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Roger Ballen. Photo Credit: MONA/Rémi Chauvin. Image Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

PREVIEW

Roger Ballen

by [Briony Downes](#) | Posted 21 Jan 2014

Photographer Roger Ballen creates images that stick with you, images that stubbornly hover in the mind's eye like a filmy shadow. Hailing from New York and currently residing in South Africa, Ballen mines the depths of the human psyche and takes us to a place far beyond the veil of comfort and security.

Ballen's work straddles the fine line between raw beauty and confronting grit. His images are theatrical, disturbing, and at times, oddly humorous. He grew up surrounded by books and prints brought home by his mother, a picture editor at Magnum Photos, and perhaps this explains his emphasis on black-and-white photography.

In a new exhibition brought to MONA by curators Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling, images from Ballen's *Asylum* and *Apparitions* series document the architecture and inhabitants of an abandoned house in Johannesburg. Labelling it the "Asylum of the Birds" for the striking number of winged denizens seeking refuge there, Ballen has used the house as a backdrop for a surreal dreamscape where headless figures roam and animals become mediators between reality and the subconscious.

In a cavernous gallery near MONA's library, Ballen's images weave a dreamlike narrative. Weathered and dirt-streaked protagonists huddle beneath blankets covered in sketchy drawings reminiscent of Art Brut. They clutch white doves yet shy away from the outspread wings of larger, perhaps carnivorous, birds. Drawing and sculpture feature heavily in most of the works as Ballen combines objects (dolls heads, bird cages, sticks) to construct images so laden with detail they border on the cinematic, like a Hitchcock nightmare brought to life.

Fulfilling a desire to drag these subconscious spaces further into reality, it makes sense that Ballen has included a companion installation, allowing the viewer to experience the essence of the photographs in a three-dimensional space. Following the path of a winding staircase above MONA's library, viewers emerge into the Roundhouse, a dimly lit room filled with grotty detritus. Crude drawings cover the walls and the air inside is thick and hot. A busted toilet cradles a taxidermy duck while the plastic sheen of disembodied mannequin heads glint from their posts on the wall. Like a cross between a crack house and a carny hideout, this space is strangely intimate and domestic. Amongst the grit, there are mattresses on the floor, lamps, armchairs and a framed painting of a dog. As time passes, it becomes apparent this is a place of darkness tinged with

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comfort. Like much of Ballen's photographic work, it reaches out to our dark places and unashamedly shines a light into their deepest corners.

With a career that spans over 50 years, the experience of viewing Ballen's work is like stepping into a curio shop of nightmares. His style is distinctive and finely honed. As a master of technique and grand visual storytelling, Ballen continues to remain an important voice in contemporary photography – a fair guarantee that wound won't heal any time soon.

Roger Ballen

Museum of Old and New Art (MONA)

7 December 2013 – 21 April 2014



Roger Ballen, *Asylum*, 2013, installation view. Photo Credit: MONA/Rémi Chauvin. Image courtesy of MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.



Roger Ballen, *Asylum*, 2013, installation view. Photo Credit: MONA/Rémi Chauvin. Image courtesy of MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania.



Roger Ballen installing his work, *Asylum*, in the MONA Roundhouse, December 2013.



Roger Ballen, *Caged*, 2011.



Roger Ballen, *Headless*, 2006.



Roger Ballen, *Suspended*, 2012.



Roger Ballen, *Take Off*, 2012.

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