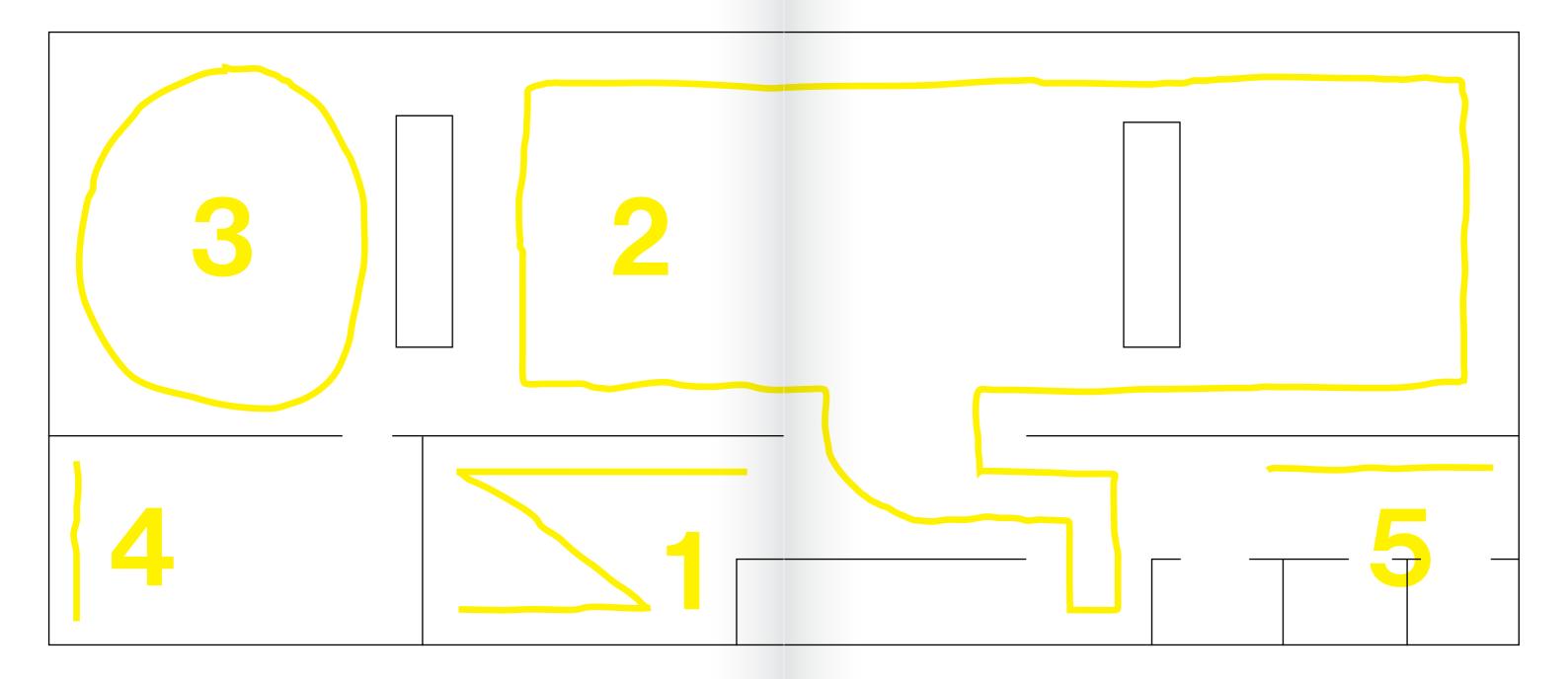
# Tell It to the Mountains

### Lindokuhle Sobekwa Mikhael Subotzky







In Tell It to the Mountains, both Sobekwa and Subotzky look backwards that they might retrieve the past from forgetfulness; might give to it a material home. Returning to their archives, the artists attend to questions of home, land and longing. Together, they afford lasting reflections on displacement; the sense of being removed from one's place by fate or circumstance, of feeling a stranger on familiar soil. - Lucienne Bestall

- Prologue 1
- Umnqhameko (2021)
- 2 3 Moses and Griffiths (2012)
- 4 I carry Her photo with Me (2017-ongoing series)
- Lindokuhle and Thembinkosi Goniwe in conversation 5
- Index of Works
- Notes

