

The collective unconscious

Sometimes a little self-reflection goes a long way. On the eve of his talk at Photo London 2017, photographer **Roger Ballen** looks back on his controversial career. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

Of all the photographers who have passed through culture's gates of consciousness in the past few decades, only a few have been known for their ability to raise the hackles of the audience. Photography has often found itself subject to accusations of exploitation, whether that exploitation occurs within the context of blasphemy, pornography or, most commonly, taking advantage of those who may not be in a position to judge whether or not they should be photographed.

In the case of Roger Ballen, he's

a photographer who, at the earliest stages of his career, often found himself accused of exploiting marginalised and mentally unstable South Africans in order to create sensationalist portraits in books such as *Platteland*, *Shadow Chamber* and *Boarding House*. However, there's an argument to be made that this tired – almost clichéd – condemnation of Roger Ballen's work is something of a smokescreen.

In my own experience, when I first saw Ballen's work some years ago, it caused me look away, to almost attempt to 'unsee' it. It's only

in retrospect that I can look back at my reaction and realise that my horror of it was inspired by my own inability to face a photographer who was utterly untroubled by plunging into his own subconscious.

'People don't want to talk about the dark recesses of their mind because they're scared of their own thoughts and feelings,' Roger tells me from his office in Johannesburg. 'This is what a lot of members of society have, unfortunately, done to themselves. But look, I don't take pictures with a preconceived formula that I imagine might unleash the subconscious mind of the next person. If I start with a premise at all, it's that I want to take pictures that challenge me and open me up to my own mind. If the pictures do that for me then I feel confident enough to let them out into the world, and it would appear the nature of my pictures does that to other people. I hear that a lot, so I guess it's true.'

It would be easy to imagine Ballen as a foreboding character, emanating surly growls and nihilistic proclamations. In fact, quite the opposite is true. He is patient, open and generous. It's a strange prejudice we have about the kinds of figures who create work that some would find uncomfortable. There's something in that. Some artists create images that explore those facets of our mind that we would like to shy away from. But through an honest and open approach to what makes them human, they are able to confront

'Waif' 2012, from Ballen's latest project *The Theatre of Apparitions*



ALL PICTURES © ROGER BALLEEN



'Ghostriding' 2011, from *The Theatre of Apparitions*

the shadowy realms that sit behind consciousness and get a well-rounded perspective on what it is to be alive in the world. Once you've confronted and accepted that, you're left with a pretty optimistic and balanced perspective on life.

Down to earth

It may surprise you to hear that Ballen's background isn't exactly in photography. Apart from his mother's influence, he has received no training in the art. In fact, for years Ballen worked as a geologist, hence his move from New York to Johannesburg in the 1970s. There's an interesting metaphor there. Ballen spent years plunging his hands into the dark soil of the earth and has now become known as a photographer who spends his time diving into the shadowy spaces of the subconscious.

'It's so difficult to know exactly what influences your aesthetic,' he says. 'You have things that influence you in certain ways, but you don't know how it affects your pictures. The human mind is made up of billions and billions of brain cells, and how they all interact to create what you generate as an artist is really hard to understand. You could easily make metaphors if we take the example of geology, where you're looking at the earth for minerals and you're trying to pierce below the surface. When I work with my subjects, I'm

trying to get beneath the surface. We can also use analogies such as that my pictures are layered like sediments. Ultimately, I'd say the most important thing about being a geologist was that, because of the financial stability, I was able to do all my pictures for all those years. I was able to continue being a photographer artist because I had another source of income.'

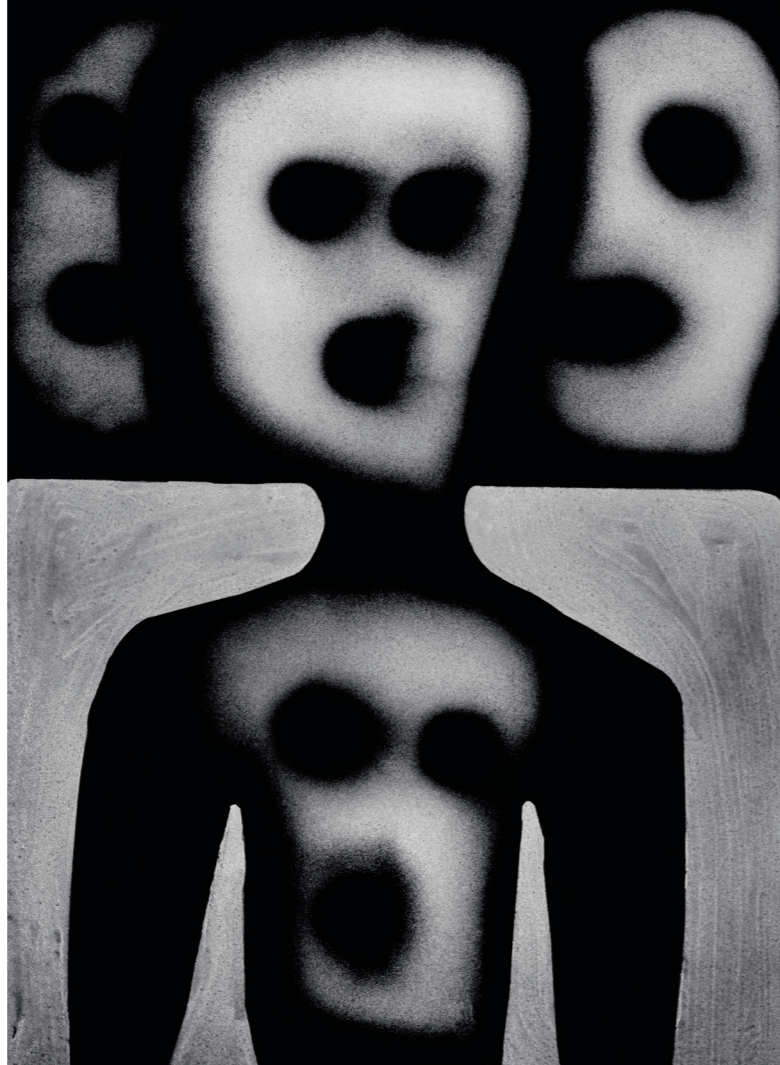
Ballen may not necessarily see it this way, and I know a lot of readers certainly won't, but there's something almost child-like about his images. They're totally expressive in the use of props and the use of drawings. There's a primitivism to them. He is allowing his mind to express itself no matter the result. In a sense, he's getting out of his own way; he's not over-thinking it. Ballen has often mentioned the Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung – an individual who was very attached to the idea of sometimes reverting back to an almost childlike approach to the world. Themes recur time and again in Ballen's work: wires, animals, drawings, interiors that seem to verge on the threat of collapse under the weight of their own tension. But, as Ballen says, all of these would be nothing



