Photos that defined – and defied – racist SA

For all to see, iconic Drum pictures by Jürgen Schadeberg

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The dark days of apartheid can be seen in an exhibition of historic images by Jürgen Schadeberg, photographer for Drum magazine in the 1950s at the Killarney Country Club in Johannesburg, from September 19 to 21. The exhibition forms part of the launch of his memoir, The Way I See It.

The exhibition by Stephan Welz & Co is a collection of 60 prints shot by an inspired photographer, who, at the age of 20, fled from fascism in Germany only to find rampant racism in his mother’s new homeland, South Africa.

Included in Schadeberg’s defiant photos for Drum – the pioneering black lifestyle magazine that riled the government in the 1950s when apartheid was at its worst – are now famous images such as:

• A young Miriam Makeba in a bikini on a mine dump.
• Schoolboy Hugh Masekela with a new trumpet donated by Louis Armstrong.
• Jazz singer Dolly Rathebe in a bikini on a mine dump.
• The Women’s March of 1955.
• Sophiatown’s forced removal.
• The funeral of the Sharpeville massacre victims.

With the advent of democracy, Schadeberg in 1994, as freelancer, took the iconic photo of Nelson Mandela, pensive, gazing out from the Robben Island cell where he had been imprisoned for 27 years.

Mandela remembered Schadeberg’s sympathy with the struggle in the 1960s and seemed more relaxed in this picture than others shot by his contemporaries.

Schadeberg’s pictures are acclaimed globally but little was known about the strife that accompanied him. His new memoir.

To shoot a photo spread of the iconic, sexy jazz singer, Rathebe, photographer and model climbed a mine dump to set the scene for bikini “beach” shots.

Here, four policemen suddenly appeared, accusing the couple of breaking the infamous Immorality Act. Rathebe was ordered to pull her dress up so the sergeant could check her panties, while his officers were on their knees frantically searching the sand for “evidence” of intercourse.

After being arrested, with Rathebe dumped in the back of the police van, Drum corroborated Schadeberg’s explanation.

The station officer advised him to leave the “black Communist rag”, never trust blacks, and to learn Afrikaans to share in the country’s “great future”. There was no apology for the humiliated young woman.

When Schadeberg was sent to shoot a shy promising singer, Makeba, hostile studio owners spitefully provided an old junk-filled studio. On the way, there had been a tense drive through the CBD with angry whites shouting abuse at Schadeberg through the window of his car for allowing Makeba to use the passenger seat.

Black women had to sit in the back of white men’s cars to show that the “boas” had no sexual intention. So, after the scary drive – with a terrified Makeba’s head down – the couple sat down trying to create a backdrop for the now famous shot of Mama Afrika at the microphone. That wallpaper behind her was old record covers found in the studio, laboriously attached by photographer and subject.

Some Schadeberg “undercover” photos are disturbing. His secret shot of a horsemanship with whip riding through Lewheld crop fields recall old movies with cowboys herding cattle. Then you read that the whip was there to boost productivity from black workers on the ground by a potato farmer’s “boss boy” in the saddle.

And the heart-wrenching image of a smiling Boland black farm worker, tipping his tin mug to the sky to savour the last drop of the reject wine he had queued for as part of his daily wages. The labourers – doomed to alcoholism by this despicable “Tot System” – included women and 14-year-old children.

To test apartheid’s effect on worship, Schadeberg, with hidden camera, took black colleagues to white churches. An Anglican Church parishioner removed his black colleague from the pew while the Seventh Day Adventists kicked his friend out, already at the door. Clutching Bibles, some chased him and Schadeberg down the street. The Dutch Reformed Church insisted the photographer and black reporter stay for the full service... to allow elders to summon the police who were sitting outside with automatic rifles after the last amen had been said.

The Jürgen Schadeberg Exhibition of limited-edition prints has been curated by Antonette Murdoch, and staged by fine art dealers, Stephan Welz & Co, in collaboration with Schadeberg and publishers, Pan MacMillan. The exhibition is open from 10am to 5pm from September 18 to 21.

Schadeberg, 86, lives in Spain with his wife, Claudia.