# Prologue

This exhibition by Lindokuhle Sobekwa and Mikhael Subotzky is rooted in friendship and a shared enquiry into the meaning of home and belonging. The two photographers met in 2014. Their introduction was framed by a mentorstudent relationship, but quickly outgrew this circumstance; a temporary professional association soon matured into a personal friendship. Sobekwa and Subotzky's decision to exhibit together recalls an earlier instance of two photographers and friends showing together. In 1989, Santu Mofokeng and Paul Weinberg, both members of the photographic collective Afrapix, jointly exhibited work under the title Going Home. Their project emerged out of a personal conversation. "We ended up asking ourselves what does it mean for each of us when we say: 'I am going home.' What does this mean in a society like South Africa?" Mofokeng's question is not isolated in time; it remains urgent, indeed central to South Africa and its tradition of socially engaged photography. What does it mean to belong? What and where is home? Who defines home and belonging? Mofokeng pointed out that these questions are not only existential. Going home is also a logistical exercise. It involves subtly coded decisions – and just as often impositions – involving particular means of transport and time. Far from being "a sliver of velocity pillioned," to quote the exiled poet Arthur Nortje, the human body in transit, on its way home, is frequently confronted with regimes of control, compression and deadening time. Three photographs, one each by Mofokeng, Ernest Cole and David Goldblatt, register the crushing brutality of movement in a country where home was, and still remains, a fractured possibility for many. Home is here, but it is also there. This search for somewhere, home, is the fulcrum of this exhibition. The two artists present their dialogic findings using biographical portraiture and visual poetry, each brilliantly unstable forms of knowing.

- Sean O'Toole



# Umnghameko (2021)

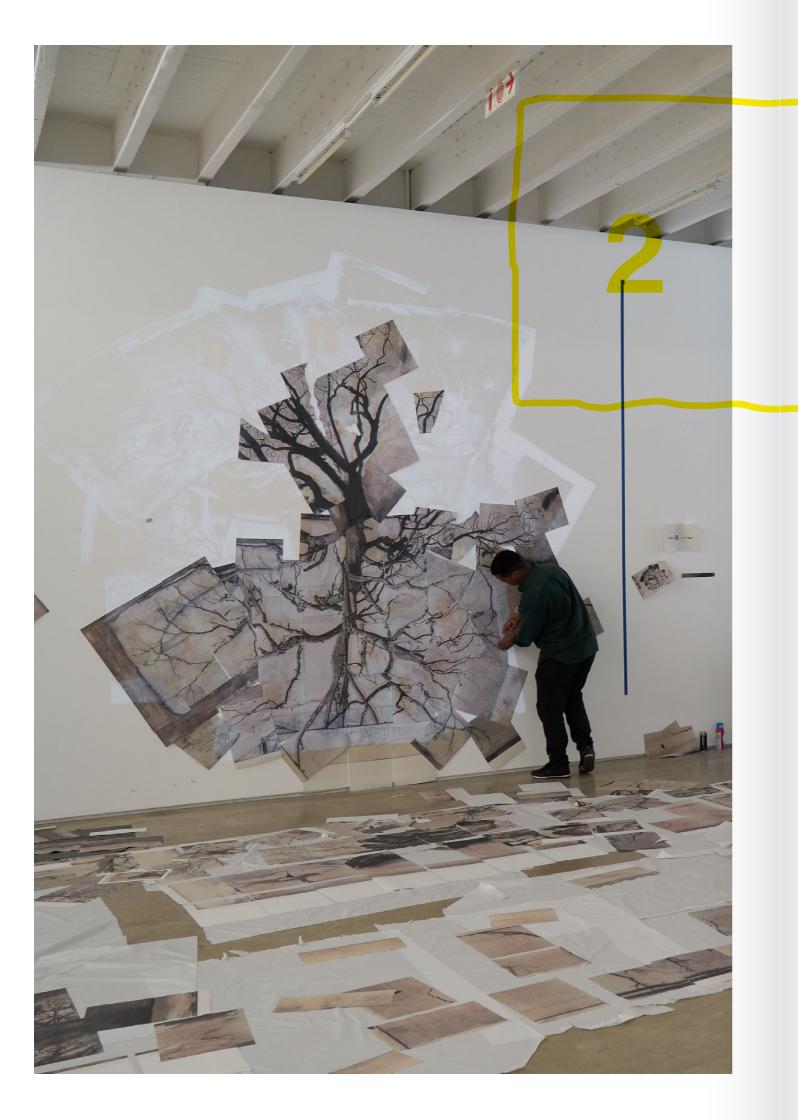
*Umngqameko* (2021) pulls images from across Sobekwa's series and projects to create an autobiographical narrative. In his mother's language isiXhosa, Umngqameko speaks of the far distance, looking toward that which can never be reached. Photographs from Sobekwa's series *Ezilalini (The country)* (2018–ongoing) are central to the installation, in which Sobekwa returns to his ancestral home in the Eastern Cape where his generational family reside and the inzinyanya (the ancestors) can be felt. The countryside, with its areas of trees and forest, is of particular importance to facilitate these connections.

