



A Visual Odyssey

Photographer **Roger Ballen** displays his latest exhibition, *Menagerie*, in Malaysia and takes time to speak to **Tien Chew**

THOSE BLESSED with a creative mind are able to view life through lenses not usually shared with their less imaginative counterparts. Art mediums the likes of photography understand this sentiment to great effect, manipulating light and the environment to capture all manner of images.

Roger Ballen is one of the people that understands this, having over 50 years of experience in photography and leaving his career in geology to pursue his well-known love for the medium. It isn't difficult to understand why, when Ballen reveals that his mother was one of the pioneers of photographic galleries in the United States. Armed with a solid foundation in the art form, it was only natural that a young Ballen would eventually begin his own journey into the world of photography.

"Photography has a few unique characters and it's the only medium that freezes time. The whole essence of photography circles around this concept, that you're reproducing a unique moment and leaving behind a statement that could never have been presented in any better way except through photographs," says Ballen. "About 90 to 95 per cent of the great photographs taken throughout its history, deal with this concept in a very central way, and that's what separates photography from other art fields," he adds.

Being one who challenges rather than conform to societal norms, you only need to look at some of his celebrated works to see why. Ballen forces the viewer to pause and re-examine the link between the relationships of the objects that have been set up in his artworks. The words 'dark,' 'unsettling,' 'ghostly' or even 'eerie' are some of the adjectives that have been used to describe this man's unique images and narrative.

"Generally speaking, when a person looks at one of my photographs, they have to believe in the authenticity of the moment. If they believe that I created the moment or if it was staged, the picture doesn't have the impact," says Ballen. "These aren't issues that a painter or a sculptor deals with when they display their works."

While his photographic works do indeed challenge the perception of what is often considered the norm, it also addresses an array of issues that he simply describes as visual statements. Since this is the case, Ballen explains that his works cannot be defined in words. "I've always said that the best pictures that I've taken over the years are the ones that you have no words for," he opines.

When it comes to creating a series, Ballen doesn't rely on inspiration to get the job done and instead expresses that he works with passion, focus and good old-fashioned discipline. "I always tell students that the best way to learn photography is to take pictures and ponder upon your own work. That's the best way to improve," he advises.

Although he was born in New York City, he has spent the better part of over 30 years living and working in South Africa. As he ages, he reveals that his works are becoming more and more complex, as his ability to display such complexity through the camera has increased throughout his career.

His exhibition titled *Menagerie* is a multi-dimensional visual conceptualisation of the meaning of the animal, drawing from the past 20 years of his works, and is targeted to debut at Wei-Ling Contemporary in The Gardens Mall from October 24 and will be on display till the year-end. A number of 45 iconic Roger Ballen works from his past art series, the likes of the *Asylum of the Birds*, *Boarding House*, *Outland* and *Shadow Chamber* will run alongside his most current body of work entitled *The Theatre of Apparitions*. ●

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