

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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***Ernest Cole Photographer* presents groundbreaking work
by one of South Africa's earliest and most important
anti-apartheid photographers**

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New York University's Grey Art Gallery presents ***Ernest Cole Photographer***, comprising 125 gelatin silver prints—at once wrenching, subtle, and poetic—by one of South Africa's first and greatest black photojournalists. *Ernest Cole Photographer* is the first solo museum exhibition of Cole's photography. The rare black-and-white prints in the exhibition have been drawn from Cole's stunning archive—now in the care of Gothenburg's Hasselblad Foundation, which organized the show.

Through multiple series of incendiary photographs, Cole (1940–1990) created a cogent, harrowing portrait of black life during apartheid. Yet despite their power and historic importance, the works have received little attention since 1967, when Cole's groundbreaking book, *House of Bondage*, was published, with an introduction by Joseph Lelyveld. *Ernest Cole Photographer* presents the images along with astute captions, bearing stark witness to the wide spectrum of human experience as black people were forced to negotiate every aspect of their lives during the apartheid era.

Grey Art Gallery Director Lynn Gumpert notes, "Ernest Cole not only documented life in South Africa but also pushed for radical change. Through his trenchant critiques of institutionalized segregation and his celebrations of human resilience, Cole challenged the status quo, and his work continues to speak incisively to contemporary issues of inequity and poverty, in the United States and the world over. By exposing the evils of apartheid in images captured at the front lines, the exhibition constitutes both a body of evidence and a moral reckoning."

Cole was born in the black freehold township of Eersterust, Pretoria. Later he and his family were forcibly relocated to the township of Mamelodi, in compliance with the Group Areas Act. Having taken up photography as a teenager, in 1958 he landed a position as a darkroom assistant at *DRUM*, a black lifestyle magazine in Johannesburg. There, he mingled with young black South African photographers, journalists, jazz musicians, and community leaders in the burgeoning anti-apartheid movement. In the mid-1960s, inspired by Henri Cartier-Bresson's books, Cole embarked on his dangerous life mission: to produce a volume that would awaken the rest of the world to apartheid's corrosive effects.



"All stand packed together on the floors and seats."
(Caption from *House of Bondage*, 1967)
© The Ernest Cole Family Trust
Courtesy the Hasselblad Foundation

Published by Random House in New York, *House of Bondage* is a graphic and hard-hitting exposé of the racism and economic inequality underpinning the apartheid system. It was immediately banned in South Africa, but contraband copies played an important role in shaping the country's emerging tradition of activist photography. As stated in the book, "Three hundred years of white supremacy in South Africa has placed us in bondage, stripped us of dignity, robbed us of self-esteem, and surrounded us with hate."

In an essay for the *Grey Gazette* accompanying the exhibition, NYU professor Ulrich Baer observes: "The pernicious apartheid regime forced black South Africans to be constantly mindful of how whites regarded them, lest they suffer severe penalties for overstepping a written or unwritten rule. In order to witness this oppressive reality Cole had to step outside of the awareness of surveillance.... [He] had to see his subjects in ways not permitted in South Africa: as beautiful, as connected, as human, as alive.... *House of Bondage* shows the apartheid world within the world but also hints at a larger, yet unrealized world where black people could be seen, or choose not to be seen, on their own terms."

Cole's mastery rests not only in his personal daring and desire to capture the extraordinary in the ordinary as it was defined by apartheid but also in his skillful use of camera techniques. A singularly gifted storyteller, he deploys striking perspectives and framing to elicit emotional responses. In a photograph taken on the street in central Johannesburg, for example, Cole uses a head-on camera angle to evoke the process of checking passes, with the weight of his gaze bearing down on the confrontation between a young black man and a black police officer. Caught within Cole's frame are concerned black bystanders alongside whites—including a plainclothes detective whom Cole unveils with the adjacent newspaper poster blaring today's headline: "Police swoop again." In another image, he harnesses the serialized image's rhetorical power, offering an oblique view of a line of naked men awaiting medical inspection, drawing viewers' eyes along the contours of each exposed body. In the background he shows us the clinic too full to care for its patients.



