

Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal



Artist in focus

Roger Ballen Photography



PORTRAIT OF SLEEPING GIRL, 2000



UNTITLED, 2005



TOMMY, SAMSON AND A MASK, 2000

Foreword

The Art Gallery of Western Australia is pleased to present the exhibition 'Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal: Roger Ballen Photography'. Part of our 'Artist in focus' series, this exhibition is the first Australian overview of this important American born, South Africa-based, photographer's practice.

Over almost thirty years, Roger Ballen has produced some of the most compelling and thought-provoking images in contemporary photography. His work is unflinching, confronting and always deeply moving. With its roots in the photo-documentary tradition, Ballen's approach has expanded to become an unforgettable vision of the human condition.

We are especially indebted to Roger Ballen for so generously supporting this exhibition with loans of works and his absolute commitment to all levels of the project. I would also like to thank Ballen's assistant, Trish Fisher, for her key support and Bronwyn Rennex and Catherine Benz from Stills Gallery, Sydney. The dedication of Art Gallery of Western Australia staff has ensured the success of this exhibition. I would like to thank them for their professionalism.

'Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal: Roger Ballen Photography' has been devised as part of the FotoFreo Festival 2008. I am proud to offer a major international contribution to this important event.

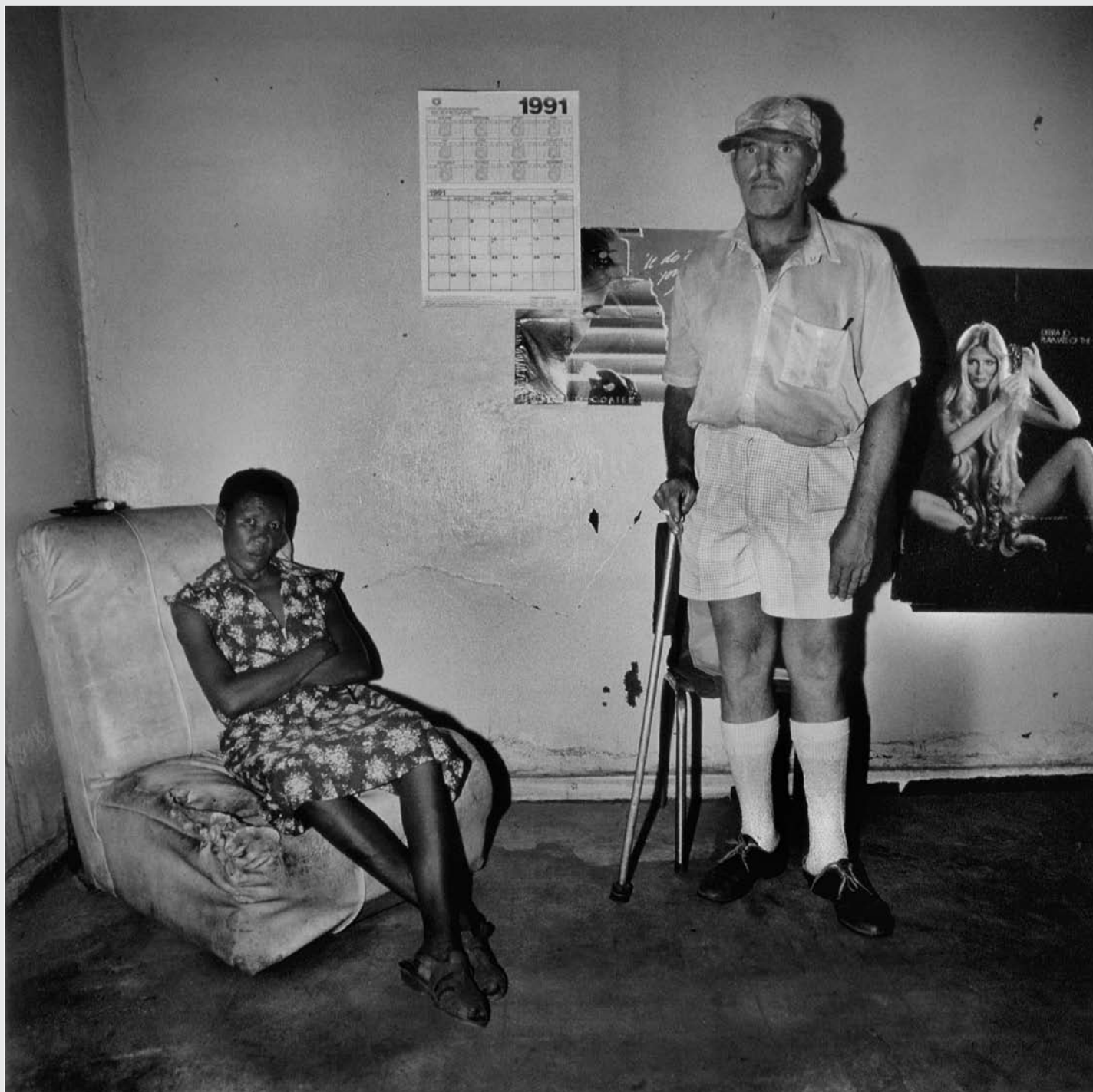
Alan R. Dodge
Director



SLEEPING BABY, 2000



TERMINUS, 2004



MAN AND MAID, NORTHERN CAPE, 1991

Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal: Roger Ballen Photography

Waking dreams are the ones that are important, the ones that come when I'm quietly sitting in a chair, gently letting my mind wander. When you sleep, you don't control your dream. I like to dive into a dream world that I've made or discovered; a world I choose¹.

David Lynch

A journey in search of a language

Unsettling, beautiful, tender and often brutal, the oeuvre of Roger Ballen is one of the most singular and searingly intense in art today. Presenting work made between 1983 and 2006, this exhibition explores the depth and nuances of his practice as it consistently strikes at the heart of what it means to be a human animal, driven by a range of fitful and barely understood forces. The span of material also takes in Ballen's shift from a photo-documentary style to a profoundly compelling psychological subjectivism – a waking dream in photographic form.

From the outset, Ballen's work possessed a restless heat and ambiguous visual poetry that somehow insisted on pulling away from the task of depicting the subject at hand and moving into other, far less determinate, far more complex, territory. Ballen himself terms the progression of his practice as a 'journey in search of a language'². Given that the seeds of the later work are evident in the earlier, it is an evolution where the grammar was present from the beginning, but where the full vocabulary, and consequent awareness of its possibilities, only gradually came into being.

