

SeeingEye

Sanell Aggenbach

Roger Ballen

Zander Blom

Alex Emsley

Matthew Hindley

Karin Preller

Andrew Putter

Matty Roodt

Chad Rossouw

SeeingEye

Making the invisible visible.

by Leigh-Anne Neihaus

With Miró, a line is a line. In photographs a line could be a wire or a mark on a wall.

Roger Ballen¹

The complex relationship between imitative painting and generative photography has waxed and waned since photography's inception; each medium taking its turn to influence the other more. Assumed characteristic differences between the two have all but fallen away with artists explicitly pushing the boundaries of medium specificity over the last four decades. Indeed painting's aesthetic is now so inextricably linked to photography that reflecting on the one often leads to a deeper understanding of the other.

1. McClelland 2009, 11

Photography has a perceived indexicality (a connection to the physical world) whereas painting tends towards being a stand alone, uniquely mediated product. These days, the indexicality of the photograph has been replaced by complete control and manipulability of digital. There is also the temporality of creating and viewing photography and painting. The less immediate nature of the latter (how long it takes to produce a painting, and perhaps also to view it) must be compared to the immediacy of the rapid 'click' of a camera and the instantaneous recognition inherent in viewing a photograph. When these characteristics begin to appear in painting, photography's connection to the world (its truth element) is unscrambled, prolonging our consideration and slowing down our habitual ingestion of the photographic image.

Although at first glance 'SeeingEye' seems to be simply about photographs that mimic the style of paintings and vice versa, the exhibition is rather intended to stimulate further debate around the two mediums' status of representation and value, even though the market place has dictated one as

important as the other. Spanning from painting that draws on photographic tropes such as blur, pixilation or hyperrealism, through to photographs that directly reference traditional painting subjects or task themselves with exploring the subconscious, 'SeeingEye' offers palpable moments of overlap.

Recently Roger Ballen (b.1950) co-directed *I fink you frecky* (2012), a music video for Die Antwoord. The video, employing Ballen's signature aesthetic, quickly went viral with over 7 million hits on YouTube at the time of writing this essay. However, Ballen's prominence came long before his foray into this notorious rap-rave group's world with his photographic series documenting rural South African communities.² The earlier work laid the foundations for what would subsequently become Ballen's distinct visual vocabulary evident in his later books, *Outland* (2001) and *Shadow Chamber* (2005). Marking his departure from reportage and a move towards portraying the darker sides of the subconscious, these images show a more controlled painterly approach through childlike mark-making, increased collaborative dealings with his subjects and the use of props.

Shot in Ballen's trademark black and white square format, the varied and layered elements within these complex compositions reveal glimpses of the human psyche, and moreover, tweak our subconscious with potent visual cues. Meaning and interpretation become endless and are left entirely in the hands of the viewer, or, in the words of Williams: "They elicit a nonlinear, nonverbal experience from the viewer and offer up scarce evidence of whom, why, or when. Something in them begs to be explained, broken down, contextualized, which can't be done."³ *Onlookers* (2010), *Transformation* (2004) and *Headless* (2006) each offer an example of how Ballen severs the photograph's link to the physical (and photographable) world and creates his own perplexing dream reality wherein rich and layered compositions delve into the darker sides of our mind. The attention placed on an interior reality rather than a more representative, external one is, on a cursory level, painting's territory. Speaking in an interview with Doug McClemon, Ballen affirms this notion: "The work has more aspects similar to painting than photography. I'm very

2. *Dorps: Small Towns of South Africa* (1986) and *Platteland: Images from Rural South Africa* (1994)

3. Snider 2009, 2

reluctant to say [this] because you're looking at a photograph and the aesthetics behind it is a photograph."⁴

Like Ballen, **Zander Blom** (b. 1982) constructs mixed media compositions and then photographs them. Blom's series, 'The Black Whole Universe', continues his previous photographic path of abstract installations on walls and corners of ceilings, images he previously captured in his Brixton home. The process is set: a range of diverse mediums (painting, drawing and paper) are carefully composed and then photographed. Here Blom creates his own structural moments, once installed and photographed, these are then painted over, uninstalled, lost.

Visually these photographs recall the minimalist abstraction of painters such as Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland and Robert Ryman. Abstraction is a compelling area for photography; in its purest form photographic abstraction completely removes the physical world and becomes photography about photography. However, Blom's photographs are less about photographic abstraction and more about painterly abstraction. The hard-edged minimalism of *Chapter 1. Scene 012* (2010), for example, is not so much a representation of a painted corner of a room but instead is more about a harmonious sense of space and restrained line and tone. A formalist lens reveals these images to be precisely weighted compositions comprised of both razor sharp line and soft gradation of tone.

'The Black Whole Universe' sees Blom move this component of his oeuvre out of his home and into the various visited cities abroad where he temporarily installs these abstract moments into studios and galleries. Each place visited is filed as a different chapter, and each new image taken within the chapter is labeled as a new scene (in reference to the filmic genre). On completion, this body of work will take the form of an extensive publication including texts and records of the props used. The record may also serve as a type of unorthodox travel log; travel and photography have since the early days of photography gone hand in hand. Instead of shooting the sights, as might be expected of a tourist, Blom creates monochromatic installations and shoots those instead. Only through the title of the work do we know where the image was shot.



The Black Hole Universe Chapter 2. Scene 005
São Paulo, 2009, C-print on Kodak Endura metallic
gloss paper, 87 x 60 cm, Edition of 3 + 1AP
Zander Blom

The Black Hole Universe. Chapter 1. Scene 012
Berlin, 2010, C-print on Kodak Endura metallic
gloss paper, 87 x 60 cm, Edition of 3 + 1AP
Zander Blom

Matty Roodt's (1989) large installation *Twilight* (2011) also touches on travel photography, albeit with a distinctly different intention from Blom's. Roodt translates a clichéd holiday snap of a sunset into small, uniformly sized painted blocks. The viewer is left with little choice but to consider the technical construction of a photograph and how it is made up of small pieces of information (pixels) all working together to form a coherent image. The scale of the work encourages a sense of immersion, but this sensation is broken when the viewer comes closer and encounters the work's fractured nature.

All too often, this type of souvenir snapshot ends up on a pile or in a dusty box at the back of the wardrobe, amongst all the other photographs of holidays passed and forgotten. By manually pixelating this archetypal image, Roodt catalogues the colours of an imagined sunset and, in a way, personalises it. Through the act of deconstruction her installation examines photography's connection to memory. Roland Barthes speaks of this photographic trait in his seminal book, *Camera Lucida*: "Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be perfect tense whereas the tense of the Photograph is aorist), but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter memory."⁵ To reiterate, a photograph is incapable of genuinely remembering, and on the other hand it is perfectly capable of replacing a memory.

In a similar manner to Roodt, Karin Preller (b.1962) draws on photographic visual cues to broadly investigate the nature of photographic representation. Her paintings employ blurred imagery, tightly cropped compositions and a uniform application of paint (completely devoid of brush-strokes much like an airbrush). When Barthes stated, "A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent," he was speaking of the difficulty in separating the physical photograph from what it is representing.⁶ By highlighting the more formal qualities of photography, Preller encourages a slower, subsidiary action of reflection. Like many artists before her she is examining the 'truth' element of photography. Similar to Roodt's work, Preller unpacks the notion that photographs can act as a memory replacement, as a type of *reality divider*.

5 Barthes 1981, 5

6 Ibid.

Through the act of painting a photograph, Preller creates a play between the two mediums' temporality: photography promotes rapid seeing while a painting slows it down. As Szarkowski puts it: 'Paintings are *made* – constructed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes- but photographs, as the man on the street put it, were taken.'⁷ Preller is attempting to counter the instantaneous nature of photography, by using the length of time it takes to make a painting and in doing this she revokes photography's rapid capturing of an moment passed and the instant recognition of the world it depicts.

There is an overt sense of being party to something intensely private in **Sanell Aggenbach's** (b.1975) amorous paintings. This feeling is primarily due to their sexually explicit nature, but even the more gentle images of couples dancing or locked in an embrace, have the capacity for unease due to their voyeuristic nature. *Lets* (2012), *Magnolia* (2012) and *Nachtmusik no.3* (2012) form a part of the body of work '*Nachtmusik*' that sources photography as a medium for recounting half-truths through referencing tampered photographic film and intimate portraiture. Instead of focusing on the accurate form of photography (as mimetic representation), Aggenbach contemplates painting as an inaccurate and misleading record of reality; these paintings are images of images wherein distortion becomes an essential part of the process. The strictly muted palette (a reference to night vision optics) and the distance of painter to the subject creates a sense that a snapshot has been taken from a distance, without the subjects' consent. There's also an implication of a 'before and after' of activity alluding to photographic practice; isolating and capturing one moment amongst many is, at its heart, a camera's vocation.

