

Geology of the mind

ANDREW STEPHENS *December 28, 2013*



Asylum: Roger Ballen at MONA's Round House.

The location is perfect. From MONA's rock-ensconced main galleries, there is a tunnel that leads underground to a place known as the Round House, designed by Roy Grounds, which nestles into the side of the hill, not far from the property's vineyards. This part of the museum is a heritage-listed, modernist beauty built in 1958, housing the small library plus a few satellite exhibition spaces. To travel there through that dark, slightly foreboding passage is like entering MONA's deepest, most private part. Its subconscious, perhaps.

It is an apt setting for the art work of Roger Ballen. A New Yorker who has spent much of his life in South Africa, he was for many years a practising geologist and his work has often taken him a couple of kilometres below the earth inspecting precious metals and minerals. His black-and-white photography of people is equally exploratory: it has long been celebrated for its intimacy, candour and ability to disturb.

In the past decade, though, the people have disappeared from Ballen's work - at least, they are still there but the full figure has gone; now, his people are disguised, fragmented and juxtaposed with other things.

In 2008 Ballen started visiting a rambling building in Johannesburg. It was a

sort of mission, he says, where animals roamed about or occupied cages and where "some people would come for a day, others stay for five years". The on-site owner likes helping people and animals; when the occupants get jobs, they give him some of their earnings as board.

Over five years, Ballen took pictures there of the animals, people and the environment. He used a Rolleiflex camera with black-and-white film - something he has used for 50 years and which he says makes abstract what "might be referred to as reality". The results in this project are mesmerising assemblages that incorporate drawings (by himself and the mission's inhabitants), fragments of people, fascinating textures and settings and, always, somewhere in the picture, photos of the birds that lived there. It is called *Asylum of the Birds*.

Ballen began to make art full-time in the 1990s. His work at MONA occupies three rooms in the Round House - a formal but very dark gallery for the framed photographs; a fake room built from scratch with a tin roof, housing an installation that somehow captures the atmosphere of the rooming house; and a smaller gallery of framed works. Together, these three components conjure a definite psychological space and the quietly spoken Ballen feels comfortable within it.

Will visitors? Curator Nicole Durling says she will be curious to watch how people respond and whether their emotions will be evident - for certainly this is work in a territory all its own that, once entered, is hard to glide over or forget. It is dark and quietly unsettling and MONA's publicity material describes it as "a wound-opener"; and yet there are always the birds, which seem to appear at every turn in various guises.

Durling says Ballen's work is so complex in its construction, with so much layering, that it is difficult to absorb everything in it. "It is an interesting process where it is about trying to capture a particular moment but at the same time nothing has been left to chance," she says. "Everything is considered within the pictures, everything leads to a particular point. There is nothing you can do

without."

Ballen says that before he takes a picture, the most important thing is that he have a silent mind. "I don't think about the pictures before I go there, because that is the nature of photography," he says. "I don't stress my mind, I go in there and find the way forward. The hardest thing is, like other arts, painting or writing, you get an amazing thing one day, and nothing the next. That is the nature of art. It can be as easy as walking along and you kick a can and get an idea.

"To get from here to there, there are thousands of steps in between. The back of the mind proceeds with the benefits from the front of the mind, to get the picture to the point where I think it is now ready."

His photographs - shot on film and the negatives transferred to digital with no manipulating software such as Photoshop used in between - are perhaps closer to surrealist collages or assemblages than anything else, and have an incredibly complex layering effect, which is accentuated by being in black and white. They have a rough, authentic texture.

The geological affiliation goes deeper, for these images are like imprints of the subconscious. As Ballen says, the place he likes to be in "is a place most people don't like being in". His work has been described as relentlessly downbeat and unsettling; yet its beauty and delicacy is astounding. As Durling says, Ballen has had a knack in his photographic career of finding "the most spectacular but most disturbing environments and subject matter".

In the installation room that works with recreating the feeling of the Johannesburg rooming house, Ballen has mixed his own materials and images with others scouted out in Hobart. The oddly shaped room has the mood of people living on the edge in dire desperation, but Ballen is attracted to this environment and says it is not confronting for him.

"I find them exhilarating, these spaces," he says. "I like the people, the people like me; it is comfortable and I have more friends from these places than I do elsewhere. I like being in these environments. This is their space.

"A lot of people say [my] work is dark and disturbing but for the people from that world it's not dark and disturbing, it's humorous."

The installation room is like walking into one of Ballen's photographs and he describes it as "not necessarily a set but more like a parallel space" to the photographs.

"For me it is a nice experience. The cold-blooded [photo] behind glass - being able to walk around [in] it is a different experience. The whole room is a fiction. This is a refined version transformed by my brain."

Roger Ballen is at MONA until April 21. mona.net.au

Andrew Stephens was a guest of MONA.