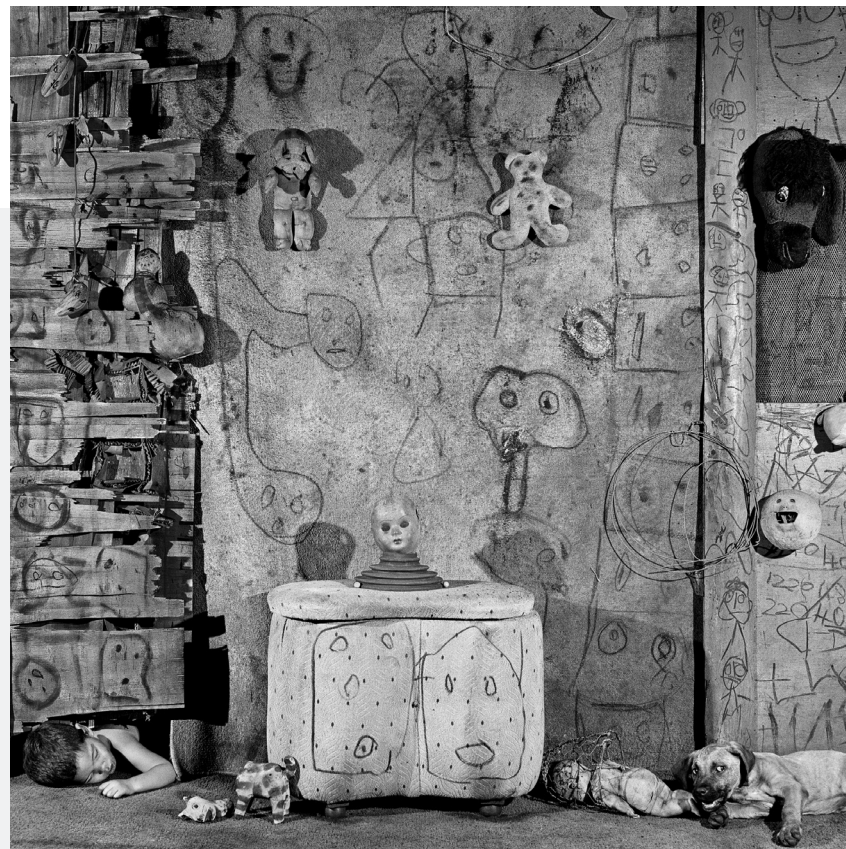


# LE THEATRE DE L'ESPRIT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROGER BALLEEN



1. © Roger Ballen Courtesy / Galerie Karsten Greve

**EXHIBITION FROM JULY 1 TO AUGUST 26, 2017**

IN COLLABORATION WITH GALERIE KARSTEN GREVE COLOGNE, PARIS, SAINT-MORITZ

From July 1 to August 26, 2017, FLAIR Galerie presents Roger Ballen's photographs, a collection taken from 2000 to 2008. We glimpse "his visual statements" with mysterious accents, issuing from the series *Shadow Chamber* and *Boarding House*. To finesse Jean Cocteau's quote, "Cinema is modern day writing, whose ink is light itself", his ineffable photographs, a kind of atemporal writing, reinvent themselves under the eye and as per a *mise en scène*, behind the curtain, so to speak. They ground the turbulent history of our world, under the light of a hypothetical fire.

Deep dive into the intriguing universe of a most influential photographer from the debut of the 21st century, who is also presenting a new installation/exhibition *The House of the Ballenesque*, as part of les Rencontres de la photographie d'Arles, this summer.

Masterfully, he shows a crashing world where bodies and broken dolls, rabbits hung on the wall, submerge the viewer thrown in a quizzical state, at first dazed, then captivated, and sometimes seduced. His photographs are considered enigmatic, mysterious or fanciful, without any intention to provoke on his part. Rather they would plant the pebble causing a stumble, the better to rebound. A moment's pause imposes a state of awareness that will surprise the visitor. Roger Ballen, it would seem, intends to address here a regard rather than a simple vision, compelling it to contemplate of *The Chamber of Enigma*, for instance. While meditating on the prints, one drops into a metaphorical dimension, since the photographer intends to reflect on

