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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ROGER BALLEN IN CONVERSATION WITH DOUG MCCLEMONT

When Roger Ballen talks about his body of work, it is seldom in terms of social commentary. If the personal history of one of his sitters seems unavoidable, Ballen addresses the narrative only in the broadest possible way. To the artist, the images of small-town South Africa contain interplay of light and dark, painterly lines and the secrets that shadows obscure and reveal. For the rest of us, they're unforgettable.

His subject is the human condition; if existence is not always cakes and ale, so be it. A former geologist, Ballen now mines photography for its hard, theatrical center. Every Ballen photograph is an unapologetic, colorless and compelling world formed at that place where fiction and documentary overlap. A lie that tells the truth.

Ballen often conceives of a series of images would look in book form rather than a gallery display. After his early 'Boyhood' (1979), the photographer began his now famous exploration of South African towns, or Dorps, for his second collection entitled 'Dorps: Small towns of South Africa' in 1986. Then came the controversial 'Platteland: Images from Rural South Africa' (1996) and 'Outland' (2001). With 2005's 'Shadow Chamber' and now 'Boarding House', both from Phaidon Press. Ballen continues his exploration of black-and-white and photography's painterly possibilities.

During his recent trip to New York, I sat down with the artist to discuss the new works, the power of metaphor, and the irritating emptiness of "politically correct" thought.

DOUG McCLEMONT: It was surprising to see how few faces feature in your newest

work. When did you first get interested in the people of South Africa.

ROGER BALLEN: I always thought Dorps was the most important of my projects because I started to go inside...metaphorically and physically. Before that my photographs had always been taken outside. I spent a lot of time in the South African countryside because I was a geologist at the time as well as a photographer.

DM: What drew you inside?

RB: Life there was very different that what we have here today...very bright very hot so it became impossible to get any work done. I started to get bored hanging around in cars waiting for the sun to be in the right position. So I began to knock on doors and go inside of peoples' houses.

DM: They were receptive, obviously.

RB: Yes. Once I was in other peoples' houses a new vision opened up for me. I began to become aware of things like wires...the textures of their worlds were somehow not acquainted with my own interior. So the motifs I discovered in that series were documented and expanded as time went on. You can see some of those motifs in 'Boarding House' although they're much more abstract. Also in 'Outland' on a children's bedroom wall.

Fate, 2008

DM: I know the images...a portion of the alphabet is traced on one wall. When you first encountered these people the wires were already there? And they wrote on the walls, the kids drew on the walls?

RB: Exactly...

DM: Are you recreating that for 'Boarding House'?

RB: I think what is interesting about the 'Boarding House' is that it is not quite clear what I've recreated. It's about what is documentary versus what is fictional. The photographs are all taken the same way and evolve in the same way. I think it is interesting that they confuse the mind. They're about imagination but also what someone might define as reality.

DM: Some might say a harsh reality.

RB: Not necessarily, no. The new work was developed from my earlier more concrete

experiences in people's homes. To actually encompass a vision of a world in itself and to document a particular group of people in a specific place.

DM: Yet each photo is its own world... its own narrative. It seems like these worlds could only exist in black and white. You celebrate black and white.

RB: Definitely. My pictures are inseparable from the black and white medium. . I don't work in color. I don't really see in color. My vision and my expertise have been applied to black and white for over 50 years now. My subjects are synonymous with black and white. They're part of a metaphoric black and white world.

DM: I like the fact that the negative space is just as important as the positive. Shadows are hugely important in your work. It's cinematic, but it's more than that--it's like you're painting.

RB: Yes, it's very much about painting. My negative space is a space that has meaning. In much of photography the negative space is meaningless and inorganic. Plastic. My last book was called 'Shadow Chamber'. The shadow chamber can be a source of energy and inspiration and imagination just as much it can be a disturbing place where one might feel despair. I tend not to look at darkness as despair and light as happiness.

DM: Is the relative absence of people in the new work a way of allowing the environment to tell its own story?

RB: It's a good point. I think the new work is the result of small changes over the years. I guess eventually you feel you've seen enough faces and want to open up your own interior reality. So by moving away from the faces gradually, I began to find other realties. In a way you're looking at a documentation of my interior.

DM: So the Boarding House isn't an actual place?

RB: The Boarding House might or might not be a real place...whatever that means. It is a real place, in the sense that the book is the real place. The book is the Boarding House and the Boarding House could be a place out there and it is a place in people's minds.

DM: Also, there's an inevitability about theses places. Like: this is the way it is, and we go on. Even before 'Outland' your book 'Boyhood' explores this idea, it seems to me. The boys are about to play the cards they've been dealt. The denizens of 'Outland' are who they are and they can't be anyone else. I never bought into the politically correct view. But what do you say to people who criticize and say "Who are you to photograph people who are less economically well off....or mentally ill?"

Bite, 2007

RB: I'm anti-PC... it's fascism. I'm not interested in any politically correct thinking. It's generally based on false constructs.

DM: And of course has nothing to do with art.

RB: Definitely not.