Inviting readings both linear and cyclical, *Umngqameko* begins at *Germiston bus stop* (2019) to trace a horizon line formed through considerations of colour and shape, earth and sky.

In another approach to the installation, *Umngqameko* can be read as an ecosystem that emerges from the planting of *Mthimkhulu II* (2021). A site specific work, the tree is evocative of the ihlathi lesiXhosa, those remaining thickets of forest sacred to the amaXhosa and that can be found in the Eastern Cape.

During his residency at A4 in October–December of 2020 Sobekwa printed his photographs onto the readily available, recycled paper found in the office printer and began to cut-out and layer elements directly onto the foundation's walls. As yet untitled, this first tree was interrupted by a fire in a neighbouring building that closed A4 for ten months. Taking the process back with him to Johannesburg, Sobekwa continued to develop this collage based strategy with additional collaborative support from David Krut's print studio.

Sobekwa returned to A4 with an outline for the installation of *Mthimkhulu II* which, as if it were indeed alive, evidenced this nearyear of growth through a robust accumulation of form.



Sobekwa invites his earlier work into conversation with more recent projects, that he might trace the thematic line that carries through his photographs. In consolidating a new series, he extends considerations of fragmentation to his archive of images. Reflecting on his own sense of 'unbelonging' when visiting his familial homestead in rural Transkei – far from his home in Thokoza, Gauteng – Sobekwa finds echoes of this estrangement transcribed on the landscape. Such estrangement appears implicit in past projects too, among them the artist's series on *nyaope* and the low-income suburb of Daleside, as well as his elegy to an absent sister, *I carry Her photo with Me*, which marked Sobekwa's first photographic pilgrimage to his ancestral homeland.

- Lucienne Bestall

# Moses and Griffiths (2012)

Mikhael Subotzky's *Moses and Griffiths* (2012) is a portrait of the lives and labour of Moses Lamani and Griffiths Sokuyeka, two men who worked in Makhanda (previously known as Grahamstown). Lamani operated a nineteenth-century camera obscura at the Observatory Museum while Sokuyeka gave tours of the 1820 Settlers Monument. The film is intended to be displayed as a four-channel video installation in which voices and captions are played at once. The formal experience of viewing the work comes together with themes of labour alienation, class conflict and racial discrimination.

In Moses and Griffiths, both men 'perform' their tour as they usually would for the tourists and school children who are the most frequent visitors of these historical museums. They also give their accounts of growing up and working in Makhanda and its neighbouring township, Tantyi. Their tones of voice suggest that they perceive their role as not only informative but also mildly entertaining and personable. At the film's start, the manner in which they perform their respective tours is not dissimilar to the way that they detail their life stories. At the beginning of the film, their 'tour guide voices' and 'real voices' meld into one, and it is difficult to differentiate between them. One of the critical concepts of contemporary labour is affective labour, work which relies upon human interaction and emotional exchange (both virtual and 'real'). For industrial and pre-industrial economies this interaction/exchange was largely incidental to producing a physical product. After the mid-twentieth century, it became more common for the interaction to be the product, as is the case for Lamani and Sokuyeka. But as the film gains momentum, both men become more impassioned as they describe their own lives. It becomes easier to untangle which 'version' of each man is speaking. It has been argued that affective labour is too broad a term to be useful. While it might not serve as a precise category, it provides the language needed to assess the complications

which arise when a worker whose labour is emotional engagement, is alienated from this labour. These complications drive the narrative tension felt throughout the film. It becomes clear that there are two Moses and two Griffiths, and that they cannot be reconciled or easily separated. The 'ideal' version of their identities, as demanded by the institutional structures in which they work, is hostile to their core identities outside of their labour. They must speak in English even though they are more capable of expressing themselves in isiXhosa. Sokuyeka must describe the settler wars between the British and amaXhosa without inserting his inherited knowledge of Makana Nxele, or describing the hurt he felt when he and his colleagues were accused of starting the fire that burned the monument building down in 1994. In unspoken contrast with the alienated labour of Sokuyeka and Lamani is Subotzky's artistic labour. How far can we describe artistic labour as an 'ideal' labour in which the worker acts in accordance with the person? The essay uses the narratives represented in the film, along with its aesthetic choices, to analyse the tensions of race and labour in the South African context.

