

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



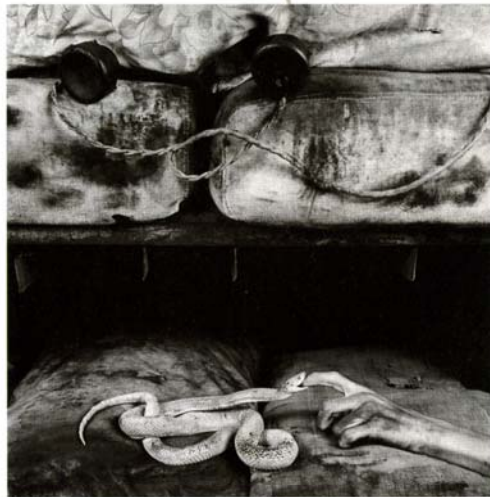
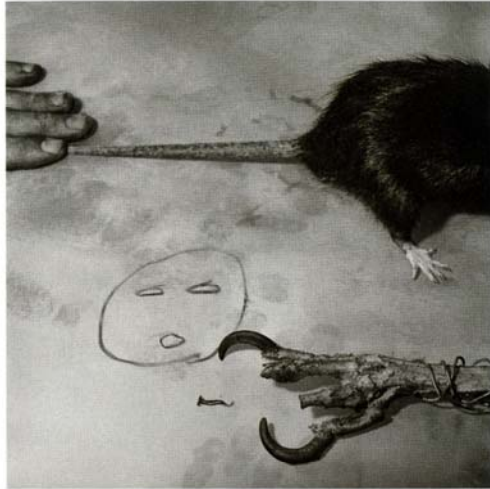
### PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROGER BALLEEN

Over the past two decades, Roger Ballen has developed a style of image making that is firmly rooted in the documentary tradition of the great midcentury storytellers. But Ballen consistently takes the notion of a photographic "document" as a mere starting point for an ever-deepening exploration into the human subconscious. His images come from the realm of dreams.

Ballen grew up in New York under the influence of the Magnum circle of photographers; his mother ran the New York office of the famous agency for many years when he was a child, and as a youngster Ballen considered Henri Cartier-Bresson, Bruce Davidson, and Elliott Erwitt as uncles and tutors. He later studied geology and settled in South Africa, where he continued to make photographs, especially in the backcountry around Johannesburg.

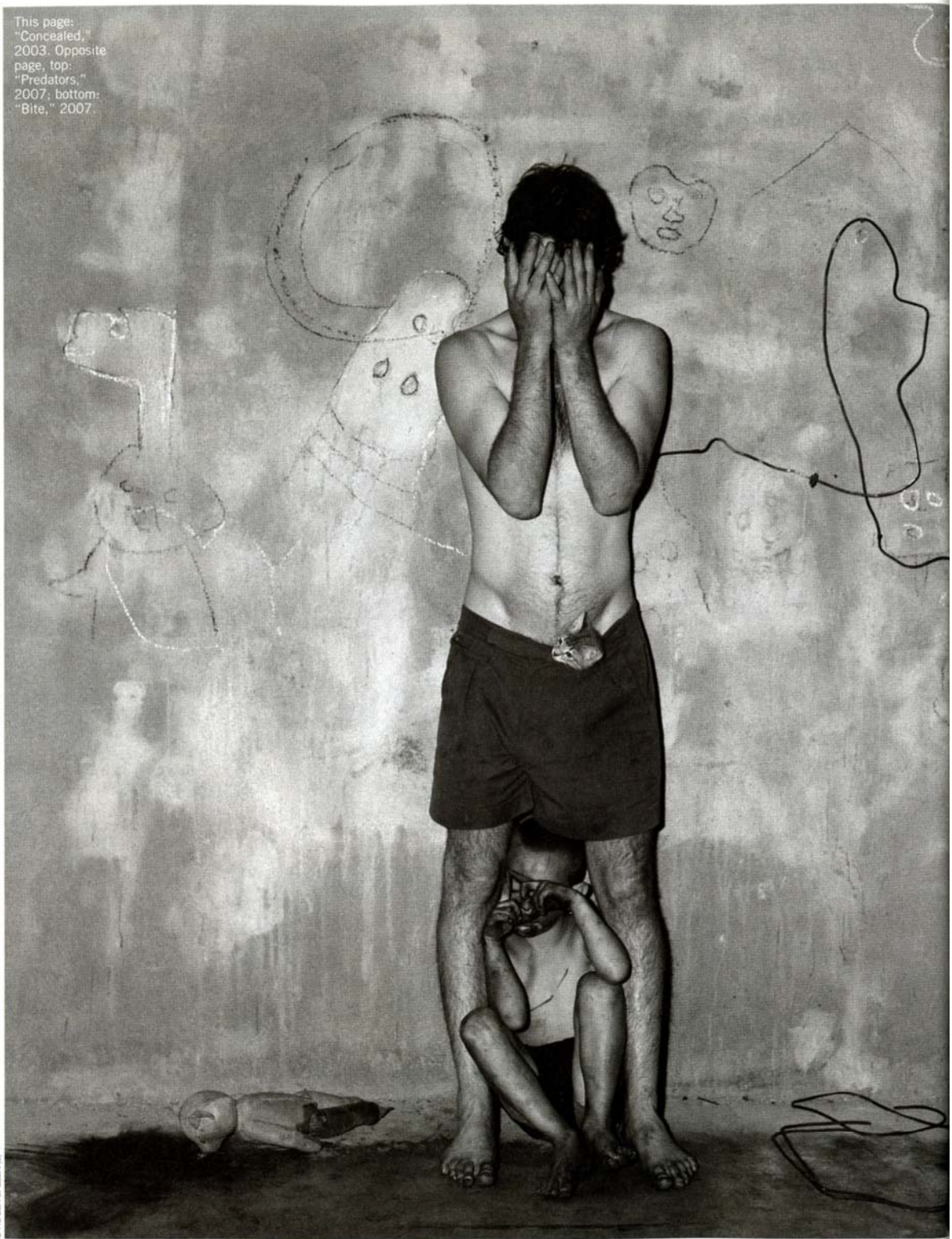
His well-received 2001 book, *Outland*, documented the underprivileged residents of rural South Africa. His follow-up book, *Shadow Chamber* (2005), wandered into an imaginative middle ground. He began photographing complex, fictional scenes filled with symbolism. In his introductory essay for *Shadow Chamber*, the late Robert Sobieszek wrote that Ballen's "art tests our very conception of the reporting photographer creating tableaux that speak to, and not just about, our human condition."

Ballen's new book, *Boarding House* (Phaidon, \$70) continues this rich, penetrating vision. Mark-making, sculpture, theater, and photography are all deftly woven together to create a cast



## AP INTERVIEW BEHIND THE MYSTERY OF ROGER BALLEEN'S ART

This page:  
"Concealed,"  
2003. Opposite  
page, top:  
"Predators,"  
2007; bottom:  
"Bite," 2007.



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Left: "Eulogy," 2004. Below: "Vase and Skull," 2005.

companion volume or a natural outgrowth of that earlier work?

**RB** Well, I think that if you're an attuned person and artist, you're writing your own diary all the time. Your work is growing as you grow. The images in *Boarding House* are in many ways much more complex visions of reality than the images in *Shadow Chamber*. Likewise, *Shadow Chamber* was a more complex vision of reality than *Outland*. In *Boarding House*, in some way at least, I've come into my own style.

**AP** Kathy Ryan, the picture editor of the *New York Times Magazine*, has commented that you're

a one-man school of photography. One is hard-pressed to find somebody doing what you're doing, which is such a fascinating combination of photography, drawing, and sculpture. What do you consider as your breakthrough stylistic changes?

