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 archives. Gordon’s richly coloured panoramic landscapes give a view of what at first appear to be backdropping, glamorous, lights, evoking the ship-as-area, but on closer examination reveal themselves to be machines that spew out dangerous emissions into the homes that are dotted by the surrounding giant spouting 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 dis-ease 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 the family portraits, adding a 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 places 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 participants, who were 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 situation which is empowering and still satisfies the aesthetic demands of the art world.

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