

## PHOTOGRAPHY

## INNER MIND

Roger Ballen presents life's absurdities through black-and-white images in Beijing, Deng Zhangyu reports.

American photographer Roger Ballen's distinctive style of black-and-white images are mostly described as "weird" by viewers because of the provocative themes.

People can now get a glimpse of his artistic works at an ongoing show in Beijing. The exhibition hall of the art museum at the Central Academy of Fine Arts has been transformed into a gray-colored theater-like area. Ballen's photos are either suspended in the air or mounted on tilted wooden frames, some as high as 4 meters.

To echo the show's title, *Theater of the Absurd*, Ballen has decorated a part of the area in the style of his pictures. Other than putting up his photos on the walls, he has painted the walls in parts, too, and has installed animal sculptures on the floor. There are chairs for visitors as well.

"It's great! There are few times in my lifetime that things have been so interesting," the 66-year-old photographer says about his first show in Beijing.

Every year, Ballen holds shows in different cities across the world. But he calls the Beijing show "unique" as it tries to explore a more interactive space with the audience.

Fan Di'an, president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, says: "When I walk into the show space, I am both a visitor and an actor of the 'theater'."

Ballen's works are a mix of drawings, installations and photography. His square photos always include wires, animals, discarded stuff and graffiti on walls, bearing a distinctive aesthetic.

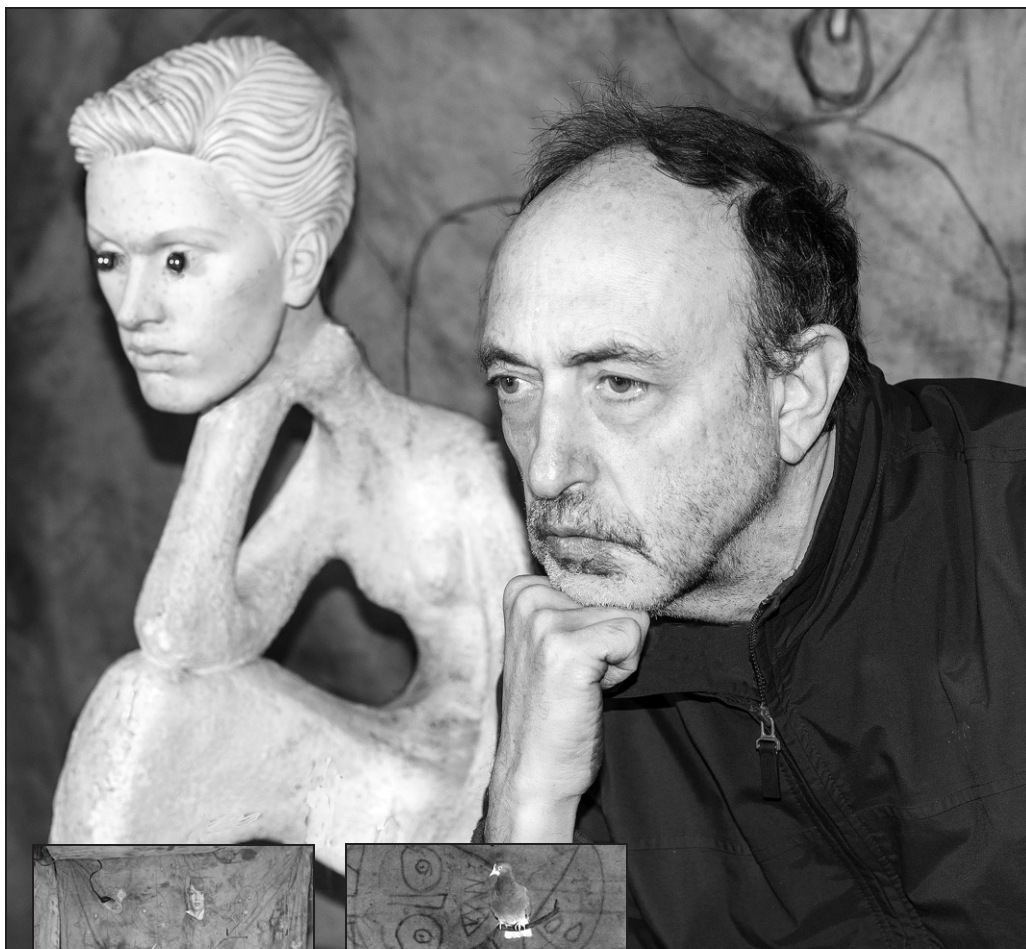
The show features photos he took in South Africa in the past 20 years as well as two videos, including the music video *I Fink U Freeky* that he co-directed for the musical duo Die Antwoord.

