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Mikhael Subotzky and the Goodman Gallery: constructions of cultural capital

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Abstract

In this research report I look at how the Goodman Gallery has played a role in the construction of cultural capital around the contemporary South African photographer Mikhael Subotzky (1981). Unpacking Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" (1986: 243), and applying it to the South African art industry, I explore the direct impact that commercial galleries have on the building of artists' careers through acts that result in the construction of cultural capital, and in what capacity they do this.

Little has been written in South African art history about local commercial art galleries, and my interest in the role that they play in the construction of art history stems from my own involvement in this sector, as a commercial art gallery curator. As businesses, these institutions have profitable ambitions, and by successfully promoting the artists they represent, they are affecting the course of South African art history.

Due to the potentially vast nature of this subject I have chosen to focus on one contemporary artist, Mikhael Subotzky, and his relationship with the one South African gallery he has been affiliated to throughout his entire professional career, the Goodman Gallery. As much as every person's life is different, every person's career is different too, and in this way I cannot use Subotzky's career trajectory to explain all other contemporary South African artists' careers, but I do believe that the impact that commercial galleries can have on the cultural capital surrounding artists in South Africa is a topic that should be explored further.

I argue that there are various ways of gauging the cultural capital surrounding an artist in the South African art industry, and that one can look at various aspects of an artist's career and assess their cultural capital. I substantiate this claim in this paper, and indeed why it is important to understand what role the commercial gallery can play in this construction.

(Keywords: cultural capital; Pierre Bourdieu; commercial art gallery; Goodman Gallery; Mikhael Subotzky; South African art industry)