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Roger ballen: Boarding house [Exhibition Catalogue]

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ROGER BALLEEN:

BOARDING HOUSE

march 5 - may 31, 2009

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ROGER BALLEEN:

BOARDING HOUSE

OCAD Professional Gallery
March 5 – May 31, 2009

JUST to mess with our heads, Dutch director Saskia Vredeveld opens her short film *Memento mori* (2005) with a little trick. After establishing the run-down but neighbourly setting, the camera slowly pans left while photographer Roger Ballen enters from the right. He walks casually through the shot, exiting to the left as we notice a young boy coming the other way.

Reversing direction, the camera follows the boy's short, brisk steps from left to right. As he leaves the frame, he crosses paths with Ballen, who, having re-entered from the right, walks away from us to inspect six newly-printed photographs drying on a line. Meanwhile, the camera pulls back to reveal the boy now standing quietly in the left foreground.

Obviously, after leaving the shot, Ballen walked counter-clockwise behind the camera to appear on the other side; the boy did the same going clockwise. But more important than the manoeuvre's simplicity is how easily we can figure it out, given that it contravenes, if mildly, our conventions about what happens in front of a movie camera.

We expect movies to be internally consistent.^a If I leave a shot from the left, I'm supposed to re-enter from that same side. Doing otherwise breaks the illusion. It highlights the role of scripts, sets, editing rooms, camera angles and so on in fabricating the worlds that movies depict. And if the point of a movie is to get lost in its world, then being reminded that it's a fiction spoils the fun.

So why build this thing (fiction or, more generally, art) that requires us to forget everything we know (or to forget that we know everything) about how it was



Still from *Memento mori*, Saskia Vredeveld, dir., 2005. (courtesy Peacefield Films)

made? When we're considering Roger Ballen's art, answering this question raises another, namely, where are we?

Given that Vredeveld made *Memento mori* the same year that Ballen released his seventh book, *Shadow Chamber*, perhaps that's where we are. But where is that? "The images in *Shadow Chamber* are completely honest, contingent, expressive and truthful; they are fully vested in the tropes and conventions of documentary photography," writes Robert Sobieszek in that book's introduction. "The images are also fabricated, orchestrated, artful and fictional, in direct descent from other historical photographic fictions."^b

That seems right. Consider *Oblivious* (2003). We're in a room, a chamber, a bedroom — in French, *une chambre*. We see a bed with a cover, a pillow and a puppy. This might be what Sobieszek calls this image's truthful, documentary side.

Yet this familiarity has a great deal of unfamiliarity about it. Grime is everywhere: the walls, the sheet, the pillowcase. The pillow's lumps suggest that it hides a box. The large drawing on the wall's left side seems vulgar, until a second look reveals that the phallic shape jumping out at the viewer might be a tongue sticking out of a mouth or the body of a bird flying upward. Then there's the wire shapes fastened to the wall: one vaguely dog-shaped, one more or less abstract, and one — apparently protruding from the pillow — shaped like a speech bubble. This picture's place on the truth-fiction axis is unclear since, although the drawings and wires at first pre-existed Ballen's arrival with his camera, in *Shadow Chamber* this relationship changes. As Robert Cook says in his useful catalogue *Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal*:

The drawings on the wall 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.^c

Without abandoning the documentary tradition, Ballen figuratively circumvents it in *Shadow Chamber* just as he literally walks around it in *Memento mori*. Psychology, not sociology, as Cook notes; and Ballen's psychology as much as anyone else's.^d "The Shadow Chamber is supposed to be a place people aren't sure about," Ballen says. "It could be a real place, could be a fantasy place, could be both. There's nothing to say it can't be real, nothing to say it is. It's a dark, disturbing and...funny place."^e

Photography, too, has its shadow chambers, its light-free boxes. The camera's name, for example, abbreviates that of its precursor, the camera obscura or "dark room." Then there's the "darkroom" where one develops pictures. Naturally, many photographers consider these murky devices obsolete. But Ballen, like many artists, sticks with the film-based process, which, despite the science involved, remains mysterious.

He has explored such enigmas for over 30 years, and this exhibition lays out this trajectory by placing selections from his entire career alongside his most recent work. Appearing in Ballen's latest book, also titled *Boarding House*, these new images delve even deeper into the enigmatic. For instance, we can't tell where the title picture was taken, or under what circumstances. Set against a messed-up wall, the scenario looks like part of a larger room, perhaps a basement. A face stares at us from the picture's centre — except that it doesn't, because its eyes are closed and anyway it's a doll, its rubberized neck looking like something from an oversize jack-in-the-box. The live creatures are the dog in the bottom right corner and the boy in the bottom left. But are they alive? The wary swivelling to one side of the dog's eyes looks too strikingly anthropomorphic to be real, and the boy's mouth seems open slightly too wide for someone asleep. And how can his legs fit under that Louise Nevelson-like structure?

That last question has an answer, if we look closely. A flap of heavy cloth, like carpet, runs up to the boy's elbow. If we follow it back, we see that it connects to the wall — which turns out to be cloth, not a structural surface.

Commenting on Ballen's shift away from documentary, Cook writes, "These actions take on a sense of the theatrical, that Ballen sees as linked to playwright Samuel Beckett's work — something compelling that confounds straight-forward narrative interpretation. Despite its references to the theatre, it is stasis that is vital to Ballen's work."^f But if Ballen's later work accentuates this theatricality, an affinity with theatre infuses even his most documentary photographs from the start of his career.

The Indonesian boys from Ballen's first book, *Boyhood*, for example, seem spontaneous. As they clown around, the one in the centre looks up, sees the photographer pointing his camera, and flashes an impish grin as Ballen trips the shutter. Yet the hand reaching in from the top right and the cropping of the figure lying on its back catch our eye with a deliberateness that points to the artist's role in composing this picture.

So, too, does the question of where we are. We're looking down on the boys, but the angle of the picture plane makes it hard to know if the ground beneath them is horizontal (like a beach) or tilted (on a hill). Their nakedness suggests the former. But the surface texture — more like dirt than sand — suggests the latter, and this aspect of the composition seems staged to disorient us.

The architecture in *Plattelend*, such as *Side view of hotel, Middleburg* and the portraits in *Dorps* like that of Sergeant de Bruin similarly turn theatre back on itself, making it the vehicle of documentary. The factual titles — name, place, date — speak to documentary photography's truthful conventions. We know where we are, and when. The flat backgrounds that recall theatre sets in the *Boarding House* and *Shadow Chamber* pictures here become the opposite: neutral environments that "tell it like it is" just as the direct looks of the portraits' subjects do.

Yet the "it" being told remains up for grabs when we recall that in 1992 — when Ballen shot de Bruin's portrait — South Africa was in the throes of its transition from apartheid to democracy, halfway between Nelson Mandela's release from jail (1990) and the elections that swept the African National Congress to power (1994). One might suspect that this context, and that of the full-blown apartheid around the pictures in *Dorps*, would make Ballen's photographs controversial, as indeed it did in South Africa throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.^g As with truth and fiction, though, Ballen frames his relation to controversy ambiguously. He didn't run from it, despite being arrested several times. On the other hand,

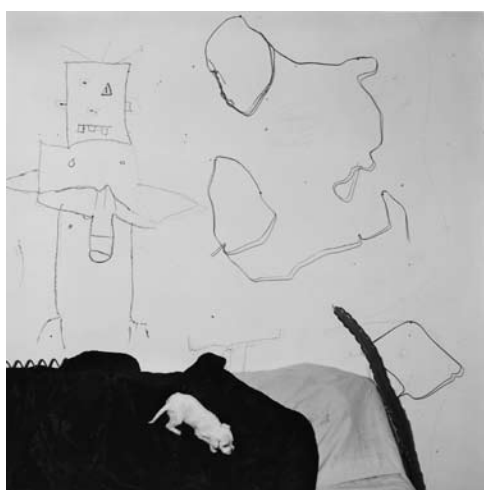
although he is a white person living in South Africa, he didn't address that situation directly in the way that such artists as Kendell Geers and William Kentridge have. Ballen's oeuvre contains nothing equivalent to Geers's presentation of a broken, menacing Heineken bottle as a self-portrait, or Kentridge's lyrical laments over apartheid and its aftermath.

Clearer parallels exist with photographers whose works are political without being didactic (in the way that everything is potentially political). For this reason, Ballen often gets compared to Diane Arbus. This comparison makes sense for the first fifteen years of his career, when he depicted the people and places on the margins of South Africa — deeply impoverished whites, for example, whose decrepit appearances and situations contradicted apartheid's ideology of white supremacy. However, in *Shadow Chamber* and, even more, *Boarding House*, Ballen moves away from the conventions of documentary and portraiture that connect his earlier pictures to time and place. "His human subjects appear as an isolated foot, hand, or inexplicable combination of limbs, shadows, and draped forms that reveal little about themselves," writes Heather Snider about Ballen's most recent book, noting that these pictures' dark undercurrents do not rule out playfulness.^h

This ambiguity, in which contradictory meanings co-exist uneasily rather than cancelling each other, often figures in the details of Ballen's pictures. The sleeping boy in the picture *Boarding House* might be an uncertain figure in a dank-looking, run-down room, or a kid who's fallen asleep wherever, worn out from playing with the toys and dog that accompany him. This proliferation of meanings shifts Ballen from documentary to surrealism — Hans Bellmer when hewing to its darker side, Man Ray when exploring lighter themes. ("The Selma Blair Witch Project," a fashion shoot that Ballen did for the *New York Times Magazine*, accentuates the connection to Man Ray.ⁱ)

This affinity with surrealism points to where, finally, Ballen sets his pictures. Over the last 30 years, he has framed his images more and more tightly, moving to photographing exclusively indoors and thus eliminating context while emphasizing detail, to arrive at vibrant yet disconcerting scenes that could be anywhere. The surrealists loved how such uncertainly linked the camera to one final dark chamber, namely, the inscrutable black box of our minds. Despite science and our talk of rationality, we don't quite understand how either one works, nor can we really control what they do.

— Charles Reeve



Roger Ballen, *Oblivious*, 2003 / Roger Ballen, *Indonesia*, 1979 / Roger Ballen, *Side view of hotel, Middleburg*, 1983. (all images courtesy of Roger Ballen and Clint Roenisch Gallery)



Above: **Roger Ballen**, *Sgt. F. de Bruin, Department of Prisons Employee, Orange Free State, 1992*. Front and Back Cover Images: **Roger Ballen**, *Boarding House, 2008*, (details); (Courtesy the artist and Clint Roenisch Gallery)

EVENTS

Wednesday, April 8:

The artist will give a lecture and sign copies of his latest book, *Boarding House* (Phaidon). Free and open to the public. 6:30 pm, OCAD auditorium.

Thursday evening walk-throughs:

20-30 minute discussions of the exhibition. Free and open to the public. Walk-throughs begin at 6:30 pm and take place in the Professional Gallery.

March 5

Charles Reeve. Curator of OCAD's Professional Gallery and Assistant Professor of Liberal Studies and Art, Charles Reeve organized the exhibit "Roger Ballen: Boarding House."

March 26

Blake Fitzpatrick. Blake Fitzpatrick is a Professor in the Documentary Media Program and Director of Photographic Studies, School of Image Arts at Ryerson University. His many interests as a writer and photographer include documentary and photojournalistic photography, photographic responses to the nuclear era and contemporary war representation.

May 21

Sophie Hackett is Assistant Curator of Photography at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

For more information on the Professional Gallery and its Programs, please go to www.ocad.ca/progallery, or visit us on Facebook.

ENDNOTES

a
Many writers have made this point, but the classic discussion remains Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

b
Robert A. Sobieszek, "Shadow Chamber," in *Shadow Chamber* (London: Phaidon, 2005): 9-10.

c
Robert Cook, *Brutal, Tender, Human, Animal: Roger Ballen Photography* (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2008): 24.

d
Ibid., 20.

e
Robert Grieg, "Chamber of Horrors" *The Independent on Sunday*, December 4, 2005.

f
Cook, 24.

g
Ibid., 18-19.

h
Heather Snider, "Robert Ballen," *Eyemazing* (Winter 2009).

i
"The Selma Blair Witch Project," *New York Times Magazine*, October 30, 2005.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in New York in 1950, Roger Ballen has lived in South Africa since 1982. He won the Photographer of the Year Award at the inaugural Rencontres d'Arles Awards in 2002 and subsequently has had over 50 exhibitions worldwide, including solo shows at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, New York's Gagosian Gallery and Toronto's Clint Roenisch Gallery. Many museums have collected Ballen's work, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Centre Pompidou and the Museum of Modern Art. The Roger Ballen Foundation has helped bring to South Africa major exhibits of work by Stephen Shore, Vik Muniz and Janiana Tschäpe.

ROGER BALLEEN BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Shadow Chamber (Phaidon, 2005). Essay by Robert A. Sobieszek.
Fact or Fiction (Galerie Kamel Mennour, 2003).
 Introduced by Stéphane Gulbourgé.
Outland (Phaidon, 2001).
Cette Afrique le (Editions Nathan, 1997). Essay by Lionel Murcott.
Platteland (William Waterman, 1994).
Dorps: Small Towns of Africa (Hirt and Carter, 1986).
Boyhood (Chelsea House, 1979).

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