Bloom (2011) is painted in filmic negative, a direct reference to photography and film, while the lovers in *Magnolia* look as if they've been over-exposed by a camera flash or shot with night vision. In each case the photographic idiosyncrasies work toward obscuring facial and other details of the subjects creating a palpable tension with the personal nature of the scenes depicted. The intentional loss of detail works towards



A Brief History of the Spirit World
2012, Oil on Linen, 200 x 200 cm
Matthew Hindley

One Pearl of Great Price
2012, Oil on Linen, 280 x 200 cm
Matthew Hindley

a distinct awareness of secondary translation, first translation performed by photographing, and second being the act of painting. Although there is the photographic sense of a 'That-has-been, it also feels like a somewhat murky, distant memory.'⁸

While Aggenbach paints intimate moments glimpsed, **Matthew Hindley** (b.1974) stages his moments to photograph and then paint. Approaching his paintings much like a film director would approach making a movie, locations are scouted, models and props hired, the scene is set and photographed. From the hundreds of photographs taken, Hindley selects a handful of the most compelling, which he then translates (very often) into large scale painted canvases that uncannily resemble impassioned film stills. The paintings' staged nature evinces Hindley's filmic influences while offering a glimpse into the fantastical subconscious of the artist's mind.

Hindley is like many other artists that orchestrate scenes and construct environments with the intention of photographing them (like Gregory Crewdson or Thomas Demand). These photographers aim at unpacking the fact and fiction debate now synonymous with photography and, albeit from a painter's perspective, this is precisely the terrain we see Hindley delving into. His extensive process works towards owning the image; these are his creations from start to finish, he controls the referent, in fact, he constructed it (so seldom does one get a sense that photographers *own* their final image, it's the image that seems to own *itself*). Although characteristically photographic, through the delayed and internal act of converting the chosen photograph into a painting, Hindley absolves himself from the immediacy of the photographic index and by doing so inhabits a space in between the two mediums.

Like much of Hindley's previous work, *Invisible Beings in Everyday Life* (2012) is a dramatically lit tableau vivant hinting at a narrative beyond. Unlike Aggenbach's paintings that present voyeuristic instances (where proceedings continue unfettered before and after the image is taken), Hindley suggests that all action has led to this paramount moment. The sense of fragmented temporality is frequently thought of as a photographic characteristic. How often do photographers wait for the perfect moment to shoot? Before and after are



Early Autumn
2012, Oil on Linen, 50 x 60 cm
Alex Emsley

left discarded and relegated to the status of mere buffer for the optimum moment.⁹ Hindley constructs these scenes to edge towards an ambiguous and moody tenor and in doing so, provokes the viewer's curiosity and penchant for the dramatic.

Stemming from the tradition of photorealism, **Alex Emsley's** (b.1973) still-life paintings, like much of the work of Hindley, Preller and Aggenbach, relies heavily on photographic source material. Only a high-resolution photograph can offer the depth of information that could aid Emsley in creating such extreme hyper-realistic representations. Susan Sontag speaks of this photographic realism in her well-known book, *On Photography*. She states, 'Photography is the reality: the real object is often experienced as a let down.'¹⁰ Although certainly a painting, *All sorts* (2012) comfortably wears the mask of a photograph. Emsley's paintings excel in such clarity and perfection of colour that they are more real than real. With sweets and flowers so very honeyed and alluring, the viewer is immediately struck by the impossibility of the still life's existence.

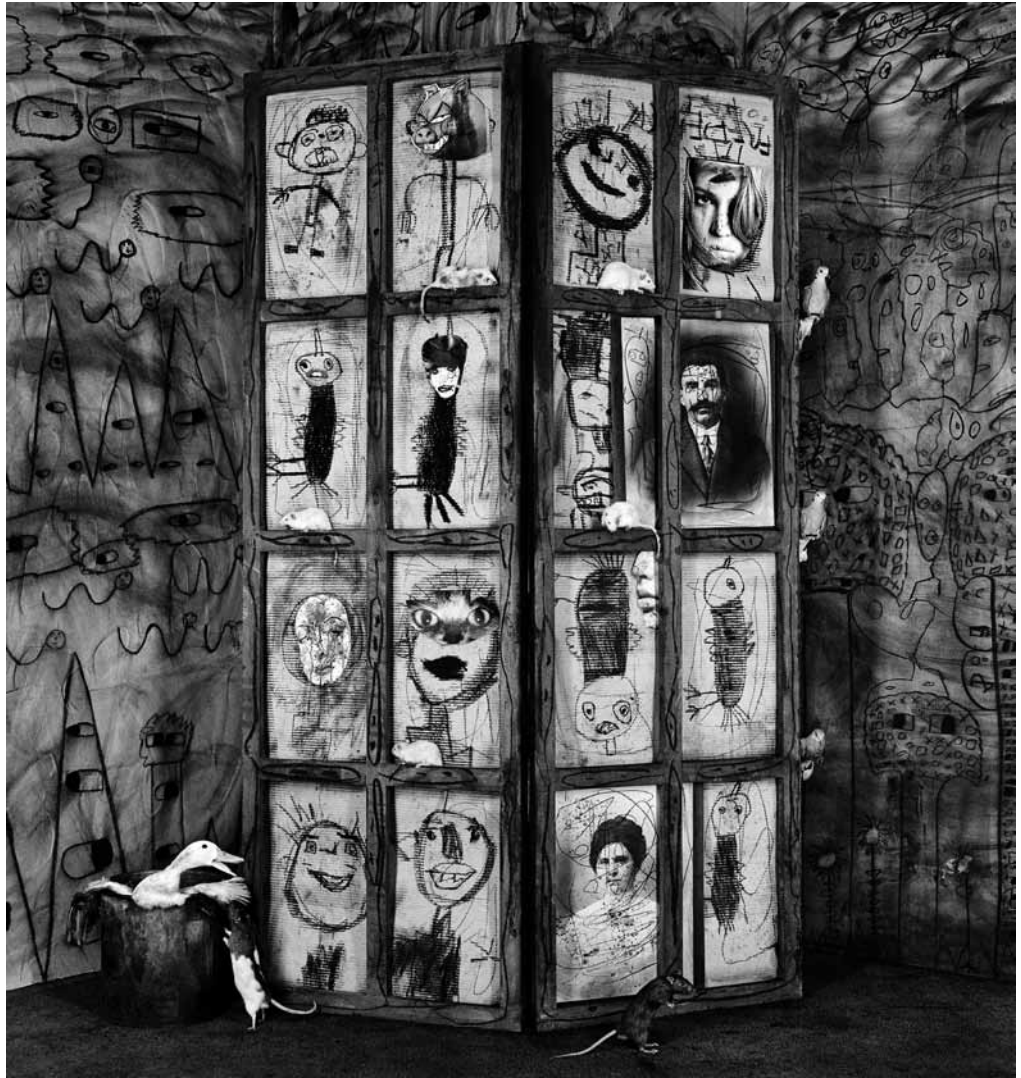
Whereas Emsley's paintings could, from a distance, easily be mistaken for photographs, **Andrew Putter's** (b.1965) photographs could certainly be mistaken for paintings. *Bessie* (2009) and *Guillaume Chenude Chalezac* (2009) were selected for display from Putter's astonishing body of work, 'African Hospitality'. The staged photographs borrow heavily from 18th-century English painting in Putter's choice of composition, pose and lighting. 'African Hospitality' tells the intriguing and true story of Europeans who were shipwrecked on the Wild Coast from the 1600s to the 1700s. Some of these survivors formed close relationships with the local Pondo communities, often achieving full integration: 'Bessie' ended up marrying a chief and becoming an African queen while 'Guillaume Chenude Chalezac' found his place in a chief's combatant entourage. Borrowing artifacts from museum collections, all adornments and weaponry were in fact genuine in Putter's otherwise fictional account of how these historical characters could have appeared. By presenting these subjects through traditional modes of portraiture, colonialist adorned as colonial subject, Putter challenges the assumption of 'culture-types.' The poststructuralist notion of floating identity is at play here, that identity is not set in

9 Cartier-Bresson made the phrase 'a decisive moment' famous; when composition and subject matter join together in a visual climax.

10 Sontag 1977, 147



Lets
2012, Oil on Canvas, 28 x 21 cm
Sanell Aggenbach



Onlookers
2010, Archival pigment prints, 90 x 90 cm, Edition of 20
Roger Ballen

stone but rather is situational and can certainly be antithetical.

Chad Rossouw (b.1982) employs photo manipulation to challenge the assertion of photography as historical evidence. *The Cleansing* (2011) presents a group of South African politicians that, from one image to the next, are removed until there is only one politician left. Inspired by Soviet censorship in the 1950s and 1960s this work speaks further of photography's status as a historical instrument and how it stands, often shakily, as documentary evidence. The photograph's testimonial standing is usually guaranteed by the dominant order of state (those who stand behind the image and back it as truth or evidence). The process of deleting subjects out of images is a painterly one, an activity that evinces a level of control not (generally) assumed by the photographer.

Similarly in *Death Star* (2009), Rossouw evinces a level of control over the generative aspects of the photograph. Here he simulates a late 19th century spirit photograph, a type of photography that concerned itself with capturing images of ghosts and other spiritual beings.¹¹ *Death Star* is done in the style of a Cabinet photography: a photograph mounted on a piece of card that is embossed with the photographer's name and other information. Similar to his postcard series, *The De La Rey*, Rossouw adds credibility to the image by forging small details; in the case of *Death Star* it's the studio's information at the bottom of the card. There is a definite parody at play in this image; there is no ghost but rather Darth Vader looming in the corner of the room. Rossouw's playful look at the authenticity of photographic representation references a long history of misleading the public with photographic imagery.

The joint photographic contingent of 'SeeingEye' challenges the photograph's indexicality by attempting to control and construct the referent. Ballen, Blom and Putter achieve this through composing scenes that either mimic painting styles or employ painting within the image, while Rossouw contests the photograph's authenticity by reconstructing images already made. On the painting side Preller and Aggenbach are inspired by visual photographic traits and so too is Roodt, who builds fragmented pixel paintings. Hindley on the other hand draws his influence from film stills. Artworks included have in some

11 This process was first discovered by William H. Mumler in the 1860s. Recognising a market for it, Mumler started taking people's pictures and doctoring the negatives to add lost loved ones into them. His fraud was discovered after he put identifiable living Boston residents in the photos as spirits.

instances been isolated from their intended conceptual pool. Further to this they represent a small section of those paintings and photographs that impact one another; they are intended to offer enough of a parallel to inspire dialogue and to make the invisible visible.

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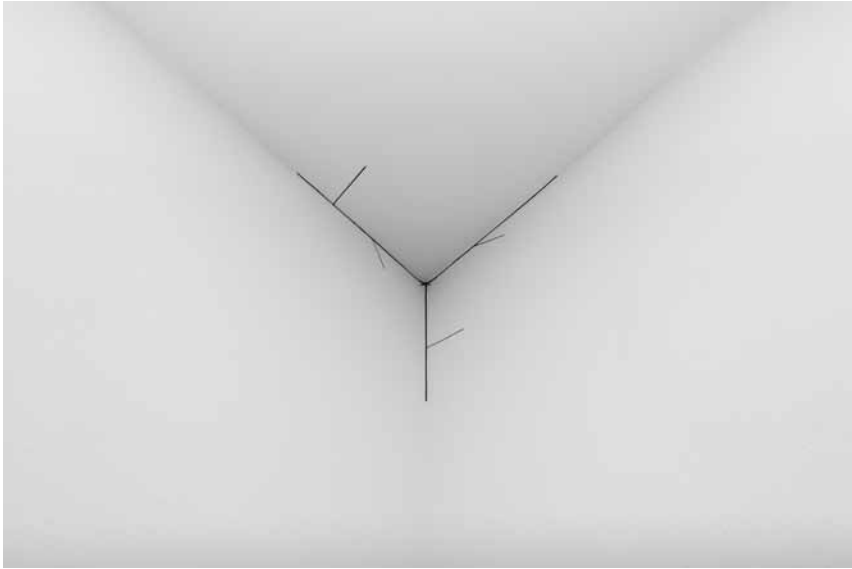
Sontag, S., 1977. *On Photography*. London: Penguin

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A Selection of Works from SeeingEye



Invisible Beings in Everyday Life
2012, Oil on Linen, 280 x 200 cm
Matthew Hindley



The Black Hole Universe. Chapter 2. Scene 041
Berlin, 2010, C-print on Kodak Endura metallic gloss paper
87 x 60 cm, Edition of 3 + 1AP
Zander Blom



Magnolia
2012, Oil on canvas, 69 x 50 cm
Sanell Aggenbach



Nachtmusik no.3
2012, Oil on canvas, 62 x 45 cm
Sanell Aggenbach



All sorts (In progress)
2012, Oil on Linen, 80 x 80 cm
Alex Emsley



Transformation
2004, Archival pigment prints, 60 x 60 cm, Edition of 20
Roger Ballen



