

Roger Ballen



ALEXANDRA ROSS IN CONVERSATION WITH ROGER BALLEEN

Alexandra Ross: The American photographer Diane Arbus once said, "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know." Do you think that this works in reverse – that the less a photograph tells you, the more you know? I ask because much of your work is so enigmatic. It suggests hidden narratives that lie beyond the picture frame.

Roger Ballen: I've never really tried to do anything consciously when I take the pictures. I just find great images that ultimately have a deeper meaning for myself. I've never tried to create images for other people or create a specific message. It's always been something that comes from my deeper visual psyche that wants to reveal that part of myself to myself. So by taking pictures I've gone fishing into the inner zone to find what's there.

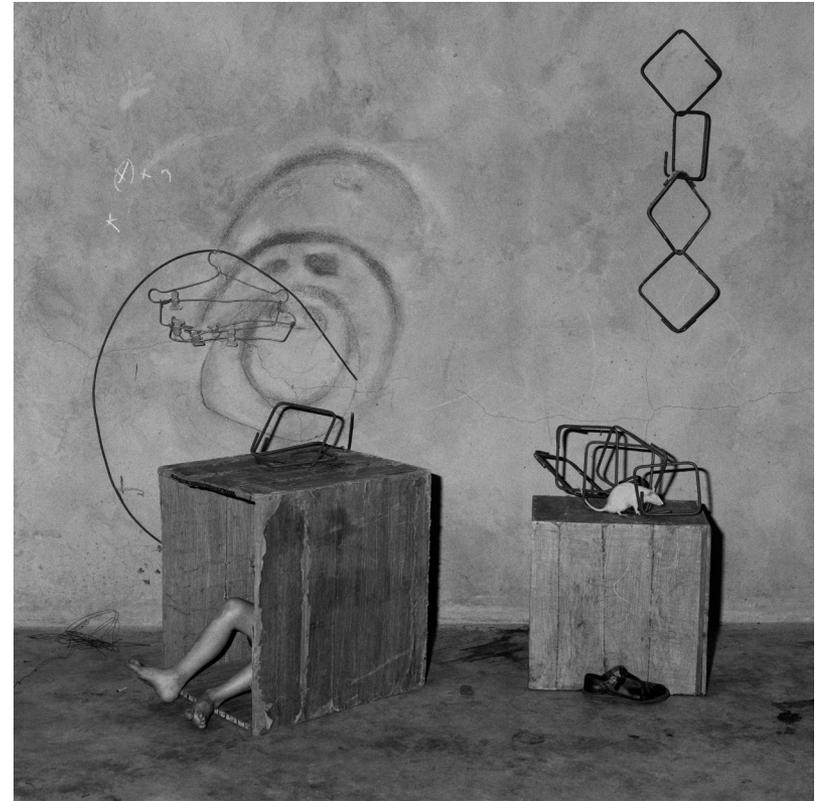


AR: Fishing ... or mining?

RB: I always say that when I started mining I was looking for the vein into the underground. For me mining is a metaphor for something fundamentally psychological. My pictures mean many things to many people but they're not socio-political, economic statements. They come out of the motivation to understand who I am and what the human condition is, and one of the aspects of the human condition is our inability to deal with chaos. Ultimately chaos overwhelms us.

AR: And the ultimate chaos for us is death – also apparent in your work. Many of your pictures are of people lying inside 'coffin-like' boxes, or shrouded, for example.

RB: You know, I think it's a very natural thing. The death instinct is just as strong as the life instinct, the two go together, they're synonymous. A lot of my photographs have enabled me to better understand my own condition and the human condition. Death is an important part of that.



AR: After Dorps (1986) all your photographs have been taken in interior spaces, spaces that become metaphors for the psychological interior, the psyche.

RB: The interiors are very contained and they're very ambiguous. A lot of people find them disturbing. In many ways they're quite mysterious. They're a metaphor for the interior because fundamentally, what could be more mysterious?

