



Roger Ballen

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF SEEING?

Roger Ballen has spent nearly six decades making photographs that refuse to explain themselves. Animals stare back without revealing what they know. Primitive drawings crawl across walls. Rooms become psychological chambers, and carefully constructed compositions hover somewhere between order and collapse. We have learned to call this world Ballenesque, but Ballen himself seems far less interested in the label than in what happens when we encounter it.

Because perhaps the discomfort was never really inside the photograph. Perhaps it begins with us. For Ballen, the room is the mind, the wall is the psyche, and the image is a surface against which something buried can suddenly become visible. His photographs do not tell us what to think. They ask why we feel what we feel.

In this conversation with The Art Talk Magazine, Ballen speaks about geology and the unconscious, animals and archetypes, the move from black and white into colour, sixty years of building images layer by layer, and why the greatest photographs remain impossible to fully understand. The closer we look, the less certain everything becomes.

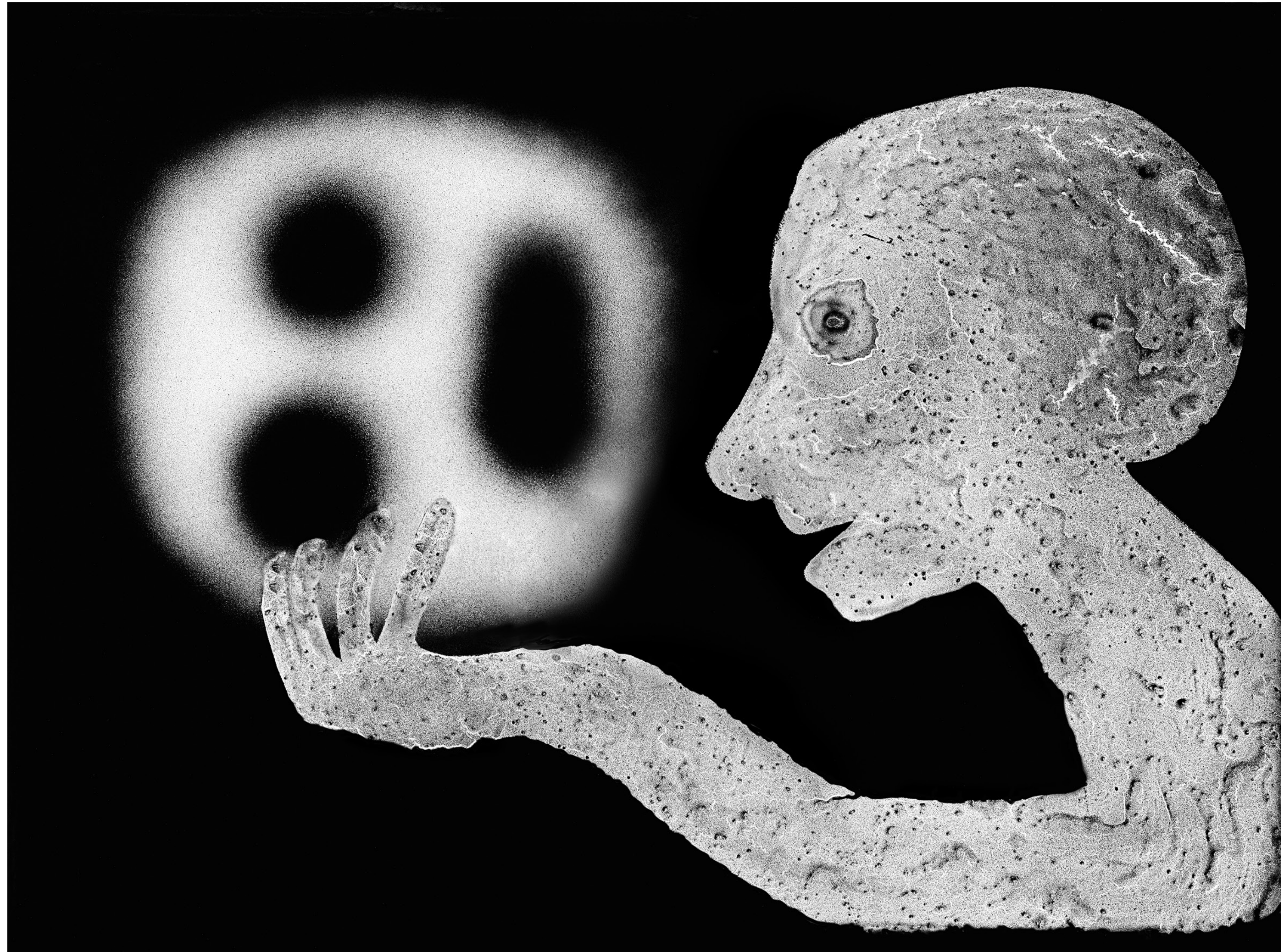
Art Talk Magazine: Roger, we had the great pleasure of meeting you at Photo Basel this June, and one of the things we loved most was discovering your wonderful sense of humour. Your photographs are so often described as dark, disturbing or unsettling, yet humour—and particularly absurdity—seems to run through them constantly. Do you ever find yourself amused by how seriously people interpret the Ballenesque world?