Cai Meng, curator of the show, says he met Ballen in 2013 at the Pingyao International Photography Festival, where the Johannesburg-based artist won the biggest award of the festival in North China's Shanxi province.

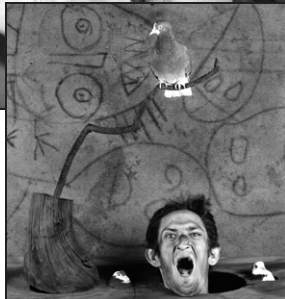
"Many contemporary Chinese photographers are influenced by him," says Cai. Ballen was born in New York and moved to Johannesburg in the 1970s.

He started his work in South Africa as a geologist and then kept recording life in towns and villages by taking photos, with portraits being his main subjects. Since 2000, Ballen has changed his approach to tableaux, an abstract way of photography that combines installations, sculptures, films and photography.

It's common to see animals in his pictures — rats, birds, geese, snakes and even lions are included in his "crew" list since Ballen calls himself the director of his photos.



Snagged, a photo by Ballen.



Scream, a photo by Ballen.

## If you go

9:30 am-5:30 pm, through Sept 23.  
Art Museum, Central Academy of Fine Arts,  
8 Huajidi South Street, Chaoyang district,  
Beijing. 010-6477-1575.

"Birds fly fast. Cats are the worst to control. I just take photos spontaneously when they move, maybe a good one or not. It all happens naturally," says Ballen.

"I can speak at language in order to know what they're thinking. But cats never tell me what they want," he says, jokingly.

Animals in his pictures add a sense of reality into his fictionalized visual works, he explains.

Ballen says each picture needs thousands of steps for preparation, even though the shooting takes only 15 minutes sometimes.

To set up a backdrop for his photos, he visited numerous flea markets in different parts of the world, hunting for things he wanted for his filming.



It's not simply black and white. There are lots of grays in between."

Roger Ballen, US photographer, says of his strong love for black-and-white images



## Online

Watch the video by scanning the code.

Prior to his Beijing show, he spent days visiting flea markets here looking for stuff he needed to build his "set" for the show.

"I'm a world expert on flea markets now. But it's hard to find something unique," he says, revealing a sense of humor, which can sometimes be seen in his works.

On the theme of his Beijing show, he says it is through "absurdity" that he understands life. Life is meaningless, he says philosophically. No matter what we do, we can't change our destinies.

Cai, the curator, says Ballen expresses the workings of the human mind, a consistent style that the photographer has pursued in his pictures to reflect people's thoughts.

Ballen's strong love for black-and-white images goes back 50 years to when he first used cameras to take portraits of people. The simple aesthetic approach followed through his career.

"It's not simply black and white. There are lots of grays in between," he says.

Contact the writer at [dengzhangyu@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:dengzhangyu@chinadaily.com.cn)

## Pengzhou special

## Pengzhou events, friendly ties boosting international reach

By LI YU and PENG CHAO  
in Chengdu

Pengzhou, a city in the northwest of Chengdu, capital of Southwest China's Sichuan province, is playing an active role in international cooperation and exchanges.

The city has just held the 2016 Chengdu International Sister Cities Youth Music Festival, at which six teams from countries including Russia, Israel, the United States, Japan and Mexico put on an entertaining music show for the public.

Gilad Segev, a popular Israeli musician who participated in the music festival, spoke highly of the event and said he regards Pengzhou as a perfect location to hold the event.

"The city has deepened its friendship with other cities around the world and fully demonstrated its unique character that combines both tradition and fashion, urban and rural, and rapid growth and laid-back lifestyles throughout the event," he said.

A series of other activities were also held at the music festival, including an outdoor sports challenge and a mountain scenery photo contest, as well as a feast of German craft beer.

According to the Pengzhou publicity department, the city has hosted more events in recent years to help develop itself into a modern and international city.

Officials said that hosting international events makes the city better-known to the world, and leads to more cooperation and exchanges with foreign countries, which as a result will boost the city's social and economic development.

Pengzhou has a long history of foreign exchanges.

In 1860, French missionary Annet-Théophile Pinchon went to Bailu, a small town in Pengzhou, and he later built Annunciation Seminary, a Roman Catholic college, in the town.

The campus became an architectural landmark and is now listed as



Bailu is a French-styled town, where French missionary Annet-Théophile Pinchon built a Roman Catholic college in the 1860s.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



The city of Pengzhou has hosted a number of international cultural events in the past years.



a cultural relic under State protection.

Bailu has hosted a French classical music festival for the past three years and it is preparing to host the event again this year, with famous musicians from both China and France invited to

perform at the festival.

Last year, the town established friendly relations with Moret-sur-Loing in France.

The Pengzhou government has invited delegates from the French town to participate in the third Tianfu Ancient Town Art Festival

in Chengdu this year, and Pengzhou will also send a troupe to perform at the event.

Pengzhou has established friendly ties, or sister-city relationships, with 10 foreign cities — including Ipswich in Australia, Murzzuschlag in Austria and

Vercelli in Italy — more than any other county-level city in Sichuan province.

In May, Han Yi, Party chief of Pengzhou, met with a visiting mission from Seine-et-Marne, in France's Ile-de-France region, to discuss possible cooperation in the fields of tourism, trade, culture, agriculture and environmental protection.

The two sides signed an agreement on friendly cooperation.

Jean-Jacques Barbaux, president of the general council of Seine-et-Marne and head of the French delegation, said he was impressed by Pengzhou's development potential and its natural environment.

"Pengzhou is both a young and old city. It has a 4,000-year history as well as fashionable modern styles," he said.

"The French-style town of Bailu makes us feel at home. There is a Chinese saying that though they are born 1,000 miles apart, souls which are one shall meet," he added.

In the same month, Pengzhou sent a delegation to New Zealand, Vanuatu and Australia, during which Pengzhou Mayor Dong Li and Onen Gavika, mayor of Luganville in Vanuatu, signed an agreement for friendly cooperation.

The agreement makes Pengzhou the first city in Sichuan to have a friendly relationship with a city in the South Pacific islands.

Pengzhou also reached an agreement with Ipswich, its sister city in Australia, to deepen cooperation in trade and education as well as in events.

In July, Pengzhou signed an agreement with Oakville, a suburban town in Southern Ontario, Canada. The two sides are scheduled to establish friendly ties next year, and they will conduct friendly exchanges and deepen cooperation in education, biomedicine, aerospace power and tourism.

Contact the writers at [pengchao@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:pengchao@chinadaily.com.cn)



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Jean-Jacques Barbaux, president of the general council of Seine-et-Marne

## Pengzhou intro

Pengzhou is 25 kilometers to the northwest of downtown Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province. It covers an area of 1,421 square kilometers and has a population of 810,000.

It is known as the "hometown of peonies". The earliest written record detailing the planting of the flower in the city dates from the Tang Dynasty (618-907). It remains a specialty of the city to this day and has become the city flower of Pengzhou.

The city is a key part of the Longmen Mountain ecology tourism belt. Famous tourist spots in Pengzhou include the Longmenshan National Geological Park, Baishuihe National Nature Reserve, Baishuihe National Forestry Park and Longmenshan National Scenic Spot Zone.

The city lies at the intersection of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and is at the core of the Chengdu-Deyang-Mianyang economic zone, a major growth engine in West China.