**RB** The most important stylistic change was adding the drawings and sculptural pieces during the period at the beginning of *Shadow Chamber*. Those sculptural pieces and drawings, I think, add a very particular and peculiar level of meaning and complexity to the work. I'm looking into my own psyche and delivering that in a very formalistic and clear (continued on page 82)

" I LOOK INTO MY OWN PSYCHE. "

of characters—animals as often as humans—that stand firmly before the camera, in real space and time, and yet somehow shimmer on the edge of immateriality, leaping out from fantasy for a brief moment, only to recede into the unconscious the next. He has transformed a technical vocabulary and drafted a dark poem infused with all of the struggles and turmoil of our modern lives. As Sobieszek mused, "little more can be expected of art." Recently, *American Photo* contributor **Darius Himes** spoke with Ballen about the evolution of his work.

**AP** Roger, does *Boarding House* pick up from where *Shadow Chamber* left off? Do you see this as a



**AP** You seem extremely concerned with mark-making. Not only the marks in front of you on the walls and windows and doors of the photographs, but the photographs themselves. The camera-mounted flash flattens everything in front of the camera—hands and feet, kittens and birds, branches, wire, mattresses and scribbles on the wall—to a highly potent and outlined gesture. There also seems to be an element of collaboration going on between you and the people in your photographs.

**RB** There is a small measure of collaboration with the people. But don't ever underestimate the animals. They play a large role in my photography, and even I am not quite sure what they represent. The metaphor or symbolism of an animal is quite different from that of a human being. Animals have endless mythology and metaphor wrapped up with them. There are probably more animals than humans in my photographs.

**AP** It doesn't seem like you're working with any particular cultural mythology in your work. Are you creating your own mythology?

**RB** The pictures are of a psychological culture, a Jungian culture, if you will. It is difficult trying to define my work because I feel like I'm trying to define myself. Perhaps a poetic way of putting it is that I'm trying to define and place where one's dreams are coming from. It's a hard place to get to, honestly. It has taken me many years to get to that place and to define it visually.

**AP** You allow the imagination to play in an unguided way, yet the structure of the images is so refined. It's a nice balance between structure and total freedom.

**RB** I feel that I've got to provide the road for the viewer to travel. That's why I don't like

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"I PUT YOU IN  
THE PLACE  
I WAS IN AS  
I MADE  
THE PHOTO."

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particular place, the one I was in when I was photographing. I want to immerse you in that photograph. I'm not going to let you sort of sit outside the photograph and figure out what it's about. I'm going to put it right in your stomach for you.

**AP** What about the humor in the work?

**RB** All my work over the last 10 to 15 years has black humor to it. It's funny, but there is an element of tragedy and disturbance mixed in with the comedy. There are a lot of opposites in the work. For example, the places that I've been photographing in, from a content point of view, are extremely chaotic but, as you mentioned, the photographs are well managed and well composed. This creates a tension that I like.

**AP** There's also a certain stability that comes about through the square format. You provide a very stable place for all of the chaos.

**RB** Nothing is a more stable form than a square or cube.

**AP** Let's talk specifically about the work in *Boarding House*. Are you shooting in the same physical locales as in the previous work, or are you in new locations?

**RB** *Boarding House* is mostly from another location, another place entirely. This new place inspired me and partly led me to create these images. I guess I was ready to be led there.

**AP** And tell me about your relationship to black and white. Have you ever done some of this work in color?

**RB** I can't separate this work from black and white because I don't think in color. I'm 58 years old, and I've been doing black and white since I was five years old. I don't really like color. I like color paintings, but color pictures give you a wrong impression about reality. Most people think the camera is a factual instrument to duplicate reality, or objectify reality in some way, which is completely wrong! A color photograph leads you to believe that whatever you're seeing is the real color, when in reality it's photographic color. In very few cases, artists can manipulate color to create meaning the way a painter does. But with painting we never start with the assumption that reality is being duplicated. What worries me about color is that there is something artificial about it, but it won't admit to its artificiality. ■