Right: 'Haunted' 2012, from *The Theatre of Apparitions*

Far right: 'Take Off' 2012, from *Asylum of the Birds*

'Feeding' 2012, from *The Theatre of Apparitions*



without the *form* of the image.

'I'm basically a formalist,' Roger explains. 'I find most photographers in the history of photography and contemporary photography never talk about the form of the picture. In painting, people are very concerned about the form, and for me you have no content without it. It's like if you're a good writer or poet: every word means something. Very few people in photography think this way, and that's why so much of photography is so sloppy and doesn't have much impact.'

'It's like a human body or anything in nature. Everything in nature is there for a reason. For me, a photograph is the same. If there's one thing that doesn't work, the whole thing falls apart. It's like having a cancerous cell.'

That idea of facilitating an organic process is perhaps key to Ballen's work. It's how he can create work with such confidence. It's how he can deal with subjects that other photographers, even audiences, may choose to shy away from.

'I believe that I have everything in my mind that I need to have in my mind,' he explains. 'I'm like a lion – they have everything they require to give them what they need to do in their life: they have to hunt. I'm

prepared when I get to the location. I don't have anxieties about it. When I get there, I'm mentally and emotionally focused on what I'm trying to do. It's like a good athlete. A good athlete is not nervous or tense. If he or she is, they're not going to do well.'

People person

'The one thing you really have to take into account is that since 2002 there are hardly any portraits among my photographs,' Ballen says when I press him on the accusations of exploitation in his work. 'A lot of the images feature animals, drawings, installations and complex relationships between the space and subjects. One should be aware that the concept of portraiture and the human subject being the subject has not been the focus of the work for the past 15 years.'

'But, also consider that you couldn't do what I did for all these years unless you have a terrific relationship with the people being photographed. If I didn't have a great empathy with the people, believe in what I was doing and feel a friendship and warmth, then it would be impossible to do anything. That must tell you something about how much the people like and

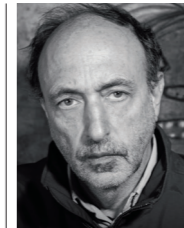


respect me. And I feel the same towards them. It has to be a win-win situation, otherwise things would never happen.'

Ballen's most recent body of work takes this removal of the human subject to the extreme. *The Theatre of Apparitions* has been years in the making and was, in fact, made in the same period as his two books *Boarding House* and *Asylum of the Birds*. These newest images are an intriguing departure for Ballen, who has produced a series of unusual images painted onto glass. The images feel almost like cave paintings or fossils. There's something archetypal about them. In 2002, drawings started to play a big role in Ballen's images. By the time he began *The Theatre of Apparitions*, drawings had already established themselves as something important in what he was doing, so for him this was

another way of working with drawing and photography.

'During the time I was shooting the *Shadow Chamber* book, which was published in 2005, I was in a women's prison in Johannesburg,' says Ballen. 'One of the cells had drawings on the blacked-out windows and the glass had a strange luminosity to it. The drawings had a ghost-like, metaphysical feeling to them. This was quite an amazing experience for me. I took a picture and that ended up in *Shadow Chamber*. At the same time, I was working in a warehouse with a lot of windows, so I started experimenting with some pictures. The project lasted about eight years and it kept metamorphosing all the time into different imagery and aesthetics. All these pictures were all taken on glass windows with a 6x6 and eventually 4x6 camera.'



Roger Ballen is a New York-born photographer living in Johannesburg, South Africa. He has published several books and has been called one of the most influential photographers of the 21st century. To see more of his work, visit www.rogerballen.com. He will be presenting a talk at Photo London on 20 May. www.photolondon.org

'The moment I started to mix these paints together on the glass, I started to get all these cracks and the chemistry. It was unexplainable. I got different formal relationships of these materials. The way the paint cracked opened up the aesthetic of the work. That was the decisive moment of the project.'

Up next is an onstage talk at this year's Photo London. He'll be in conversation with Mark Lubell, executive director of the International Center of Photography. Then, in early September, Thames & Hudson will be releasing a weighty volume called *Ballenesque*, which will get to the heart of just what that term means. It's certainly a distinct aesthetic and one that requires careful analysis. With any luck it will create a few converts for the pro-Ballen camp.