



# Roger Ballen

Iziko South African National Gallery  
6 November 2010 – 16 January 2011



*Froggie Boy, USA, 1977*

Front cover: *Portrait of sleeping girl*, 2000

Back cover: *Culmination*, 2007

**R**OGER BALLEEN is one of South Africa's most recognized photographers both locally and internationally, known for his singular vision and for images of great emotional power and aesthetic richness.

Born in the United States in 1950 and growing up in New York, Ballen has often acknowledged the providential circumstances that provided early opportunities for acquaintance with not only the work of many great Modernist photographers, but sometimes the photographers themselves. Ballen's mother worked for Magnum, and between 1970 and 1973 owned a gallery on Madison Avenue in New York.

In spite of this, photography was not initially Ballen's first choice of career. During the early seventies, he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, but later studied for a Ph.D in Mineral Economics, graduating in 1981. In the period between his academic pursuits he spent five years travelling the world, including a visit to South Africa, after which he returned to the United States with his South African wife. His international journeys provided material for his first book of photographs, *Boyhood*, published in 1979.

Roger Ballen's South African photography began when he returned to this country after receiving his Ph.D. While working as a geologist, he was required to travel through the rural countryside, where he was struck by the precarious existence of those living in the marginalized communities he encountered. His book, *Dorps: Small Towns of South Africa*, was produced in 1986 and demonstrates the photographer's fascination with architecture and the interior spaces that bear the distinctive imprint of those that inhabit them. *Platteland: Images from Rural South Africa* (1994) focuses on the residents themselves, and at the time of publication was considered somewhat controversial.

Ballen's work subsequently moved away from a classical style of documentary photography to a more imaginative means of exploring 'the human condition' and the human subconscious, where the photographer worked in a directly collaborative manner with his subjects. This trajectory becomes increasingly apparent in *Outland* (2001), *Shadow Chamber* (2005) and in his most recent book, *Boarding House* (2009). His photographs exhibit a sense of the theatrical and exploit the tension between the fictional and the 'real'. In the self-contained worlds that he creates, puppies, rats, disarticulated limbs, wire, drawings and old furniture perform roles within the claustrophobic confines of a doorless stage that are sometimes humorous and nearly always disturbing.

This exhibition tracks the evolution of Roger Ballen's unique style. A sense of continuity is apparent in a number of visual 'threads' and the use of graphic elements, such as electrical wiring, that can be traced from his latest work back to his earliest photographs in the small towns of South Africa.

Ballen's work has been exhibited in notable institutions throughout the world and is represented in many significant museum collections, such as those of Bibliothèque Nationale, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



*Front Door, Hopetown, 1983*



*Dresie and Casie, twins, Western Transvaal, 1993*

## Roger Ballen

In conversation with Pam Warne

*You grew up surrounded by the work of many great Modernist photographers. Are there any particular works that you recall responding strongly to, or which, in retrospect, you think may have shaped the direction of your photography?*

I bought my first camera when I was thirteen. By that stage, in the early sixties, my mother had been working for Magnum for some years. Through her conversation, and particularly her collecting, I was exposed to the work of many photographers - some of them now considered historically important. In this milieu there was a complete belief in the value of photography; and particularly in its ability to capture and convey meaning in a socio-documentary context.

At an early age I was captivated by the work of Paul Strand. He operated as a photojournalist, but considered himself an artist. He was a street photographer;

yet he worked with his subjects in a very intimate way. Even today his work seems timeless (and yet, in its idealism, it now strikes me as belonging to a previous era). His deep respect for the inherent formal qualities of a photograph, and his use of the square format, were to be significant for me. He was my first role model.

