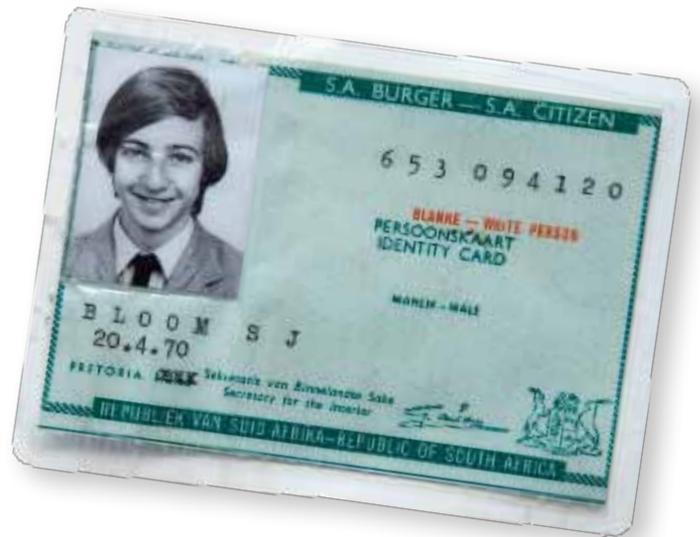




While this is a relatively simple shot, it is one that is loaded with a sense of unease

A different time, another life

Steve Bloom is known for his wildlife images, but when he started his photographic career he produced an emotive body of work documenting apartheid in South Africa. As an exhibition of this work opens in London, **Gemma Padley** speaks to Steve and asks him why and how he took these images



JUST when you think you have a solid understanding of a photographer's work, something utterly surprising will come to light. Such was the case recently with Steve Bloom, whose enthralling and poignant images documenting apartheid in South Africa during the mid-1970s are in the spotlight as part of the London Festival of Photography. Many AP readers will be familiar with Steve's wildlife images from our *Photo Insight* series in 2010, but long before he started photographing wildlife Steve was an avid documentary photographer. The

images on display in this latest exhibition are a mixture of intimate portraits and street photographs that document what was going on in South Africa during a time of intense political and social upheaval. Many haven't been seen since they were taken more than 30 years ago.

Born in South Africa in 1953 but now based in Kent, Steve was drawn to photography from a young age. 'As a child, I always loved photography,' says Steve. 'I had a Kodak Box Brownie camera. When I first saw a print magically appear in the

Above: Steve Bloom's identity card. Note the categorisation as 'white person'

darkroom under a safelight, I thought photography was a wonderful process.'

In the 1970s, as a young adult living in South Africa, Steve started using his Canon FTb 35mm single lens reflex camera to document daily life in a country that was undergoing immense change and turmoil. Photographing intensely from around 1975–1977, Steve produced a considerable body of work that provides a fascinating insight into life at this turbulent time.

'I sensed something very disturbing about the society I was living in,' says Steve. 'I used to take my camera loaded with Kodak Tri-X black & white film out with me and photograph people in the streets or knock on people's doors asking if I could take a picture. People were generally very accommodating.'

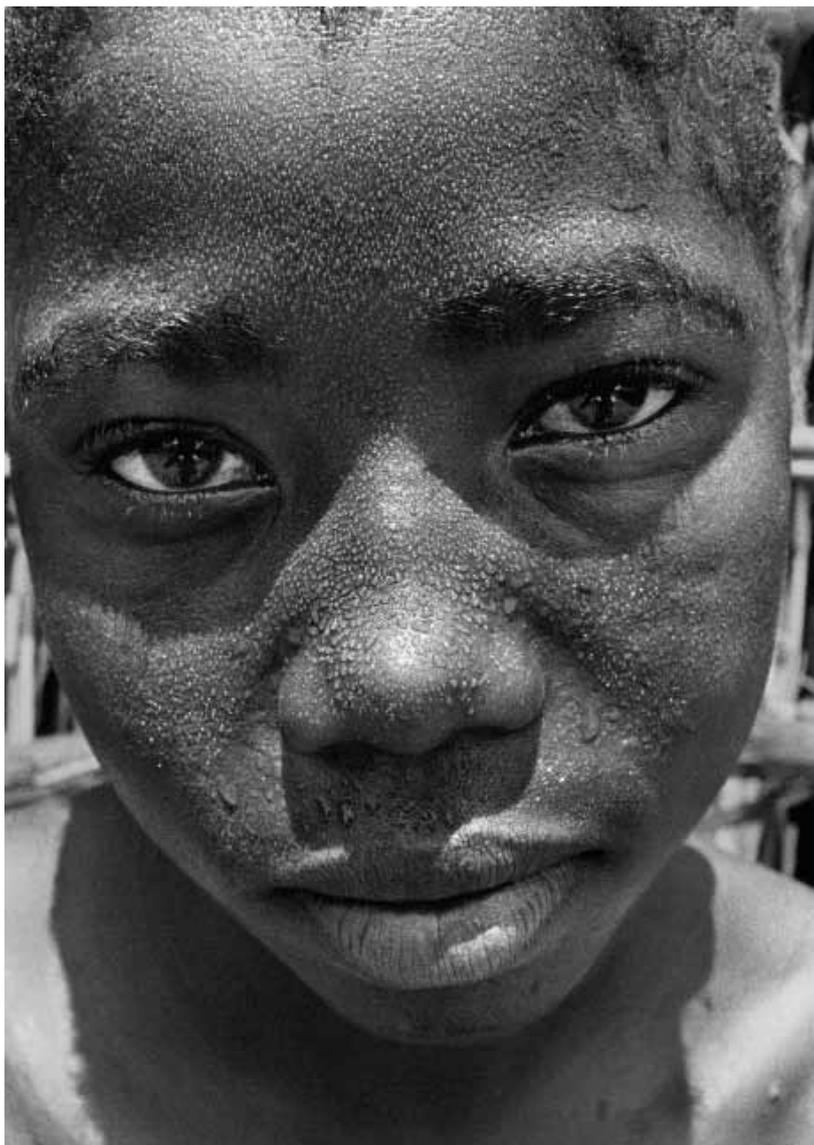
Determined to use his camera to try to make sense of what was happening around him, Steve's aim was to 'get under the skin' of the society he was living in. 'I felt uncomfortable being part of [what was going on] and I certainly didn't feel a sense of belonging,' says Steve. 'As a photographer, I was trying to capture a sense of alienation in other people.'

