

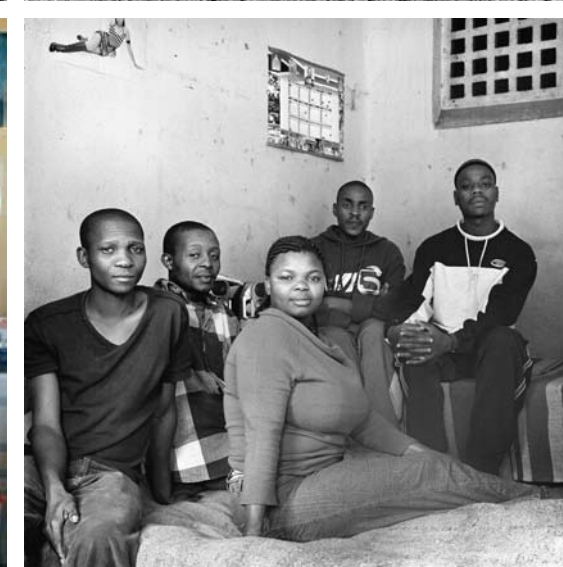
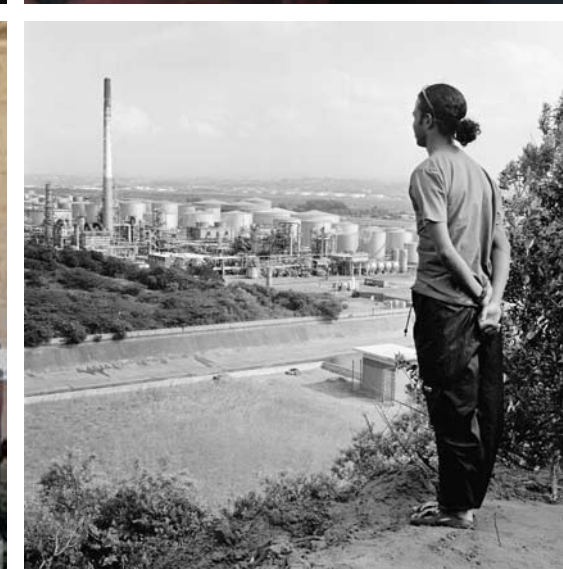
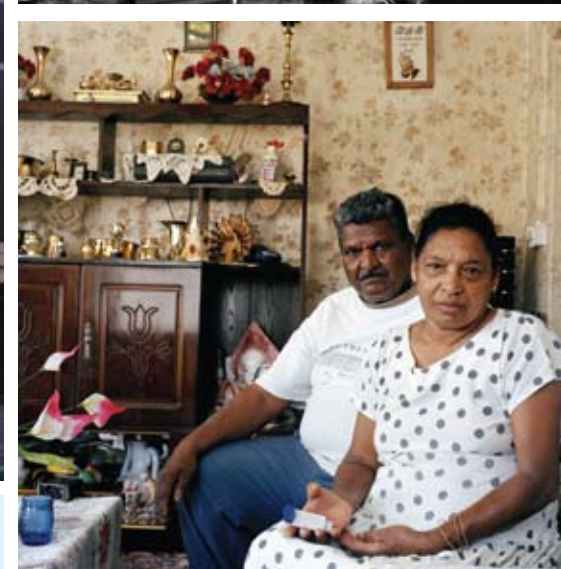
# BREATHING SPACES

SURVIVING IN THE NOXIOUS ENVIRONMENT OF DURBAN'S SOUTH BASIN, AN INTIMATE INVESTIGATION OF THE LIVES OF PEOPLE IN MEREBANK, WENTWORTH AND LAMONTVILLE.

A project by Jenny Gordon  
& Marijke du Toit







These photographs are the result of an interdisciplinary partnership between Jenny Gordon, a photographer and lecturer at Rhodes University, and Marijke du Toit, an historian in the history department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Their project, which began in 2002, has focused on documenting a particular area of Durban, known as the South Basin, which incorporates the working-class suburbs of Merebank, Wentworth and Lamontville. There are many oil refineries and other industries here which have caused heavy pollution, resulting in a community that has suffered ill health for many years.

