

ROGER BALLEEN

The art of Roger Ballen is impossible to forget. It goes deep. Gets at places we didn't know were there. Maybe hoped weren't there. It makes us wild. It opens us up to those uncertain, shocking and frighteningly banal aspects of the waking dream, twitching between animal and human, the clean and the unclean, the animate and the inanimate, the lived and the imagined, the natural and the performed. So despite the fact that his early and mid-period works – stretching, say, from the late 1970s through to the 1990s - were made under the guise of the photo-documentary tradition, there was always something else going on, something much sharper, much hotter. Arguably, the dynamic is this: Ballen's complex artistic vision transforms particular historical and social issues into private, felt, internally experienced matters.

This transformation happens because of his particular attention to photographic detail. For Ballen, inspired by the American 'Field painters' of the 1960s and early 1970s, everything that resides within the visual field is significant. Accordingly, Ballen is not a photographer for whom standard divisions like subject and object, motif and background, make any sense: the drizzle and lilt of a wire, the shuffle of a shoe, the smear of sand on a wall are as important to the reading of the work, to its distinct power, as gestures more humanly communicative like a smile or grimace. This expanded pictorial focus produces a kind of animism where objects that might be mute in another photographer's work speak in a chaotic and compelling tongue, making even the most ostensibly naturalistic image more sur-real than real.

Since the late 1990s Ballen has been working at intensifying this core of his practice. For instance, his often curiously unique subjects now perform with and for him to create images that are in all ways true theatrical partnerships. He has also worked on the environments themselves, responding to drawings on the wall and clusters of objects that become antic sculptural formations as we find an unfathomable blurring of fact and fiction. His most recent work (to be published by Phaidon Press in the Spring of 2009) has pushed this further still, often eradicating the human figure altogether to create intense and loaded subjective spaces that produce intense arenas of disease. While the figure is absent, these works feel like part of minds, as if the very spatial architecture of our internal states are mirrored by these ambiguous visual object poems.

Ultimately, therefore, the work of Roger Ballen is a form of radical, disquieting subjectivism, a psychology of the world itself that represents the inside of politics, the inside of ideology, the inside of ourselves.

Robert Cook, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of Western Australia

Roger Ballen was born in New York City in 1950. He has lived and worked in Johannesburg, South Africa for nearly 30 years. Ballen's work has been shown in important institutions throughout the world and is represented in many Museum

Collections such as Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England and Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA.