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Photography

Strange but nearly true: life in the Boarding House

Roger Ballen's disturbing reimagining of a South African subculture

Even a prolonged perusal of the extraordinary images of *Boarding House*, Roger Ballen's most recent series, makes it difficult to credit the independent existence, outside of the actual photographic frame, of such a truly bizarre environment as is consistently portrayed within the pages of this book. We are, of course, accustomed to take as read the veracity of the photographic image, viewed as something that has actually appeared before the lens, exactly as it now appears in the photograph. Yet here, confronted with Ballen's extremely disquieting and oddly dislocated scenarios, where nothing is just what it seems, we may actually begin to doubt what is before our eyes and instinctively consign what we perceive to the realm of nightmares or, indeed, the quite unfathomable domain of an over active imagination.

Nevertheless, having become accustomed to the fairly eccentric nature of Ballen's two immediately preceding bodies of work, as collected in his two books, *Outland* (2001) and *Shadow Chamber* (2005), we should not perhaps be so surprised by the quite deliberate blurring of fact and fiction that becomes apparent in *Boarding House*. However, those earlier photographic sequences were marked by an unspoken sense of playful collaboration between the photographer and his subjects. Ballen's erstwhile focus once lay squarely on his somewhat eccentric sitters, who, more or less patently, availed themselves of certain props while quite unselfconsciously performing to camera. Such factors once served, however



The fiction behind the facts: Roger Ballen, *Cut Loose*, 2005; *Boarding House*, 2008

tenuously, to anchor his previous work to some semblance of reality, quite beyond enhancing its specific psychological context.

But when it comes to the new *Boarding House* pictures, that human presence and more specifically the emotive element of facial expression or body language, has largely and noticeably retreated from view, when it is not completely absent. This has the uncanny effect of further distancing us from a personal and rather more immediate connection with reality and indeed, may prompt us to question their internal veracity.

Yet, should we choose to lay aside such purely methodological considerations and enter more fully into the

spirit of this remarkable new series, we soon discover that these pictures are littered with the human presence, although this often takes the form of artefacts, tools, ornaments, stray belongings, childish drawings, toys, domestic animals or pets. Indeed, despite the fact that most of the actual people here involved either turn their backs, hide their faces, or merely reveal isolated parts of themselves, such as their arms, legs, hands, feet, fingers, or even just their noses, mouths and teeth, their partial or implied presence, albeit vestigial, often hidden or remote, does contrive to populate the physical and psychological fabric that they appear to inhabit.

Eventually we reach the crux

of the matter, upon learning from the text that this quite extraordinary place which Ballen has felt compelled to photograph over the last few years and calls "the Boarding House", far from being a figment of his imagination, really does exist. Very remote and hidden among enormous tailings from gold mines near Johannesburg, it is in actual fact a three-storey warehouse building which has become a neighbourhood unto itself. The interior is crowded with the poor: entire families of workers, transients, criminals hiding from the law, even witch doctors who attend to the many diseases within this unsanitary and overcrowded environment. Few rooms are separated by walls, most of the spaces, as in a

shantytown, being partitioned by rugs, blankets or metal sheeting, and each being self-contained. There are no visible windows or open doors. Each doorway, although closed, seems to lead to an inner sanctum. One, surrounded by a giraffe hide, belongs to a *sangoma*, or South African witch doctor. Another, with a picture of Mary and the infant Jesus, leads to a makeshift church. A third, more ominous doorway is the entrance to the "Ghost Room", where long ago the managers of gold mines were reputed to have violently punished recalcitrant miners, sometimes even starving them to death. This lawless yet strangely enthralling location has served as the focus of Ballen's photographic work

over the last four years. As he says: "It is difficult to explain this place except that I think it exists in some way or another in most people's minds."

Although we seem to have come full circle as to whether these pictures represent documentary fact or elaborate fiction, the reality is not quite so simple. Ballen seldom photographs this environment as it would normally appear, but instead physically and deliberately intervenes, altering the given arrangement of the space and the objects and or human traces in evidence, to construct complex visual metaphors for certain eerie, spiritual, religious, tragic and predominantly psychological states of mind. As David Travis, the long term former chairman of the department of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, writes in his instructive critical essay: "Dwelling within the imagination and vice versa... although one can imagine [Ballen] as an instructor from the way he directs and organises or adds drawings to a wall or room, he is actually learning by absorbing and experimenting in a give-and-take struggle between rational awareness and the directness, as well as the absurdity, of irrational expressions." With these bizarre, emotionally loaded, intriguingly conceived and brutally compelling, highly graphic images, Ballen confirms his position as one of the most profound and original creative photographers at work today.

Richard Pinsent

□ Roger Ballen and David Travis, *Boarding House* (Phaidon Press), 128 pp, £35 (hb) ISBN 9780714849522