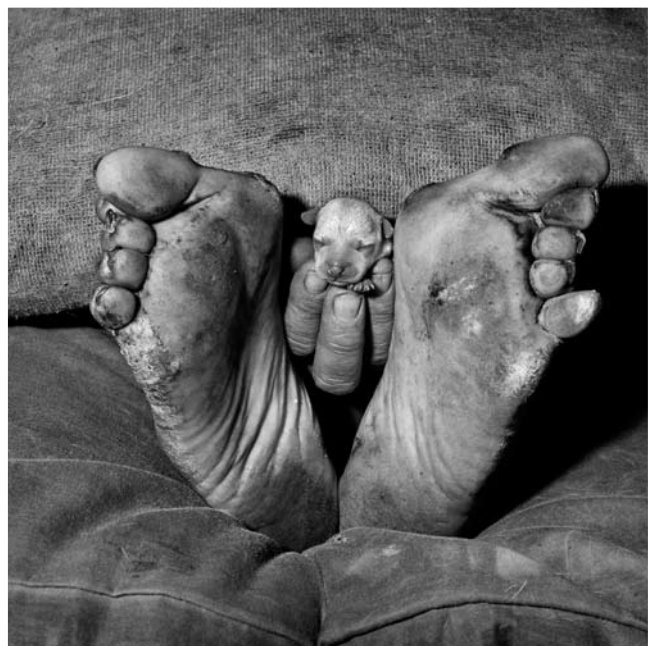
The development of Ballen's practice has accordingly gone hand-in-hand with his increasing confidence as an artist. Working in isolation from an artistic scene or other photographers, he has been forced to find for himself a way



SULLEN, 2003



BEDROOM OF RAILWAY WORKER, DE AAR, 1984



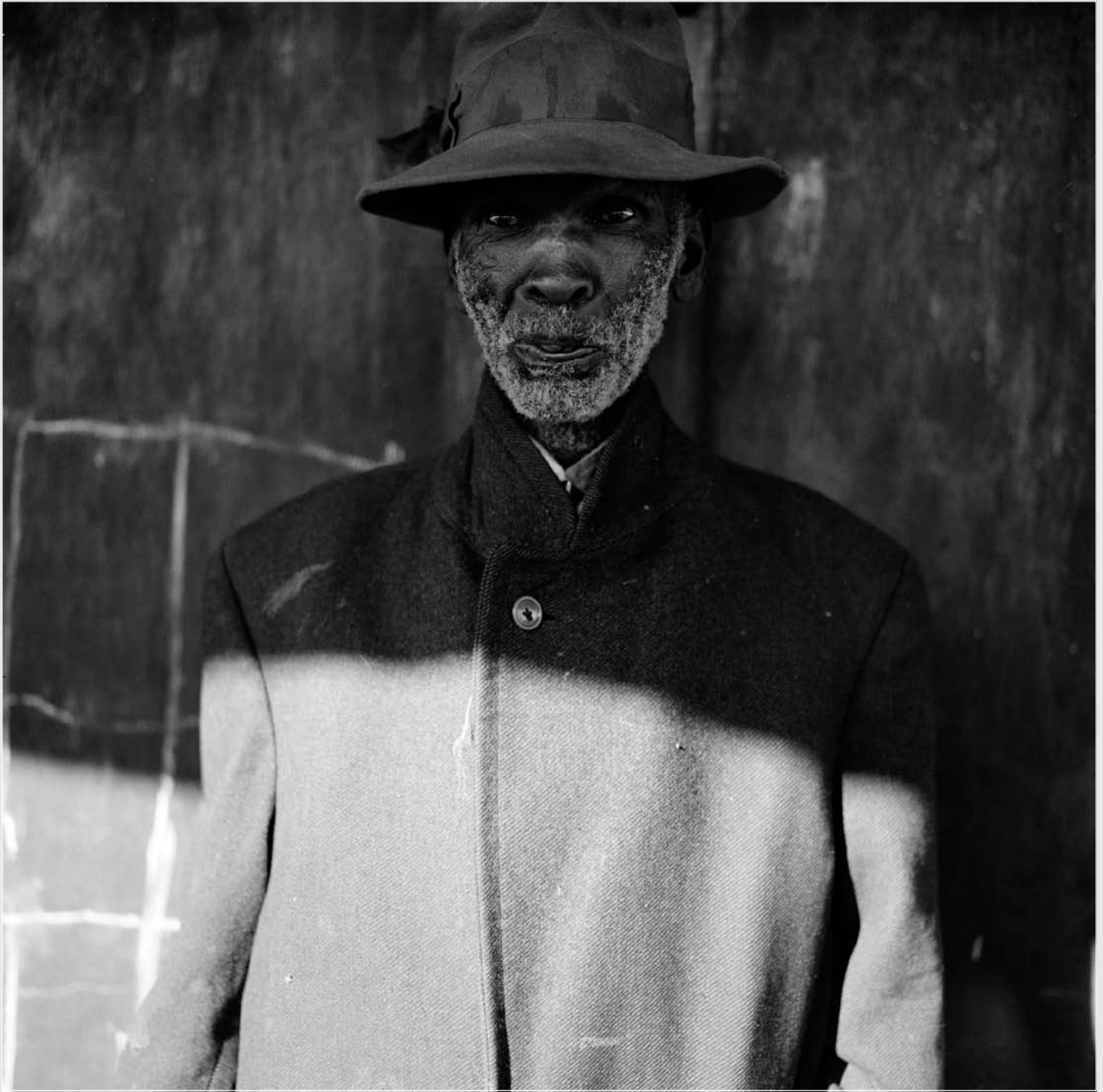
PUPPY BETWEEN FEET, 1999

to use photography to map his ideas and desires. In this task he has been eminently successful, becoming internationally recognised for a creative audacity coupled with an unrelenting examination of the ground of our humanity.

I have eaten contemporary photography alive

Roger Ballen was born in New York City in 1950. His father was a lawyer – uninterested in the arts – while his mother had what Ballen calls ‘an artistic temperament’ and was involved in the post-war New York art scene. These personal and social factors, combined with an encouraging friend, led his mother to join a Magnum Photography Agency as a photographer’s assistant in 1964. In addition, she established a photography gallery on Madison Avenue that operated from 1970 to 1973. In these two spaces she interacted with such historical figures as Kertesz, Steichen, Strand and Cartier-Bresson among many others. Ballen remembers his home being littered with photography books, photos and, on occasion, the famous photographers themselves. It was this first-hand experience of the best of modern photography that constituted the real-life foundation of his artistic education. This was put into practical application from the age of 13 when he purchased his first camera. So while he never formally trained, photography was present for his entire life. ‘I have eaten contemporary photography alive for the last fifty years’ is how he puts it.

With the nuances of modern photography firmly established within, it was at the age of 18, in the late 1960s, that he started taking photographs in earnest. One of his first series of works was the documentation – in an existentialist-focus-on-the-isolated-individual-in-the-crowd mode – of civil rights activists and anti-Vietnam War protestors who were ever-present on the streets of Berkeley, California. Ballen had moved from New York to the West Coast to study for his undergraduate degree in Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. He had decided to study there because it was one of the best universities in America, but also admits that he was attracted to the place because it symbolised the ‘West Coast Dream – girls, water, good weather’. Consequently, the political hot-bed that Berkeley was at the time only impacted on him after his arrival.



OLD MAN, OTTOSHOOP, 1983



ORPHAN, 2002

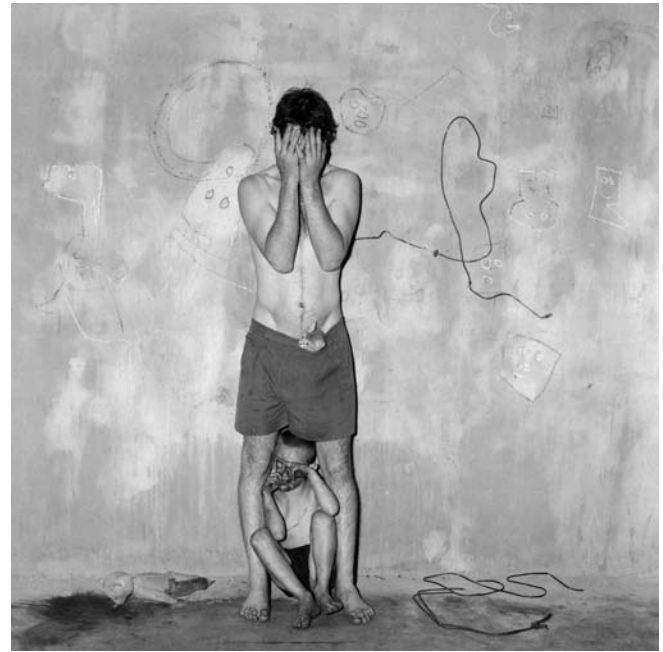
Looking back now, he sees the period and place as 'having a special edge, being the most benign revolution in history, the only time there was such a wide-spread and concerted revolt against corporatism and globalism'. A major legacy of this time for Ballen was that it imbued him with a strong sense of personal revolt. Interestingly, it was, in part, this individualistic attitude that helped him realise as he neared graduation that the professional work of the psychologist was probably not for him. 'It just dawned on me', he says, 'that sitting down each day helping suburban housewives with their problems was not something I was attracted to. I think I was interested in psychology for my own sake, for the study of my own mind, and not necessarily as an avenue to help others'.

