

Photo blog: Johannesburg: A City Between

LSE's Ed Charlton previews an LSE exhibition of award-winning photographer Jodi Bieber which runs from 13 June to 15 July.

For more than twenty years now, South Africa has been labouring at its own democratic redevelopment. As the country's economic and cultural dynamo, Johannesburg has experienced a particularly profound set of changes during this time. The once white inner-city was transformed during the early-1990s by the flight of major business and investment, leaving its many high-rise buildings either to decay or to the improbity of slumlords seeking to profit from the city's swelling migrant population. Satellite centres quickly emerged amid the city's suburbs, shifting attention, investment and opportunity away from the historic downtown region. This trend has been slowly reversed in the years since, but Johannesburg remains a place very much wrestling with its own historical failures. It is a city trussed spatially and structurally to the past but dreaming of a future. As John Matshikiza puts it, Johannesburg resembles 'an unfinished movie', a place of rising and falling action that has been unable to claim for itself a resolution.



Westbury
Photo Credit: Jodi Bieber

It is from within this imperfect story that South African photographer Jodi Bieber, whose work is featured in the LSE Atrium Gallery this month, first learned her craft. After training at the highly-regarded Market Photography Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg, she began documenting the country's first democratic elections for *The Star* newspaper in 1994. She has since gone on to win numerous awards, including the World Press Photo of the Year in 2010. The photographs on display in the Atrium Gallery are taken from her collection *Between Dogs and Wolves: Growing up with South Africa* (2006), a meditation on the twilight conditions that accompanied the transition from apartheid to democracy. Her images capture with a quiet but critical eloquence the extremities of life in Johannesburg, especially for its youngest and most vulnerable of residents. We find spaces and people caught between the city that was and the city yet to come.



Old Turbine Hall, Newtown Photo Credit: Jodi Bieber

Jodi Bieber's photography is distinctive in its intimacy but it is not alone in capturing with delicacy the moments of hope, tenderness and uncorrupted virtue that, despite the backdrop of violence, addiction and poverty, structure the urban imaginary. This exhibition parallels her photography with literary renderings from some of the Johannesburg's most incisive biographers in an effort to reflect upon the ways in which the city has always been a twilight space, a city trapped, even since its original foundation in 1886, between its own irreconcilable extremes.



Market Theatre Precinct, Newtown Photo credit: Jodi Bieber

Johannesburg: A City Between runs at the LSE Atrium Gallery from Monday 13 June until Friday 15 July. This exhibition is open to all, no ticket required. Visitors are welcome during weekdays (Monday – Friday) between 10am and 8pm (excluding bank holidays, when the school is closed, at Christmas and Easter, or unless otherwise stated on the web listing). Find out more about the exhibition.

Ed Charlton is Mellon Fellow in Cities and the Humanities in LSE Cities.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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