

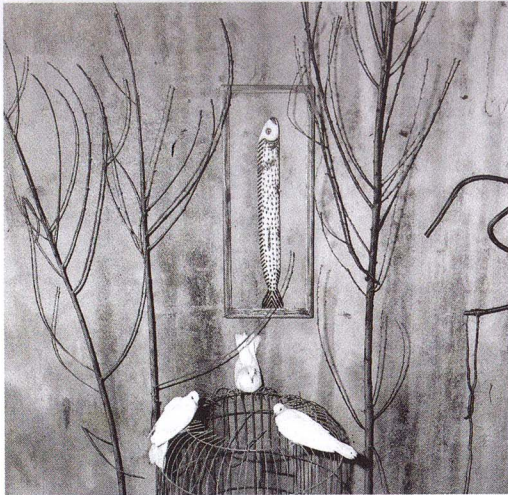


ARTS ABROAD

Opened in 1960, the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art was the first gallery in Britain dedicated to collecting modern and contemporary art. Fifty-five years on, many important and world-famous pieces of art have entered the collection, including works by Picasso and Matisse, paintings by the Russian artists Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova, and sculptures by the British artist Henry Moore, all of which are on display. *20th Century: Masterpieces of Scottish and European Art* supports the gallery's mission to place modern Scottish art in an international context by showcasing the artists' work alongside their European contemporaries. This must-see exhibition will run for another two years at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh. Admission is free. Visit www.nationalgalleries.org for more information.

culturalindex

The arts at a glance
BY ANANDHI GOPINATH



From far left:
Ambience, Nine Birds, Homage, 2011

Unpretty art

Roger Ballen's deeply challenging works show for the first time in Malaysia

When American photographer Roger Ballen takes a photograph, he doesn't just tell you any story, he tells you this specific story about the land, the people he's met throughout, the journey in documenting the essence of a certain place, a certain foreign country.

And the stories are not of a perfect, happy world. The stories are of a people living in a world that makes no sense, a world where the lines between reality and fiction are nullified, close to being non-existent. Ballen doesn't believe in traditional definitions of beauty.

Not one to conform to societal norms, he, in fact, challenges them. Disturbing, dark, gritty, grotesque – these are some of the adjectives that come to mind when describing his photographs. While viewing his works, one can see how he composes a juxtaposition of found objects, humans and animals that bring out a sense of irony and absurdity. By doing so, he forces the viewer to rethink the inter-relationships between the objects portrayed in his work.

If the odd subject matter is one trademark of Ballen's art, its monochromatic presentation is another. By eliminating all colour in his photographs, he is able to create images that are not a mimicry of reality but instead a tangible depiction of his own mind. He takes you on a voyage through his thought process – with exaggerated facial expressions, quirky characters portrayed in the photographs, child-like scribbles and graffiti on the walls in the background. Nothing is



Eugene on the Phone

supposed to make sense; it only serves to reel you into a wacky, weird yet wonderful journey.

But the subjects of his portraits are very real indeed, the setting of the images very much in existence. Based in Johannesburg since the 1980s, where he once worked as a geologist, Ballen has made the subjects of his work South Africa's poor, many of whom are disabled or mentally unstable. But where once he went looking for his mainly white subjects in the outlying villages, shooting them against the harsh landscape in which they lived, he now creates even more elaborate sets in the derelict houses of South African cities in which the poor and disenfranchised live today.

"If you look at *Plattelands* or *Outland*, you'll see that it is more about the human condition and people's inability to deal with the chaos around them," Ballen says, referring to two previous series of his works. "My goal was to reveal something about the human condition. Being in South Africa might have prompted that, but the reason that those pictures still stay on the wall and people relate to them all the time is because there is something universal about them and people don't have to know anything about South Africa to identify with those photographs." I have to agree with him on this – you do walk away from his pictures personally affected in some way, and it has little to do with the context in which they were captured.

Ballen fits the physical stereotype of an artist – he is tall and lanky, with slightly hunched shoulders. His personality, however, is very different from his work: he

is as interesting and colourful as his works are devoid of paint. His current exhibition at Wei-Ling Contemporary is his first in Malaysia. Titled *Menagerie*, it will bring together a selected compilation of 45 iconic works that span past series such as the *Asylum of the Birds*, *Boarding House*, *Outland* and *Shadow Chamber*, to his latest body of work entitled *The Theatre of Apparitions*.

Some time before the installation of the full-sized artworks, I met Ballen who was on a short visit to KL after the Singapore International Photo Festival (SIPF) 2016 at Gilman Barracks in September.

Even in a catalogue, his images are unsettling – someone's head trapped in a birdcage, a small child holding a bird in a visibly filthy coop, while another little boy looks into the camera from his vantage point under a chest of drawers.

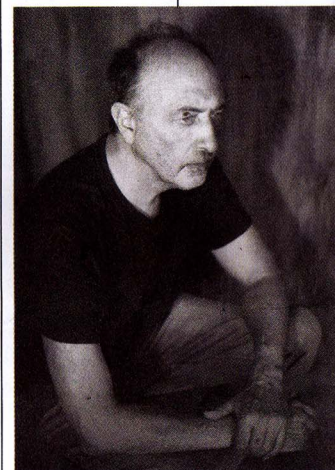
Why is he so drawn to the extreme and the grotesque? "I really don't see my work that way," he says. "I don't really believe in traditional definitions of beauty.

In my brain, for instance, what we would call traditionally beautiful people have their own disturbance. As a photographer, you see the mask in front of everyone's face. You have to go beyond that. With me, it's a case of being compelled to journey deeper psychologically in order to make art."

According to Ballen, avant-garde Irish playwright Samuel Beckett is a major influence on his work. "My photographs evoke the absurdity of the human condition, but they are also records of a personal psychological journey. For me, photography is a way of looking in the mirror."

Alongside Beckett, he cites Carl Jung and radical 1960s psychoanalyst R D Laing as key influences on his

creative journey as a photographer. "Jung's idea of the shadow self is in there, for sure," he says. "The darkness in all of us that we suppress. I often think that when people react to my pictures, the darkness they see is a reflection of their own repression."



Ballen says his photographs evoke the absurdity of the human condition, but are also records of a personal psychological journey

Roger Ballen's *Menagerie* runs until Dec 31 at Wei-Ling Contemporary, Level 6, The Gardens Mall, Mid Valley City, KL. Opening hours are from 11am to 7pm (Tues to Sun), call (03) 2282 8323 for more details.