I got to know Andre Kertesz. He had left Europe for the USA during the Second World War. Kertesz had been influenced by the surrealists: their qualities of puzzlement and contradiction were intrinsic to his eye. My mother was the first person to sell his work in the States at a photographic gallery that she had opened. Americans had considered his work unsalable; he in turn was appalled at the unsophisticated state of photography in the USA. I took a photograph on Kertesz' verandah on Washington Square one day, looking down on the park; to be in his place, so to speak, to see as he did. It was a kind of tribute to him. I owe to



*Sergeant F de Bruin, Department of Prisons employee, Orange Free State, 1992*

Kertesz the understanding of enigma and formal complexity that underlie much of my work.

Among other photographers who have influenced me were Henri Cartier-Bresson, Elliot Erwitt and Walker Evans.

*Boyhood (1979) was your earliest published body of work and one that South African audiences are probably least familiar with. Could you describe the circumstances*

*around the creation of this series? Is it, in essence, autobiographical?*

In 1973 I left the US on a five year journey that would take me through much of the East and Africa. As I travelled I began to observe and to photograph boys. They seemed to share a universal language: instinct and raw emotion that were primary wherever I went in the world. As I participated in their lives through my camera, I began to reanimate the lost



boy inside me. In time, this led to the publication of my first book, *Boyhood*, in 1979.

*Your first South African project was Dorps: Small Towns of South Africa. You have frequently said that Dorps was the most important project of your career as a photographer. In what way did it differ from your previous work, and how did it provide a foundation for later work?*

Up to the time I started photographing in the dorps, my camera of choice had been the more portable, less visible thirty-five millimetre. In the dorps it gave way to a two-and-a-quarter Rolleiflex. The square format of the new camera fitted the greater stillness, the more classical and calculated composition of my new images. Its size meant a slower, more deliberate approach, a more consciously acknowledged relationship with the subject.

Further, the images became more frontal. In particular during that period (1982 to 1986), I began to use flash extensively and to shoot predominantly with a square format. Moreover, I found the type of subject that I would work with for many years and identified and photographed the important motifs that I would concentrate on such as wires, marks on the wall, stains, etc.

*When you arrived here, were you influenced by the work of any South African photographers?*

When I first arrived in South Africa in 1974 I was still quite influenced by field painting and some of the photographers that I mentioned previously. I spent many weekend afternoons in the library of the Bensusan Museum which at that time

was located on Empire road in Parktown. I was amazed with the quality of the books and magazines that were collected and was able to find inspiration in images that I found.

During my initial period in South Africa from 1974-76 I became quite friendly with John Brett Cohen. John knew the photographic scene in South Africa and was passionate about black and white photography. We were both very much 'street photographers' and we spent considerable time discussing our visions of what made an important photographer. At this same time I joined the Johannesburg Photographic Society, but found myself isolated as photographic technique dominated most of the discussions.

*Platteland was published in 1994. You have expressed in the past that you were shocked and puzzled by some of the hostile reactions to this work and have, on occasion, attributed criticism to the tyranny of political correctness. I find many of the portraits very arresting, but if taken at face value as documentary, the cumulative weight of the message could certainly be read as a pronouncement that a particular group of people are grotesquely physically, mentally or socially backward. But the subsequent direction of your photographic practice suggests other interpretations. You have spoken about the people you photographed as representing an archetype, as being symbolic of something else. Could you explain this?*

I believe that my photographs are more psychological in meaning. The pictures represent a psychological culture. At the same time they emanate from my own psyche. I have never considered myself a photo journalist or a politically orientated



*Puppy between feet, 1999*

photographer. It is my opinion that the most political transformations are psychological and that if my photographs transform the psyche of the people who view them then I have altered their political consciousness. My photographs in *Platteland* were more about the human condition than the social condition of a group of poor white people in South Africa. The images in this book depicted a universal sense of marginalisation, alienation and the inability to cope with

the chaos that exists around us. The reason that these photographs still have meaning to people who know nothing about South African history is that my viewers feel that an aspect of themselves is being reflected in the image.

*After Platteland, you stopped being a 'hobbyist photographer', as you describe it, to become 'a more serious artist'. Did you give up your work in geology to focus more completely on photography?*



*Eugene on the phone, 2000*

After *Platteland* was published in 1994, due to the great attention this book received I decided I should spend more of my working time taking photographs rather than practice my profession as a geologist. Rather than work intermittently, I began to work on specific days of the week. Instead of travelling around the countryside, I concentrated my work in Gauteng.

*In the late 1990s, there started to be a*

*change in your approach. Both you and your subjects became more active participants in your own work and the images also became less identifiably South African. What was behind these shifts? Was the reaction towards Platteland a contributory factor behind the change?*

Sometime in 1997-98 I began to view myself as an artist/photographer for the first time. For the two previous years I had travelled quite extensively in



Europe and was influenced by a number of photographers who were working outside of the traditional boundaries of documentary photography.

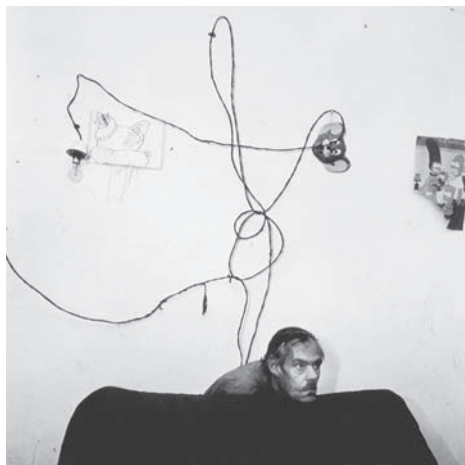
I have always felt that my work was fundamentally psychological and existential and that viewers were unable to relate to other aspects of my images because the people that I portrayed were so visually powerful.

I think that my work changed not so much because of the controversy that surrounded *Platteland*, but more likely as a result that I needed to find images that extended my understanding of myself and to photography. I think that if you're a sensitive artist, you're writing your own diary all the time. Your work is growing as you grow older.

*Outland was published in 2001. In a recent interview you said that while working in the period up to Outland, you were struggling to understand the meaning and purpose of your photography. You said that you remember thinking to yourself, 'one thing I'm trying to define is, "Is chaos fundamental to the world around us, or is order?"'*<sup>1</sup> Would you say that an exploration into that question is still key to your photography?

The question of whether there is some intrinsic order to life always will be a central question that I ponder as I become older. Nevertheless, this question was not foremost on my mind during the period from 2003 onwards. Other issues such as man's inherent relationship with nature dominated my thought.

*When talking to Shaun de Waal about the photographs from the late 1990s that appear in Outland, you said that your subjects 'were brought into another realm,*



*Head below wires, 1999*



*Head inside shirt, 2001*

*and that realm was my psyche' (2006).<sup>2</sup> Could you elaborate?*

From the mid-nineties onward my goal was not so much to record the world with my camera as I interacted with it, but to transform it through my psyche. The images that I began to create were fundamentally more and more a result of being transformed through my imagination.



*The chamber of the enigma, 2003*

*What were the changes in your work leading up to the publication of Shadow Chamber in 2005?*

In 2003 there was a fundamental shift in my work. The human face which had dominated my photographs for most of my career disappeared. Drawings and sculpture-like figures became central to the content and formal qualities of