In 1976, considerable cracks in the apartheid system began to show, explains Steve. On 16 June of that year, black school children took to the streets to protest against new laws passed by the government stating that Afrikaans was to be the compulsory language in black schools. The authorities responded violently to the demonstrations, killing and wounding many children.

'This was a pivotal time in South Africa's history,' says Steve. 'People were starting to stand up



Steve would often photograph in people's homes, a method that helped to reveal more about the character of his subjects



to the authorities. Through my photography I wanted to capture people in their private worlds, who were living through this time.' As a result of his images, Steve was exiled from South Africa in 1977 and unable to return for 13 years. 'Some of the portraits, as innocuous as they look now, were used by members of the anti-apartheid movement and as a consequence I was unable to go back to South Africa for many years,' he says.

SUBJECT CHOICE

While some of Steve's images are opportunistic 'grab' shots that he had to react to with lightning speed, others are more reflective, taken at a slower pace and somewhat less reliant upon a fleeting moment. Sometimes photographing in illegal squatter camps and soon-to-be-demolished shanties, many of Steve's images display an honesty and earnestness. He often photographed people in their homes and the result is a number of remarkably moving and contemplative portraits. 'I photographed in an area called District 6, which had been declared a

'whites-only' area,' recalls Steve. 'Anyone living there who was black or mixed race was evicted. It was about white supremacy at the expense of everyone else.'

In other reportage-style images we see people being arrested or chased by police and candid images of passers-by. 'Although there are some images of people being arrested or chased by police, many of the photographs are straight portraiture, looking directly into people's eyes,' says Steve. 'I was trying to capture something of what these people might be feeling and who they are. One of the challenges of [portrait/documentary] photography is finding a way to get beneath the surface of a person. I had a real hunger to say, "This is what I think about what is going on."'

STEVE'S APPROACH

Steve adopted a bold but sensitive approach when taking his photographs and explains that when out with his camera he would switch on his 'photographer's eye', looking for things of interest, sometimes with a slightly humorous slant. In the images taken on the street in particular, Steve often comes in close to his subject, occasionally



Above: Seemingly mundane and candid pictures, such as this one, carry a sense of tension when viewed in the wider context

framing his image to cut off or obscure part of the subject. Sometimes shooting from a low angle, the pictures capture a sense of immediacy and intimacy, immersing the viewer sharply in the action.

'This kind of [compositional approach] adds to the disturbance of the images,' says Steve. 'There is often tension already in the scene and the lack of a calm composition adds to this. I didn't go out with too many predefined ideas because you don't know what you're going to discover. It was a more organic process.'

However, far from having the freedom to photograph what, when and how he wanted, Steve had to execute some caution. 'No one had free rein to photograph completely how he or she wanted,' he says. 'On occasions, I did experience threats when photographing on the street, but I didn't take much notice and just carried on. I did go to places where white people weren't allowed and take photographs, but I don't wish to portray myself as a hero. There were people who

Above left: While some of Steve's photographs were quick 'grab' shots, he balanced these with calmer, more reflective images

EXHIBITION

'ABOUT 18 months ago I was going through boxes in my attic and rediscovered my negatives from my time in South Africa,' says Steve. 'I scanned these at 8000dpi using a Nikon scanner and reprinted them, dodging and burning the images in the digital darkroom. The final exhibition prints look like silver-gelatin prints, but they are in fact digital versions, produced at such a resolution that all the grain has been reproduced faithfully. Seeing the images large is tremendously exciting,' he adds. 'It is a reminder of the world I was living in, which wasn't a pleasant one as it was an awful oppressive system.'



Right: Steve's posed portraits communicate a real sense of honesty in their depictions of people within the comfort of their own environments

Below: Some of Steve's shots capture the sense of chaos that often erupted on the streets



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took far greater risks in standing up for human rights [than I did] and who suffered serious consequences, and I have enormous regard for them.'

REPORTING VERSUS INTERPRETING

So does Steve feel that his pictures are an objective account of the time rather than his own subjective views? 'As a photographer, you are always putting your personal feelings into the work you produce, from the way you compose your image to the moment you decide to press the shutter,' he says. 'I don't believe that the photograph is totally objective, otherwise photographers wouldn't have their own styles.'

Steve regards the documentary photography he did, and indeed still does occasionally, as being not dissimilar to his wildlife work, to which he has been wholly committed since the early 1990s. 'To me, the idea of trying to develop one genre of photography and then doing something else allows for a great deal of diversity,' he says. 'The subject matter may be different, but my goal is the same – to create a powerful, emotional statement.' **AP**



Left: Images such as this, while not explicit in their political content, are as important as Steve's more challenging photographs

Steve's exhibition, **Beneath the Surface**, is being held at the Guardian Gallery, King's Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9GU until 28 June as part of the London Festival of Photography. Tel: 0207 520 1490. Website: www.lfph.org/diary/beneath-the-surface. Open daily 10am-6pm. Admission free. Steve will also be giving a talk on 11 June in the Scott Room, the Guardian Gallery, at 7pm. To see more images by Steve, visit his website at www.stevebloomphoto.com