AR: Speaking of mystery, during a walkabout at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) in 2007, somebody asked how you make your pictures, who the people are, where you make them ... you know, very specific questions, and your answer was, "A magician never reveals his secrets."

RB: (Laughs)



AR: In a sense you are a magician because of the enigmatic quality of your work. How you get your subjects to do the things they do is a question that's always present. Some of the criticism leveled at you is that you've 'hypnotised' unwitting people, that you've manipulated them. How do you feel about that?

RB: I think that type of criticism is completely irrelevant. Nobody will ever really know what my relationship with the people I photograph is or who they are. The issue of what's 'wrong' with my photographs is demeaning to the people in them. Every time you look at a newspaper or turn on the TV you see much more demeaning images than mine. As far as I'm concerned, most of the media is shrouded in hypocrisy. At the end of the day those kinds of comments are a reflection of the viewer's inability to come to grips with their own interior.

AR: Also, they come out of an attempt to pin your work down, to fix meaning.

RB: People can't handle chaos. There's so little human behaviour anymore that is about an introspective, poetic, philosophical approach to life.



AR: I want to talk about Dorps (1986). When did you first encounter the small towns of South Africa?

RB: My first foray into the dorps was in 1974 when I was working as a geologist. I'll never forget my first night in the platteland in a tiny little hotel in Richmond, and the siren going off in the evening for the black people to get off the streets and go back home. So Richmond will always have a special meaning for me. The interesting thing is that there weren't many people on the streets in those days, it was almost as if there wasn't anybody there ... and that goes back to the central question I asked myself at the time – what was the unique aesthetic sensibility of these places? I really wasn't concerned one way or the other with black people or white Afrikaners – that really wasn't the issue. I always just tried to take the best pictures that I could. Dorps is an important part of this show because it's being shown in a dorp but the pictures have transcended themselves on many levels. The issues I'm dealing with now are different and more complex than before ... so there's been a long evolution. But Dorps was the most important of my projects because everything started there. My style, my pattern, was defined in Dorps – it was the first time I started using a flash and started finding the motifs that I'd later expand on.



AR: The objects and marks on the walls for instance?

RB: Yes, and I also found a certain type of person that I would try to enter psychologically and visually. The reason I first entered these interiors had something to do with the light. In a lot of these small places in the Karoo it's very difficult to photograph outside for almost ninety percent of the day, almost impossible. It was hot, it was boring and there was nobody outside. So one day I started knocking on doors and then I went inside, literally and metaphorically.

AR: Something that I've noticed about those early works is that all of the things on the walls – the wires, pictures, drawings – were presumably made and placed by the people in the pictures. It seems that you recognised, amongst other things, their creativity, the artist in each of them. The feeling I get is that there's a very open and non-judgmental attitude towards the subjects.

RB: You're absolutely right. I always say you don't have to go to museums to see art. If you had to take some of the walls in my pictures and cut them out, they'd make really interesting works of art in a museum.



AR: So there's this tension between what you've constructed and composed and what already exists. Even though your compositions are considered there's also an accidental quality about them.

RB: For me the great challenge always is to create art from the incidental, from the commonplace and transform it.

AR: Transformation, magic, alchemy – these things are evident too. But your alchemy is about taking ordinary things and turning them into art.

RB: Yes, because all of my photographs have this rough edge to them, they feel like they've been lived in, touched. There's a real sense of surface. I think in all the work there's a sense of breakdown or inability to cope and most of the individuals in my pictures become metaphors or comments about the human condition.



AR: But there also seems to be a real connection between you and your subjects as individuals.

RB: I think that there are two points here. One is that you shouldn't really think of photography as being any different than say, painting or drawing. The camera is no different from a pencil. Two people will never take the same picture, and people can't understand this even though they'll understand that if I give you a pencil and I have a pencil and we draw the same tree that the drawings will never look the same. So when we talk about the subjects, the subjects only exist because I exist, because of the way I formulate the reality in the pictures through the camera. So what you're seeing is Roger's photograph of Roger's reality, that's all. When we talk about the subject, my relationship with the subject is a transformative process. That subject that you see in the pictures doesn't exist. They exist, but not as you see them in the photographs.



AR: I'm thinking about what isn't in the pictures, the unseen narratives, which leave them open to a variety of interpretations.

RB: I always say that the best pictures are the ones even I don't understand. Those are the ones I like. That's the purpose of taking a picture – to challenge myself. What's the point of doing it if it tells me what I already know? Why else would I take a picture?

(26 August 2011)



Image: (page 3) EARLY MORNING, NAPIER, 1985, *DORPS*
Image: (page 5) SIDE VIEW OF HOTEL, MIDDELBURG, 1983, *DORPS*
Image: (page 7) HIDEAWAY, 2003, *BOARDING HOUSE*
Image: (page 9) MAN AND MAID, NORTHERN CAPE, 1991, *OUTLAND*
Image: (page 11) JOHAN AND BERTE, BROTHERS, WESTERN TRANSVAAL, 1987, *PLATTELAND*
Image: (page 13) FRONT DOOR, HOPETOWN, 1983, *DORPS*
Image: (page 15) DIAMOND DIGGER AND SON STANDING ON BED, WESTERN TRANSVAAL, 1987, *PLATTELAND*
Image: (page 17) WALL SHADOWS, 2003, *SHADOW CHAMBER*
Image: (page 19) EULOGY, 2004, *BOARDING HOUSE*
Image: (page 21) CORNERED, 2004, *BOARDING HOUSE*
Image: (page 23) BOARDING HOUSE, 2008, *BOARDING HOUSE*

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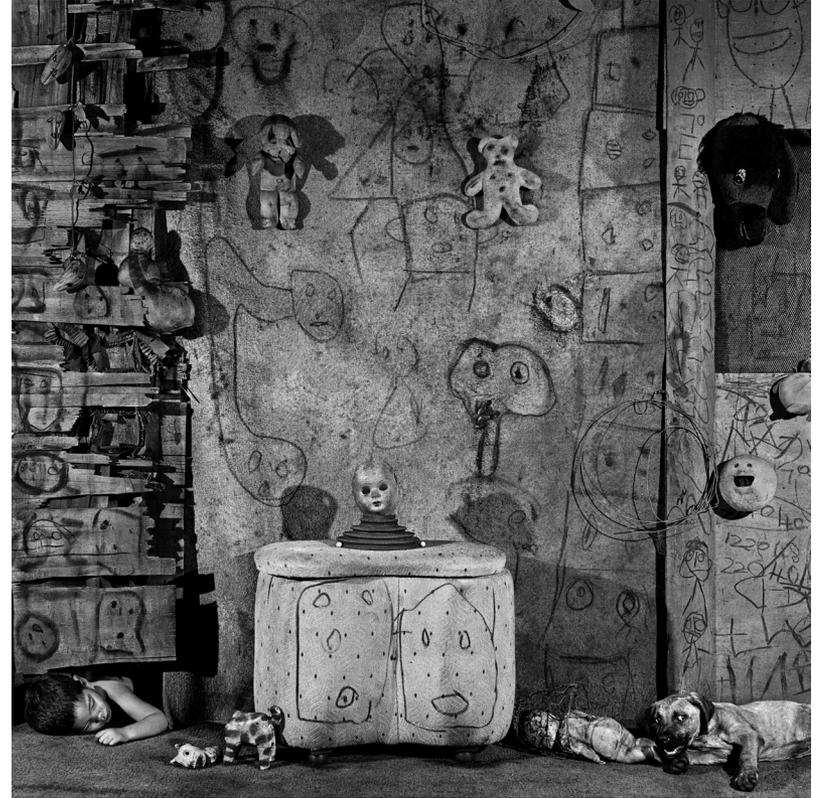
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