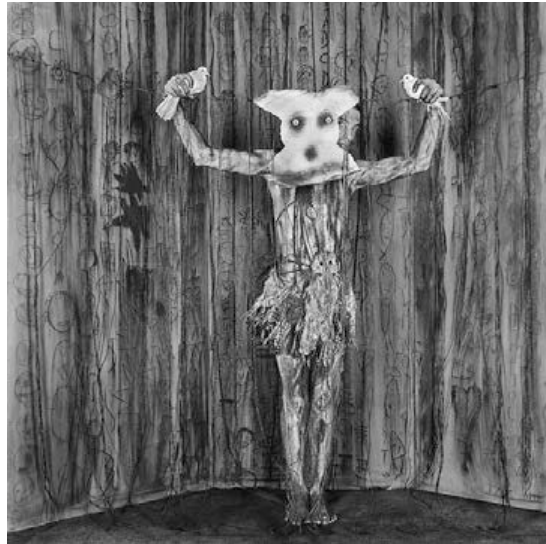


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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The Beautifully Strange Photography of Roger Ballen



Roger Ballen's inventive photographs rely on many other media, including drawing and sculpture, to create a new world. "Alter Ego." From the Asylum

Photography is said to be the truest representation of reality. The ability to capture still and moving image inspired artists to document life, rather than embellish it. Filmmaker Dziga Vertov inspired the genre *cinéma vérité* or truthful cinema. Today, photography maintains a special claim to objective truth alongside news stories. Rarely is the hand of the artist acknowledged in the making of a photograph.

But it's everywhere in the work of New York-born, South Africa-based photographer Roger Ballen. A new exhibit at the African Art Museum, curated by fellow artist Craig Allen Subler, takes 55 works from Ballen's nearly half-decade career shooting in black and white to illustrate the ways in which the artist has utilized the tools of drawing, namely mark-making and line, to create his unique aesthetic world.

Spanning from his early portraits to later, denser works that reference theater as much as photography, the exhibit, "Lines, Marks, and Drawings: Through the Lens of Roger Ballen," shows just how thoroughly the concept of line infiltrates and structures his work across his entire career. Mangled hangers, clotheslines, stick figures drawn directly on the walls—the lines of Ballen's photographs exist like totems, complete with their own psychic drama similar to Jackson Pollock's early experiments with Jungian archetypes, or Pablo Picasso's mythic figures like the minotaur. The exhibit moves

roughly from portraiture to theater to a collaborative image-making that fuses the subject with line so completely that all that's left is a peek of an arm or a disembodied head.



His Platteland series explores the interior spaces of rural South African homes. "Boy with Guns, Western Transvaal." 1993.

The artist, who spent nearly a year hitchhiking from Cairo to Cape Town as a young man, is also a geologist who claims citizenship in what he sees as the last generation of photographers working with black and white film. Though he has lived in South Africa for more than 30 years, his work maintains an outsider art aesthetic. Interior shots in the homes of rural South Africans, from his Platteland series, seem to exist at the precise moment chaos turns to order and vice versa: live animals exist alongside their more domesticated toy counterparts, white walls that are otherwise unadorned have smeared handprints or childish doodles scrawled right on the surface and people are typically in some state of undress.

In South Africa, the aesthetic has reached a certain counter culture cache embodied in the idea of Zef. Taken from the Afrikaans word for "common," zef's unofficial ambassador is the band Die Antwoord, which collaborated with Ballen on its video "I Fink U Freeky," also included in the museum's exhibit.

"They told me when they first saw [my] work that they stopped what they were doing for a year and went in a different direction," says Ballen of the hip-hop-rave group who reached out to him to work on the video. He says their two styles organically fused and the whole video took only four and a half days to shoot.

When Ballen first saw the exhibit, he says it felt instantly right. "The exhibition is quite silent," he says, pleased with the outcome. In fact, it's almost eerily so. The aesthetic still hits just as hard when combined with the rambunctious music of Die Antwoord. Standing in the middle of the gallery space, surrounded by work from his entire career, Ballen says it's exhilarating to confront himself, to look at what exactly has been guiding his work for so long. "It's very gratifying," he says. "Looking back at the work, you feel, well, at least I've preserved something through all those years. . .there is a line that runs through."