

Boarding House

A photograph that defies notions of place, subject, or era, can become something quite unfamiliar. Photography's visual reference points, rendered by the simple process of exposing film to light, map our perception of reality despite the concerns of modern and post-modern theory. Artists and theorists have spent the greater part of the last century deconstructing the photographic belief system, yet the most subversive acts may still arrive through traditional picture making. While technology such as Photoshop has become both temple and verb for a new century of artists, there will always be a place in the core of the medium for an artist of singular vision to explore uncharted terrain. Roger Ballen is such an artist. Living and working for many years now outside the central corridors of the art world, he has methodically developed a striking body of work in stripped down, film-based, black-and-white photography. In recent years, Ballen seems to have taken leaps forward, bringing the visual language he continues to refine to a peak level of clarity and originality. His photographs are instantly absorbing, then just as quickly mystifying, and perhaps ultimately, impenetrable.

The tableau of Ballen's unsettling visual fantasy world condenses decades of thoughtful photographic exploration. Ballen grew up in New York amidst a vibrant photography community and was aware of modern photography from an early age. His mother, who worked for Magnum and ran a photography gallery, introduced him to photography and some of the most influential photographers of the 1960s and 1970s. Ballen purchased his first camera at the age of 13 and made his first serious photographs amidst the political upheaval he witnessed as an undergraduate in Berkeley, California. He eventually pursued a career in mining and settled in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he has lived since the early 1980s. In 1979 he had published his first book of photography, *Boyhood*, a semi-autobiographical series of travel-based photography, but it was in photographing the rural communities of South Africa that he shifted to the subject matter forming the template of his signature work.

His first shockingly fascinating portraits of rural white South Africans stunned the art world with a deceptively straightforward depiction of a remote and strange people. Published in the book *Platteland* in 1994, this series of portraits followed Ballen's more environmentally focused *Dorps* of 1986. Together the two books established the fundamental elements of Ballen's work. The characters Ballen presented were so odd as to be alienating even to most South Africans and earned him no favor within his adopted country. But what became clear as Ballen continued to produce an evolving body of increasingly complex images was the extent to which Ballen's vision was as unique as any of the subjects he portrayed. From the haunting portraits of *Platteland*, to the images featured here from his eighth and most recent book *Boarding House*, it seems that the further Ballen ventures, the stranger and more jarring his pictorial world becomes.

In *Boarding House*, Ballen leaves behind any remnant of formal portraiture. His human subjects appear as an isolated foot, hand, or inexplicable combinations of limbs, shadows, and draped forms that reveal

little about themselves. Ballen's feel for character brings the empathetic voyeurism of Diane Arbus to a fragmented staging reminiscent of Joel-Peter Witkin. However, it is significant that, unlike Witkin, Ballen depicts pieces of human beings that are clearly still attached to their living hosts. They are full of life, and communicate a celebratory, playful feeling despite the suggestion of dark undercurrents. With this series, the sense of disjointedness that has been a part of Ballen's work for over a decade comes into full focus, delivering a sort of tarot card mash up with unlimited interpretive possibility.

Drawings have appeared on the walls of Ballen's photographs for many years. In Boarding House they finally arrive at center stage. The random and frenetic lines that appeared on walls and surfaces in his previous work now come together as figures, faces, and scenes. Shown in black and white, they emulate charcoal and in their forceful directness bring to mind the work of fellow Joburg-based artist William Kentridge. Perhaps the charcoal line reflects some essence of both artists' experience of life in South Africa. Yet, while William Kentridge directs his heavy and dynamic charcoal line with overt political, stylistic nostalgia, Ballen's lines unfold in a world far from any nation or history. His photographs portray an otherness that highlights the expectations and assumptions that we, as viewers, bring to them in our effort to identify and categorize as a way of understanding.

The Boarding House photographs are rife with inner tension. Opposing visual and conceptual points tug at one another to create a carefully tenuous cohesion. Ballen plays with the sense of two-dimensional space in this series more than in any previous work. Planes intersect the picture space in unexpected ways, edges become passageways, and foreground and background collapse and intermingle. Though formally traditional, raw, and gritty, these qualities are pushed to an extreme with such confusing visual technique that the photographs can almost seem synthetic and unreal despite their textural familiarity. They perplex the eye; they bewilder the mind. They elicit a nonlinear, nonverbal experience from the viewer and offer up scarce evidence of whom, why, or when. Something in them begs to be explained, broken down, contextualized, which can't be done. Ballen successfully lures the viewer into questioning the meaning of imagery that is fundamentally beyond the scope of logic.

The title, Boarding House, refers to a fictitious place, based on the concept of transience and temporary residence. It is a metaphorical place in which Ballen presents aspects of the human condition through cryptic settings and narrative. Boarding House is the manifestation of his unfettered imagination and is intended to find its way into the open places within the viewer's mind as well. Though Ballen maintains tight formal control of every visual element within the frame, he allows meaning to unfold in the realm of free association, so that details within and amongst his images inform each other in the creation of their own peculiar language. Whether the Boarding House is a real or imaginary place is both indecipherable and irrelevant. It is a place where Ballen's subconscious can occupy its own universe and nurture its own natural forces.