Although Gordon's photographs concentrate mainly on the social issues of the area, there is always a suggestion of how the landscape and its spaces are constructed, underpinning the emphasis on the inhabitants. Gordon's richly coloured panoramic landscapes give a view of what at first appear to be twinkling, glamorous, lights, echoing the ships at sea but on closer examination reveal themselves to be machines that spew out dangerous emissions into the homes that are dwarfed by the overarching giant spewing black smoke into the air.

There are also the quieter, more intimate and often hidden spaces of the domestic interiors. There is a contrast between power and fragility, which is constantly played out in the photographs of the inhabitants of this area.

A major issue addressed by the photographs is the ill health and disease of the people who are being engulfed by their noxious environment. The photos are documentary in nature and show interior domestic spaces where the narratives of illness and confinement are often hidden from the public gaze. Many of these photos consciously place people in a specific context with the objects they treasure around them, emphasising personal narratives. Illness is not always apparent but visual clues, such as the presence of an asthma pump, bring an awareness of the lives being led.

When Gordon's images were exhibited at the Durban Art Gallery last year, they were juxtaposed with photos taken by members of the community, giving them a voice in the exhibition. This approach is becoming more prevalent among activist curators and artists and one which is long overdue. The sense of agency was further developed by exhibiting older family portraits, adding an historical dimension to the discourse.

The exhibition is part of a much larger project, which has been ongoing since 2002 and which has been shown in various manifestations in different spaces including neighbourhood libraries and the UKZN campus. Workshops were held with various groups, many of whom have benefited from learning the skills of photography while being sensitised to environmental issues. At each venue, comments were elicited from the viewers, who are then able to participate fully in the process and become part of the archive of the exhibition.

The project is an excellent example of how art can be genuinely socially committed and where the voices of the curators are shared with those of the subjects in a manner which is empowering and still satisfies the aesthetic demands of a fine exhibition.

*This is an edited version of Carol Brown's review of the Breathing Spaces exhibition, which was originally published on ArtThrob.*



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1. Feona Kahn on the balcony of her family's flat in Dinapur Road, Merebank. The Engen oil refinery is visible in the background. 2. Boys from Wentworth in front of the Engen Oil refinery. 3. Taking a photograph in the barbershop at Wema hostel. Gordon is behind the tripod and to the right Du Toit can be seen talking to the barber. 4. Latasha Webster (right), and her cousin Lucinda Booysen who has fought auto-immune hepatitis. She also has chronic asthma. Austerville. 5. Fazlala having her hair done by Ursula Pechey in Hime Street, Austerville. 6. Lorna McDonald at the Memorial Wall in Austerville. Lorna is touching the name of her brother who was stabbed to death by a member of a local gang. The wall remembering young men who have died in gang violence now also bears the names of those who die from Aids. 7. The Govenders at home in Dinapur Road, Merebank. 8. Darryl Govender looks at the Sapref oil refiner from Buldana Road in Merebank. 9. Nomsa Molly Malinga with her daughter Senzi and grandson Bongani, at their Pungula Avenue home in Gijima, Lamontville. 10. Olga Labuschagne, her grandson Quinton and his friend Peter in her flat, Hime Street, Austerville. 11. Three women working their gardens in the shadow of the planes flying overhead. 12. Disposable nappies for sale at a house overlooking Mondli. 13. Dudu Dlamini in the Wema men's hostel. 14. Chenece, Anita, Precious and Faith play with bricks wrapped up as dolls. Michael and Mervin are behind, Tara Road, Wentworth. 15. Dulcie Marce in her lounge at Quality Street Flats in Austerville. 16. Zanele Ngcobo in the room she shares with her partner and four other men, Wema hostel, Lamontville. 17. Hafiza Reebee at home in Shillong Road, Merebank.

**Previous page:** The view from George Bridger's third floor flat in Hime Street, Austerville, showing the boundary between residents and the industries they live with.