

## Roger Ballen: Uncanny Animals

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Roger Ballen depicts an abstracted imaginary space that is inhabited by both animals and people. Mostly within grey, barren cell-like structures, nightmarish scenarios, which are unspecific in their narrative, are enacted. The oppressive intensity of this environment is created by the metaphorical or symbolic interplay of the spaces, the figures and animals, and the furniture and other paraphernalia that exist within – and in fact help create – this world.

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 surreal than real.

Ballen's black and white photographs are acknowledged as being some of the most intensely challenging, even shocking, images being made in the world today. In them, humans, animals and inanimate objects are presented in taut arrangements that comment on the animism running through all things.

The Ballen beast, one of the fundamentals of his aesthetic, oscillates between the domestic animal (dog, rabbit, chicken, pig, duck, gold fish), the mock animals (plastic dinosaurs and lizards), and the parasites (mice, rats, flies). One can imagine that with portrayals of killings, Ballen alludes at the lot befalling them in certain explored regions, their sacrificial use. But all in all, their presence adds spontaneity and innocence to that of the individuals.

Here, the relation between man and animal that appears playful touches however a profound truth of the human condition, the animal part, "becoming animal", as Gilles Deleuze said. The subjects crawl, climb on the furniture, open their mouth for silent roars (*Roar*, 2000), have the same behavior as animals (*Woman, man and dog*, 1995). A model hiding his face behind the lifeless body of a chicken materializes this interference (*Chicken mask*, 2002). It is not a case of behavior imitation, but a case of metamorphosis, a feeling, an expression of the affectations and the perceptions of the animal, captured in the photograph. If, in turn, it were abusive to speak of a human animal feeling, an anthropomorphization, still their presence and their glance interrogate us with a disturbing persistence. In *Loner*, the dog that turns his eyes towards the photographer has the same moving presence as that of Goya in the black paintings of the *la Quinta del Sordo*. Ballen's objective is not to reinterpret the symbolic function of the animal, which is here a plastic subject, a volume in space. Whether alive or artificial the animal is an actor. The fluorescent

eyes of the albino rabbits or the white mice, as with the details of the still lives, constitute a discreet detail, an access point to the content of the picture and to the manifestation of the author's vision of the world... "The style that I use to do these portraits has not been invented for a specific reason, it corresponds to my way of seeing things. If one considers my actual pictures, although they only contain inanimate things, the same sensibility intervenes." We interviewed Roger Ballen to discuss the animals in his photographs.

*• You have spent most of your time in South Africa, photographing the countryside and its inhabitants, searching for aesthetic symbols to convey the sense of the place and people that have inspired you. How do animals come to be part of some of your most enigmatic and uncanny images?*

Since 1994, nearly all of my photographs have been taken in and around Johannesburg South Africa. During the period 1982 to 1994, my photography was centered in the South African countryside and during this time I documented animals in their environment. My use of animals in my photographs was not a sudden occurrence, but evolved over a number of decades. Initially the images I shot had a somewhat documentary quality to them and as time has progressed from the late 90's onward, the works have become more aesthetic and complex in nature.

*• Your background involves studying geology; how did you become interested in photography and has geology influenced your photographic practice in any way?*

I have been involved in photography since I was a young boy as my mother worked at Magnum Photos and started one of the first photography galleries in the US. During my childhood and adolescence I was introduced to some of the greatest photographers in the world as well as their images. I decided as a young man not to pursue photography as a profession but rather as a hobby or art form as I have never been particularly attracted to commercial photography.

My geological work brought me to the small towns of the rural areas of South Africa and it was as a result of being in these areas that I began to photograph these places in the early 80's. My first book was entitled "Dorps, Small Town of South Africa" and I always said this project was the most important of my career as it laid the foundation for most of my later work.

*• It has been said that your images are at once dark, disturbing, and funny. What role does beauty play in your work and more specifically in those images involving animals?*

I don't necessarily define my work in any category as the meaning of my images is multidimensional and can be disturbing on one hand and humorous on another. Many people categorize my work as black humor. As far as I am concerned there is intrinsic beauty to all animals and therefore I do not have to work with the concept as it already exists.

- *What artists have informed your practice?*

I have been influenced by all forms of art from early cave drawings to contemporary work. It is difficult for me to state that one type of art or particular period of art has been more influential to my development than the next. I believe my work is quite psychological in nature and may contain various aspects of 'Art Brut' or even Surrealism. Consequently, I might point to artists such as Dubuffet or Picasso but I could just as easily point to the influence of African or Oceanic art as important references in the development of my work.

• *In the photographs that constitute Shadow Chamber, we encounter an abstracted imaginary space inhabited by both animals and people. The oppressive intensity of grey, celllike rooms nightmarish environment is created by the metaphorical or symbolic interplay of the spaces, the figures and animals, and the objects that exist in this world. Why did you decide to include animals in the series and what role does the play?*

Animals were an integral part of the Shadow Chamber space and it is hard to avoid their presence as they pervaded the environment. The animals, like everything else in the photographs, are part of a larger whole or meaning. It is not possible to define what role they play as it is not possible to define what role anything else plays in the photograph; except that they are integral.

• *Large part of your career developed around a solidly original and sympathetic approaches to portraiture. You once said about the people you photographed that: "they were faced with revolution, fear, alienation, isolation, and rejection. The way these people were photographed, in my mind, was a metaphor for what a lot of people were feeling. They were feeling unsettled, alienated, and not able to cope in all sorts of ways." What is the difference between taking images of people and taking images of animals in your practice?*

In my mind the major difference is that people are aware of the camera and the end result of being photographed and have some expectation of the outcome. Obviously, different people relate in different ways to the camera – some are very excited and willing to be shot whilst others are more shy and feel that the camera might intrude their physical being. For example, in Africa there are many states where people absolutely love to be photographed whilst in others there's a feeling that the camera, steals their spirit. One of the most interesting, unanswered questions is "how do animals think". Unfortunately I have not been able to answer that question and as a result am not able to provide an explanation of what an animal thinks or feels when I attempt to take their photograph. On another level I do not feel self-conscious when I photograph animals whilst with people I have to take into account their sensibility as we interact.

- *How did the image 'Animal Abstraction' from 2002 come about?*

It is not simple to describe how one of my photographs come about, as there are literally hundreds of interactive pieces that must be unified within a split second. Certain aspects such as the lighting or the direction of the camera or the focus directly depends on me. Whilst other aspects of a photograph such as the movement of animals and the subtleties of the space itself are determined by externalities. For example in the image “Animal Abstraction” the cat decided to stretch at a particular time and by doing this he formally created a visual relationship with the wire on the wall. The rabbit was running around the room and decided to stop near the metal piece. In some unexpected way, a shadow extended itself from the wire piece on the floor which added another dimension to the photograph. This photograph is very much like nearly all of my others – there is an interaction between what I do and what prevails at the time. Nevertheless, if somebody else was in the same room with the same camera, in a lifetime, it is highly unlikely that we would ever take the same photograph. A photograph is no different to a drawing, no two people will ever make the same drawing in similar circumstances. Ultimately the photograph “Animal Abstraction” reflects my way of seeing / my way of being.

• *At times, animals in your photographs are seen performing what appear to be meaningless tasks. Why?*

It is impossible for me to categorize what is meaningless and what is meaningful to an animal. What may seem to be a meaningless task by me might be very meaningful for the animal. It is well known that animals have much more developed senses than our own. For example a dog’s sense of smell is perhaps a thousand times greater than a human’s and whilst he may be walking around in a so called meaningless way, he may be receiving meaningful information through his nose about the world that he is interacting with.

The meaning of the animals in my photographs is strictly relevant to the photographs themselves. The images that I capture are self-contained and ultimately reflect my world as I create it rather than trying to document a public world.

• *Can you tell us about ‘One Arm Goose’ in The Chamber of the Enigma?*

The photograph “One Arm Goose” is one of my favorite photographs. Not only have I been able to link, many unrelated forms in an integrated way but at the same time I have created an aesthetic meaning that is ambiguous, beautiful and authentic in nature. For me, one of the most important aspects of this photograph that makes it captivating is the doll’s arm next to the wing. The subconscious mind clearly links the origin of the arm to the goose’s wing. I guess, somewhere in evolution there was a split – from a common element in one case wings evolved and in another case arms, feet, paws, etc.

• *What is the relationship between the animals and the people portrayed with them in your images?*

The relationship between the people I photograph and the animals is multi-dimensional and complex, not unlike the relationship that exists in contemporary society between itself and nature. In some of my photographs there is a very close and deep bond between the animals in the picture and the subjects that may own or live with particular animals. In other cases the relationship is more antagonistic in which the humans try to control every aspect of the animal's lives and see the animals as a means by which they can exploit their own needs.

Generally speaking, after encountering thousands of cultures travelling from one country to the next, I truly believe that the relationship between man and animals is antagonistic. In other words it is fundamental to human nature to perceive nature / animals as threatening and a phenomenon that they must protect or guard themselves against rather than something to spiritually nurture.

*• Your work has in a number of occasions presented the viewer with stuffed animals. Do they represent anything specific within your imagery?*

In my book Shadow Chamber there are a number of photographs that contain stuffed toys most in the form of 'teddy bears'. These objects by their very nature symbolise an aspect of childhood and depending on how these toys or stuffed animals are used, different meanings are created. For example, in the photographs from Shadow Chamber "Orphan" and "Rejection" the hidden meanings behind the teddy bears are quite different than in the photograph "Excited man".

*• In Loner, a man lies on a slumped mattress. Above him a crucified baby doll has been labelled 'God' in big childish letters, below a little white dog looks back at the camera like he knows something we don't. What are the challenges presented by working with animals on set?*

The major challenge for me in working with animals is to create relationships between the animals and the other aspects of the photograph. It is crucial that I capture the animal's demeanor in such a way that the viewer can interpret its meaning within the context of a human experience but as well as the meaning of the entire picture that the animal is contained in.

For example in the photograph mentioned above we sense that the dog feels compassion and concern for his master on the bed; this compassion or concern may have nothing to do with the way the animal is thinking or feeling but as an artist, I have been able to convey that meaning to the viewer and as a result of that interpretation the photograph makes visual sense. Furthermore, it is very important to notice the formal relationships that the dog is part of in the image, namely as he turns and looks at me, his formal relationship with the boy on the bed could be seen as a cross which again is part of the form on the wall. Another important formal quality is that the dog's eye has a similarity to the top eye of the doll on the cross.