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AMA

Wedge garden | Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook | Remembering Ningura Napurrula



Roger Ballen, *Asylum*, 2013, installation views, Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart; mixed-media and found objects; images courtesy MONA; photos: MONA/Rémi Chauvin

Rogerworld

CRAIG JUDD

The MONA-speak machine goes into lurid overdrive to declare that Roger Ballen is a 'wound opener' whose photography 'sheds light on the darker side of the human self – a scab that most of us would perhaps rather leave untouched'. Such claims suggest that audiences could be entering the realms of the post-surreal, a dangerous place of visceral tension and explosive expressivity. However, going on a recent visit to MONA, the studied attitude of boredom manifested by some of the museum invigilators was more compelling than the works and environmental assemblages on display. Maybe Ballen should have used these workers, largely drawn from the Hobart art world, as subjects for the new work – after all, he has collaborated with the post-punk group Die Antwoord to make the 2013 music video 'I Fink U Freeky'.

Ballen gained a certain notoriety in the early 1990s with a series of portraits of dirt-poor white Afrikaners. The images in 'Platteland' display the heritage and careful distillation of the modes of depiction developed by artists such as August Sander, Weegee, Walker Evans and Diane Arbus. The comparative social and intellectual freedoms in post-apartheid South Africa, and the success of contemporaries as disparate as Cindy Sherman and Joel-Peter Witkin, allowed a space for Ballen to tap into the marketplace desire for images of the marginal and the grotesque. He enjoys the challenge of the depiction of damaged people in damaged spaces, whether actual or constructed. Responding to a level of critical and public unease with this content, Ballen has stated that, rather than being exploitative of economic and social misfortunes, of disabilities and unusual physical appearance, he collaborates with his subjects, some of whom become his friends. What has occurred, though, perhaps out of respect to the individual consciousness of his subjects, is that traditions of the photographic portrait have begun to disappear. The loving caress of the lens that delivers the gifts of infinite detail also homogenises foreground to the background. Ballen now uses the photograph to create a painterly field.

The artist's exhibition at MONA consists of photographs from the recent series 'Asylum' and 'Apparitions' and a large-scale sculptural installation. The images certainly have presence due to their contrived, stylised graphic intensity. For example, in an image from *Apparition of the Birds* Ballen has made several backdrops scrawled with various

marks that resemble childish images of ghosts or people scared and screaming. At the base of the image are three clearly lit male heads, possibly severed, also screaming. To further confuse the picture plane, Ballen has placed a rude string curtain, a (read 'living') white dove and another unidentifiable (read 'dead') avian part suspended. While this and other works on display are somewhat programmatic evocations of voodoo and magick, what is most intriguing about Ballen's work is the (now not unusual) desire to move from the trace of the object to objecthood itself. Ballen enhances the material settings and accoutrements to such a degree that *staging* is the key content of the work. I kept wanting Ballen to push things even further: why present a photograph at all? Cook these stage sets in the computer; give them real guts.

I experienced a similar reaction to the slightly abject environment presented as a complement to the 'straight' photography. With some wit the curators Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne have located this installation in rooms at the top of a tightly enclosed spiral staircase. After negotiating this bit of architecture, audiences enter yet another MONA-type dark shadowy cave. However, this space is deliberately domestic in scale and references. Underneath an exposed corrugated iron ceiling, artfully stained walls contain an array of old carpets and mattresses, lampshades, faux-naive drawings and graffiti, old posters, dolls, masks, stuffed birds, wire and foam sculptures. This is typical of environments the artist calls 'Rogerworld'. While at a pinch there are echoes of Bataille and Dubuffet, the trauma and rupture here is mere affectation. Ballen obviously enjoys the tropes of the demimonde, Grand Guignol and sideshow horror, but there are far too many bug-eyed, simply rendered human forms not shit-scared enough to be anything but decorative. This is not an unstable liminal environment. Ballen might have done well to be given a quick Tasmanian Art and Culture 1.01 lesson by Durling and Varenne – if you want to be truly frightened, look to the restrained horror and outrage in the work of Julie Gough, the vexing attenuation of Pat Brassington or the righteous anger of novelist and cultural analyst Richard Flanagan.

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'Roger Ballen' is at the Library Gallery, MONA, Hobart, until 21 April 2014.