Roger Ballen: I'm not really amused by the way people interpret the Ballenesque world. It is always very difficult to get into somebody's head. My pictures are not easy to interpret. They are very complex and they're not about one statement or the other.

So sometimes it's interesting to hear somebody say something I haven't heard before, but usually, at least for my pictures over the last 20 to 25 years, people find it hard to come up with a word about the work. Some people say it's disturbing, some people say it's funny, some people say they don't understand it. Some people say the photographs are absolutely amazing. I hear a range of words about the work, and I'm not usually amused, because it's usually the same sort of reaction that I get from time to time.

ATM: You have said that photography can function almost as a mirror, leading us towards parts of ourselves that we might otherwise avoid. When somebody tells you that one of your photographs frightens or disturbs them, how much do you think they are actually telling you about the photograph—and how much are they inadvertently telling you about themselves?

RB: The photographs are powerful and most importantly, they usually elicit a strong response. And so I think that does say something about the



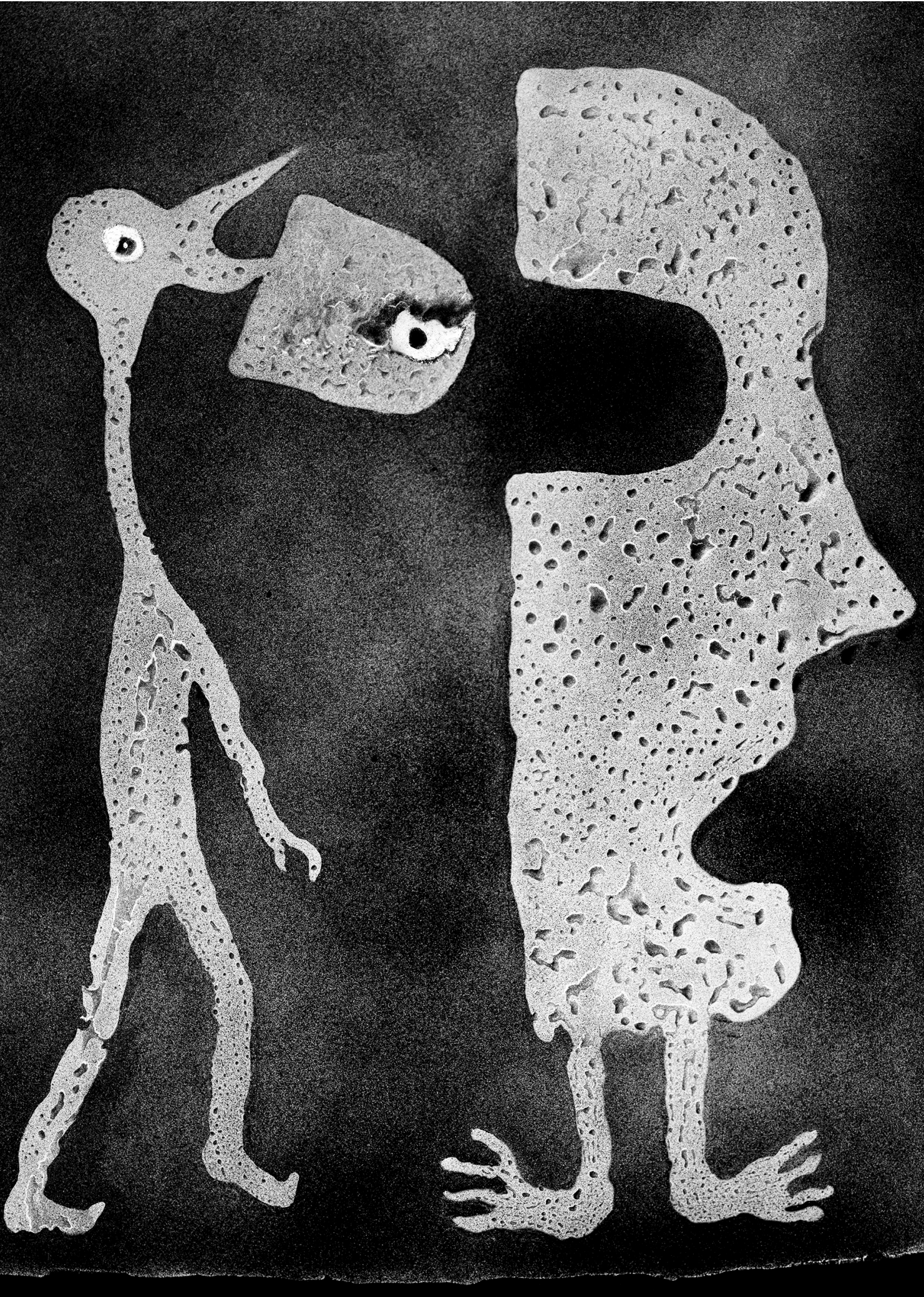
Amulet, 2011

pictures.
If people say they're frightened or disturbed, it's usually something to do with them - I guess when they say they're frightened by the pictures, they haven't come to terms with themselves or with the nature of life. All they have to do is look at their TV set or read the newspaper, and they can see things that are far more frightening, ultimately than my photographs.
My photographs make people look inward, and sometimes they don't like what they see, or they're scared about what they might see. I guess that's the strength of the photographs: if they make people turn inward and reflect on who they are the work is having a positive affect.