*One arm goose, 2004*

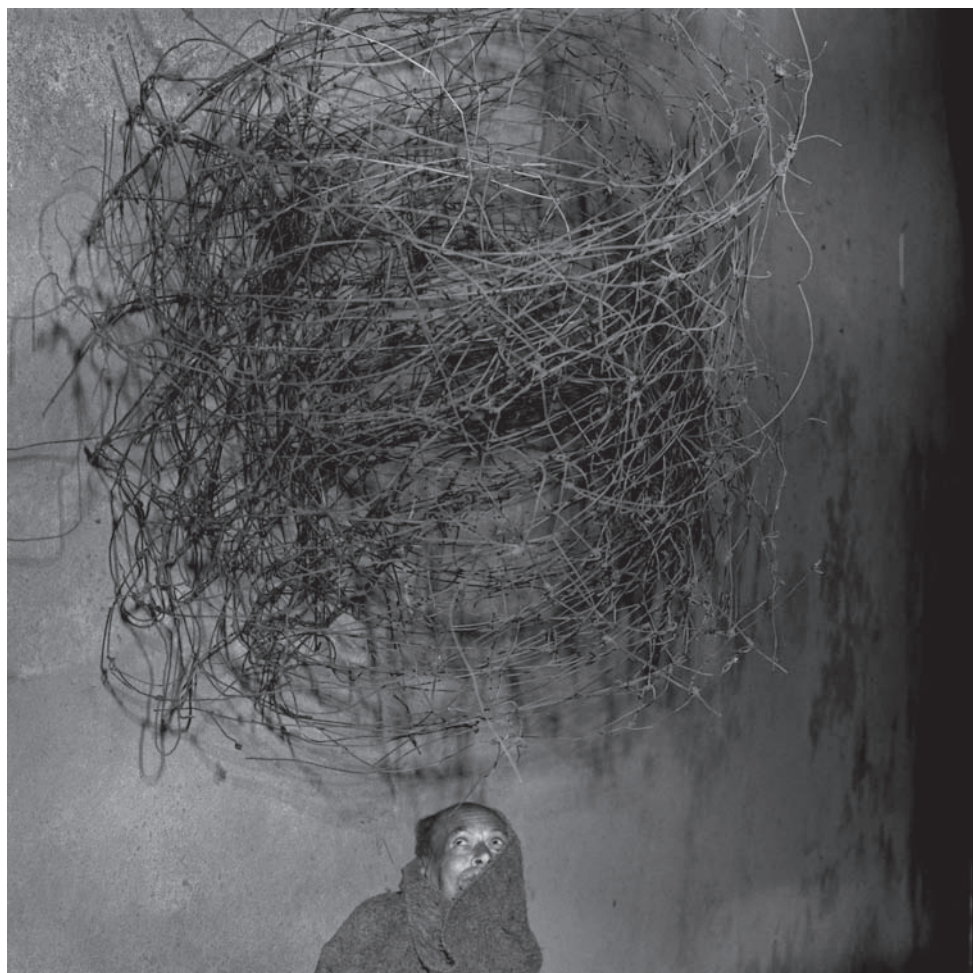
my images. The introduction of drawing and graffiti into my photographs added another dimension of meaning to my work; works started to incorporate aspects of painting and sculpture. Through this interaction I have been able to expand my vision of the world inside and outside of me. The sculptural objects and drawings add a peculiar level of meaning and complexity to the work. It is a style and vision that is my own and I truly think it's quite separate from anything in photography at this point in time.

*May the 'shadows' in your work be understood in the Jungian sense, as a 'reservoir for human darkness' – that part of our unconscious which loves to create external scapegoats for its own repressed inadequacies?*

The concept of the shadow in my work can be elucidated through an understanding of Jungian psychology. The Shadow is the side of our psyche that we are scared to confront, to come to grips with. Most people call it the dark side. For me the dark side has always been a source of light and energy. I often mention to people that one cannot find light without knowing the dark.

*Both you yourself, as well as people writing about your work, frequently mention the phrase 'the human condition'. But what exactly does 'the human condition' mean or imply to you?*

As I get older, the meaning of the human condition is rooted in the realisation that 'knowing more is knowing less.' We are doomed to leave this world without any clue as to why we were here, where we came from, and where we are going. This is a fate of utter marginalisation.



*Twirling wires, 2001*

*Is the title for **Boarding House**, which was published last year, a metaphor for human existence?*

The phrase *Boarding House* connotes to me a place of transitory existence somewhere between here and there. We come from nothingness and go back to nothingness.

*In some ways, your photographs make me think of the nightmares, of the*

*overwhelming terrors experienced by a small boy. Would this be off-beam, in terms of your intentions?*

My intentions in taking these images are to better understand myself. I do not take photographs to mimic what other people might experience or to predict how they might react. It is just not possible for me to understand how others will relate to my images.

