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Bieber and the power to not judge

BY ROBYN SASSEN ON NOVEMBER 5, 2018 • ([LEAVE A COMMENT](#))



BABY bear in flight: *Cotlands baby sanctuary for HIV/Aids children*, a 2000 photograph by Jodi Bieber, printed on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta paper.

RESPECT. YOU RECOGNISE it as you look at the children, the dispossessed, the poor, the street-friendly, the felons in Jodi Bieber's photographs. It derives from the photographer. It's a source of nutrition infused in how the subject exists in her frame. Curated by Reney Warrington, Rosebank's Foto.Za gallery has assembled 70 pieces from three published collections and a photo essay by Bieber, and it's a knockout.

Between Darkness and Light is a modest-sized exhibition. It is doable for you to walk past each image and give yourself time to look at each with care, in maybe an hour. But as you approach the first, a strange thing happens. You realise something more: there's a lifetime of ideas and opinions and fire and context in each. These can never be just pleasant images. They're doors into lives, opened with grace, which you stand at, humbly and with privilege.

Four little girls stand in a row. They're neighbourhood pals, and yet in the way in which each of them looks at the lens, something of their past and future is frozen here. Bieber's image of a public swimming pool in Soweto does something similar. All at once you're immersed in the relation between characters, and you're glorying in the stories and sub-stories that define the work. These images can never be downplayed into 'snaps'. There is too much invested in the ebb and flow of the image. The cuteness of the babies is filtered through a lens that enables you to see them as people, not pictures.

In her black and white series, there are many children in a variety of contexts; many may discomfort you. But then you look into the faces of the sitters and you see a world which is not about you. You see the Coloured township of Westbury with its texture and day-to-day dreams; not all of them are pitiful or broken. There is joy and there is humour. And all at once, it's like you're gazing into a painting by Vermeer, because of how this photographer allows light to touch her subject matter.

Bieber's approach is unique; yet it stands its ground alongside the work of more famous photographers such as David Goldblatt and Roger Ballen. Bieber's work embodies a very specific energy. It's like she's 'one of the guys' and not a curious bystander or privileged impostor into an otherwise private context. The work has levity and it's compelling it doesn't force you emotionally in any direction. Rather, it presents things with a fresh directness. Above all, it is her photographs of young people that sing with a vibrancy, even if the subject matter is disturbing.

Bieber's photo essay in this exhibition is a curious and haunting foray. It's focused on incarcerated women. Each looks back at you from within her own space: the bunk bed in the jail which she now occupies, with her possessions that make it 'home'. Her crime? All their crimes? They're women who have killed their husbands. And as you look into the eyes of each of them, not knowing the story, not knowing why, you see something. And you take away

that something with you, but still you do not know what it is, and you're unable to judge for that reason. They're extraordinary portraits that draw from Bieber's unique sense of empathy.

- *Between Darkness and Light* by Jodi Bieber is at Foto.za Gallery in Rosebank, until November 30. Call 011 327 6376.

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