*I carry Her photo with Me* (2017–ongoing series)

Khanya Mashabela

From the forthcoming essay 'Labour and Race in Mikhael Subotzky's Moses and Griffiths (2012)', A4 Press, 2021,

Then, we are just back to our starting point again, so that all makes three hundred and sixty degrees, right around. And that is the end of our tour. – Moses Lamani

In conversation with this slideshow presentation of Sobekwa's work, Nduduzo Makhathini creates *Meditations for Ziyanda: Siyokukhumbula* (2021) on piano. "May it find her spirit," Mkhathini wrote.

Lindokuhle Sobekwa recalls a story about the inzinyanya, the ancestors; that they have forsaken the cities – of Johannesburg and the area of Thokoza where he grew up – because the children of the Eastern Cape arrive there to become lost, never to return.

The prompt for *I carry Her photo with Me* was a family photograph that evidenced the disappearance of Lindokuhle's sister Ziyanda. Searching for her daughter, the children's mother removed Ziyanda's face from the image that she might use the cutout in her attempts to find her child.

Ziyanda disappeared on a day that Lindokuhle was knocked down in the street by a car. She had been walking alongside him at the time of the accident. When Lindokuhle woke up in hospital, his back was broken and Ziyanda was missing. Requiring multiple surgeries, he remained in hospital for three months.

The fact that Lindokuhle was a dancer before the accident – before Ziyanda was gone – is a less-told part of his story. Many of the young men in *Nyaope* (2014) had belonged to his same dance troupe. So did Ziyanda, before the troupe asked that Lindokuhle take her place. When one finds out about his dance, it is visible everywhere in his photographic practice – in the particular way movement is captured in the transitions between moments and distilled as a finite, suspended instance. Discharged from hospital and unable to dance, Lindokuhle began to pursue photography with intent. For his mother, dancers and 'cameramen' in Thokoza were at the same level – reprobates and lowlifes wasting their time and talent on the streets. And this is how stories imbibe dispute; digest contradiction. This story is visible on the photograph. We follow its traces to find a cameraman in Thokoza eking out a living taking snapshots in exchange for cash. The importance of one such family portrait is elevated after a child's disappearance. Intervened upon in the face of loss, relied upon in the hope of restitution, the photograph becomes the prompt for a teenage boy's documentation of his sister's absence. The dancer's intimate knowledge of the body is available in his photographs, his practice rooted in gestures of return. "Ziyanda is now my ancestor," writes Lindokuhle.

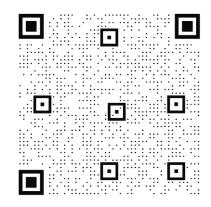
- Sara de Beer

### Lindokuhle and Thembinkosi Goniwe in conversation

Most often, Sobekwa finds himself having to tell his story – modulate his practice – for English speaking audiences, his home language of isiXhosa unaccounted for in these exchanges. Thembinkosi Goniwe became an interlocutor and conversation partner during Sobekwa's residency (A4, October–December 2020). Over three conversations, the two practitioners (Sobekwa then stationed at A4, Goniwe between Johannesburg and Makhanda) explored Lindokuhle's work in isiXhosa, code switching where it was comfortable, or felt necessary, including into English. In consultation with the practitioners, it was decided the audio would not be translated for the purposes of the exhibition.

I am asking us to suspend this order of asking or set of expectations of 'what it means, what it is about', and instead to say 'what is it that is at play other than that which I know or I see? What are the references that are not only looming behind the image but also that I'm bringing to the image?' And this way of thinking, for me, enriches us because through its engagement we are always searching for things that are not self-evident. We are forced to pay attention to subtleties, to nuances. We are forced to open up the images for other possibilities, to think of both the observable and invisible.

This helps me understand that artworks are not just that which is standing there in front of us to look at and consume; they are also an extension of those who make them and an extension of us to those people who make them and are in them. In other words, what I want to make of this conversation is that we are creating connections between us, whether via



Wifi – A4 ART Guest Password – spellcheck these images or the photographs, that mediate our interaction and relations.

What happens when you suspend this name or designation 'photography' and we think instead of the economy of the image? The medium tends to trap us in how customarily we approach the image within an established convention, even if we argue not to do so. When we write, for instance, the sentence we inscribe on the page reminds us to be mindful that any meaning is always a construct, a working thought or experience. That construction, once we become aware of it, opens up other possibilities. What would it say? Where would it take us? If not, what would it be? In what form would it manifest? And for what reasons or consequences?

