People Apart:
Cape Town Survey 1952

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRYAN HESELTINE

Groups Areas: Racial Survey (Occupation), 1947. Drawn in the Office of the Town Planning Branch, City Engineers Department, Cape Town (subsequently annotated by hand). Reproduced courtesy of the Heritage Resource Centre, City of Cape Town. The area marked in purple on the left of the image is the Bo-Kaap; slightly to its right, between the bay and the mountain and annotated in pen, is District Six. Inside back cover: the area top right labelled 'slum clearance' is Windermere; Langa is bottom right; and Nyanga, not built at the time this map was drawn, is further away to the south and east.

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Cape Town in the early 1950s was a city in the midst of profound transformation. Added to the social challenges of rapid urbanisation were South Africa's unique set of political tensions and conflicts. The Nationalist Party, elected in 1948, was just beginning to implement its policy of apartheid, which extended existing segregation with the ultimate aim of a society based on total racial separation.

This striking collection of photographs by Bryan Heseltine, exhibited here for the first time in more than fifty years, offers a glimpse into the lives of South Africans who would feel the full force of apartheid through the 1950s and beyond. The images were made in the late 1940s and early 1950s and provide a rich and intimate description of life in a number of townships and areas of the city: Windermere, the Bo-Kaap, District Six, Langa and Nyanga. The photographs belie the official image projected by the South African government. They show some of the dreadful housing conditions that existed on the periphery of the city, but also testify to the vibrancy of social and cultural life, including the work of street craftsmen, beer brewing, music and dance. A number of photographs taken in Windermere focus directly on the physical environment, with both interior and exterior images of the shack dwellings, or 'pondoks', that dominated the urban landscape. The collection includes some remarkably intimate portraits, illustrating the diverse styles and identities of Cape Town's inhabitants.

The exhibition draws attention to the history of the images and how they were taken up, first by the South African Institute of Race Relations, in the cause of social reform and campaigns for better housing for some of the city's poorest inhabitants, and later, in England, by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, bringing the work into the ambit of the emerging anti-apartheid movement. This was an early attempt to find a visual language with which to represent apartheid South Africa to a British public. Underlying the exhibition is the question of what it means for both British and South African audiences to look at the images now, in the post-apartheid era.

Photographer. *Windermere, Cape Town, c.1949-52*

The Photographs

Bryan Heseltine was clearly a skilful photographer. The images are both aesthetically and technically accomplished; they demonstrate a considered, reflective and, at times, even playful, approach and hint at an awareness of both European and American styles of photography. Furthermore, the many portraits in the collection go beyond the depiction of black South Africans as examples of racial types or social problems and are evidence of an engagement with his subjects that is confident and, at the same time, respectful.

More broadly, the collection represents the convergence of two distinct interests or motivations. On the one hand, in common with a number of photographers in the immediate post-war period, Heseltine developed an aesthetic interest in the visual quality of life in black townships. This would not entirely displace the ethnographic style of photography – the lens through which white society had preferred to view black South Africa – but it nevertheless represented a departure. On the other hand, the expansion of urban squatter settlements and the increasing visibility of poverty in South Africa's cities provoked intense social and political debate. In this context, photography appealed to advocates of social reform as a forceful means of bringing home their argument.

The evidence suggests that Heseltine began photographing in townships as a personal project but he was subsequently supported by the South African Institute of Race Relations, whose staff helped facilitate his access to the townships and smoothed relationships with residents. This enabled him to make photographs that clearly required the consent, or at least compliance, of his subjects. Evidence of the two distinct forces shaping the work surfaces in the disjunction between the images and the text that accompanied the original exhibitions: informational captions, such as 'lack of recreational facilities', contrast with a visual aesthetic which is pictorial, at times even theatrical, as well as social documentary.

Watch repairs. *Windermere, Cape Town, c.1949-52*

Craftsmen. *Windermere, Cape Town, c.1949-52*

Unidentified woman.
*Windermere,
Cape Town, c.1949-52*

Windermere

Windermere was an informal settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town; the name was an ironic reference to the English lake, adopted because of its propensity to flood. Outside the municipal boundary until 1943, it attracted some of the city's newest and poorest inhabitants, and by the early 1950s was home to a cosmopolitan community of between 15,000 and 30,000 people. In 1958 it was declared a 'coloured' area and the majority of its inhabitants were removed to segregated townships on the Cape Flats, or forced out to the rural areas.