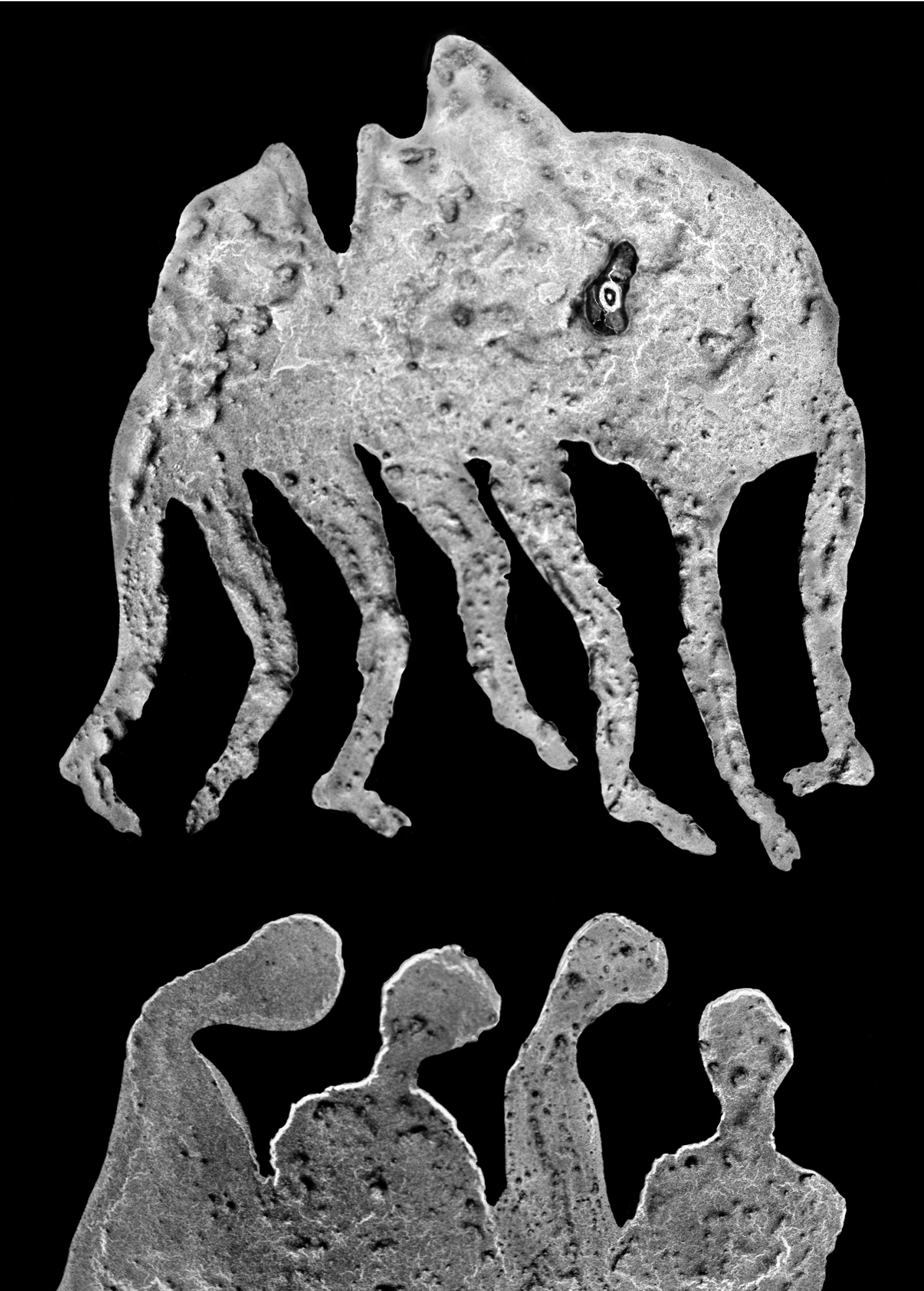
ATM: You grew up surrounded by extraordinary photography through your mother's connection with Magnum, yet your own journey eventually took you far beyond documentary photography. Looking back now, was photography ever really about documenting the outside world for you, or were you unknowingly photographing your way towards an interior one?
RB: If you look at my history and my pictures, I think beginning in about 1973, maybe even earlier, they were already psychological in nature. My voice was psychologically orientated from my first project, which was called Boyhood. I guess the purpose of this project, which was my first book, was to find my own childhood. Until the mid-nineteen nineties my work could be viewed as documentary photography, but as time goes on, it's clear that even those early photographs have a psychological edge.

ATM: There is an extraordinary evolution across your work: landscape becomes portrait; portrait becomes psychological theatre; the room becomes a stage; drawings enter; animals appear; bodies fragment; and eventually photography begins colliding with installation, sculpture, painting and performance. Did you consciously dismantle photography's boundaries, or did photography simply become too small to contain the world you were creating?
RB: My aesthetic, the so-called Ballenesque, has developed step-by-step, layer by layer. Sometimes there's bigger jumps like an earthquake and sometimes, like in geology, they evolve layer by layer. It takes a lot of steps to create my photographs, and you learn from your own work. And sometimes the work doesn't tell you anything new, it tells you what you did before. And sometimes you just make that step in a particular work and you build on that step, and I think that's the only way to improve: by doing the work and making the steps. After nearly 60 years of hard work, dedication, passion and focus is the real key to what I have created over the years.