Without attending to these questions, one thing for sure is that this construction opens up various possibilities to think of and engage an image. Precisely in that once it hits our eyes, we are unable not to think, not to unsee it, but to respond to its sensitive effects of visuality. The point I am driving is that we become mindful not to make conclusions at the outset, for our first encounter with the image is an opening into worlds beyond that which we initially see.

The problem with interpretation is that it doesn't enquire – it's not an inquiry. It's a kind of engagement driven by and towards a conclusion where one says, 'this is what it is about.' This 'what' is the meaning or message! In an inquiry, you are searching, thinking 'what is the photograph asking you to do: what to perform and in what ways to do so?' Interpretation forces us to end our engagement with an image quickly, especially after capturing our prey: meaning or message. When we do so, in most cases – not always – we overlook the language here. I am thinking of language as a form of expressive process, and any process of communication or representation cannot be only one way but more.

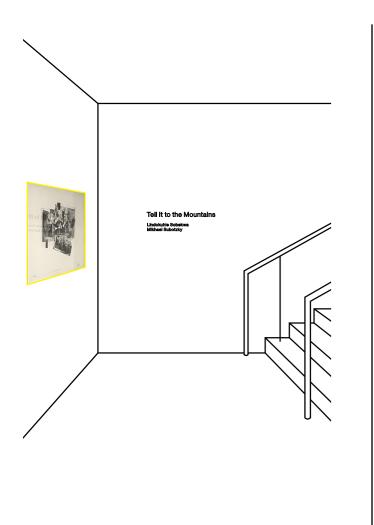
> Thembinkosi Goniwe in conversation with the artists, writers Sean O'Toole and Khanya Mashabela, and A4 team members at a roundtable conversation for Tell It to the Mountains at A4 (December 2020).

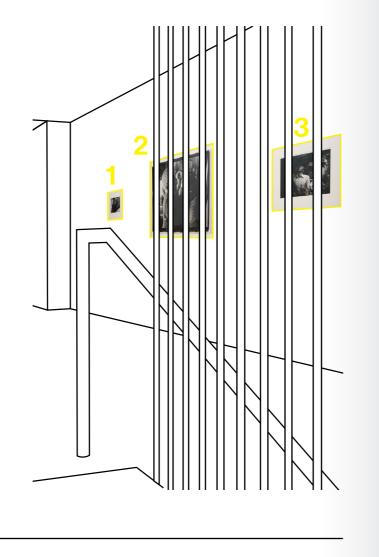


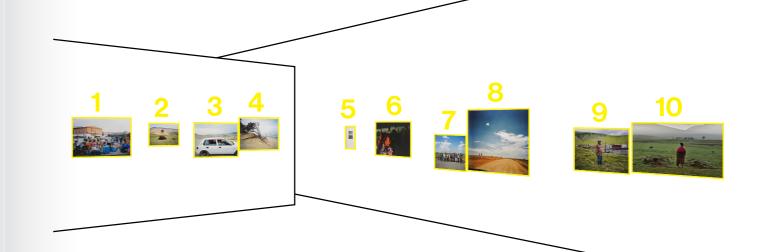




### **Index of Works**







### Entrance

Lindokuhle Sobekwa and Mikhael Subotzky Tell It to the Mountains, 2021 Pronto plate lithograph, digitally printed chine collé, micropore tape Paper size: 72.5 x 90.3 cm

### Prologue

1 Ernest Cole Untitled. c. 1960-1963 Gelatin silver print 29 x 19.7 cm

2 Santu Mofokeng Supplication, Johannesburg-Soweto Line, 1986 Gelatin silver print 67 x 100 cm

3 David Goldblatt Going home: Marabastad-Waterval bus: 8.45pm, 45 minutes to the terminal, 1984 Gelatin silver print on fibre-based paper 20.5 x 43 cm

Umnghameko – Lindokuhle Sobekwa

1 Germiston bus stop, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 - ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 40 x 50 cm

2 Symbol of graves, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 - ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 64.5 x 83.7 cm

3 Ntasbasgogo Qumbu, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 - ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 64.5 x 83.7 cm

4 Nggeleni, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 - ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 64.5 x 83.7 cm

5 Makhulu ehlakula egadini, 2018 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 - ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 47.2 x 32.3 cm