Couple dancing. *Windermere, Cape Town, c.1949-52*

Bow player. *Windermere, Cape Town, c.1949-52*
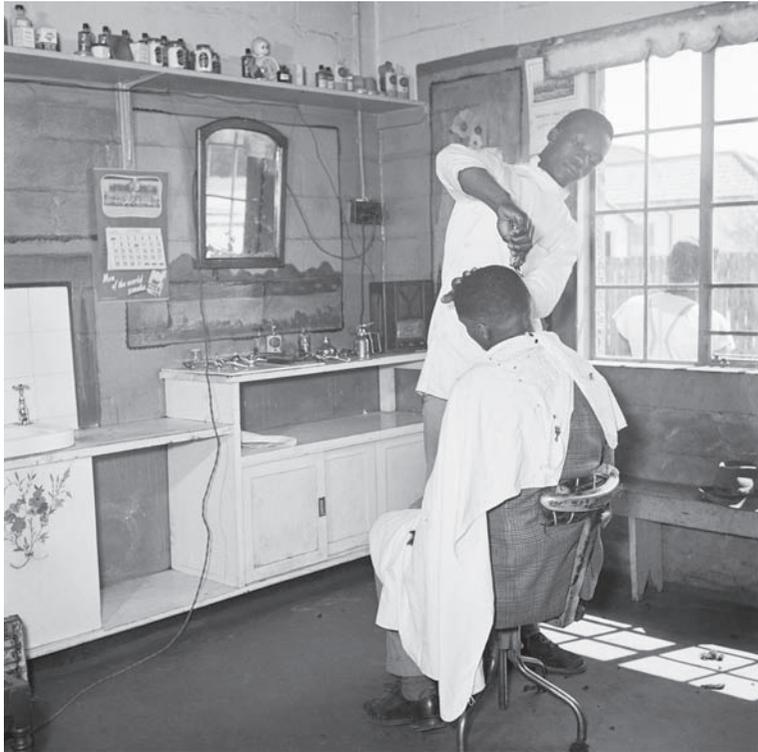
Barber shop.
*Langa, Cape Town,
c.1949-52*

Nyanga

Nyanga was a new township established in the early 1950s. Although the brick-built family houses were presented as an improvement on the shack dwellings of Windermere, they still lacked many basic facilities and, in line with apartheid planning, black South Africans were being forced further away from the centre of the city, out on to the inhospitable and barren Cape Flats.


*Nyanga, Cape Town,
c.1949-52*

Langa

Langa is Cape Town's oldest black African township, officially opened in 1927. At the beginning of the 1950s it had a population of approximately 11,000; this would more than double by the end of the decade. Although Langa was home to many established town dwellers, including middle-class black families, the largest proportion of its population were single men living in barrack-style dormitory housing, many of whom were migrant workers.

Street games.
*District Six,
Cape Town,
c.1949-52*

District Six

District Six, established in 1867, was a vibrant mixed community close to the city and port. It would later suffer one of the most notorious forced removals of the apartheid period. In 1966 it was declared a white area by the South African government; its population of around 60,000 was forcibly relocated to segregated townships on the Cape Flats and its buildings razed to the ground. Forty-five years on, under the post-apartheid land restitution programme, some former residents have finally been able to return to the area.