ATM: You trained and worked as a geologist, which seems almost beautifully appropriate in retrospect. A geologist looks beneath surfaces, studies layers and searches for structures in-



Replacement_2010_courtesy of Galerija Fotografija



Assembly, 2011



Duality, 2013



Face Off, 2010

visible from above. Is that, in some strange way, exactly what Roger Ballen the artist has spent his life doing with the human psyche?

RB: There is a link between the field of geology and my process of photography. So, I think there are a lot of very good analogies such as being familiar with concepts of enigma, mystery, and layering. Geology might be a source of inspiration, but it is important to understand that it is fundamentally a science. For me in the end both fields can be seen as revealing aspects of art and science.

ATM: The word Ballenesque now describes a visual universe recognisable almost instantly: wires, cracked walls, animals, drawings, masks, hands, feet, strange objects and enclosed spaces. Very few artists succeed in creating a language identifiable without seeing their name beside it. But does creating such a recognisable world eventually become dangerous? How do you prevent the Ballenesque from becoming a style that Roger Ballen himself has to escape?

RB: When I go out and take a picture I don't have a plan in mind. I have to create pictures step-by-step. And I've commonly stated that making a picture is like a painting, it could be like 1,000 steps to get there. Planning a photograph is not part of my style. My work needs to challenge me, that's crucial. The image should contain complexity within a clear and precise form. I am not thinking of the Ballenesque when I create my images.

ATM: Animals occupy an extraordinary position in your work—birds, rats, dogs, pigs, reptiles and other creatures appear almost as protagonists rather than accessories. At times they seem more self-possessed than the humans around them. What have animals allowed you to say about human beings that photographing humans alone never could?

RB: Animals are mysterious. You never know what an animal thinks or feels, but there are definitely relationships between the animal and the human and the human and the animal. So I'm in a way trying to define this very, very complex psychological relationship between the two.

Animals by their very nature create enigma within my work, because you can't ever really know what the animals are thinking. People always ask me about the people in the pictures, they never ask me about what is going through the animal's mind.

ATM: And then there are the drawings: primitive faces, figures, eyes, bodies and marks that can feel simultaneously prehistoric and childlike. A few lines suddenly become a person, and once we recognise that person we cannot unsee it. What fascinates you about that extraordinary psychological moment when an abstract mark becomes human?

RB: My drawings are very primitive, very primal. I think. It's very difficult to say that they're realistic anyway, they're almost like cave drawings. So when people look at some of the drawings, they immediately can relate to them as archetypal.

ATM: Your earlier photographs inevitably raise questions about representation because many depicted people living at society’s margins. Those pictures have subsequently been discussed through changing ideas about power, authorship, voyeurism and exploitation. When you look at works such as Dresie and Casie, Twins today, do you see the same photograph you saw in 1993—or has the world around the photograph changed its meaning?

RB: It’s difficult to say how you related to a picture of 20 or 30 years ago, but I can say my great pictures still elicit a strong psychological response. So I think no matter where and when you’re showing ‘Dresie and Casie Twins 1994’, it’ll create a response - it’s an archetypal photograph, and people don’t necessarily need to know anything about the circumstance, me or the place to react to that picture, and so I think that’s in a way, what makes a great photograph. It is timeless, and people respond to it, no matter whether they know anything about the place or the artist. That’s what differentiates a great work from something that’s just contemporary.

ATM: For decades, black and white seemed almost inseparable from the Ballenesque. And then colour entered the universe. Spirits and Spaces feels like an important rupture precisely because colour changes the psychological temperature of everything it touches. What did colour allow you to express that black and white could no longer do? Did colour enter the Ballenesque—or did you have to teach colour how to become Ballenesque?