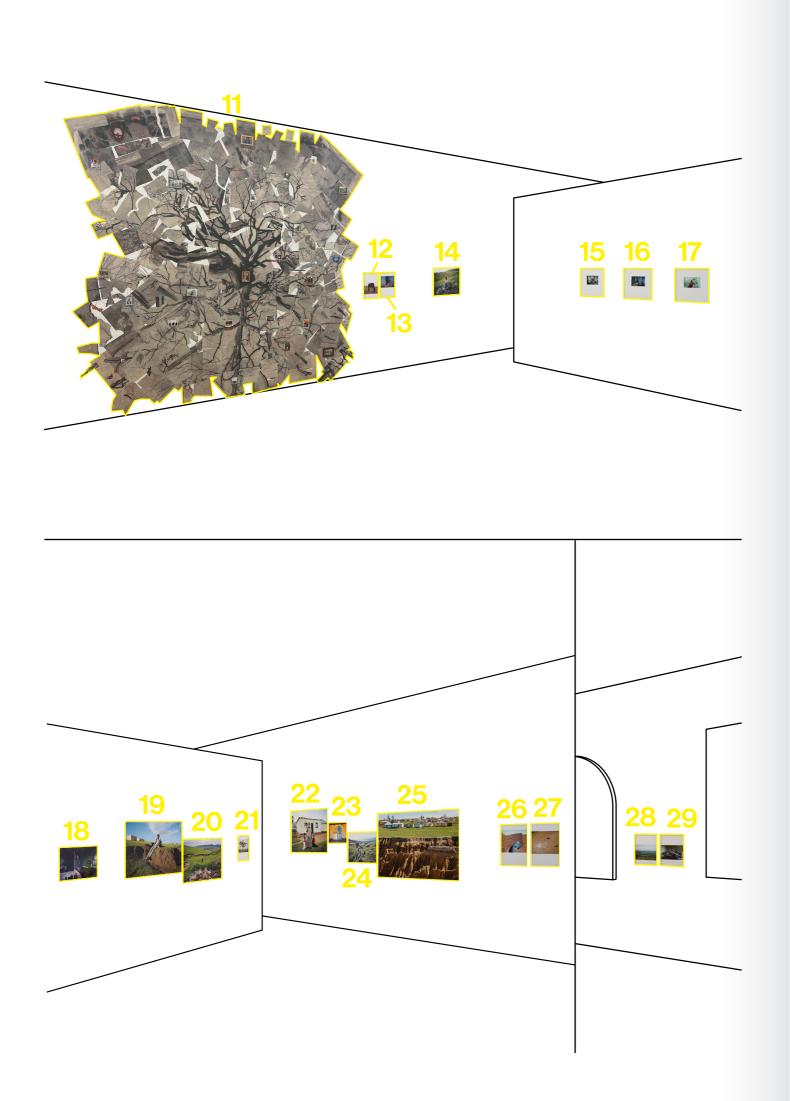
6 Ziyaphuma ezicweleyo, 2018 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 66.67 x 100 cm

7 Amakhwenkwe, 2019 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 - ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 60.2 x 70.22 cm

8 Tsojana bus stop, 2018 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 100 x 125 cm

9 Malume Stellenbosch, 2021 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 58 x 74 cm

**10** My mother visiting our ancestors' graveyard, 2019 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 66.67 x 100 cm



<b>11</b> <i>Mthimkhulu II,</i> 2021 Recycled paper, wheatpaste, family photographs, vintage frames Dimensions variable
12 Bhayi alembathwa lembathwa ngabalaziyo, 2019 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 41.6 x 28.4 cm
13 Veld fire, 2018 [From Daleside, 2015 – 2021] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 41.6 x 28.5 cm
<ul> <li>14 Zenandi, 2021</li> <li>[From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing]</li> <li>Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag</li> <li>49.32 x 63.16 cm</li> </ul>
<b>15</b> <i>Mzwandile at home after coming from the rehab centre,</i> 2018 [From <i>Nyaope Chapter II,</i> 2018] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 43.9 x 43.3 cm
16 Morne's younger sister, 2016 [From Daleside, 2015 – 2021] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 43.9 x 43.2 cm
<b>17</b> My mother at work, 2018 [From I carry Her photo with Me, 2022] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 44 x 43.4 cm
18 Mona Lisa gaze, 2021 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 40 x 50 cm
19 <i>Ta Mneija,</i> 2021 [From <i>Ezilalini (The country),</i> 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 75 x 100 cm

20 *eMtyamde*, 2021 [From *Ezilalini (The country)*, 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 64.5 x 83.7 cm 21 *Mthi woLanga,* 2021 [From *Ezilalini (The country),* 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 41.6 x 28.5 cm