Bo-Kaap

The Bo-Kaap, formerly known as the Malay Quarter, is located on the edge of the city centre just below Signal Hill and was historically home to Cape Town's Malay community. More ethnically diverse than the term suggests, the community has its origins in the Muslim slaves who were brought to South Africa from South and Southeast Asia during the colonial period. The Bo-Kaap avoided the fate that befell District Six, and is now promoted as one of the city's tourist attractions.
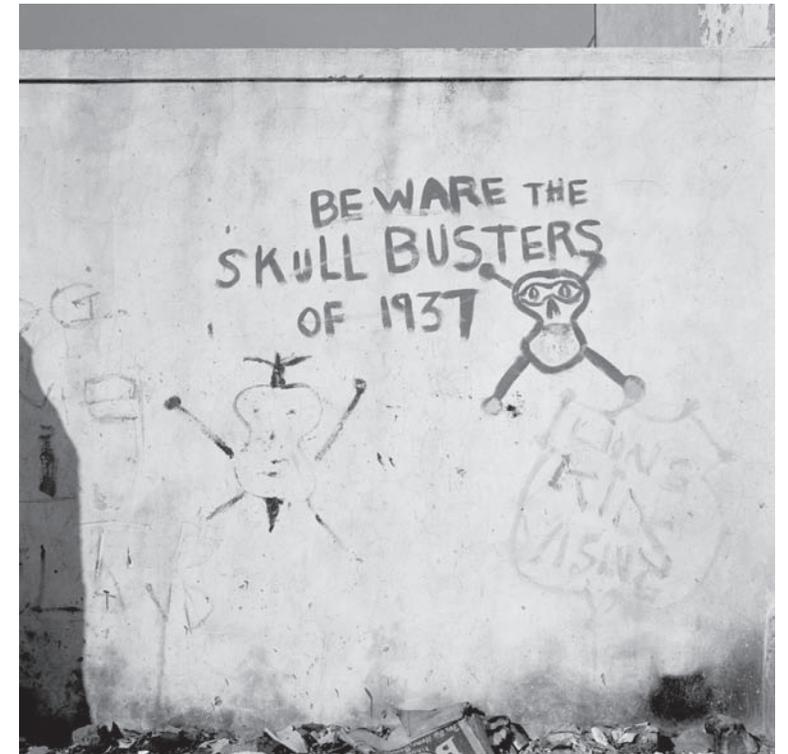
Skull Busters.
*Bo-Kaap, Cape Town,
c.1949-52*

Unidentified man. *District Six, Cape Town, c.1949-52*

Clifton Street. *District Six, Cape Town, c.1949-52*

African Dilemma, Cape Town, 1952

The photographs were first exhibited, under the auspices of the South African Institute of Race Relations, as *African Dilemma: A Survey of Urban Conditions*. The Institute had already been considering the possibility of an exhibition 'to show how Africans are living in our cities and to stress the need for a constructive programme of urban housing throughout the country' when Dr Oscar Wollheim came across Heseltine's photographs of Windermere – 'the best he had ever seen of that type'. Heseltine's work quickly became the focus for the planned exhibition and he was commissioned to extend the range of images so they might present a representative selection of old and new housing. The exhibition took place at Stuttafords department store in January 1952.



African Dilemma.
Stuttafords, Cape Town, 1952

A People Apart, London, 1955

A second exhibition of Heseltine's South African photographs – *A People Apart* – was shown in the crypt of St Martin in the Fields, London in February 1955 under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), the London-based missionary society. In an echo of what happened in Cape Town, the photographs once again seemed to be in the right place at the right time. In 1955 the Nationalist Party government in South Africa passed the Bantu Education Act, effectively removing mission societies from their role in educating black South Africans. In response, the SPG launched the South African Emergency Fund with *A People Apart* providing an important focus for the campaign. As indicated by the title, the exhibition was not merely a fundraising opportunity, but a condemnation of the policy of apartheid. It attracted coverage on the BBC and in *Picture Post* and toured regionally.