Clark Kent changes into Superman

Lacking the personal investment to tackle the daily grind of the clinical psychologist's life, Ballen decided to travel around the world for a number of years after graduation. This decision was also made because his mother died in 1973, soon after he had finished his studies. He has written of this time that:

I was full of disillusionment, and had a deep mistrust of Western values. The death of my mother in the following year [following graduation] left a void in my life: my knowledge of contemporary psychology did not address my grief or the questions raised by my existential depression. I was looking for a mystical way of life, a connectedness, that neither my Jewish suburban upbringing nor my education had provided. I felt a need to move away from the materialism of technologically developed societies³.

He ended up in South Africa in 1974 where he met the woman – artist Lynda Moross – who would become his wife. Together, they moved back to the United States in 1977 and in 1979 Ballen's first book of photography, *Boyhood* – a collection of work made on his travels that also reflected on his own boyhood – was published. Despite this event, photography remained for Ballen something of a 'hobby'. He thinks of himself as working on pure intuition and in isolation at this time, and didn't see himself as an artist in a professional sense,



CONCEALED, 2003



EUGENE ON THE PHONE, 2000

despite feeling, as he had always done, like an artist within. During this period, he was professionally driven toward the field of mining and studied for a Ph.D. in Mineral Economics at the Colorado School of Mines, graduating in 1981. For Ballen, this was no dryly practical way to make a living, but a deep passion. Mining also allowed him to work outdoors and develop his highly methodical, scientific leanings. It was an attractive combination.

Returning to South Africa with Lynda after completing his studies in Colorado, Ballen established himself as a mining entrepreneur. His business involved finding and buying land that held high loads of substances such as chrome, diamonds and manganese. He would then sell it on to big companies or mine it himself. Key to his professional set-up was that he was his own boss. He was not at all keen to work for a corporation or for other people; he was not interested in spending his days in a bureaucratic environment dealing with other people's issues and problems. Being his own boss also meant that he was free to take photos whenever he was able to within his schedule; there was no one looking over his shoulder, checking on his activities and whereabouts. He is adamant that if there was he wouldn't have been able to concentrate on developing his artistic side and his photographic work. To make photos, he needs to enter a different zone completely, stating that 'it's a bit like in Superman: there is the Clark Kent and then Clark changes into Superman'.

His geological work was also vital in the development of his photographic practice insofar as it took him outside his home-base of Johannesburg and into the poor rural areas known as dorps that became his initial signature arena of focus. In the early 1980s when he started photographing them, dorps were still found only an hour outside of Johannesburg. As close as they were, they had a very particular quality. 'There was no tourism', Ballen says. 'Things were very relaxed and isolated. All around was breakdown, chaos and disorder. The people had this quality about them too. It was rural, but also "far away" in a different sense. These places, these people, were not "contemporary"'. For Ballen, a photographer steeped in the inquisitive tradition of modern photo-journalism, the question was 'how can I define the unique aesthetic of these places? What is particular about them?' While he saw this

issue at the time as a purely 'documentary concept', he was aware of feeling that the 'places symbolised something deeper. The buildings, the towns, the walls with the wires hanging on them, I had never encountered these before. They all struck me as having a psychological relationship'.

The whole place was incredibly loaded, producing a sense of fascination and dis-ease in him. As he explained in the introduction to his book on these places:

I always have a sense of anxiety when entering a dorp for the first time. I don't know what to expect, where to go and what to do. I guess this is part of being a photographer. Generally I drive around the dorp once or twice to become acquainted with the layout of the place. During my drive around, I target the places I want to come back to – places that seem to strike me for some reason or another. ... As an American and outsider, I perhaps saw these towns differently⁴.

The challenge was, therefore, to find a way to allow his subjects to declare what was unique about them while also bringing out those aspects that articulated the 'psychological relationships' he could discern.

Hi, I'm Roger

Fully achieving this would require him to penetrate the houses he was passing by. This necessitated a shift in his practice. Prior to this time, he considered himself a street photographer; he would simply shoot the people he came across on the street or the external features of buildings. Because there was a general, quick-spreading curiosity about Ballen as an outsider in the dorps he was often – though not always – welcomed by the locals and able to enter into a dialogue. This feeling of good-will gave him the courage to start knocking on doors and asking to photograph interiors and inhabitants *in situ*. He was drawn to places by instinct and would simply knock on a door and say 'Hi, I'm Roger' and ask to photograph a house or its inhabitant. The first time he did this and was warmly welcomed, he believes, changed everything for him; it started the relationships that would radically open up his practice



PENSIONER WITH DOG, ORANGE FREE STATE, 1991



PENSIONER, VOLKSRUST, 1984

and take it in unforeseen directions. The dorps would be the scene of his work over the next ten years, a period that saw him increasingly intimate with his subjects, getting to know them and revisiting and re-photographing them.

These early works have an incredible power. The sense of chaos and unravelling is perfectly expressed in all. What is most important to note, though, is that this is expressed in the layers of rich detail in the works; fragment speaks to fragment, producing remarkably taut and alive wholes where there is no 'dead' or bland space at all. For instance, in the photograph *Bedroom, Bethulie*, 1984, there is a bed with three white pillows stacked against the wall. A sentimental mother-and-baby portrait hangs high, and a bigger baby portrait takes up another chunk of the wall. Both seem old, seen through the distance of time, seemingly occupying different time-zones and eras. Yet these photographic ghosts of different generations come together in concert with the other elements of the image. They speak to each other in the present tense.

To further illustrate this point, in *Pensioner, Volkrust*, 1984, we find an old-ish man at home with a series of girly pinups on his wall. The girls arch their limber backs while the man is wooden, his shoulders heavy, his hands clunkily large. Most significant, though, is the fact that he has a hulking shadow behind him. This shadow seems to be a distinct physical presence, different and separate from him, maybe more substantial too. In fact, it seems like it is nudging him irresistibly forward. Again, each element in the image has a presence that reaches out to the viewer and across to the other elements within the image. There is a strong feeling that things are only just being held in place, and that every object has equal agency. The human does not stand above the rest of the photographic field, but is simply one animated thing among many others. Here, Ballen evidences a sustained awareness of the importance of the whole of the image that takes his photographs beyond simple observation, hinting at the force of his own growing vision. Established very early, these qualities are the hallmark of Ballen's photography; both his early and recent works convey his ability to pick out every available significant detail in such a way as to imbue even the most documentary of his images with the flavour of the disturbingly surreal⁵.