DM: I think you're attracted to your subjects' resolve.

RB: But the bottom line is what you're seeing is a photographic level of reality. I could put you in the picture and they could say, "He's retarded" but it's the way I photographed you. So how do you know what is true?

DM: We don't. We attach that stuff to the image.

RB: I'm just trying to say that those peoples don't even understand photography. They're making assumptions in most cases. For example, let's look at South Africa in general: somebody would make the issue about poverty...the people that I photograph in Outland and Shadow Chamber are better off than 95% of the population. So they're not poor in South Africa, they're middle class. Most of the population lives on $50/month. I'm not dealing in poverty...they're not poor in South Africa, they're poor in PC terms. When people look at the walls in the photographs they say, "Oh that's dirt," but what they don't know is that people in South Africa don't paint their walls white. They have drippings, made of earth. And there usually have fire inside, so if you went into a home of a tribe in South Africa and the walls have black on them from the fire, somebody might say 'that's filth." So it's all these westernized values imposed on an artificial reality called a photograph. A good photograph --the ones I take at least--are about my vision, not necessary about the subjects themselves. It's about the way I project my own internal reality into the world. Somebody sitting here with a subject of mine in a million years wouldn't create the same sensibility as me.

DM: You could probably make those photos here in New York, say.

RB: Of course! And I could transform nearly anybody into practically anything I wanted to in a photograph., all things being equal. When somebody reacts that way, you've hit a sore point in that person's subconscious. You hit a weak point. A point of repression. What you're hearing is....

DM: Guilt?

RB: Yes, or a defense mechanism coming out. It's a reflection of that person's own issues nine times out of ten.

DM: There's a huge difference in making a photograph and a comment. But having said that, there is definitely a racial aspect to your earlier work. The one that I have hanging in my living room, "Man and maid, Northern Cape" (1991), the black maid is seated and the white man is standing using a cane. The Blond beauty in the calendar on the wall makes it racially loaded.

RB: If you look at the way I photographed the man glaring right at the camera. That's what the photo is about, that stare. One has to find the metaphor in those eyes. And then of course there was the maid there which was a political statement to a degree at the time. They were a reflection of a certain group of people in the South African countryside and of the human condition.

DM: Are you still in touch with your subjects from those days?

RB: I try to be. My work since 1994 has been all about Johannesburg, so I don't actually go to the countryside. I really haven't been back there in 14 years.

DM: Animals have certainly played a part in your work: taxidermy, newborn puppies, rats. Is that just because they worked in the shot or are there bigger issues evoked like man's relationship to animals?

RB: There is a very deep reflection on man's relationship to animals in the work. And it's not a very nice one, generally. One can interpret the images in many ways but the relationship is clearly not one of comradeship.

DM: Yes, it's a forced coexistence.

RB: Forced and antagonistic.

DM: The image that encapsulates that for me is "Eugene on the phone" (2000) the kid is pulling at the cat in a way that the cat is probably so used to...but still is clearly uncomfortable. It's desperately trying to get away.

Eugene on the phone, 2000

RB: These pictures can be shocking to Western culture but when those same people go to the supermarket and see raw meat hanging there it has no effect on them. Their stomachs are full of that stuff day and night, but they get upset when they see someone

pulling on a cat. Yet they're responsible for a murder every day. You support the murderers who kill the chickens. This whole kind of denial exists throughout Western culture which seems to me to be sort of a part of a deeper malaise.

DM: But it's good that your images are unsettling.

RB: Yes, it's very good.

DM: I've never seem an image of yours that doesn't unsettle me in some way. Do you respond more to painters than photographers?

RB: At this point, I do. The work has more aspects similar to painting than photography. I'm very reluctant to say because you're looking at a photograph and the aestethics behind it is a photograph. What I do wouldn't work as a painting.

DM: But there is painting in it... the sets in 'Boarding House'.

RB: I work with the people who make these sets and hopefully whatever is there is unified through the camera--within the film. If you made paintings of all these things it wouldn't have the same effect.

DM: You can distance yourself from a painting more readily.

RB: A photograph a reality you can't deny. I think it's also important that with a good photograph you have to believe in the authenticity of the moment. For example, Conceptual photographers or a painter, say, who is taking a photograph don't necessarily transform what is in front of them into a moment that people believe in. One that can never be repeated. Which is the essence of photograph. It tells you that every second in time is different from every other second. You want people to understand that the image in front of them has something to do with the truth...and it can never be

repeated. That way, they believe in the reality in front of them.

DM: Even if the reality is a dreamlike one.

RB: People have a complex reaction to the Boarding House photos because there is an aspect to them that is very real and earthy and harsh and in front of your face. You can almost smell the pictures. But on the other hand they are very surrealistic and dreamlike. Some people are not quite sure how to place these works. They can't deny them, though. It's a subconscious challenge... like when you're half asleep and you're not sure that the dream you're dreaming is real. That type of state of consciousness is what we live in all the time, really. So this is a photograph of that state as much as anything else.

DM: Do you always shoot in the square format?