the psyche. Strewn with farmyard animals, often stuffed, represented in their relation with man, this space of transitory residence translates the confrontation of knowledge faced with different obstacles, such as displacement and denial. Detailing the locus of a primary experience permits the chaos to be lifted. The author's subjective windows are not constructed to satisfy our egos. Surrounded by his rupestrian drawings, like an ancient geologist, he forbids you to close your eyes: it's the price paid for being an uninhibited actor, anxious to learn. Once in the clear, the curious amateur is confronted with his desire to know (once acquired which bears, I dare hope, more than didactic value) to escape the sentiment of shame: faced with our contradictions, that of forgetting to protect each living being.

Therefore, a suspended effect plays within the fascination and the capture, within the strangeness of photography where the loss of realism—drawing/object—slides into a kind of condensation of heterogeneous materials: teddy bears, accessories, boxes, flowers, blackboards scribbled on...

Roger Ballen puts the extant image to the test, imparting an alternate perception of the world. To put into question the regard, in a society invaded by images, operates through devices arousing the drive of the witness. The perception of his photographs incites transformation in the ferryman, leaves room, for his thoughts to be expressed, comparable to the sparks glimpsed in a cavern, which might lead to a desire to act, with the same intensity.

**Nathalie Gallon, 2017**

Translation by Ilsa Carter and Pierre Guglielmina

## BIOGRAPHY

Roger Ballen was born in New York in 1950 but for over 30 years he has lived and worked in South Africa. His work as a geologist took him out into the countryside and led him to take up his camera and explore the hidden world of small South African towns. At first he explored the empty streets in the glare of the midday sun but, once he had made the step of knocking on people's doors, he discovered a world inside these houses which was to have a profound effect on his work. These interiors with their distinctive collections of objects and the occupants within these closed worlds took his unique vision on a path from social critique to the creation of metaphors for the inner mind. After 1994 he no longer looked to the countryside for his subject matter finding it closer to home in Johannesburg.

Over the past thirty five years his distinctive style of photography has evolved using a simple square format in stark and beautiful black and white. In his earlier works, his connection to the tradition of documentary photography is clear but through the 1990s he developed a style he describes as 'documentary fiction'. After 2000 the people he first discovered and documented living on the margins of South African society increasingly became a cast of actors working with Ballen in the series' *Outland* (2000, revised in 2015) and *Shadow Chamber* (2005) collaborating to create powerful psychodramas.

The line between fantasy and reality in his subsequent series' *Boarding House* (2009) and *Asylum of the Birds* (2014) became increasingly blurred and in these series he employed drawings, painting, collage and sculptural techniques to create elaborate sets. There was an absence of people altogether, replaced by photographs of individuals now used as props, by doll or dummy parts or where people did appear it was as disembodied hands, feet and mouths poking disturbingly through walls and pieces of rag. The often improvised scenarios were now completed by the unpredictable behaviour of animals whose ambiguous behaviour became crucial to the overall meaning of the photographs. In this phase Ballen invented a new hybrid aesthetic, but one still rooted firmly in black and white photography.

In his artistic practice Ballen has increasingly been won over by the possibilities of integrating photography and drawing. He has expanded his repertoire and extended his visual language. By integrating drawing into his photographic and video works, the artist has not only made a lasting contribution to the field of art, but equally has made a powerful commentary about the human condition and its creative potential.

.../...

His contribution has not been limited to stills photography and Ballen has been the creator of a number of acclaimed and exhibited short films that dovetail with his photographic series'. The collaborative film *I Fink You Freeky*, created for the cult band Die Antwoord in 2012, has garnered over 85-million hits on YouTube. He has taken his work into the realms of sculpture and installation, most recently at Paris' Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature (2017), Australia's Sydney College of the Arts (2016) and at the Serlachius Museum in Finland (2015) among others.

His most recent project has been *The Theatre of Apparitions* (Thames & Hudson, 2016) and its related animated film, inspired by the sight of hand-drawn carvings on blacked-out windows in an abandoned women's prison. For this series Ballen started to experiment using different spray paints on glass and then 'drawing on' or removing the paint with a sharp object to let natural light through. The results have been likened prehistoric cave-paintings: the black, dimensionless spaces on the glass are canvases onto which Ballen has carved his thoughts and emotions.