BEDROOM, BETHULIE, 1984



MUNICIPAL WORKER WITH PREGNANT WIFE,
WESTERN TRANSVAAL, 1994



SERGEANT F DE BRUIN, DEPARTMENT OF PRISONS EMPLOYEE,
ORANGE FREE STATE, 1992

Eye contact

While these dynamics are absolutely central to Ballen's work as a whole, there are also moments, especially in the portraits of the 1980s to the late 1990s, where the tension subsides a little and in its stead is a more relaxed and beautifully tender state of photographic regard. One such image is *Sergeant F de Bruin, Department of Prisons employee, Orange Free State, 1992*. The Sergeant's face resembles that of late actor Walter Matthau – rubbery and Bassett-like, with markedly protruding ears and a globular nose. He seems entirely calm and relaxed, having finished his day's work and maybe already repressing what he has seen or done. Similar in stance, is *Pensioner with dog, Orange Free State, 1991*, where a man in an interior holds a dog by his collar. The dog seems placid, though potentially fierce, and because of this it becomes a study in the active construction of repose, peace and order. It

is a gentle image, in so much as the man is holding the dog back, accommodating the photographer and, thereby, the photograph itself. This dignified sweetness is also apparent in *Municipal worker with pregnant wife, Western Transvaal, 1994*, an image of a tall woman and a short chubby man. Their mouths and eyes are points of contact, openings. They seem proud of their partnership and their situation. What is key to all such works in this vein is that they are entirely non-judgmental portraits that show people at their ease, allowing the photographer in as an equal and demonstrating their active interest in him and the process.

It is in this context that one of Ballen's most controversial and iconic images resides – *Dresie and Casie, twins, Western Transvaal, 1993*. It shows the twins with their hair sitting spiky on their heads, big noses, big ears, protruding bottom lips, and a stream of drool dangling from their mouths that has stained their shirts⁶. They seem relaxed in their skins, totally alert to what is going on. This work is a study in inquisitiveness, a study in what it means to present a camera to another human and what it means to face that camera. Ballen presents us two sharp, massively physical beings scrutinising the camera's lens back with as much intensity as we, as viewers, bring to the photograph. Such is its power that we do not feel comfortable sitting back and judging these subjects; we are also forced to consider how they view us.

What can't be shown

Despite the basis of trust, exchange and friendship that Ballen's works are based on, a tidal wave of controversy about his practice occurred when his book *Platteland: images of rural South Africa* came out in 1994 – the same year that apartheid in South Africa ended. While the book established him overseas it was also received with immense hostility, particularly in South Africa. Such was the anti-Ballen fervour at the time that there was a special edition of the *Southbank Show* on ITV dedicated to him, his work and the outrage around it. Ballen had never made a secret of the circumstances of those he was taking photos of. In the very moving introduction to *Platteland* he catalogued the chaos, squalor and hardship of the lives of those he was documenting as well as the broader layers



DRESIE AND CASIE, TWINS, WESTERN TRANSVAAL, 1993



PROWLING, 2001

of social breakdown that produced their circumstances⁷. His images – that eschewed the sentimental in order to get at a deeper reality – were seen to be denigrating his often poverty-stricken (mostly white) subjects, showing them as somehow less than human. He was seen as a cruel, interloping American who had overstepped the mark, the mark of what could and could not be represented in his new country. He felt shunned by the South African arts community and, more disturbingly, received many death threats⁸. It was an extremely difficult and testing time for him, but his methodical nature saw him keep his head and pursue his evolving vision regardless.

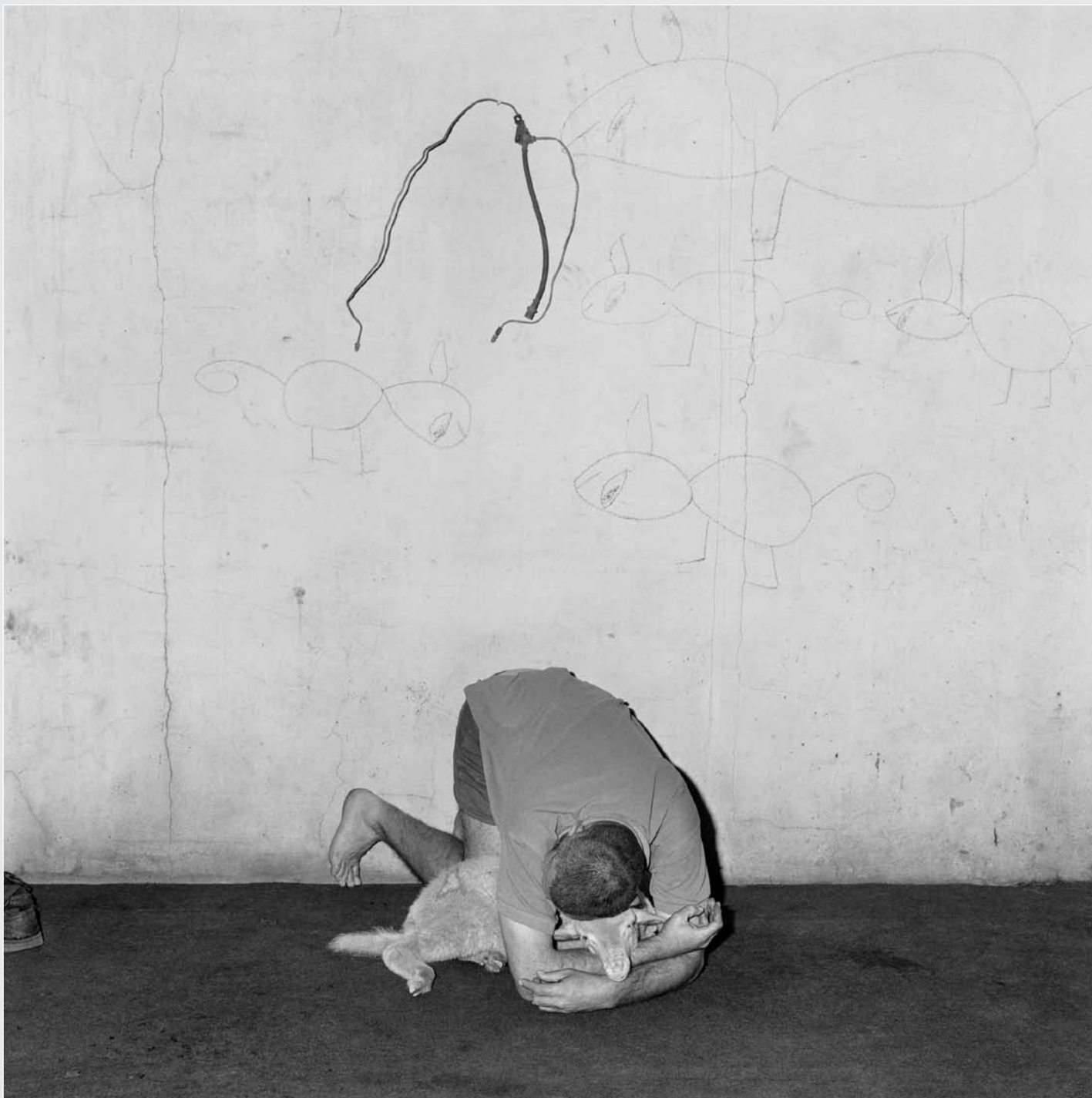
Ballen considers that the outcry against his work was rooted in South African history, surmising that it may stem back to the Anglo-Boer War, fought between the British and the Afrikaaners (colonists of Dutch descent) from 1899 to 1902. The Afrikaners were soundly beaten, suffering severe poverty

and dislocation as a result. Ballen believes that this lodged in the cultural memory and that the horrors of apartheid were instituted as a way the majority Afrikaaner population could establish themselves as 'top dog', thereby never having to feel that kind of humiliation again. The fact that his work displayed a white population that was not at the top of the cultural or economic heap, he believes, raised too many questions about the actual status of white culture in South Africa, and perhaps elsewhere in the colonial world. He was depicting a people whose histories and realities had been swept under the carpet, whose circumstances had been resolutely repressed. To depict these people with his developing combination of surreal vision and unsentimental regard, was to upset the balance of a culture for whom certainties of black and white, coloniser and colonised, were set in stone as a force of massive cultural defensiveness, especially in the turmoil of the immediate post-apartheid period.

