

## 'Racism' of early colour photography explored in art exhibition

Artists spent a month in South Africa taking pictures on decades-old film engineered with only white faces in mind

**David Smith** in Johannesburg

guardian.co.uk, Friday 25 January 2013 16.57 GMT



'Kodak Shirley' cards used for calibrating skin tones in photographs were named after the first model featured. Photograph: Adam Broomberg And Oliver Chanarin/Goodman Gallery

Can the camera be racist? The question is explored in an exhibition that reflects on how Polaroid built an efficient tool for South Africa's apartheid regime to photograph and police black people.

The London-based artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin spent a month in South Africa taking pictures on decades-old film that had been engineered with only white faces in mind. They used Polaroid's vintage ID-2 camera, which had a "boost" button to increase the flash – enabling it to be used to photograph black people for the notorious passbooks, or "dompas", that allowed the state to control their movements.

The result was raw snaps of some of the country's most beautiful flora and fauna from regions such as the Garden Route and the Karoo, an attempt by the artists to subvert what they say was the camera's original, sinister intent.

Broomberg and Chanarin say their work, on show at Johannesburg's Goodman Gallery, examines "the radical notion that prejudice might be inherent in the medium of photography itself". They argue that early colour film was predicated on white

skin: in 1977, when Jean-Luc Godard was invited on an assignment to Mozambique, he refused to use Kodak film on the grounds that the stock was inherently "racist".

The light range was so narrow, Broomberg said, that "if you exposed film for a white kid, the black kid sitting next to him would be rendered invisible except for the whites of his eyes and teeth". It was only when Kodak's two biggest clients – the confectionary and furniture industries – complained that dark chocolate and dark furniture were losing out that it came up with a solution.

The artists feel certain that the ID-2 camera and its boost button were Polaroid's answer to South Africa's very specific need. "Black skin absorbs 42% more light. The button boosts the flash exactly 42%," Broomberg explained. "It makes me believe it was designed for this purpose."

In 1970 Caroline Hunter, a young chemist working for Polaroid in America, stumbled upon evidence that the company was effectively supporting apartheid. She and her partner Ken Williams formed the Polaroid Workers Revolutionary Movement and campaigned for a boycott. By 1977 Polaroid had withdrawn from South Africa, spurring an international divestment movement that was crucial to bringing down apartheid.

The title of the exhibition, *To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light*, refers to the coded phrase used by Kodak to describe a new film stock created in the early 1980s to address the inability of earlier films to accurately render dark skin.

The show also features norm reference cards that always used white women as a standard for measuring and calibrating skin tones when printing photographs. The series of "Kodak Shirleys" were named after the first model featured. Today such cards show multiple races.

Broomberg and Chanarin made two recent trips to Gabon to photograph a series of rare Bwiti initiation rituals using Kodak film stock, scavenged from eBay, that had expired in 1978. Working with outdated chemical processes, they salvaged just a single frame. Broomberg said: "Anything that comes out of that camera is a political document. If I take a shot of the carpet, that's a political document."