22 Ekhwenzane, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 75.44 x 94.30 cm

23 Engonyama my auntie's interior, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 33.73 x 43.20 cm

24 Melusi wenkomo, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 49.36 x 63.16 cm

25 Ezindongeni zase Kwezane, 2019 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 100 x 150 cm

26 UmamBhele uyatyabeka, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 53.6 x 36.8 cm

27 Tsojana river, 2018
[From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing]
Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag
53.3 x 37.6 cm

28 Amabele weNtombi, 2018 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 41.9 x 28.6 cm

29 Geraldine and her husband in their new home,
2019
[From Daleside, 2015 – 2021]
Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag
41.9 x 28.6 cm

30 *uMthembu omncinci,* 2019 [From *Ezilalini (The country),* 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 55 x 36.7 cm

31 Omama bathwelinyanda, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 62.4 x 80 cm

32 eDonkey Church, 2020 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 41 x 52.1 cm

33 *Mhlonyane*, 2020 [From *Ezilalini (The country)*, 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 100 x 127.6 cm

34 Kwa Malume Mxolisi, 2019 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 56 x 70 cm

35 Ezindongeni zase Khwezane, 2018
[From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing]
Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag
70 x 87.5 cm

36 Kwa MamThembu, 2019 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 40.8 x 8 cm

37 Estopin Qumbu, 2020
[From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing]
Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag
100 x 126.1 cm

38 Yonelisa Samela in his grandmother's garden during South Africa's first lockdown, 2020
[From Lockdown series, 2020]
Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 53.6 x 53.3 cm

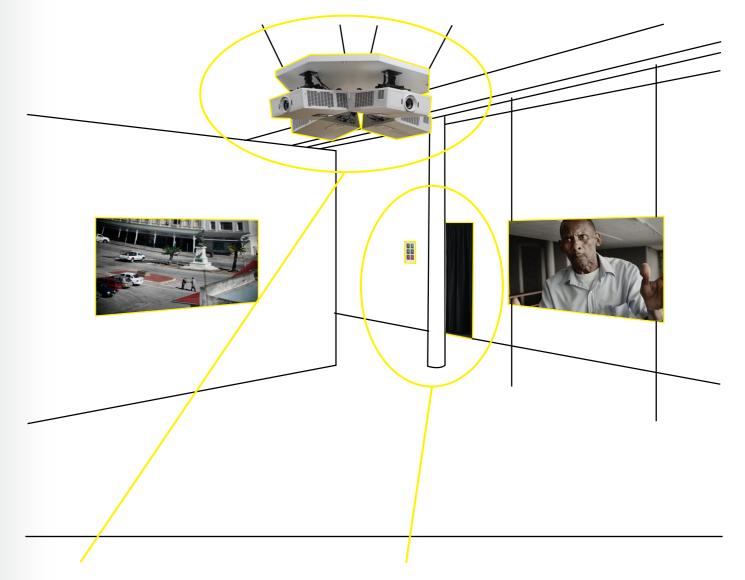
39 *Mandla*, 2018 [From *Nyaope Chapter II*, 2018] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 53.6 x 53.2 cm 40 Brothers fighting, 2017 [From Daleside, 2015 – 2021] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 53.4 x 53.6 cm

**41** Death of George Floyd, 2020 [From *Lockdown series*, 2020] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 48.1 x 33.6 cm

**42** Jordan and Nadine, 2017 [From Daleside, 2015 – 2021] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 53.6 x 53.2 cm







Moses and Griffiths

Mikhael Subotzky Moses and Griffiths, 2012 Four channel film installation with sound 18:51 minutes

43 After a protest related to continuous power cuts during Lockdown Level 5 in Thokoza, 2020 [From Lockdown series, 2020] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 43.7 x 63.4 cm

44 Jeannie with her sisters, 2017 [From Daleside, 2015 - 2021] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 54 x 37 cm

45 Shack of nyaope users is set on fire by an angry group of men that claim they stole their things. Nyaope users are always the first suspects in the communities, 2013 [From Nyaope, 2014] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 123 x 166 cm

46 Kwa Ta Mneija, 2021 [From Ezilalini (The country), 2018 – ongoing] Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag 40 x 50 cm