Added to this is the fact that Ballen sees his work as being ultimately about the human condition as a whole, and not simply the record of the particularities of certain social and personal conditions. Indeed, he is now quite adamant that the photographs are not social at all but psychological. Accordingly, he sees his subjects as part of himself and as part of our shared humanity; he believes that much of the difficulty people have with the material is because they cling to a notion of civilisation and humanity that is fundamentally restricted and artificial.

Human animal

In distinction to this, Ballen has consistently challenged the border between the human and the animal, between nature and culture. *Man shaving on verandah, Western Transvaal*, 1986, stands out in this regard. It depicts a concrete structure with a man squatting, shaving in front of a small hand-held mirror, or mirror fragment. There are thin log segments on the left of the blockish stairs. On the other side is a drum that has been used as a fireplace for heat, sustenance or both. Behind the man is a deep blackness. Even though he is wearing shoes (and maybe shorts, though it is hard to tell), he seems profoundly naked. The scene is of brute subsistence.



UNTITLED, 2002



BRIAN WITH PET PIG, 1998

In such a context, the act of shaving clearly does not take on an air of vanity, but is something far more intense: it is as if this crouched man is engaged in an inquiry into his very being. We cannot help but wonder what he sees. Is it human, animal or some blend of the two? This work, therefore, casts a shadow over the certainties of our 'most advanced species' status.

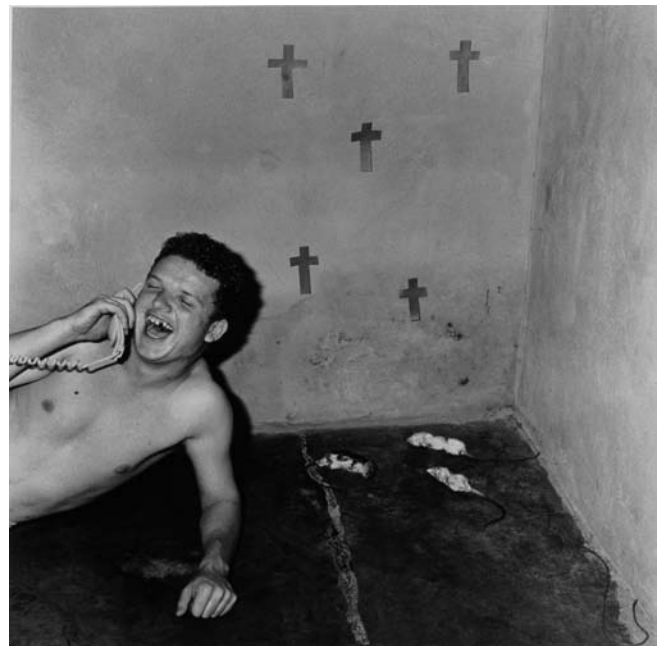
Brian with pet pig, 1998, also gets at this, though in a more humorous fashion. The photograph presents Brian, a solid, freckled man cuddling his black pig on a bed. It is an incredibly soft and sensitive image. Brian's care for his pig is obvious and beautiful, as well as just a little bit needy. They are a gentle, snuggly couple. Of course, there is more than a little resemblance between Brian and the pig. But the image is strong because we cannot help feeling that this transfer of qualities between the human and the animal is not limited to Brian, but extends to us all. This is the case in *Woman, man and dog*, 1995, that features a laughing woman whose expression is mirrored by the dog that claws over a man's shoulder. Both bare their teeth in the same manner and the work becomes a study of the primitive, un-civilised energy that drives all animals – humans and otherwise.

These qualities are often found in Ballen's works. The spaces he shoots are wide-open to the passing parade of animal life – chickens, rabbits, rats, mice, dogs and more move in and out of the picture frame. It seems that the house is not a barrier against the animal and natural world; there is an open door policy instead. It is the same with dirt – the dirt smeared over walls, the dirt covering people's feet and legs. Ballen sees these accretions as simply part of nature, of the earth we are a part of, thus challenging us to consider the porousness of the border between nature and culture, as well as the hubris in all who think we reside high above the natural.

Ballen also blurs the natural and the cultural in other, less overt ways, such as in *Rat cemetery*, 2001. The work shows a man on the phone, three dead rats on the floor and five crosses on the wall. We assume that the crosses are for the rats. Against them, the man's behaviour seems entirely inappropriate. After all, if someone has gone so far as to make crosses for the dead rats, then surely a modicum of reverence is due, if