*Without suggesting there should be, are there any reasons why women and girls are such a small minority in your photographs?*

There is no special reason why girls and woman are such a minority in my images; there are numerous types of subjects that also do not appear in my images. Nevertheless, I think I have a more intimate knowledge of how men interact in this world versus woman.

*The photographs of yours I find difficult to look at are those which show almost casual, gratuitous violence towards animals - I freely admit to 'sentimentality' towards animals. At the same time, animals seem to hold some indefinable power. Could you comment on the relationship between humans and animals in your photographs?*

I believe that the relationship between humans and animals is fundamentally



*Eulogy, 2004*





*Fragments, 2005*

antagonistic and to believe that the relationship is mutually beneficial is naive. The facts of human domination of nature speak for themselves. This is a holocaust beyond any war in human history.

*Your photographs are obviously rooted in physical reality, and the power of your images depends on the assumption that photography reflects this reality. So it's not surprising that people inevitably want to know whether the situation represented in an image is 'real' or fabricated. Although critics repeatedly point out that such questions are irrelevant, could you comment on this?*

I am not clear what is real in this world and what is not. Nevertheless, I would not hesitate to comment that the reality that is captured in my images is almost solely to do with my particular vision. I am certain that it is almost impossible for someone to create the aesthetic that I capture in my images even if they spent an equal time in the same place with an identical camera under similar conditions.

*I found what you said in an interview last year very interesting: 'What people want to hear is that I designed this in a studio and photographed it. That lets them off the hook, they will never come into this place... they can deny it. If it's out there, it's real and it's a menace to them. I want to make sure it's a menace. You have to deal with it.'*<sup>3</sup>

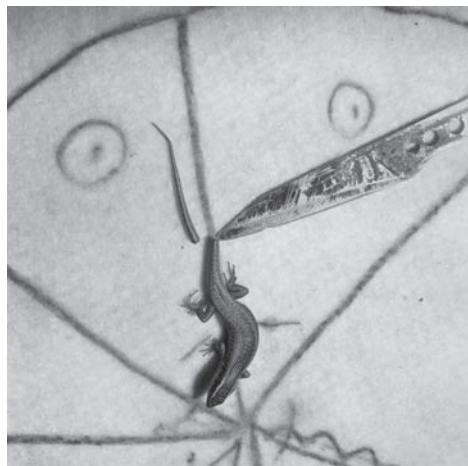
I believe that the central problem of humanity's inability to improve its overall situation is that the majority of people living on this planet are unable to come to grips with what they have repressed. This state of affairs manifests itself in behaviour patterns such a denial, aggression, and other negative acts. Until people take responsibility not only for their own behaviour, but confront and integrate their fundamental fears humanity's problems are likely to continue.

My purpose in taking photographs over the past forty years has ultimately been about defining myself; it has been fundamentally a psychological and existential journey rather than a political one.

*I understand that the photographs in Boarding House were made in collaboration with the residents of a Johannesburg warehouse where people actually live. I imagine that many of the actual inhabitants would be black. Is there any reason why black people rarely appear in the images?*

There is absolutely no reason why there seem to be less images in my *Boarding House* book of black people over other groups.

*I loved your assertion in 2005, to Heather Snider, that 'I don't intend to do anything but black and white film photography for*



*Sliced, 2007*

*the rest of my life'.<sup>4</sup> Why do you particularly like this medium?*

I have been shooting black and white film for nearly fifty years now. I believe I am part of the last generation that will grow up with this media. Black and white is a very minimalist art form and unlike colour photographs does not pretend to mimic the world in a manner similar to the way the human eye might perceive. Black and White is essentially an abstract way to interpret and transform what one might refer to as reality.

