

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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**Lens**

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

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### Showcase: Framed by Imagination

By KRISTEN JOY WATTS

Roger Ballen, 59, is a professional geologist, a “mineral explorationist.” For decades he traveled to nearly every African country looking for deposits of diamonds, clay, cobalt and coal.

“That’s what I did for 30 years,” he said. “I roamed the continent and looked for minerals, but I also always kept my eyes open for photographs.”

In the early 1980s, Mr. Ballen said, “My photography really got going when I started photographing these small towns — dorps — in South Africa.”

Before this time, many of the images Mr. Ballen had made were exteriors. In South Africa, he went indoors with his camera. “There was sort of this metaphoric movement — inside the place, inside my mind,” he said.

Trained to discover valuable deposits, Mr. Ballen exposes rich emotions in his photographs. He witnessed the goings-on at an abandoned building he called the Boarding House, located between two big mine dumps on the eastern side of Johannesburg. His aim was not only to share the story of the building or the community of residents — human and animal — within it. Instead, his haunting, cramped images offer mere clues and thwart any expectations of a clear narrative.

He included drawings on the walls, repetitive motifs, and fragmented limbs. To these formally charged spaces, he added unpredictable elements like animals and people. (He was able to recreate the feel of these psychologically fraught images for a New York Times Magazine shoot with Selma Blair.)

Mr. Ballen's style may bring to mind painters like Jean Dubuffet and Francis Bacon rather than the work of other photographers.

"I would describe Roger Ballen as a photographer who interacts with his set," said Megan Spencer, a gallery associate at Gagosian Gallery. Elements of line, she said, "are not accidental."

In fact, Mr. Ballen's hand in composing these pictures is so keenly felt that his pictures tend to inspire the same two questions:

Is the Boarding House a real place? Did Mr. Ballen do the drawings himself?

"I really don't think those are two very important issues," Mr. Ballen said, explaining that the carefully composed images are best described as interactive, comprising thousands of steps.

"I think the most important issue is you looking at the picture, and the picture looking at you."

*Mr. Ballen's "Boarding House" will be presented at Gagosian Gallery until Dec. 23.*