



# asylum of the birds

FOR DECADES, PHOTOGRAPHER ROGER BALLEEN WORKED AS A GEOLOGIST DEEP IN MINES ACROSS AFRICA, UNTIL HE STRUCK A DIFFERENT KIND OF GOLD.

*Writer Toby Fehily Photographer Roger Ballen*

ON VISITING TASMANIA'S MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART, THE FIRST THING MOST PEOPLE NOTICE, AND TALK ABOUT, IS THE BLOATED PORSCHE OR THE POO MACHINE, NOT THE ROCK OUTCROP DEEP IN THE MUSEUM'S SUBTERRANEAN BOWELS.

When South African-based photographer Roger Ballen stopped by recently ahead of his exhibition, it was the ancient Triassic sandstone formation that caught his attention.

For decades, Ballen was a geologist. Instead of hanging photographs in underground museums, he was venturing as far as two kilometres beneath the earth into hot, damp and claustrophobic mines, filled with the din of jackhammers and the stench of explosives, in search of minerals. Though photography was always his main passion, working with the earth, in a way, wasn't too far off. "The rocks, the forms, the crystal structures: nothing could be more inspiring, nothing is closer to what art's about than looking at earth," he says.

So in his early twenties, a younger Ballen left New York for South Africa. Starting in Cairo, he hitchhiked to Cape Town, stopping along the way in Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana. From there, he fanned out to the vast Saharan stretches of West and Central Africa. All the while, he was

hunting for treasure: chrome, iron, coal, gold, diamonds, copper and metals.

He was also hunting for a subject. Early in the '80s, while working in the mining town of Krugersdorp, South Africa, he started taking pictures of the old signs on the buildings to see if anything would leap to mind. While looking through the results later, he struck gold. His subject was the word 'dorps', Afrikaans for small towns like Krugersdorp. Over the course of five years, he captured the battered buildings and weary people in other almost forgotten places, with his distinctively gritty black and white lens. The pictures were so compelling they became a book, *Dorps: The Small Towns of South Africa*.

As Ballen continued to delve into the dorps, he dug even deeper beneath the surface, and with the release of his third book, *Platteland*, he struck a vein. On viewing the decrepit places and faces of rural South Africa, some critics described the portraits as the most important they'd seen, while others thought them disturbing, which isn't a problem, according to Ballen. "The more provocative pictures bring people forward into places they haven't been before or places they need to go," he explains. "If it is disturbing to somebody, it's probably the medicine they need."

By 1995, Ballen stopped filling out 'geologist' on the blue forms handed out by South African customs, putting down 'photographer' instead. His latest series, *Asylum of the Birds*,

is shot in a halfway house in Johannesburg, the photographs filled with Ballen's paintings, sculptures and installations. There are animals – rats, ducks, chickens, dogs, cats, mice and snakes – but mostly birds. There is a bird in every single photograph. Considering his background as a geologist, they come across as the figurative canaries in the coalmine, the harbingers of danger.

Outside of photography, Ballen's tapping into something entirely different. In 2012, he directed the music video for South African freak-rap group Die Antwoord's "I Fink U Frecky". "I just did it because it was interesting to do," he says. "I had zero expectations, absolutely zero." The video went viral, racking up tens of millions of views on YouTube and introducing his work to a new audience.

At first glance, the track is another dose of Ballen's disturbing medicine. Rats and snakes crawl across the band, and the crammed set is littered with rubbish. But on a closer look, contradictions peek out; the sinister smiles hint at goofiness. As bleak as it seems, everyone appears to be having fun. There is, after all, a kid doing the robot in a Pikachu costume.

The video isn't an exception. In all of Ballen's work, opposing meanings butt heads. There is a freakishness and a humanity that could be comic, or tragic, or both. The canaries in the coalmines might just as well be symbols of flight and freedom. It's disturbing but alluring, and far from black and white. •