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PERFORMANCE ART

Something to take home for your nightmares

BY ROBYN SASSEN ON AUGUST 6, 2018 • ([LEAVE A COMMENT](#))





FREEKY enough for you? Yolandi Vi\$\$er in a still from Die Antwoord's video which was filmed by Roger Ballen.

SAY THE NAME 'Roger Ballen' to certain people and you will get a rather judgemental and furious response, even before they know the context or the work being shown. *Ballen on Film* is a very important exhibition that should disengage all the Ballen nay-sayers, but it may well frighten them – and you – in a completely different way.

Professional geologist turned photographer, New York-born Ballen is easily one of South Africa's more controversial veteran arts figures. His work is technically impeccable and utterly flawless. It is the subject matter that gets people feeling morally bruised. And why? He works considerably with people who are considered Poor White. And these are real people with their genuine lives posing in the works.

Do you think it is a peep show that takes you on voyages of voyeurship into the rat-and psychosis-infested homes of the poor and oft mentally disabled? Do you think you should be looking at these images, these films? Curated with a robust sense of context, and elegant boxes from which each film is screened, the exhibition also comprises selected photographic stills from Ballen's considerable oeuvre, some images printed on the support of skate boards and nine films.

Arguably, once you have watched these films – starting with *Ballenesque*, an introductory BBC documentary made under the auspices of Thames and Hudson in 2017 on the artist and his working practices, which is installed in the room to the left of the gallery's door – you will

not have the mind space to look at anything else until you've debriefed from the experience. It is, however, important to see them in the chronological order in which they are presented.

As you engage with this material, you realise certain truths in Ballen's work. You realise the notion of Ballenesque in the way these characters are given place in his work, sometimes fighting bird/human ambiguities, sometimes reflection such basic living conditions, you can smell them in your mind's nose. And you realise Ballen's engagement with the kind of archetypal figures that Samuel Beckett populated his material. It is also here that will you see a stripping down of humanity to its basic toothless, filthy and frightened self.

But for the grace of God, there go I, you might think as you reel from film to film, looking at the lives of people who have lost all material hope. And yet, you do not lose sense of yourself in an art gallery context, as you understand the progression of the vision and practice of this provocative photographer. And while the unbridled and oft threatening sense of insanity in some of the pieces might leave your pulse throbbing at a rate higher than you'd feel comfortable with, you cannot pull yourself away from the experience until it is finished.

In this body of work, there is video footage of radically controversial hip-hop, zef rave Afrikaans band Die Antwoord, which inflamed the media from 2008, and oddly, it is this work which is arguably the most accessible. Not because of the creepy and sexually bizarre things you get to see, but because it is bound by the song. It might shriek "I fink you're freeky and I like you a lot" in a mantra like fashion, aimed more at the part of your brain that repeats songs mercilessly, but the work is bound in a way that averts open threat.

In the later works, you find Ballen playing with light and images of himself in a way that echoes the kind of material he has developed with his subject matter. You think of William Kentridge's self-deprecating and often hilarious use of himself in his films, in this vein. The approach is anarchic but drawing-based. It's animated and explosive, and there's a wit to it, which you don't see in the earlier iterations.

It's an exhibition that will blow your mind as it is designed to. Like the scary experiences in a funfare are designed to do, you are challenged to see all you can, imbibing dollops of horror that will cause your adrenalin to soar, and give you things to take home in your head and re-experience in your nightmares. And yes, there are moral issues surrounding the representation of these people. Why? Because they are real. This is not soft-soaped entertainment featuring people dressed up in a particular way. These are people showing a photographer – and by virtue of his camera, you – their lives with all their filth, broken dreams and rats. You're the one who fills in the outrage and the narrative. You're the one who puts context to these images.

- *Ballen on Film* by Roger Ballen is at Foto.Za in Rosebank Mall, until August 31.

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