A People Apart.
St. Martin in the Fields, London, 1955

A People Apart,
exhibition flyer.
Halesowen, 1955
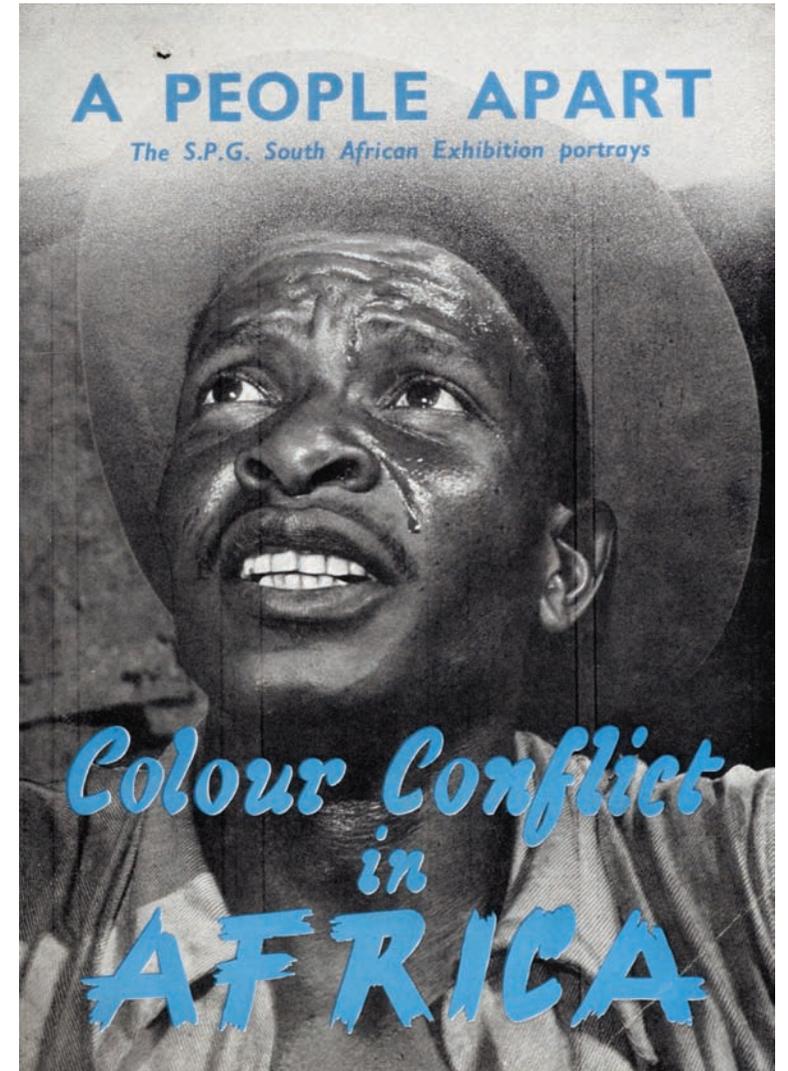
Bryan Heseltine, Photographer

Bryan Heseltine (1923-2008) was born in South Africa and grew up near Addo in the Eastern Cape. In the 1930s his parents sent him to be educated in England, where he studied at Dartington Hall School, an experimental co-educational school that counted among its pupils the children of Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, Victor Gollancz and Robert Flaherty. Heseltine returned to South Africa in 1940, following the fall of France. Having inherited his enthusiasm for photography from his paternal aunt, Irene Heseltine, a keen amateur photographer, in Cape Town he learnt his photographic trade at the studio of Leon Koopman. By the late 1940s he had established his own photographic business at 'Greenshutters', where he lived, now married, in Newlands, a suburb of Cape Town. In September 1945, and again in March 1948, he held exhibitions under the title 'With the Leica', demonstrating the technical and aesthetic capabilities of this relatively new lightweight style of camera, in addition to the medium- and large-format cameras he used for the majority of his work.

He was active in South Africa until the early 1950s when he returned and settled in England. Following the London exhibition of his Cape Town photographs he was commissioned by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to photograph in the Caribbean for the exhibition 'Window on the West Indies' shown at St Martin in the Fields, London, in 1956. A letter from the Bishop of Jamaica gives some insight into his character and working method: 'He is a very delightful young man and we much enjoyed having him with us here. He works at an appalling pressure and speed and has left a trail of exhausted canons, curates and bishops wherever he has been'. He went on to have a successful career as an editorial photographer in England, exhibiting his portraits and street photographs of Bath at the Royal Photographic Society in the 1980s.

Bryan Heseltine, self-portrait. *Early 1950s*

Research and the Collection

This project began in April 2009 with an invitation to take a look at twenty-five exhibition prints salvaged from the offices of the South African Institute of Race Relations in the 1960s. The images were fascinating, yet next to nothing was known about them; the only clue was the photographer's stamp on the reverse of the prints. Initial enquiries generated little further information, until a connection with Dartington Hall Trust led to Bryan Heseltine's family; Heseltine had died in 2008. It soon became clear that the twenty-five prints were only the tip of the iceberg. The South African part of the collection consisted of over 1000 negatives in various formats, with many remarkable images among them.

The collection presents two distinct research challenges. The first is to situate the work in a history of photographs of South Africa. Much time has been spent over the last two years in libraries and archives researching the historical context in which the photographs were first made and shown, as well as their subsequent travels. Undoubtedly the re-emergence of this collection adds to our understanding of photography in the post-war and early apartheid years. This was a time when photography was widely believed to add moral force to arguments for social improvement and the alleviation of poverty, as well as offering a compelling means of presenting the anti-apartheid case to international audiences.

The second challenge is to understand what it means for both British and South African audiences to look at the images now, in the post-apartheid era. This means paying attention to the images *as images*, and to the various ways in which they might be cared for and presented. This exhibition is one attempt to grapple with this problem, but it is necessarily only a partial response. In March 2011 the curator travelled to South Africa to talk about and, more importantly, show the images to several groups, including photography students and ex-residents of District Six. There is much more work to be done, however, to bring this work to contemporary South African audiences and to understand the ways in which these images can be meaningful in the present.

Shoes drying on rooftop. *Windermere, Cape Town, c.1949-52*

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRYAN HESELTINE

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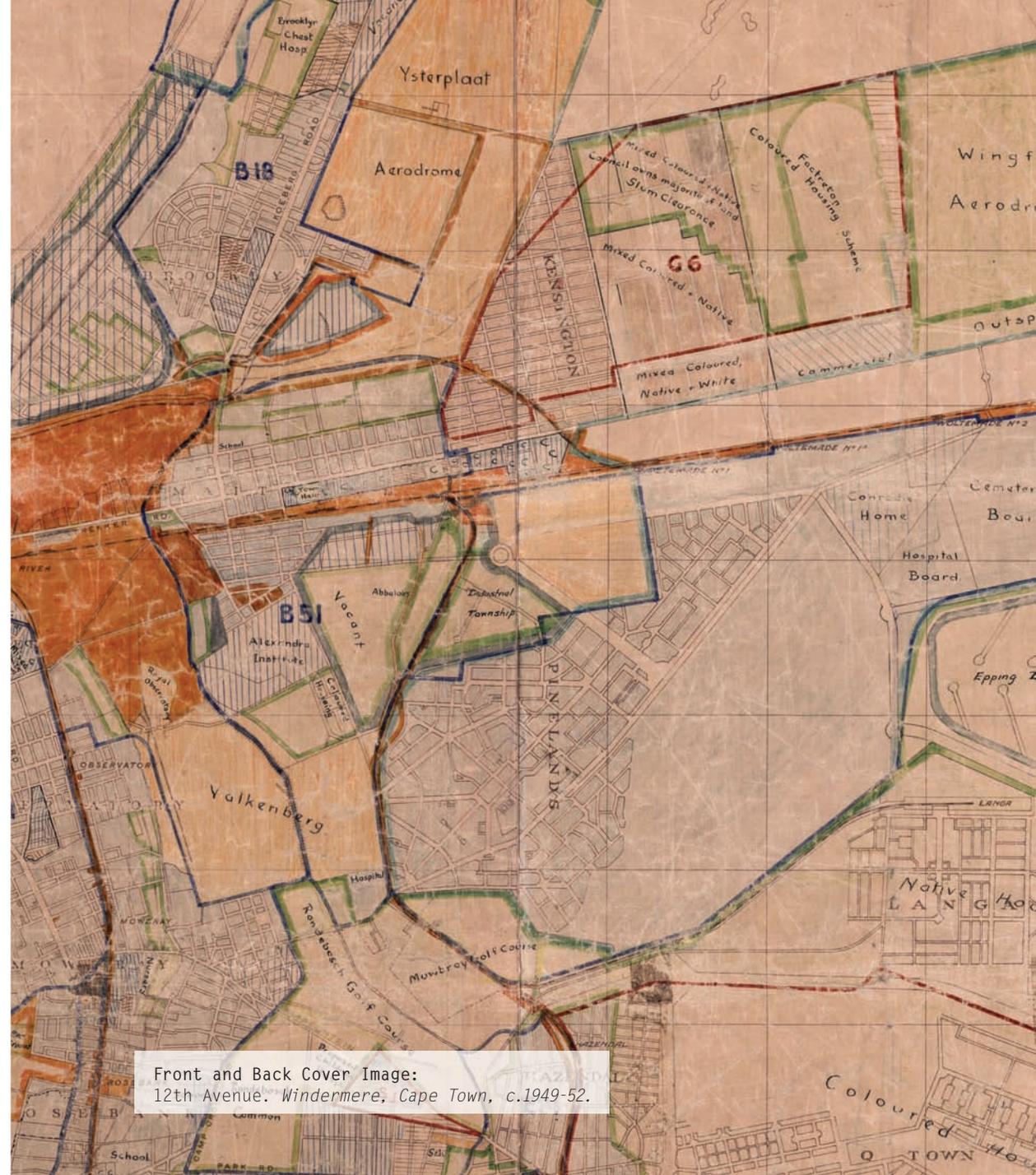
Front and Back Cover Image:
12th Avenue. *Windermere, Cape Town, c.1949-52*.