MAN SHAVING ON VERANDAH, WESTERN TRANSVAAL, 1986



RAT CEMETERY, 2001



EXHAUSTION, 2006



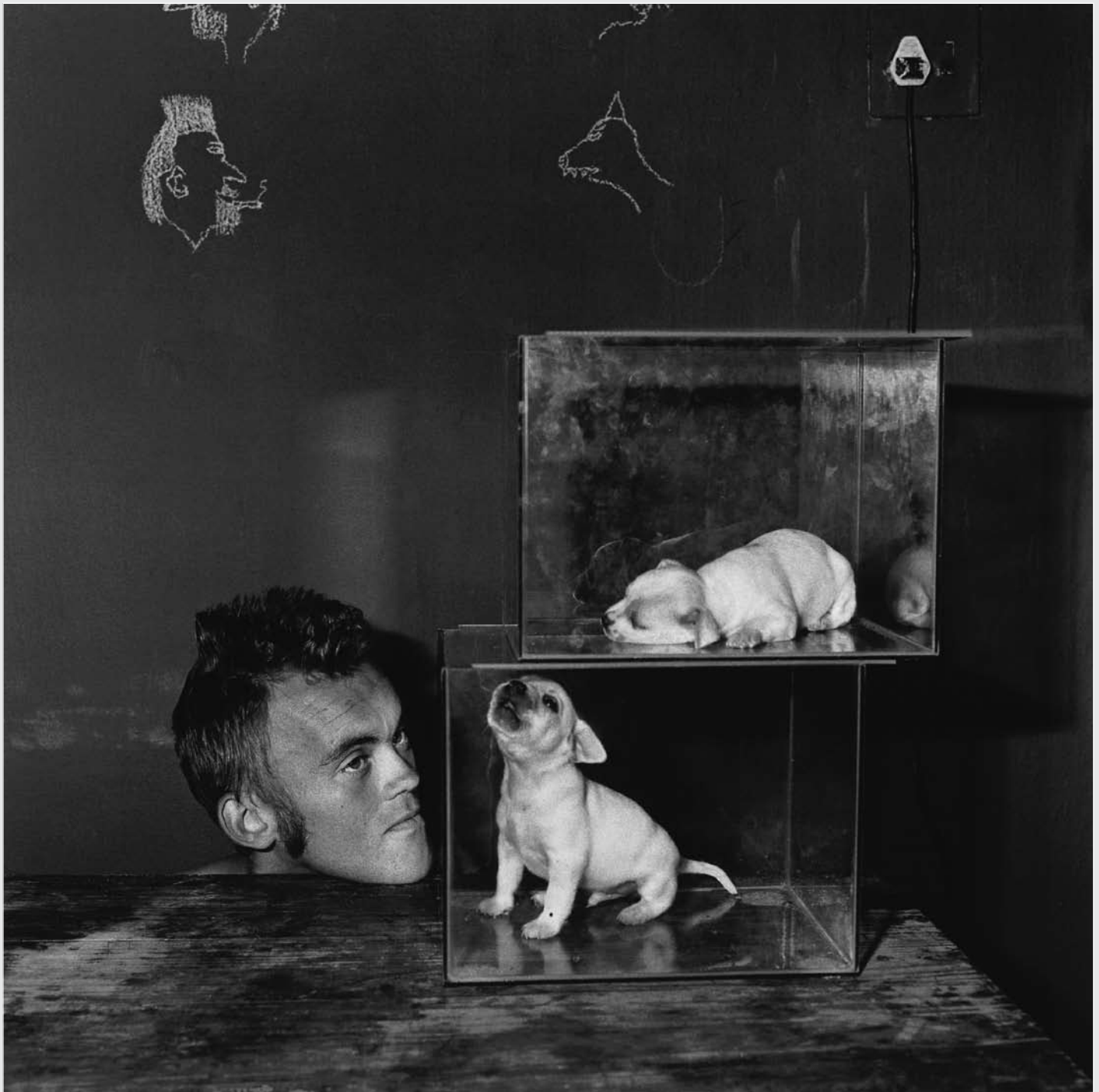
UNTITLED, 2006

only to humour the gesture. The man on the phone, however, is totally preoccupied with his own concerns. On one level, therefore, this photo gets at the ways we simply have to live in spite of the death around us and our own potential death. On another level, it is shocking as it transgresses the expectation surrounding the cultural symbolism of the crosses. Like so many of Ballen's works, therefore, *Rat cemetery* pits the symbolic against the natural and doesn't allow the former, the human domain of comforting signs and actions, to win the day. Instead, they are held in direct and taut opposition, with the man's abandon rawly existing in the chasm between.

The walls of the shadow chamber

As works like *Rat cemetery* start to explore such complex and confronting territory with a unique and clear artistic vision, it is obvious that they are different in pitch and focus to the earlier work. Ballen's move away from a documentary style began in the late 1990s. Specifically, it has grown more performative and, as a result, more inward, over the last decade. It is important to note that from the late 1990s to the present day his work is produced within a 20km radius of his home in Johannesburg. This was necessitated by the growing demands of family life. But it is also fitting that the work is made nearer to his home, as it is not so much about finding new and puzzling things in the world outside, but finding and revealing them within. Many of the newer works produced in this vein were made as part of the *Shadow Chamber* series – the book of the same name was published in 2005. The phrase was triggered by a real place and then evolved into a metaphorical space. It implies half-light, and a remove from the outside world, which adds to the understanding that this is a space of the mind and not a form of photo-sociology.

One key way in which Ballen's more recent photographs express this shift is that while in previous works his subjects sat, stood or lolled about for him, they are now more like actors collaborating in the process of making the work. They contort into poses, relax and laugh, smile and grimace, play dead, stuff kittens down their shorts, crawl on all fours and so on. These actions take on a sense of the theatrical, that Ballen sees as linked to playwright Samuel Beckett's work



PUPPIES IN FISHTANKS, 2000



ROOM OF THE NINJA TURTLES, 2003

– something compelling that confounds straight-forward narrative interpretation. Despite the references to the theatre, it is stasis that is vital to Ballen's work. Each action and gesture is caught at the right moment; a knuckle is captured just so, a chin is shot at the point of perfect elevation. The freeze-frame of these heightened physical manoeuvres speaks its own language, with these tiny details becoming ever more resonant because of the tight, walled-in spaces they are presented within.

Walls are vital in Ballen's work and have been since the beginning of his practice as the dynamic backdrops to most of his images. Accordingly, the other important shift in his work in the late 1990s was the re-invigoration of his use of them through drawing. The drawings on the walls were initially found in the settings he was working within. In the process of making certain photographs, however, Ballen and his subjects started adding to the existing imagery with chalk and other materials; they are an organic response to, and an extension of, a particular subjective situation and a particular physical context. As the walls become more active in the images, it must also be noted that he is utilising a 'palette' from his earlier work, re-routing it and bringing out its latent expressive possibilities. While in the previous work, framed photos, wires, and the like spoke to the viewer, Ballen now extends their energy and line in his and his subjects' markings. This is done in a subtle way, however, so that the difference between what is found and what is composed is impossible to discern.

Children's bedroom wall, 2000, is important here. It is a flat wall with drawings all over it – of a half-formed Casper the Friendly ghost, a troll, some words, some names. Also on the wall is a computer cable, a cut-out pig and pony, a couple of sticks and a mass of wire. These objects duplicate the feel and logic of the drawings themselves. Of course, this move also highlights the structural slippage between the constructed and the found. The fictional, representational world and the real world are brought together in one ingenious whole. The act of photography becomes an act of drawing, an act of creation. The same spirit is found in *Room of the Ninja Turtles*, 2003, a series of faces drawn in chalk on the wall, a boy with a Ninja Turtle mask on, and a series of glass marbles on a bare

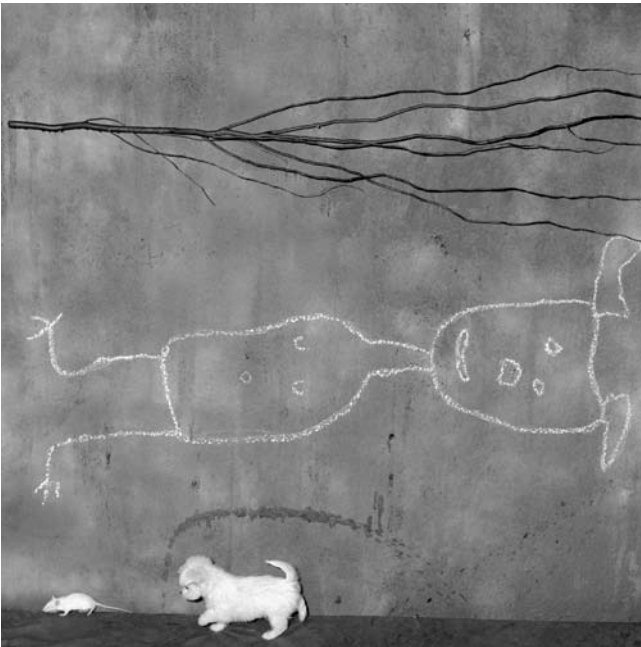
mattress that look like eyes – the lost eyes of the masks and faces. It appears as if the drawings are coming out of the wall and interacting with the objects in such a way as to erase the difference between the two- and the three-dimensional.

The drawings are also incredibly sensual, with the wall surface beautifully scumbled and possessing a rich kind of depth. In this, we might spy the influence of three of Ballen's artistic loves – Mark Rothko, Jean Dubuffett and Cy Twombly⁹. The fullness of these surfaces also throws attention on the details of all the other objects in the spaces he images. In these, surface detail is ever more alive – the rub of a garment, the stain on a sofa. All read as so much more than everyday materials – they are residues of passage, of unconscious histories, traces of movement, remnants of occupation, the effluvia of mental states. As such, each object and action becomes an ambiguous symbol of some larger, shadowy story we can't quite grasp the outline of.