RB: Interestingly enough, colour photography came very, very natural to me, it was a very fluid transition, I didn’t have to think about it. When you look at my colour pictures, the photos are something between full colour, saturated colour and black and white... monochromatic color. So it was a very easy transition for me. I didn’t have to think about technique, or I didn’t have to think about colour. I just jumped in.

I painted as a very young man and as a result understood the science of color. I had some understanding of the meaning of colour. It really was a very easy transition between shooting black and white after 50 years and then moving into colour. In 2025 Thames and Hudson published my first book in color, Spirits and Spaces. It was a inspiring project for me.

ATM: Your spaces rarely feel like conventional rooms. They can resemble cells, stages, laboratories, shelters or even physical manifestations of someone’s mind. If we removed the people, animals and objects from a Roger Ballen photograph and left only the room, would we still be looking at a psychological portrait?

RB: The space I’m working in is just a metaphor for the inner working of the mind, the walls in the rooms reflect the walls around the inner mind, the wall around the psyche. In a way, the room is that type of metaphor. I guess one could say that for the

last 30 years all these pictures have been taken in a metaphoric, mysterious space that might be seen as the room of my mind,

ATM: There is something fascinating about the tension between control and chaos in your photographs. They can look as though something inexplicable has just happened, yet their compositions are extraordinarily precise. When you’re making an image, at what point do you know the chaos has become exactly right?

RB: I think my pictures could be viewed as an expression of ordered chaos. That’s what create much of the tension in the work. Somebody once commented that my photographs are like a perfect diamond with a dark mark inside. When I used a black and white film for 50 years something the results were always unexpected until I made contact sheets. I remember Dianne Arbus’s comments that a picture always turns out better or worse. It is interesting to note that in my entire career, I have almost never obtained more than one great shot from any sequence, there is always one photograph that is better than the rest.

ATM: Galerija Fotografija has accompanied your work for many years—from the world premiere of Boarding House in Ljubljana in 2009 through The Theatre of Apparitions and international fairs, including Photo Basel. What does a gallery relationship mean to an artist over that length of time? Can a gallerist become something more than the person who presents the work— someone who actually witnesses the evolution of an artistic language?

RB: Like in most similar business’s there are relationships that go beyond just representing my works in a mechanical manner to one where there is a passion for my art and a desire to work together in a creative and harmonius ways. An important key to success is for the gallerist to know the work intimately and to convey that knowledge to those interested in knowing more about the work. I have had a long sucessful career with Galerija Fotografija from Ljubljana who certainly has been committed to my work for nearly two decades.

ATM: Meeting you at Photo Basel made us realise something that reproductions of the work don’t necessarily reveal: behind this extraordinarily strange visual universe is someone who appears to take considerable pleasure in making it. After all these decades, what still makes you laugh in the studio? And has humour perhaps been one of the secret survival mechanisms behind the darkness of the work all along?

RB: I have always enjoyed my work, always found it funny, and I’ve always told people that I’ve never felt depressed taking pictures. I’ve always enjoyed it; it has never been a depressing thing. In fact, the most enjoyable thing I think I have done over the years has been taking pictures.

So I don’t see life as light or dark, I just see things the way they are, the way that I reveal them. When most individuals state of mind is threatened they

call it dark; its a reflection of their state of being, but intrinsically, life is life. There’s nothing a dark about the night, and there’s nothing light about the day they’re all part of the same experience.

ATM: Finally, Roger, after more than four decades of entering these rooms, constructing these images and repeatedly venturing into what you have described as the deeper recesses of the mind, have you discovered more about what lies inside Roger Ballen—or has the mystery simply become greater?

RB: Without any doubt life is an enigma. Nevertheless, no matter how impossible it is to come to any fundamental conclusion about the nature of life and ones own identify I feel photography has left me with a certain level of wisdom. In the end there is no real way of defining the more complex deeper aspects of life. If we are lucky and it may be just an illusion to just scratch the surface.



Roger Ballen, Divided Self, 2007, Galerija Fotografija