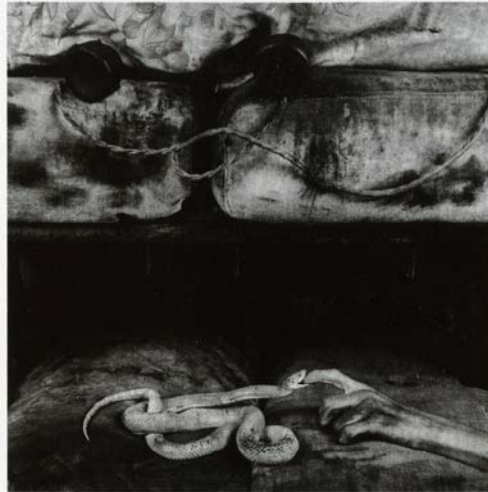


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Roger Ballen GAGOSIAN GALLERY

No photographic, or even artistic, category quite encompasses the complicated, engrossing, and at times unsettling images in South Africa-based artist Roger Ballen's new series "Boarding House," 2003–2008, several dozen images from which made up this large exhibition. Though the artworks are consistently square-format black-and-white photographic prints, they represent a combination of photography, theatrical performance, drawing, and sculpture. The images were made in collaboration with the residents of a Johannesburg warehouse that, from Ballen's description, seems like a miniature shantytown—a warren of tiny rooms that for decades has been its own ecosystem. There, some of society's marginalized figures (a few labor in nearby mines, although many are entirely destitute) scratch out an existence of minimal comfort, their small dwellings divided not by solid walls but by rugs, sheet metal, and other provisional materials.

What differentiates these pictures from the portraits Ballen made in the early to mid-1990s and his two most recent series, published in book form as *Outland* (2001) and *Shadow Chamber* (2005), is that he has reversed the priority given to his human and nonhuman subjects. Whereas those earlier photographs depicted men, women, and children in contorted poses and faintly repulsive scenarios that simultaneously elicited and rebuffed the viewer's empathy, in "Boarding House" there are few actual subjects with which to identify. The already claustrophobic, airless interiors of the building have been further flattened by Ballen's bright flash, and in the shallow compositional field that results one finds not whole bodies but parts: feet dangling into one



Roger Ballen, *Bite*, 2007, black-and-white photograph, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2".

picture from the top of the frame; hands reaching up from the bottom of another; noses and lips and eyes partially visible behind fabric panels or other obscuring devices. These human fragments are now just one more element in Ballen's macabre theater. What has come to the forefront are animals (snakes, tarantulas, ducks, pigs, puppies, kittens); tangles of wire and other detritus, such as children's toys; and, most prominently, the expressive, somewhat crude figurative drawings on the otherwise bare rear walls of these grimy dioramas. It is in creating these sometimes dense scribbles and human outlines, along with selecting

sculptural props to appear in the compositions, that the boarding house residents participate actively in Ballen's project.

The oddness and seeming cruelty of Ballen's earlier work, in which the subjects often appeared to perform their abjection for the camera, has been elevated here to a more abstract, poetic plane—one that may be all the crueler for the artist's ability to aestheticize, and therefore mask, real destitution. Nonetheless, Ballen is a talented dramatist, and throughout the series he maintains a disturbingly exquisite tension between the squalor and dissolution he depicts and a formal control that highlights the constructedness of each scenario, its collaborative, semifictional nature. In this equipoise, "documentary" realism becomes somewhat unreal. Unlike his earlier work, there is nothing specifically South African about the images in this series: The artist intends these miniature blasted landscapes to represent a psychological state dwelling somewhere within all of us. His descriptive precision, image to image, makes that claim to universality more plausible than most made by artists. One can imagine the rips and tears in the fabric hangings as psychological or emotional wounds, or the doors that lead only farther into the boarding house, never out, as reflective of the labyrinthine pathways of thought. Whether one proves able to relate to the bleak mental landscape of these astringent, absorbing compositions is another matter.

—Brian Sholis