

Roger Ballen, *Boarding House*, OCAD Professional Gallery, Toronto, March 5-May 31, 2009

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Roger Ballen, *Sgt F de Bruin, Department of Prisons Employee, Orange Free State*, 1992, from the series *Platteland*, courtesy of Clint Roenisch Gallery

Roger Ballen

Boarding House
OCAD Professional Gallery, Toronto
March 5–May 31, 2009

Everything is decay in Roger Ballen's photographs: floors, walls, toothless mouths, and lank, rancid hair.

Their only "beauty" (as we warily call it) – purloined from painterly, graffiti-wired photographs of the past (Siskind, Brassai, etc.) – is inventively and mercilessly imposed, in the pictures, upon misery and rueful wonder. Ballen's carefully calculated passages of calligraphic joy (the kind of thing that Australian curator Robert Cook, writing on Ballen's Web site [www.roger-ballen.com] calls "the drizzle and tilt of a wire, the shuffle of a shoe, the smear of sand on a wall...") always pull you in, all the while lacerating you with what often feels like your voyeuristic retreat from the urgencies of social conscience.

Ballen, a white man living in South Africa, has been doing significant photographic work in and around Johannesburg since the late 1970s. For the photographs that were in his books *Outland* (2001) and the brilliant *Shadow Chamber* (2005), he gathered together subjects and settings

(he has tended to work with a sort of prescribed *dramatis personae*, a repertoire of personages/actors, in the style of Ingmar Bergman), disposing them in increasingly claustrophobic spaces. These spaces feel remarkably like stage sets (his para-dramatic theatres of stasis are frequently compared to Beckett plays in progress). "It is difficult to explain this place [i.e., the hypothetical place that is his *Shadow Chamber*]," Ballen has noted, "except that it exists in some way or other in most people's minds."

With his new *Boarding House* (2009) – copies of which, at time of writing, were still steaming across the Atlantic – Ballen has almost entirely withdrawn the full figures of humans and of the animals that lent such urgent *sub-consciousness* to his earlier images – from his photographs. He allows them all back in again, but this time only as fragments.

In the almost seventy photographs in *Boarding House*, which are the subject of a bracing and moving new exhibition at the Ontario College of Art and Design's Professional Gallery, there is a kind of withdrawal of – or at least a porosity within – what might be called the political field of the photographs: now, Ballen seems to be in the process of exchanging documentary poignancy for an increasing preoccupation with the unlikely juxtapositions of textures and objects so beloved of the surrealists. Of the photographs in the OCAD exhibition, only four offer a whole figure. "Over the past 30 years," writes the exhibition's curator, Charles Reeve, in the brochure accompanying the show, "[Ballen] has framed his images more and more tightly, moving to photographing exclusively indoors and thus eliminating context while emphasizing detail, to arrive at vibrant yet disconcerting scenes that could be anywhere." Where they could be, for the most part, is on some irrational terrain inextricably linked with the umbrella/sewing machine/operating table interiorized intensities of the Comte de Lautréamont and the canonical surrealists.

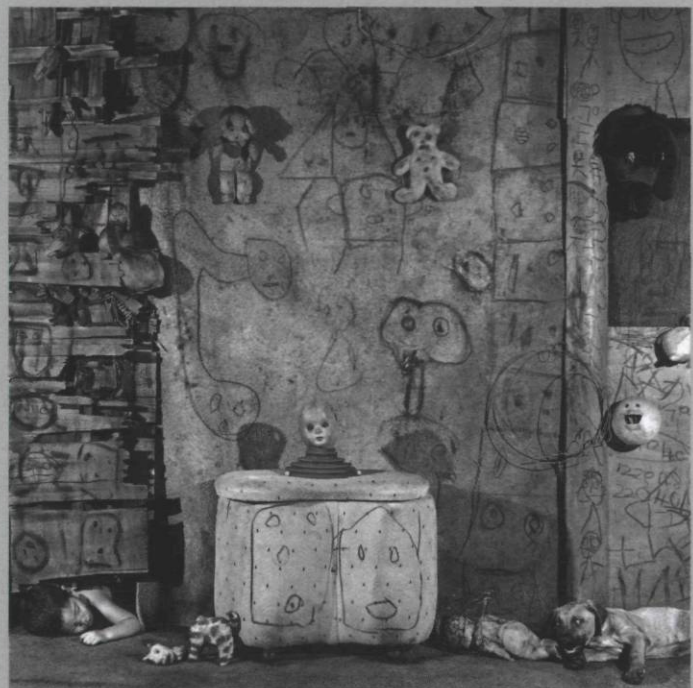
In essence, Ballen is making photographic still lifes.

But lest this sound like a retreat from imagistic urgency, it is eminently clear that these particular still lifes, though "still" – or "morte" in the sense of a seizing-up of silences – are as *brut* as any of his photos: the parts of his people and creatures that end up in the works are as destabilizingly metonymic as partial plaster casts. The white rats with their heads in a flower pot in *Stalked*; the boy with the unfurled accordion that echoes the white wingspread of a dead chicken in *Eulogy*; the man, wrapped like a parcel, huddled in the corner of *Cornered*; the dead wild boar in *Celebration*, surmounted by four upraised hands like puppets in a Punch 'n' Judy show; the cropped hand holding onto a rat's tail in *Predators* – all of these truncated presences are a kind of cultural detritus (which my dictionary defines as "a product of disintegration, destruction or wearing away"), which, even greater in emotional impact than the societal "dramas" that came before, function in

the photographs as objective correlatives, vectoring us toward the *spiritus mundi*, the image bank, that, as Ballen has ventured, "exists in some way or other in most people's minds." These fragments, if I may misuse T. S. Eliot for a moment, Ballen has shored against his ruins.

The rest is drawing, the insistent articulating of calligraphy: runic marks and primitive pictures scraped on walls and furniture, purposeless loops and twists of wire hanging down, rips in filthy cloth, blistered paint, rusty tins, torn zebra skins, stained sheets – this is the bottom-feeding life as lived, unrepressed and fearful/fearless, in the basement of the mind, as lived in the eternal Lascaux caves of the unconscious.

Toronto writer, critic, and painter, Gary Michael Dault is the author of ten books. His art review column appears each Saturday in *The Globe & Mail*.



Roger Ballen, *Boarding House*, 2008, from the series *Boarding House*, courtesy of Clint Roenisch Gallery



Carlos et Jason Sanchez, *Easter Party*, 2003, épreuve chromogénique, 116 x 182 cm

Carlos et Jason Sanchez

Œuvres choisies (2002-2007)

Maison des arts de Laval

Du 27 septembre au 24 novembre 2008

Commissaire : Madeleine Therrien

Si les frères Sanchez ont été assez actifs dans le milieu de la photographie depuis quelques années, cette présence a surtout été manifeste au sein d'expositions collectives. Aussi est-il particulièrement plaisant de leur voir enfin consacrée une exposition solo en un lieu qui, s'il peut sembler un peu périphérique, forme un très bel écrin à ces œuvres aux accents parfois dramatiques. Cette dramatisation a d'ailleurs été accentuée par un éclairage

très sélectif et très orienté qui isole chaque image de ses voisines et lui donne valeur de projection cinématographique. Nous progressons donc au sein de cette exposition en allant d'écran en écran, voyageant d'un univers à un autre, d'une scène à une autre.

Les œuvres retenues pour l'exposition composent un ensemble assez hétéroclite mais très représentatif de la manière des Sanchez. On retrouve en effet chez eux nombre d'images dont l'essentiel repose sur un art de l'apex, de la saisie construite d'un moment décisif. Que les images appellent aux modes de la photographie familiale (*Easter Party*), de la photographie d'événements cruciaux et dramatiques (*Natural Selection*), d'un quotidien magnifié ou non (*Overflowing Sink*), de la reprise médiatique (*John Mark Karr*) ou de la solli-