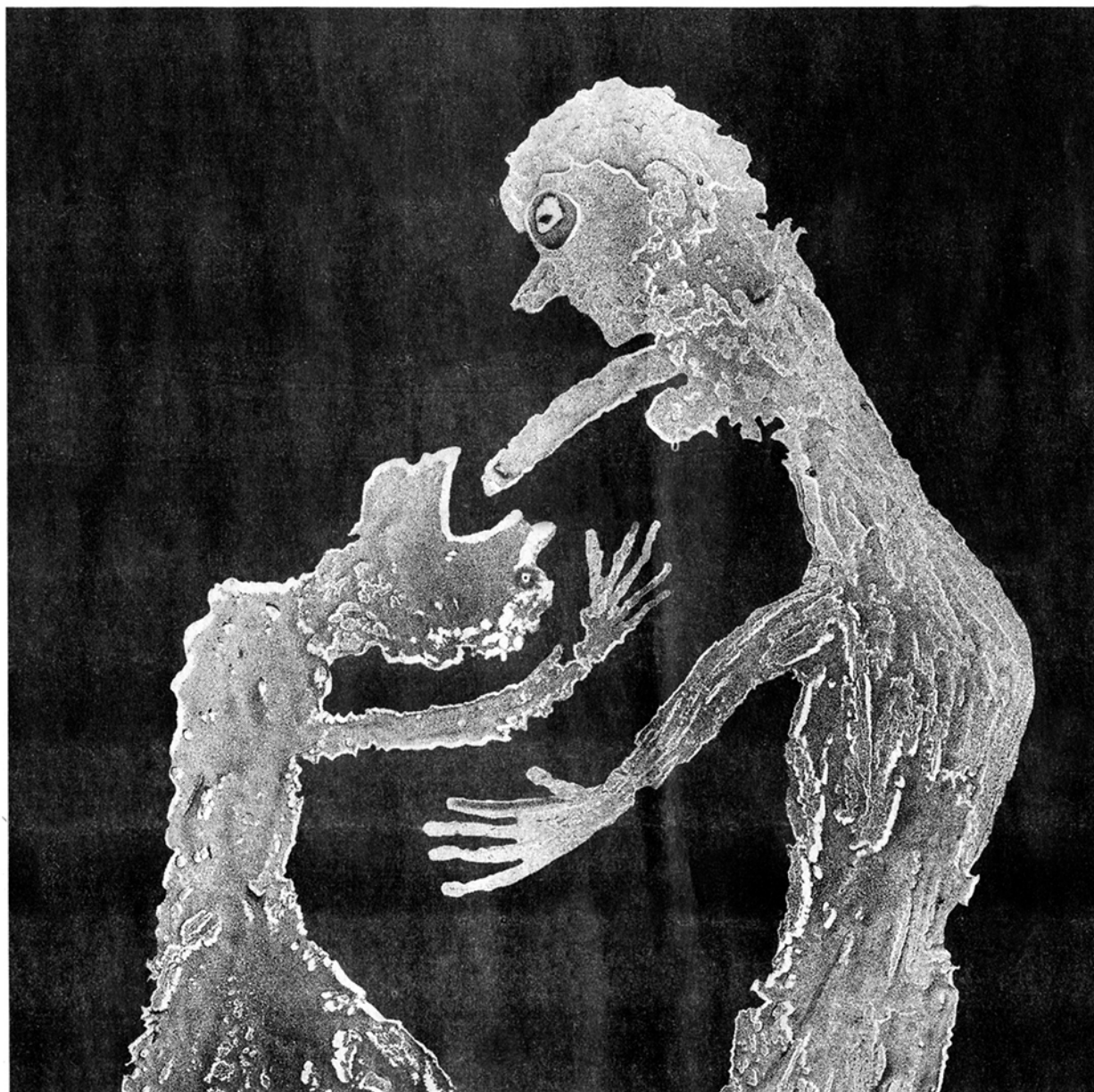


TALK

ART, MUSIC, STYLE, FOOD



(Clockwise from below) Roger Ballen; his works titled *French Kiss*; *Despair*; *Goshtriding*. Photo courtesy: Roger Ballen and Photoink

Entering the Dark Matter

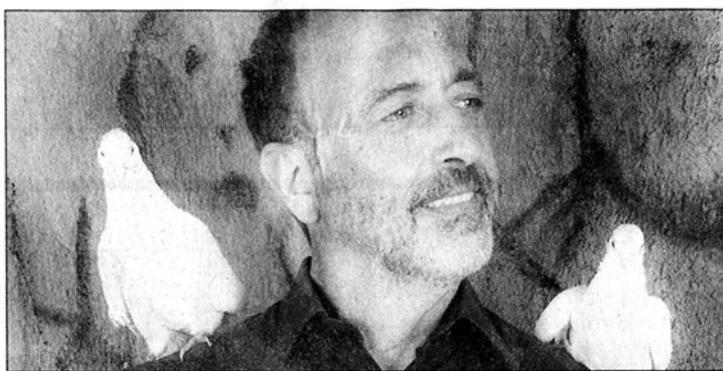
Photographer Roger Ballen returns to India with a show marking a new direction in his photography

PALLAVICHTOPADHYAY

WHILE PHOTOGRAPHING his film *Memento Mori* in a woman's prison in South Africa's Boksburg in 2004, New York-born photographer Roger Ballen came across a cell with dull, gloomy windowpanes, a space where a former inmate had scratched figures into black paint. Left completely isolated within the cell, she had only some dim light to comfort her within the otherwise uneasy surroundings. Many pictures of these anonymous drawings scratched out later landed in his book, *Shadow Chamber* in 2005. The South African photographer knew right then that this surprising encounter would mark a new direction in his photography spanning nearly 50 years, a far cry from his photographs of marginalised and mentally unstable white South Africans living on the fringes of society, ones he has documented in the past in his series "Outland" and "Shadow Chamber" to create captivating visual psychodramas. Twenty five of these images have now made their way into his second solo, "The Theatre of Apparitions", which is on display at Delhi's Photoink gallery.

Taking the encounter as a clue, Ballen began working in abandoned buildings with several windows, drew on them and later took pictures. Animals, human figures, skulls and quirky heads soon turned into his subjects in many of his black and white photographs. The result is seen in *Assembly*, where a head is seen walking with the support of multiple legs.

In *Hallucination*, a man rejoices while imagining a human figure with a horse's head, and dancing on tiptoes as his heel strikes the lower half of his body. A lover lends his amusingly long tongue to his female counterpart, much like a bird transfers her catch, a worm, to her hatchling in *French Kiss*, revealing the delight versus shame aspect of sexuality. "This may sound simple but it needed new techniques, and in the process, my photographic assistant



Marguerite Rossouw

I often say that my favourite place would be a front row seat where the internal world performs the 'dance of the subconscious'. This is how I arrived at the concept of the show

ROGER BALLEEN

Marguerite Rossouw and I experimented with paints, epoxies, emulsions, and brushes to create what I think is an almost magical journey of light and darkness, humour and horror in one single narrative," says 67-year-old Ballen, in an email interview.

Very primitive looking, his images look like a chapter handpicked from the multiple cave paintings, as his photography serves as a deep psychological journey into the subconscious mind, hovering somewhere between dream and reality and sanity and insanity. A man rides astride an alien-looking animal, as the skeletal remains of a fish fly like a bird in the sky above him in *Goshtriding*. Caught within the inner turmoil of his thoughts, a ghostly scared face with crooked teeth, is seen imprisoned within the web of his spiralling thoughts in *Despair*. "Many societies, past and present, represent animals and mythical creatures in their folk art and in their communal expressions on walls and on cave surfaces. What is different today is that we have technology to help us communicate across great distances.

Photography has been a part of that advancement. Although this is the way of the world now, I have preferred to stay as true to the source of the imagery, and to my craft, as possible," he says.

In *Waif*, a zombie like figure, with his hands stretched out, greets viewers. "Here, one may see the vulnerability of the sometimes anonymous individuals visible in public places," says Ballen. *The Back of the Mind* brings the masks that humans hide behind the veil of their faces. According to Ballen, the exhibition "The Theatre of Apparitions" and his book of the same name published by Thames & Hudson last year, takes the viewer on a journey into the subconscious, or the universe of repressed and "exiled" imagery. "For each being in the world, this will be something different. I am interested in the origins of dreams. I am transfixed by the depths and peripheries of the consciousness and my aim is never to explore dreams themselves. I often say that my favourite place would be a front row seat where the internal world performs the 'dance

of the subconscious'. This is how I arrived at the concept of the show," he says.

The Johannesburg-based photographer is credited as being one of the most widely exhibited art photographers in the world, with his works residing in major museum collections including Museum of Modern Art in New York; Centre Georges Pompidou of Paris; Tate Britain in London; and Johannesburg Art Museum in Johannesburg among others. Born in New York, Ballen, who describes himself as a "psychological photographer", decided to move base to South Africa in 1982 after being awestruck by it during his travels as a geologist. His hobby of clicking black and white photographs while embarking on his professional duties led him to take up photography full-time after his photographs garnered much attention, starting from the chronicling of poor communities in South Africa to the marginalised whites.

Ballen has much to look forward to in his cultural calendar this coming year. His upcoming book *Balenesque*, to be published by Thames & Hudson later this year, will show over 350 images handpicked from his nearly five decades in photography, from the late '60s to 2016. But the venture he is most excited about is the opening of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town in September, which will contain the Roger Ballen Foundation Centre for Photography. "The purpose of the centre will be to promote, show and archive African photography to enhance our understanding of this vital area of art production in the world," says Ballen, whose statement around his photographs may serve as a vital piece of advice for aspiring photography enthusiasts. "I seldom make deliberate choices. I allow the setting to have its impact on the process. The greatest photographs are the ones that cannot be explained, simply or in detail," concludes Ballen.

The exhibition is on at A-4 Green Avenue Street, Vasant Kunj, till May 6