*Darius Himes, in a conversation you had with him in 2009 said: 'From any objective viewpoint, Roger Ballen operates as a one-man school of photography'.<sup>5</sup> Would you agree with this statement, or do you see correspondences between your work and that of any other photographers? Are there any contemporary photographers whose work you identify with or whom you particularly admire?*

At this point in time I do not see very many direct correspondences between what I am engaged in as a photographer

and other photographers. Nevertheless, I would not to deny that my work is influenced on occasion by other work.

I think the content of my work approximates a point between surrealism and art brut. Whilst these movements originated from painting, my images are not paintings, they are photographs, and as a result I have to work within the confines of this media.

Nearly every time I visit a country I find interesting images by contemporary photographers. It is difficult for me to mention particular names as I do not want to exclude many that I have seen but whose names I have lost track of. I currently spend more time viewing art forms other than photography, from caveman painting to abstract expressionism. My favourite period in the history of photography was in Europe during the surrealistic period of the 1920s and early 30s.

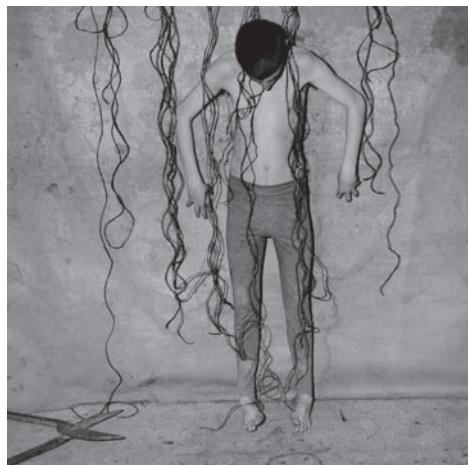
*Your work has, on occasion, been compared to that of Joel-Peter Witkin. Do you see any parallels at all?*

I think Witkin is obsessed with sexuality and the grotesque and does not pretend in any way to document reality. On the other hand, Witkin has been able to successfully integrate drawings into his images and his work is very formally composed. I believe his images are strong, psychological statements and perhaps emphasize what most individuals would refer to as the dark side.

*What is your relationship to the group Die Antwoord? Is this a collaboration, or an appropriation of your work into theirs? If the latter, do you take this as a compliment or as offensive and a misunderstanding of your work?*

Die Antwoord was very influenced and inspired by my photographs. Whilst I have mixed feelings about people using my work for their own needs, I generally feel quite positive that other artists and non-artists can find ways to integrate my work with theirs.

*Because of some of the controversy around your earlier work, its reception was, for a long time, more positive in the international arena than at home in South Africa. But in the last ten years there seems to have been a shift in perception. Would you agree that this is so?*



*Cut loose, 2005*

For all the reason stated earlier, I was very unhappy being labelled as 'the guy who photographed poor whites.' I certainly have sensed that the way people perceive me has changed dramatically in South Africa as well as the rest of the world in the last ten years. This change of perception is most dramatic among the young people in South Africa who view my earlier work with less emotion and a greater sense of objectivity.

*There are many photographers working in South Africa who enjoy the status of being regarded as artists in their own right, a position previously denied photographers. Do you think you are regarded as an artist or a photographer, and how do you regard yourself?*

When I view a retrospective exhibition like this one, I feel that I have solidified my essence – 'fixed my shadow'. If an artist is one who spends his life trying to define his being; I guess I would have to call myself an artist.



*Retreat, 2005*

1. Chas Bowie 2007. 'A conversation with Roger Ballen', SEESAW Magazine
2. Shaun de Waal 2006. 'The Decisive Moment'. *Mail and Guardian*, Friday supplement, February 24 to March 2 2006, p.4
3. Doug McClemon 31 March 2009. 'Roger Ballen in Conversation with Doug McClemon', Saatchi-Gallery.co.uk
4. Heather Snyder 2005. 'Interview between Roger Ballen and Heather Snider', *Eyemazing*, Summer 2005, Issue 7
5. Darius Himes 2009. 'Roger Ballen in Conversation', 15 November 2009 [Online] Available at: <http://dariushimes.com/blog/photography/roger-ballen-in-conversation.html>