### I carry Her photo with Me

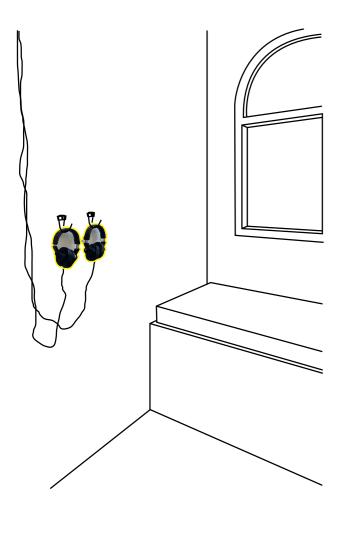
Lindokuhle Sobekwa

I carry Her photo with Me

2017–ongoing series

Slideshow presentation, 7 minutes 43 seconds

Meditations for Ziyanda: Siyokukhumbula, 2021 Composed and performed by Nduduzo Makhathini



### Listening station

Thembinkosi Goniwe and Lindokuhle Sobekwa in conversation 04 December 2020 1 hour 38 minutes

## Notes







2











1 Archival photographs from the reclamation of the Cape Town foreshore. 2 Lindokuhle visits Luyolo, Simonstown, during his residency at A4, October – December 2020. 3 Processes and conversations towards Tell It to the Mountains, December 2020 – October 2021. 4 A still from Mikhael's *Moses and Griffiths* (2012). 5 Installation in the A4 gallery, October 2021.



6 Lindokuhle takes a moment's pause on a hilltop capturing *Ezilalini* in 2020. 7 A spread from Lindokuhle's *I carry Her photo with Me* (2017 – ongoing), represented at A4 as a slideshow. Musical composition by Nduduzo Makhathini.



6













8 After the fire, December 2020. 9 Lindokuhle up the ladder, composing the image seen top left, December 2020. 10 Another of Lindokuhle's photographs, taken the morning after the fire, shows the gutted building next door, December 2020. 11 A4's library and archive find a temporary home in the ground-floor reading room, December 2020. 12 CCTV footage of the gallery taken minutes after the fire began, December 2020. 13 Bella Knemeyer 'stages the institution' in the A4 foyer, October 2021.









Lindokuhle Sobekwa (b. 1995, Katlehong)

Lindokuhle Sobekwa gained critical attention at home and abroad when still a teenager for the photo-essay *Nyaope* (2014) in which he documented friends and acquaintances struggling with addiction to the street-drug for which the series is named. In 2017, Sobekwa was selected by the Magnum Foundation for Photography and Social Justice to develop the project *I carry Her photo with Me* (2017–ongoing), tracing the disappearance of his sister. He became a Magnum Nominee Member the following year.

*Daleside: Static Dreams*, twinned projects by Sobekwa and Cyprien Clément-Delmas, was published by Gost Books last year (2020), and *I carry Her photo with Me* is forthcoming from Steidl (February, 2022.) His current photographic series *Ezilalini (The country)* (2018 – ongoing) is here exhibited for the first time within the autobiographical photographic installation *Umngqameko* (2021) at A4 Arts Foundation.

### Mikhael Subotzky

(b. 1981, Cape Town)

Made on the occasion of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award in 2012, Mikhael Subotzky's *Retinal Shift* marked the artist's growing ambivalence with the photographic form and included the filmic installation *Moses and Griffiths* (2012). The work's installation here at A4 Arts Foundation in 2021 is the first time it has been shown since the deaths of both Moses and Griffiths. Subotzky works across mediums, including painting, video and collage. In 2007, he became a Magnum Photos nominee, and member in 2011.

Subotzky's first photo-essay *Die Vier Hoeke (The Four Corners)* (2004), which documented life inside the notorious Pollsmoor Prison, garnered international acclaim for the artist, then still in his final year at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town. He continued in his study of the South African penal system in *Umjiegwana (The Outside)* (2005) and *Beaufort West* (2006 – 2008) which was later published by Chris Boot in 2008. Subotzky has published *Retinal Shift* (2012), and *Ponte City* (2014) in conversation with artist Patrick Waterhouse, both under the Steidl imprint.

Tell It to the Mountains - Wayfinder (2021)

Editor — Sara de Beer Design — Ben Johnson

With texts from Khanya Mashabela; Thembinkosi Goniwe; Sean O'Toole; and Lucienne Bestall.

All works by Lindokuhle Sobekwa are courtesy of the artist. Mikhael Subotzky's *Moses and Griffiths* (2012) courtesy of the artist and Wendy Fisher. Sokekwa and Subotzky collaborative print work titled *Tell It to the Mountains* (2021) courtesy of the artists.

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Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but know whence you came. – James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953)



### 21 Oct '21 — 20 Jan '22