

## 'My best pictures are the ones I don't understand'

A conversation with Roger Ballen

On his way by train to Amsterdam from Sittard, where museum Het Domein recently opened his new exhibition 'Skadukant', the highly acclaimed and influential American photographer Roger Ballen spoke on the phone with Ben Krewinkel. The conversation turned to his early and recent projects, his position in South African photography, the difference between documentary and art photography and ended on animals and farms. 'Farms are as destructive as cities'. Welcome to the dark world of Roger Ballen.

**Recently your first books called *Dorps, Small Towns of South Africa*, got republished. You described this book as a key publication in your career. How come?**

During the time I worked on the project *Dorps* (1982-1986), I metaphorically crossed some sort of river. You might say it was a crossing from the world of documentary to that of art. A few of the photographs in the book, you can't put words to them. They deal with a kind of silent aesthetics.

**Can you explain?**

While photographing *Dorps* I started to understand what the fundamental difference between documentary and more artistic photography was. For instance, *Dorps* includes one of the first pictures that I would call a work of art: 'Bedroom, Bethulie 1984'. There are few others like that. I never did anything like this up to that point.

**Did you capture a typically South African aesthetic?**

I would say yes, but *Dorps* contains some images that went far beyond. The same thing occurred with *Platteland, Images from Rural South Africa* on which I worked from 1986 to 1994. Why are these pictures still so powerful today. Even if you know nothing about South African history the pictures stick with the viewer.

**Do you consider *Platteland* as a sequel to *Dorps*?**

I always say, *Dorps* was about 'Places', *Platteland* was about the 'People'. The people from *Platteland* fitted well in the places of *Dorps*. So, yes, you might say the books go together. The design and format of both books is also very similar.

**Some of the portraits in *Dorps* remind me strongly of the portraits in *Platteland*, more than the portraits of your more recent work.**

The portraits in *Dorps* are more fragile and soft than those that can be found in *Platteland* which became more piercing and psychological and even disturbing to many people.

During the *Dorps* and *Platteland* period (1982-1994) I considered myself a documentary photographer. Beginning with *Outland* (1995-2000) my photographs became more abstract, and at this time I began to see myself as artist as well as photographer.

**Why so?**

I started to interact in the making of the pictures. I started to direct people, to bring things into the photographs. It wasn't just photographing of what was there in front of me, I started to add more of myself to the photograph.

**How do people react on the reissue of *Dorps*?**

Five or six years ago, I was still seen as an outsider, an American. Many people felt uncomfortable with my images. I think the reason for controversy was that it showed white people to be much different than they have been portrayed by the authorities who liked to portray them as well organised, efficient, well dressed and well educated you know. I photographed people who were exactly the opposite. In a way, my photographs broke that balloon.

**What has changed?**

During the early 1990s the white population was very defensive and insecure about itself. They were in power at the time, and felt very fragile about their position. I believe at this time there is a lot more respect for what I've done over the years. Many of the young people in South Africa look up to me and respect the contribution I made to the history of South African photography.

**You are obviously influential on young (South African) photographers. Were you also influenced by others?**

South African photography has been dominated by people whose goal is to make political statements and reveal the cultural issues of the country, which was never my primary concern. During the period that I produced worked on *Shadow Chamber* (2005), my style finally became definitive. After working for nearly fifty years the meaning of my work finally became defined in terms of my own particular aesthetics, which is something I'm quite pleased about now.

**So how to recognize a typical Roger Ballen image?**

I want pictures to challenge people's psyche, to challenge their insides. I make images that come out from the dark straight into their faces. There could be beauty and ugliness, humour and tragedy in the same image. I don't want my pictures to be easily defined. One of my favourite quotes is: 'My best pictures are the ones I don't understand.'

**Do you always work with the same people in your photographs?**

No. People come and go. For *Boarding House* (2009) I worked with poor migrant workers, miracle healers and criminals as well who stayed in a former warehouse near Johannesburg for four to five years. Some people I photograph once and then they disappear forever. The man on the cover of *Shadow Chamber*, for instance. I photographed him for five minutes and never saw him again. It became one of my greatest photographs.

**I noticed the animals are a returning element in your work. What do they mean?**

Photography is unlike painting in which anything can occur in the mind. With photography you are dealing with the actual physical world, whether it's a rabbit or a person. If you look at mythology every animal has a place, whether it's an elephant, a rooster or a rat. They all contain deep symbolism. There is something mysterious and enigmatic to them.

**The animals are mostly situated in a harsh environment, to which their softness stands in a great contrast.**

That's an important thing to say. I want to provoke the viewer to think about the nature and the self of the animal. I'm in a train now, looking around there is no single (wild) animal. Everything has been destroyed. There is an aspect of comment about that in my work. It's funny. People might think it's good to have farms and think the are ecological a good idea. There is no natural life on farms, they are environmentally destructive. Farms are as destructive as cities.

**Do The Netherlands and South Africa differ in that sense?**

No, in South Africa the only places you find animals is in the parks. It's all a big lie. It's a big whole advertising game to get people to come to South Africa. The only animals are there for the tourists. There are only a few places in Africa which have real wildlife anymore. Most has been destroyed a long time ago.

[This is an excerpt of the interview. The full text, including Roger Ballen's comment on his exhibition 'Skadukant' and a forthcoming publication *Asylum* can be read here: [www.concernedphotobooks.com](http://www.concernedphotobooks.com) ]