No known caption
(According to Struan Robertson and others, Johannesburg city benches were for whites only and were so inscribed. There were no "blacks only" benches in Johannesburg; blacks sat on the curbstones.)
© The Ernest Cole Family Trust
Courtesy the Hasselblad Foundation

Often working clandestinely, with a hidden camera, Cole photographed lines of migrant mineworkers waiting to be discharged from their labor; parks and benches marked "Europeans Only"; young men arrested and handcuffed for entering cities without their passes; crowds crammed to the rafters in commuter trains. He also depicted a schoolchild studying by candlelight; worshippers in their Sunday best; and intimate moments of children at play, mothers smiling, couples dancing, and friends joking. In 1966, during his final months in South Africa, Cole spent time with a band of *tsotsis* (street gangsters), gaining their trust and dispassionately recording their activities. In one jarring series, we see them attack and rob a white passerby, stealing his weekly paycheck.

Arrested by the police, Cole was offered two options: join their ranks as an informer or be sent to prison. He quickly fled to Europe, taking with him little more than the layouts for his book. He spent the remaining 23 years of his life in painful exile, travelling between Sweden and the United States. Uprooted from his home and community and removed from the circumstances that had fired his creative imagination, he was unable to find his bearings. After settling in New York in 1975, he was often destitute, living on city streets and in the subways. In 1990, he died

of pancreatic cancer at the age of 49—one week after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, which Cole had viewed on television from his hospital bed.

“Ernest Cole’s life and work were dominated by the apartheid system. It was the theme of his most important photographic work, it was the reason for his going into exile and becoming a stateless, but recognized, stranger in the world,” notes exhibition curator Gunilla Knape, research consultant at the Hasselblad Foundation. “The story of Ernest Cole is very little known and this exhibition is an attempt to shed light on his life and work, and to make part of a large collection of his photographs available to a broad international audience, not the least in Cole’s native country.”

Were it not for Cole’s foresight in giving a collection of his prints to Tio Fotografer (a Swedish photographers’ association), which later donated them to the Hasselblad Foundation, we would not have access to his original images today, for during his years of destitution nearly all his possessions were lost. Bringing this remarkable artist’s powerful works to the international stage, *Ernest Cole Photographer* commemorates his pioneering efforts to capture the complex truths of day-to-day, lived experience during a brutal era.

Exhibition Catalogue

Ernest Cole Photographer is accompanied by a fully illustrated 264-page catalogue with tritone images and three essays exploring Cole’s life and work. In “Ernest Cole in the House of Bondage,” Cole’s friend, fellow photographer, and studio mate Struan Robertson locates Cole’s life in the context of apartheid, detailing his artistic drive and intelligence amid extremely difficult life circumstances; in “A Slight Small Youngster with an Enormous Rosary: Ernest Cole’s Documentation of Apartheid,” South African journalist and art critic Ivor Powell explores Cole’s biography and artistic achievements; and in “Notes on the Life of Ernest Cole (1940–1990),” Gunilla Knape traces Cole’s trajectory from his boyhood through his professional triumphs and struggles. Published by Steidl and the Hasselblad Foundation, the catalogue also includes technical notes on Cole’s archive and a selected bibliography. The catalogue is available through the Grey Art Gallery for \$55.00.

Grey Gazette

To complement the exhibition catalogue, the Grey will publish a special edition of the *Grey Gazette*—available to visitors free of charge—with essays by NYU professors Ulrich Baer, on Ernest Cole and the photography of witnessing, and C. Daniel Dawson, on Cole’s photograph *Earnest boy squats on haunches and strains to follow lesson in heat of packed classroom*, along with excerpts from Joseph Lelyveld’s introduction to Cole’s book *House of Bondage* (1967), in which he recounts working with Cole as the *New York Times* correspondent in South Africa.

Exhibition Tour

Ernest Cole Photographer made its debut in Johannesburg and toured across South Africa in 2010–11. In spring 2012 the exhibition was shown at the Hasselblad Center, Gothenburg, and Kristianstad Konsthall, both in Sweden, and in autumn 2012 half the exhibition was shown at the Barbican Centre in London, as part of *Everything Was Moving: Photography from the 60s and 70s*. In 2013 *Ernest Cole Photographer* was on view at UCLA’s Fowler Museum in Los Angeles, and in spring 2014 it traveled to the Preus Museum in Horten, Norway.

Sponsorship

Ernest Cole Photographer was organized by the Hasselblad Foundation, Gothenburg, Sweden. The presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is made possible in part by the generous support of the New York State Council on the Arts; the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust.



About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, film, video, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003
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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge