

SPIEGEL ONLINE

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U.S. photographer Roger Ballen**World of outsiders**

Freaks, arms, Outcast: U.S. photographer Roger Ballen examines his motives on the edge of society. Now he has made a deeply disturbing short film about people and birds in his adopted home of South Africa.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Mr. Bales, yet you were known for your portrait work. Her latest book "Asylum of the Birds" * and the video of the same name go in a different direction. What sparked your interest in birds?

Bales: All my projects fit together slowly. In 2000, when I was working on my photo series "Outland," I was in a house where a bird was tied with one leg in a closet. This was my first bird picture, "Tethered Dove" (Tailed Pigeon).

SPIEGEL ONLINE: What birds make for you?

Bale: You are a symbol of purity, peace and the archetypal connection between heaven and earth. By the time I realized that I could combine the bird and all that he symbolizes, with my aesthetic universe.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: "Asylum" is a fairly elastic term in "Asylum of the Birds." **In the video we see how a bird is decapitated** and the headless bird hits the ground with the wings. What does this say about the relationship between people and animals?

Bale: After almost 64 years on this planet and for many years I have worked as a geologist in the South African bush, it's pretty obvious to me that the relationship between humans and animals is by no means harmonious. It is a one-way street, in which the animal is exposed to a situation that it can not handle. Man takes advantage of the nature. That man is part of nature, is easy to say. This is such a huge, uncontrolled imbalance. Man is no longer arrested the natural world.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: violence against animals is not a recent phenomenon. One could even say that people nowadays are more aware of the issue - just think of bull or cock fighting.

Bale: Man has even more than in the past lost contact. People are not in themselves when they see how a chicken's head is cut off. But they remain motionless when they see 500 in plastic-wrapped chicken in the supermarket. In the Western world we lie louder calming strategies cope. It brings people from starting to wear fur coats or cares about pandas at the zoo. But that's just a backdrop racketeering. In reality, we lose our natural environment, and this is an irreversible trend. Essentially, it is not only about ecology, but also on a psychological level to alienation and rootlessness.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: They stage for her photographs impoverished and standing on the edge of society people - the "Asylum of the Birds" is a slum shack. You photograph the residents. Critics have referred to the way you work as exploitative.

Bale: I do not know why you should call it exploitation. A photo of someone to make is not necessarily exploitation. Actually, it's all about the relationship between exploiters and Ausgebeutetem. What is it, if he or she does not feel exploited?

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Conventional ethical standards, according to the disadvantaged should be shown that empathy is created for their plight. Your pictures do not just exude empathy.

Bale: We live in a world in which most of the images are provided. What people think of empathy, is sometimes used in order to exploit them as consumers, voters or as believers. "Empathy" is a very subjective term, as well as "beautiful" or "poor". If someone is wealthy but mentally impoverished, should we then not photograph him - from empathy out? I would argue that, have not made their own dark side all those who raise such objections and attack those who do not bow to their "rules".

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Nevertheless, the video shows how you can make as an educated, neatly dressed photographer from the upper middle class photos of homeless people.

Bale: With many of whom I have worked for five years or longer. Something would not be possible, our relationship would not be based on trust, friendship and mutual respect. Places like the bird asylum are neither secure nor peaceful. They are characterized by violence and unresolved social and political conflicts. Through me the residents get attention, an expression. We draw together and build together scenes. They are so marginalized that it is an identity for them when someone who is not an outsider, they can be attention to part. Some report daily to me, I get at least twenty SMS with a request to call back. Some need money, just talk most want.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Sounds like a job for social workers ...

Bales: In a way. I am for them father, priest, doctor, lawyer, psychiatrist. I am one of their few contacts with the outside world. None of my "level" would bother with them. And if so, then it would be a slave-men's relationship.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: What represent the residents of the bird asylum for you?

Bale: They represent the human nature in its rawest form. It has always been part of my photography and my psychology, the more elementary aspects of human personality disclose: violence, the will to power, sexual dominance. And of course, the most fundamental of all human instincts: the will to survive. The people must fight for their survival - in such a situation, show the more primitive instincts.

* The picture book "Asylum of the Birds" by Roger Ballen appears on 24 March by Thames & Hudson.

Interview by Marc Erwin Babej

URL:

<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/video-asylum-of-the-birds-von-roger-ballen-a-956484.html>

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Website of Roger Ballen

<http://www.rogerballen.com/articles/the-descent-into-the-asylum>

Website of Roger Ballen Foundation

<http://www.rogerballen.org/>

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