

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# THE ART SET: *Roger Ballen at Gagosian*

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Roger Ballen, *Pathos*, 2005.



*by Lesley Hauge*

Photographer **Roger Ballen** was born in New York but has lived and worked in Johannesburg for more than thirty years. He trained and worked as a geologist, all the while taking photographs, many from the remote areas where he was prospecting for mineral deposits. His first images documented tiny hamlets in South Africa, known as 'dorps' and his international breakthrough came with his book *Platteland*, a controversial set of portraits of so-called 'poor whites.' His extraordinary images, collected by the likes of **Madonna** and **Elton John**, are intensely original, frightening and packed with elusive narrative.

*(An exhibition of his work runs through December 23rd at Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Avenue)*



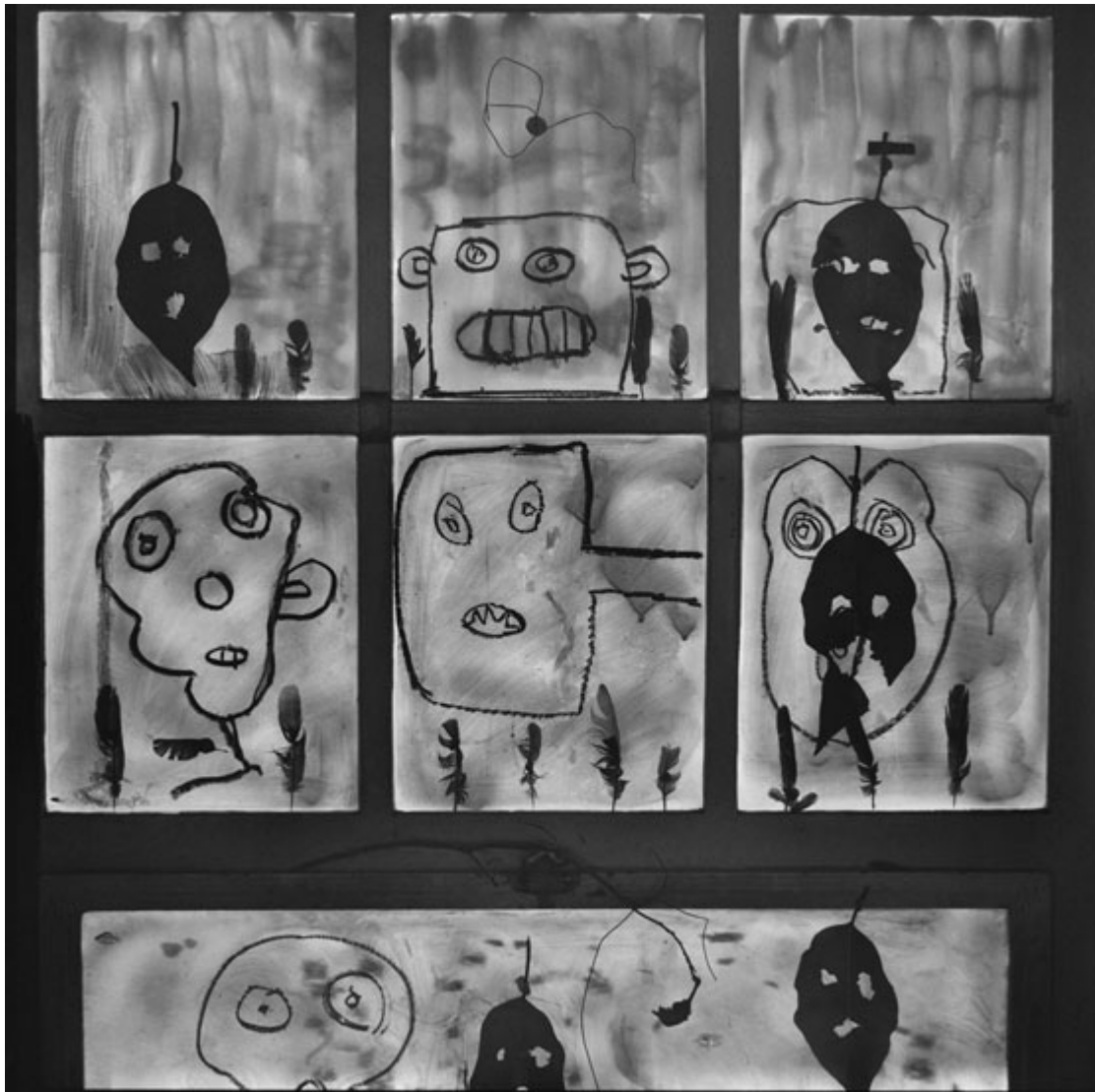


Roger Ballen, *Closet*, 2004.

Although your images are frequently described as 'scary' or 'nightmarish', this series of photographs, with all the use of animals and child-like scrawls on walls, strikes me as oddly 'tender'. Was portraying vulnerability something you for which you were consciously striving?

I almost never try to base a photograph on a word or a concept. The

photographs evolved as I interacted in the “Boarding House” space. The meaning of my photographs never matches any of the preconceptions that I might have had when I shot them.



Roger Ballen, *Dream drawings*, 2006.

**Can you describe for us something of the process of setting up your shots?**

The images evolve step by step; sometimes beginning with one interesting object at other times through interactions with the subjects I work with. No two images ever start or end in the same way.

**You started out as documentary photographer, gradually transitioning to making art – has learning to trust your own imaginative responses been a long journey for you? Did you lack the confidence initially?**

I have been photographing for over forty years and my evolution towards being an artist occurred gradually. The evolution that occurred had nothing to do with confidence or a lack thereof. It was all about growth, which enabled me to create more complex images.





Roger Ballen, *Grabbed*, 2006.

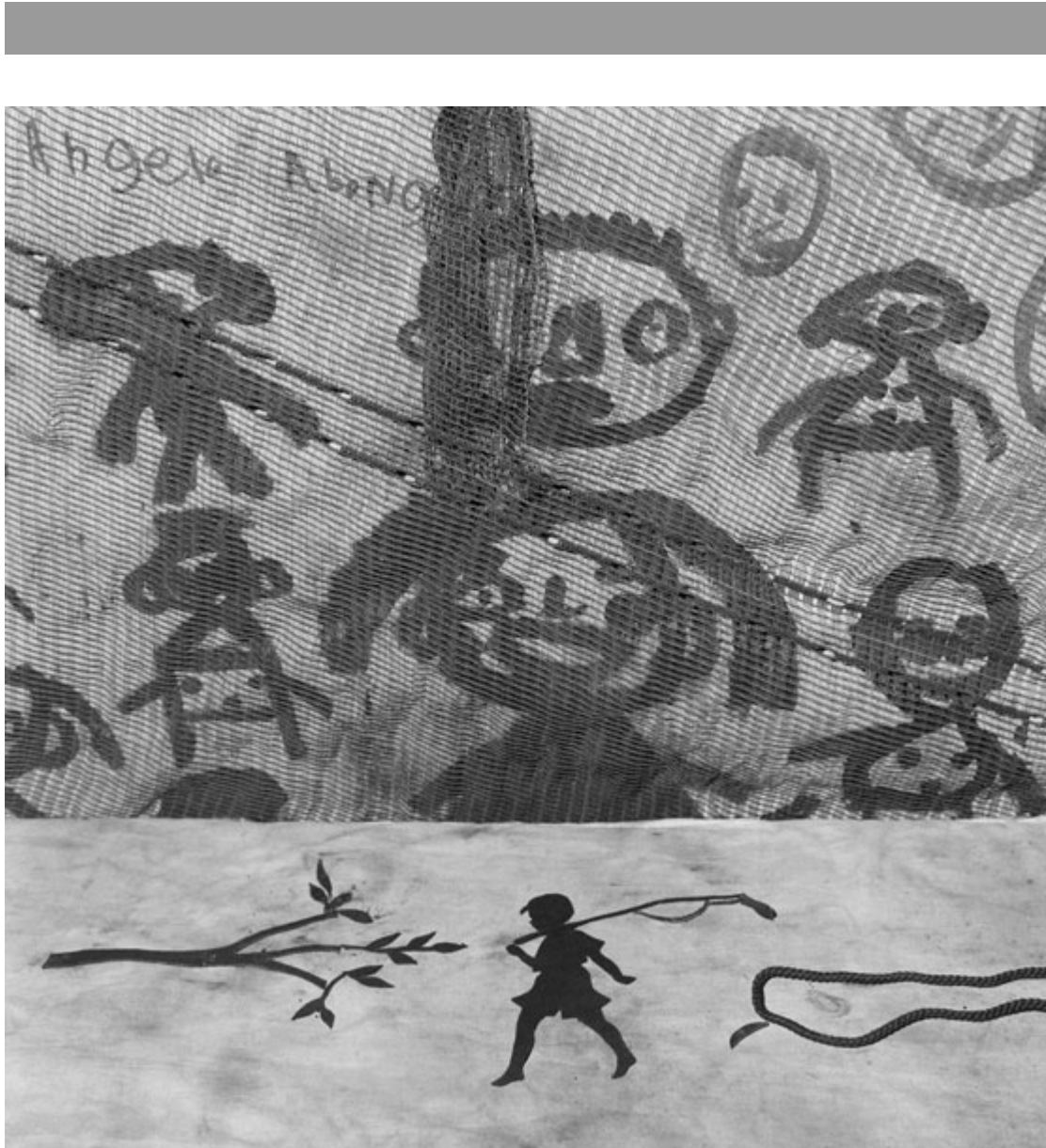
Many of the images include bits and pieces of what might be termed 'Africana' – animal hides, masks etc. but the pictures in *Boarding House* are not really 'African' pictures. How does living in Africa influence your work now?

I have lived in Africa for nearly thirty years and have traveled all over the continent. It is difficult to quantify how living here has altered my vision, but I


am quite certain it has been profound in all sorts of ways.

Do you make up tentative narratives about these pictures as you go along?

No.



Roger Ballen, *Innocence*, 2006.




**I'm really curious as to your influences other than the influences of other photographers. What sort of books do you read? Which painters do you like? What kind of music do you listen to?**

I have always stated that you do not need to be involved in art to make art. I feel that one central reason for the uniqueness of my photographs can be attributed to the fact that for many decades I have worked in isolation. I like books and paintings that express a viewpoint that is either psychological or philosophical. There are too many painters and writers to mention particular ones. My favorite music is the sound of birds or silence.

**You have spent a great deal of time taking portraits of people rather than things. Why so much emphasis on objects now?**

I expressed what I wanted to express through making portraits of people. I found a 'whole new world' in objects, drawings, and animals to explore photographically.







Roger Ballen, *Targets*, 2007.

These photographs reveal an obsession with and a deep love of animals. Do you think it is almost impossible to be an artist without some kind of fascination with animals? Can you explain your particular fascination with them?

I am certain that many people who create contemporary art have nothing to do

with animals. My fascination with animals stems from their sense of mystery and purity. It is hard to find these same attributes in most humans.



Roger Ballen, *Intertwined*, 2007.

Do you believe in ghosts? (Your pictures are full of them.)

I think I believe in ghosts.

**Are you ever tempted to work in any medium other than photography?**

I have no desire to work in any other media other than black and white film photography. Nevertheless, there are aspects of painting and sculpture throughout my images.



Roger Ballen, *Seed pods*, 2008.