For Ballen, the kind of space constructed in this way is increasingly important. Five photographs in this exhibition (made in 2005 and 2006) from his most recent, not yet titled, project – which will be published in his next book in 2009 – take this even further. Some do away with the human figure to produce an even more abstracted yet powerfully intense zone of imaginative engagement. As his work has evolved into this area it has entered a very specific art historical context that has extended through the twentieth century until the present day. This zone starts with surrealism where the ordinary is overthrown and rendered strange by a dream-like logic. From first generation surrealism it opens out to include the work of artists like Joseph Cornell, Mark Rothko, and many others. In the present era, film-maker David Lynch is perhaps the most obvious point of reference, especially his films such as *Eraserhead* and *Inland Empire*, the latter being a prolonged meditation on the interface of space and hysteria as played out in different internal zones. While Ballen's work can be positioned in such a context he stresses that it is necessary to make the work formally succeed on the photographic level. Only if that is achieved can the larger vision be made manifest. As such, it is the relationship of these new worlds with the real world that Ballen's lens focuses on; it is the tension between these intermingled zones that makes these works fire.



CHILDREN'S BEDROOM WALL, 2000



PLACE OF THE UPSIDE DOWN, 2004

I want to find the vein

Ballen has written that 'a shadow runs through my work'¹⁰. We can now conclude that this shadow has always been present, just in different forms, and to varying levels of obviousness. It has been Ballen's long artistic journey to make this shadow apparent and to explore its depths. Having made the shift to a darker vision more clear, he now wants more than anything to go deeper and deeper into this zone he has opened up for himself. He says that:

The older I get the more I need to get to the source, the place where dreams originate, the source of the psyche. The clock is ticking. There is a lot to find and it is thrilling, I am very passionate about it. I want to find the vein, the source of the ore, find the belly, the molten rock. If I couldn't do this I would feel let down inside.

As well as outlining his path forward (or downward), Ballen here neatly connects the geological and the psychological, the natural and the human. Looking back over the span of his practice to date, we can see that this pairing is everywhere in the work, driving it all at some level. It is possibly fitting, therefore, that even now, a period when there is building demand for his work in galleries and collections all over the world, Ballen continues to work as a geologist, albeit in a part-time capacity. It is work and a mindset he still enjoys. It feeds his imagination in various ways and keeps him in touch with the earth. His practice and how he manages it is, thereby, an ongoing, deeply felt, effort to depict the waking dream where the human meets the time and space of nature and where the brutal and tender, human animal opens into the geology of the mind.

Robert Cook

Associate Curator of Contemporary Art



HEAD INSIDE SHIRT, 2001

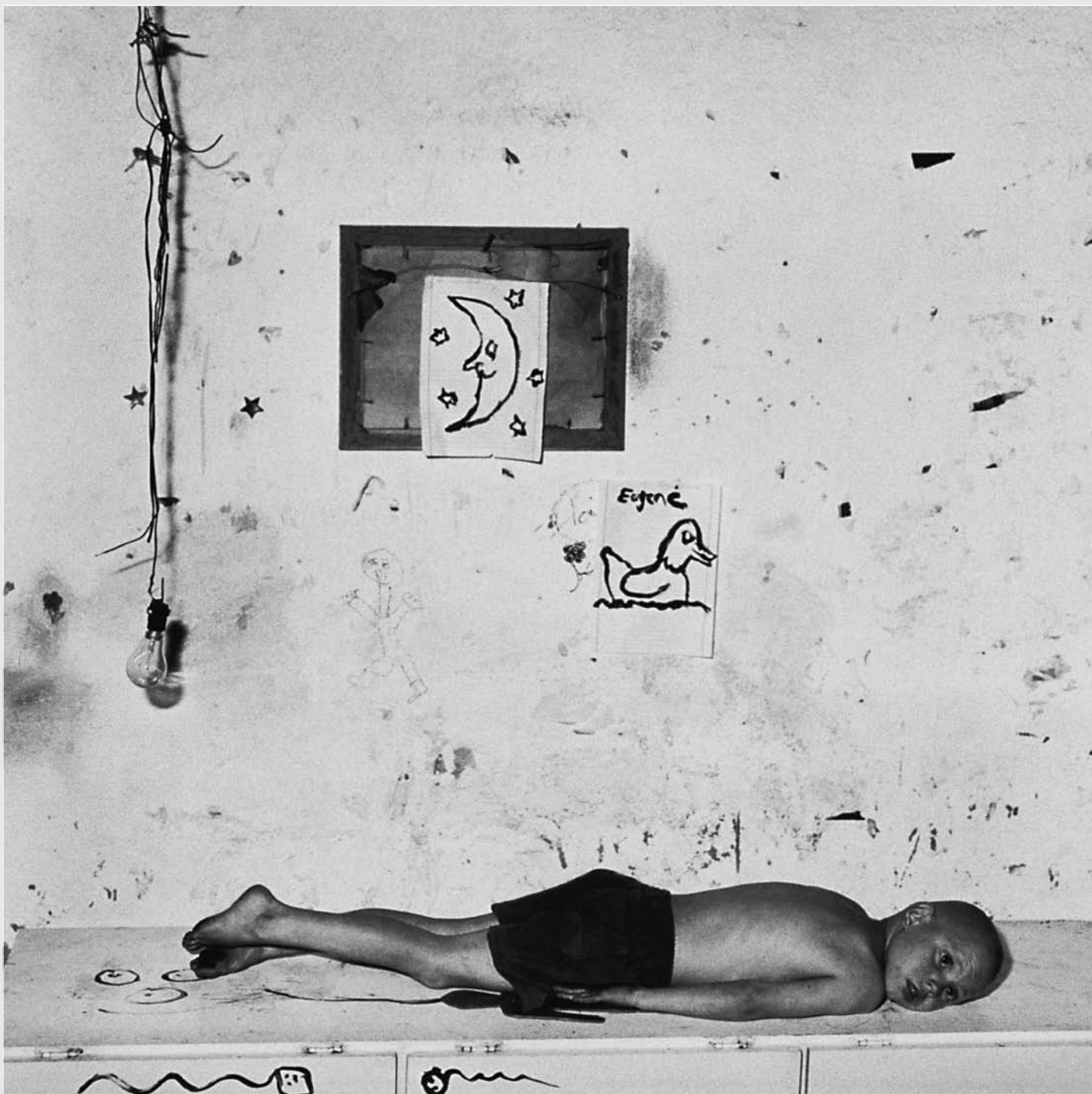


THE END OF THE WORLD, 2004

NOTES

1. Lynch, David. (1997). *Lynch on Lynch*. Faber and Faber: London. p.15.
2. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes by Ballen and biographical information in this text are from telephone conversations between the author (in Perth, Australia) and Roger Ballen (in Johannesburg, South Africa) that occurred from July to October, 2007.
3. Ballen, Roger. (undated). *Introduction to: Photographs by Roger Ballen*. unpublished, unpaginated.
4. Ballen, Roger. (1986). *Dorps: small towns of South Africa*. Clifton Publications: Cape Town, South Africa. unpaginated.
5. It is worth reminding ourselves of Roland Barthes's famous distinction between the *studium* (that which gives the photograph meaning) and the *punctum* (that which hits us on a deeper, personal level). For Barthes, the *punctum* often came in the form of a small detail or nuance. In relation to this, it is as if the entirety of Ballen's images are composed of 'punctum points'. See: Barthes, Roland. (1982). *Camera Lucida*. Vintage: London. The work of German photographer August Sander must also be acknowledged as a precursor in this regard.

