicensed bars) whites and blacks fraternized, but drinking together was forbidden, and interracial sex was of course one of the most heavily punished infractions.

Cole was strongly influenced by the work of legendary French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004). He later pointed in particular to Cartier-Bresson's book *People of Moscow*, which Cole came across as he was learning the craft of photography, as a work that had a major impact on his own efforts. He would soon adopt some of the techniques used by Cartier-Bresson.

This was a period of intense struggle and suffering in South Africa. The infamous Sharpeville Massacre, in which 69 were killed by police, took place in 1961. In 1963 the Rivonia Trial took place, in which Nelson Mandela and other African National Congress (ANC) leaders were convicted.

Before long, Cole was forced to leave the country. He knew that he could not realize his aims under the apartheid system. In 1966, he was arrested in connection with his work. He had taken photos of "tsotsis," gangsters from the black townships who carried out muggings on the streets of Pretoria, and the police demanded that he identify them. When Cole protested that he was a photojournalist, he was threatened with prosecution. Rather than cooperate with the authorities, he went into hiding and later was able to get to the US with the assistance of Joseph Lelyfeld, then a correspondent for the *New York Times*.

Even for the viewer already somewhat acquainted with the history of apartheid South Africa, Cole's work has much to offer. He captures different aspects of life, including the dignity and determination of black South Africans to survive and to create a better future.

Among the most effective of the photos is the iconic image of two handcuffed blacks, arrested for violating the pass laws, a

picture that symbolizes apartheid oppression.

Another photo shows a mass of workers waiting for a train. “Which train to take is a matter of guesswork,” the caption explains. “There are no destination signs and no announcements. ... Some jump across and are killed by express trains.”

Another indelible image shows young black boys begging in Johannesburg at night. It captures one white man slapping a young boy in response.

The living conditions among miners are depicted in a number of photographs. In one, men are showering and doing their laundry in the same cramped spaces. In another, a kitchen helper dumps the unappetizing meal for the miners onto their plates using a shovel. In another, naked workers are herded through a string of doctors’ offices as part of their registration for jobs away from their families. Another photo shows a man staring at a snapshot of his wife, whom he will not see for the many months’ duration of his work contract.

Despite all the efforts at dehumanization, however, the life of the working class also comes through. A maid is shown in her Spartan room—“newspapers are her carpet, fruit crates her chair and table.” Elsewhere people are shown socializing on their one day off, cooking for themselves on Sunday rather than eating the “pig’s food” supplied at the camp.

Cole made special effort to highlight the efforts of youth to obtain an education, something that was made extremely difficult by apartheid. One image shows an earnest young student, no more than nine or ten years old, who “squats on his haunches and strains to follow lesson in heat of packed classroom,” as the caption explains. Another photo shows a brand new school for blacks, but with no desks or equipment. The caption informs us that there were three teachers for 700 students.

Two video installations are an especially valuable part of the current show. One is an 11-minute segment from a 1969 film made for Swedish television, at a time when Cole lived and worked in that country. The excerpt includes a brief interview with Cole himself. He explains his hopes that, even though his work is banned in South Africa, that it will “be useful for our children as evidence” and lessons for the future.

A longer film, produced in 1999, after Cole’s death, provides a more detailed biography, including interviews with those who worked with Cole in the years in which he matured and produced the photos included in *House of Bondage* and others in the current exhibition.

The last two decades of Cole’s life were tragic. He was cut off from his country and the struggle to which he wanted to dedicate his life through the medium of photography. He lived in New York for some period in the 1970s, and battled poverty and apparently mental illness as well. While they may not have been directly caused by his exile, his problems were undoubtedly worsened by his isolation. He died of cancer in February 1990.

One cannot view Cole’s work without considering contemporary South Africa, and how little has fundamentally changed in the 20 years since the dismantling of the hated apartheid system. The legal barriers of segregation have come down, but the conditions for the miners, the black servants and nannies, and the unemployed are otherwise quite similar. Many of the photographs in this exhibit have their close equivalents more than 50 years later. Twenty-five percent of the population today are jobless, and exist on \$1.25 a day.

A thin layer of black South Africans, epitomized by Cyril Ramaphosa, the former head of the National Union of Mineworkers, has joined the ruling elite. Ramaphosa is now a multimillionaire businessman and the Deputy President of the country. He and the rest of the ruling establishment preside over inequality, as measured by a Gini coefficient of 63.1, a number which is surpassed globally only by three small sub-Saharan countries. This exploitation and misery is enforced by ruthless violence, as demonstrated by the notorious Marikana massacre, in which 34 miners were killed by the police two years ago.

These conditions contrast with the implicit suggestion of the NYU exhibition that the oppression and exploitation depicted in Cole’s photos are basically things of the past, or at any rate that many of the fundamental problems depicted by Cole have now been resolved because apartheid has been demolished.

The director of the Grey Art Gallery, Lynn Gumpert, writes a bit complacently, “As incomprehensible as it may seem, apartheid endured in South Africa for nearly two more decades...,” and she goes on to explain that student protest “played an important role in its demise.”

The introduction to the show acknowledges that Cole “pushed for radical change,” “challenged the status quo” and that “his work continues to speak eloquently and forcefully to contemporary issues of poverty and racial inequality in the United States and worldwide,” but this is somewhat equivocal. Did “radical change” genuinely come in South Africa? Was the “status quo” challenged in a fundamental way?

No honest assessment of the anti-apartheid struggle at this point in history could fail to take into account the severe limitations of a movement that did not challenge the profit system. In fact, the “contemporary issues” are fundamentally the same ones as those posed in the 20th century. Successors of Ernest Cole are either working today in relative obscurity, or are sure to emerge in the near future, as part of the international struggle against war, poverty and capitalist oppression.



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