In September 2017 Thames & Hudson will publish a large volume of the collected photography with extended commentary by Ballen titled *Ballenesque: A Retrospection*. In February 2017 the new Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town named its photographic facility the Roger Ballen Foundation Centre for Photography thereby ensuring that Ballen's contribution to photography in Africa, and beyond, will continue into the future.



2. © Roger Ballen / Courtesy Galerie Karsten Greve

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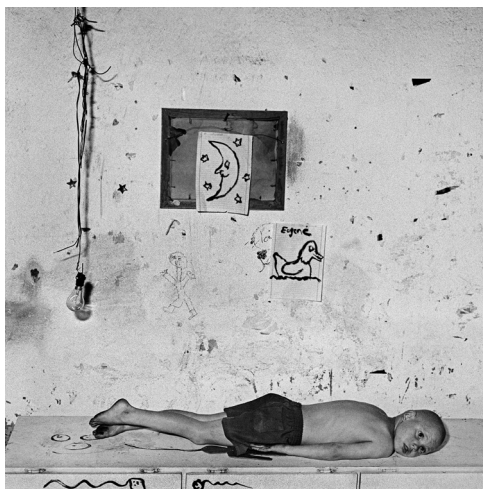
1. *Boarding House*, 2008  
Edition 9/10  
80 x 80 cm  
© Roger Ballen / Courtesy  
Galerie Karsten Greve

2. *Pathos*, 2005  
Edition 6/25  
50 x 50 cm  
© Roger Ballen / Courtesy  
Galerie Karsten Greve

3. *Under the Moon*, 2000  
Edition 12/20  
40 x 40 cm  
© Roger Ballen / Courtesy  
Galerie Karsten Greve

4. *Collision*, 2005  
Edition 7/10  
50 x 50 cm  
© Roger Ballen / Courtesy  
Galerie Karsten Greve

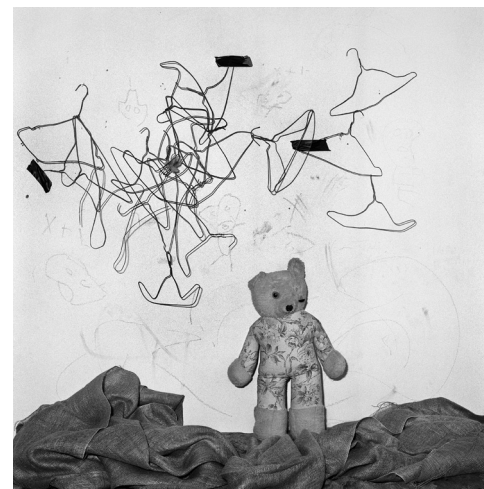
5. *Configuration*, 2003  
Edition 16/20  
40 x 40 cm  
© Roger Ballen / Courtesy  
Galerie Karsten Greve



3. © Roger Ballen / Courtesy Galerie Karsten Greve



4. © Roger Ballen / Courtesy Galerie Karsten Greve



5. © Roger Ballen / Courtesy Galerie Karsten Greve

## THE GALLERY

FLAIR Galerie, a singular space in the heart of Arles, is devoted to contemporary exhibitions, art books and magazines, dealing with the representation of animal life. At the invitation of Isabelle Wisniak, founder of the gallery, artists come to ponder, experiment and develop their work, offering an unusual flip side of the world, more poetic, enigmatic, and vast.

If animals out of their kingdom are far from an easy topic, FLAIR Galerie, ever since April 2015, has an open-door policy to different species and welcome works signed by such diverse and sensitive paws as photographer Dolorès Marat, sculptor Roland Roure and painter/set designer, Lucio Fanti, to name a few.

Since then, dogs, cats, giraffes, elephants, lady crocodiles and flying dragons take turns hanging out, framed by flair where the only frontier is human imagination.

Rosanna Tardif, 2016



© Claire Bertolino

FLAIR Galerie is a member of the Arles Contemporain network. 

Opening hours: Tuesday to Saturday, from 11am to 1pm and 3 pm to 7 pm, and by appointment.