RB: Yes, I'm very formalistically oriented. With a square everything in the photograph is equal. If it's long It means that you have to read it one way.

DM: Goes back to the balance of the black and white.

RB: But ultimately that the picture is a completely integrated whole.

DM: The zebra skin in one of the images from 'Boarding House' is like an effigy of an animal almost.

Zebra Room, 2007

RB: Some are more documentary than others. I think it confuses what Boarding House is. We're not sure what was there.

DM: When you talk about cultural differences. Is there any sense that a zebra is something not to be shot with a gun?

RB: What you're looking at is lines. It is an abstract design. In photography it's different than, say a Miró painting. With Miró, a line is a line. In photographs a line could be a wire or a mark on a wall, but its still there for a specific purpose... it can be objectified. But photography, as we were saying, has its greatest impact when one believes in the picture. So when I'm asked is it this or that, I just talk about it as being part of the Boarding House. What people want to hear is that I designed this in a studio and photographed it.That let's them off the hook, they will never come into this place... they can deny it. If it's out there, it's real and it's a menace to them. I want to make sure it's a menace. You have to deal with it.

DM: Did you always take photographs?

RB: I worked as a geologist for thirty years so I've had a different experience of the earth because I studied it so closely.

DM: But you're from a photography family, right?

RB: Yes, I grew up in photography.

DM: Did you ever think of photography as art? Something to be hung on a gallery wall?

RB: No, this was a hobby until I was about 50 years old. Then I started to see a lot of photographs. I've taken photographs since I was a boy. I never thought of it as a possible profession, I just did it all the time. My passion grew and then 'Platteland' came out I started to sell pictures.

DM: These images are like little plays. Little pieces of theater... do these pictures still challenge you?

RB: Yes, that's one of the reasons I put them in here. I haven't completely digested them. That's the nice thing about a book: you can digest the image over a long period of time and it helps you get to the next plateau. It helps me prepare the grounds for the next work.

DM: Maybe back to faces for the next body of work. Your famous image of the security guard...

RB: You mean the prison guard, Sergeant F. de Bruin.

DM: That face!

Sergeant F. de Bruin, Department of Prisons employee, Orange Free State, 1992

RB: But what is the most important thing in that picture?

DM: His stare?

RB: The wire. Before I saw him I found the wire. And then when I turned the corner there he was...but I associate that picture with the wire. Without the wire there's no photograph. That's what the picture is about, not necessarily him. The wire looks like his lips.

DM: I know there's a formal aspect to the images, but that face has seen so much.

RB: Form makes the content! Without your ribs you're just a deflated nothing. The forms bring out the content and create meaning in themselves. So it's very important to see the images as formal instruments as well as the content in and of itself.

DM: But it's also narrative.

RB: It is, you can't separate the two.

DM: This guy has seen so much and It's all reflected right there in his mug. There are so many stories behind those eyes... what we bring to it.

RB: You have to find your own world in that picture. A lot of what you find you can't explain. You can't put into words. But you have an emotional relationship. Like life.

DM: If you could have put it into words, you would have written him as a character in a book.

RB: Basically, some people see him as a monkey. The character of a buffoon and a monkey in a prison guard, whatever. There are all those masks you see in the face. The face reveals the human condition in all sorts of ways. He's funny, he's tragic.

DM: Like the masks of theater...

RB: He's vicious. He's a monkey. He's a pompous prison guard.

DM: He seems simultaneously weak and evil to me.

RB: Behind the face is always the monkey. Remember that. I've been living in Africa a long time. I've really seen a lot about the human condition. Behind the face is the monkey. You won't get me to change that point. I don't care if every PC person wants to shoot me for it.

DM: In terms of evolution, you mean?

RB: It's Freudian...

DM: The id.

RB: Yes, the monkey is the id. Each image is like someone' s id... and then I bring mine and put it on top of it. If it's good artwork, it's everybody id in some way. They're heroes of the human id. Jess and Tessie, [the drooling twins] you see who you were a million years ago...a monkey...and you were that monkey. Subconsciously, genetically in the back your mind it's the monkey. You're a monkey. You see it our ancestors, that's why the picture is so strong. Simple as that, because people relate to it. They're brutal, they're simple, they're drooling but we relate to them. We see ourselves as humans deep inside them. It's Neanderthal. Half man, half monkey.

DM: Chromosomes definitely come to mind when you see that image.

RB: No, it's not about chromosomes--that's PC thinking--the only thing that crosses your mind is: there's my face. There's my id. That's what I come from. I come from a monkey. That's your cousin in that picture.

'Roger Ballen: Boarding House' will be published in April 2009 by Phaidon. An exhibition of the new work at Gagosian Gallery in New York is scheduled for September 2009.

Doug McClemont is the former Editor-in-Chief of HONCHO, Torso, Mandate, Inches and Playguy. His writing regularly appears in publications such as Publishers' Weekly, Library Journal and Screw. He has written introductory essays for several monographs on contemporary art and is currently at work on a book of short stories entitled Little Morticians. *Published on 31-03-2009*