6. The image came about when Ballen was travelling for his geological work and staying with a game farmer. It was the weekend and his host wanted to go into town for a Coke and an icecream, so Ballen and his twin children tagged along. As they were driving around the town Ballen glimpsed an interesting person in a garden. He stopped the car and walked over. The man could not speak but his mother was on the porch and Ballen asked if he could take a photo. She said yes. As he was shooting, he saw a shadow behind him, turned around, and was startled to find the other brother. He then asked if he could take a photo of both of them. The whole event lasted only five to eight minutes in total.
7. In *Platteland* Ballen concluded that: 'The "poor whites" had always relied upon the protective paternalism of the apartheid regime which enabled them to get by somehow. But the regime is dead, leaving behind a legacy of economic recession, isolation, repression, ignorance, social bigotry, political and racial disarray. So, too, has the mantle of the assumed glory of white superiority fallen from their shoulders. They may well become another fragment of human detritus of the new South Africa'. Ballen, Roger. (1994). *Platteland: images from rural South Africa*. William Waterman Publications: Rivonia, South Africa. unpaginated.
8. Before this time, Ballen faced other difficulties taking his photographs. During the years of apartheid, he was arrested many times by police suspicious of him taking photos in public. He was never charged, and understands it as a consequence 'of living in a place that was like a war zone'.
9. Ballen draws an interesting parallel between his interest in painting and its connection to photography: 'Just before my travels, I had a short, perhaps incomplete, foray into painting. I studied for a year at the Art Students League in New York. I became fascinated by the fact that a painter works piece by piece, line by line, each shape carrying meaning, until the whole image has been built... At this time I became very interested in Field Painting – in artists like Rothko and Newman, who spread colour across the surface towards the edges of the format, with everything equally in focus. I tried to emulate some of their concepts. I would point the camera down, to create my own field of beach or sidewalk. By using a wide-angle 28mm lens, I could let people walk in and out of the frame – and keep the picture in focus throughout. I believe that is the way the eye sees – we aren't aware of blurred areas, each detail appears in focus as we give it attention. Clarity in the forms and a determination not to waste any part of the image by blurring it has characterised my work down to the present'. Ballen (undated). *op cit*.
10. *ibid*.



UNDER THE MOON, 2000



SICK ROOM, 2000

Exhibition checklist

*All works are silver gelatin prints and are on loan from Roger Ballen
All dimensions are height before width and refer to sheet size*

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Man in front of shop, Brits, 1983 40 x 40 cm | Man and maid, Northern Cape, 1991 40.8 x 40.3 cm | 40.5 x 41 cm Cat catcher, 1998 80 x 80 cm |
| Bedroom door, Bethanie, 1983 40 x 40 cm | Boy with gun, girl with doll, mother with child, West Transvaal, 1992 29.5 x 40.5 cm | Puppy between feet, 1999 80 x 80 cm |
| General dealer, Jagersfontein, 1983 42.5 x 40 cm | Sergeant F de Bruin, Department of Prisons employee, Orange Free State, 1992 40 x 40 cm | Study of boy and plant, 1999 40 x 40 cm |
| Goods, Ugie, 1983 40.3 x 39.8 cm | | Children's bedroom wall, 2000 80 x 80 cm |
| Old man, Ottoshoop, 1983 80 x 80 cm | Boy with guns, Western Transvaal, 1993 39.8 x 39.8 cm | Eugene on the phone, 2000 40 x 40 cm |
| Side view of hotel, Middleburg, 1983 40 x 40 cm | Cookie with wife, Tillie, Orange Free State, 1993 40 x 40 cm | Les hammering into wall, 2000 38.8 x 38.7 cm |
| Pensioner's bedroom, Hopetown, 1984 41 x 40.5 cm | Dresie and Casie, twins, Western Transvaal, 1993 80 x 80 cm | Portrait of sleeping girl, 2000 40.5 x 40.5 cm |
| Bedroom of railway worker, De Aar, 1984 40 x 40 cm | | Sick room, 2000 38.7 x 38.9 cm |
| Bedroom, Bethulie, 1984 40 x 40 cm | Gardener, West Transvaal, 1993 39.6 x 39.6 cm | Sleeping baby, 2000 40 x 40 cm |
| Pensioner, Volksrust, 1984 40 x 40 cm | Scrapyard worker and family, central Transvaal, 1993 39.9 x 39.7 cm | Under the moon, 2000 40 x 40 cm |
| Wall above bed, Dordrecht, 1984 40 x 40 cm | Teenager with glass eye, Western Transvaal, 1994 40 x 40 cm | Tommy, Samson and a mask, 2000 40 x 40 cm |
| Early morning, Napier, 1985 38.7 x 38.4 cm | Municipal worker with pregnant wife, Western Transvaal, 1994 40 x 40 cm | Two figures, 2000 40.1 x 40.4 cm |
| Bedroom, Nieu-Bethesda, 1985 40.5 x 40 cm | Woman, man and dog, 1995 40 x 40 cm | Man drawing chalk faces, 2000 79.2 x 79.4 cm |
| Man shaving on verandah, Western Transvaal, 1986 40 x 40 cm | Labourers, 1997 40.5 x 35.5 cm | Puppies in fishtanks, 2000 79.3 x 79.7 cm |
| Children from countryside in city home, Central Transvaal, 1987 49 x 38.7 cm | John and roommates, 1998 40 x 40 cm | Early morning, 2001 40 x 40 cm |
| Pensioner with dog, Orange Free State, 1991 40 x 40 cm | Brian with pet pig, 1998 | Guardian, 2001 40 x 40 cm |
| | | Hanging pig, 2001 80 x 80 cm |

Acknowledgments

Head inside shirt, 2001
80 x 80 cm

Loner, 2001
80 x 80 cm

Prowling, 2001
40 x 40 cm

Rat cemetery, 2001
40 x 40 cm

Sitting room, 2002
40 x 40 cm

Animal abstraction, 2002
80 x 80 cm

Cat in box, 2002
80 x 80 cm

Crawling man, 2002
80 x 80 cm

Orphan, 2002
40 x 40 cm

Untitled, 2002
50 x 50 cm

Crouched, 2003
40 x 40 cm

Cloaked figure, 2003
40 x 40 cm

Hungry dog, 2003
80 x 80 cm

Inmate, 2003
40 x 40 cm

Wild child, 2003
80 x 79.1 cm

Concealed, 2003
50 x 50 cm

Rejection, 2003
80 x 80 cm

Room of the Ninja turtles, 2003
40 x 40 cm

The chamber of the enigma, 2003
40 x 40 cm

Sullen, 2003
40 x 40 cm

Bitten, 2004
40 x 40 cm

The end of the world, 2004
80 x 80 cm

Place of the upside down, 2004
50 x 50 cm

Terminus, 2004
50 x 50 cm

Untitled, 2005
50 x 50 cm

Crossed arms, 2005
50 x 50 cm

Untitled, 2005
50 x 50 cm

Exhaustion, 2006
80 x 80 cm

Untitled, 2006
50 x 50 cm

Untitled, 2006
50 x 50 cm

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Robert Cook

Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

Roger Ballen is represented by:
Stills Gallery, Sydney, Australia

Additional information on Roger Ballen, including international representation, can be found at www.rogerballen.com.

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The West Australian



Artist in focus

**Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal:
Roger Ballen Photography**

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