Twilight,
2011, Acrylic and wood, Dimensions variable
Matty Roodt

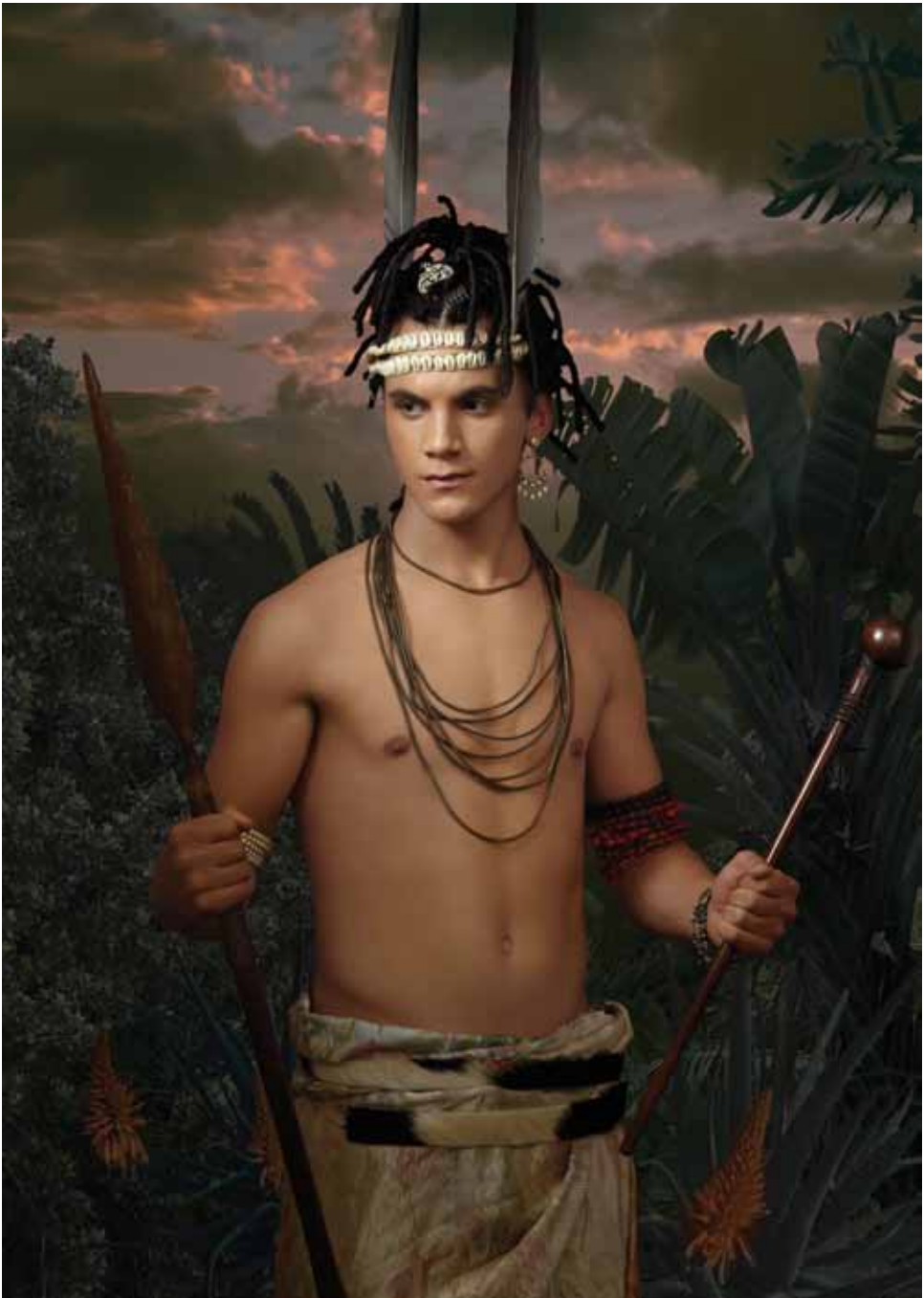




Death Star
2009, Albumen print on backing
card 12,5 x 19 cm, Edition 2/3
Chad Rossouw

(Opposite, Details) The Cleansing
2011, Inkjet prints on various media,
Installation size variable
Chad Rossouw





Guillaume Chenude Chalezac (*From the series African Hospitality*)
2009, Archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper, 52.6 x 74 cm, Edition of 8 + 2AP
Andrew Putter



Bessie (From the series African Hospitality)

2009, Archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper, 52.6 x 74 cm, Edition of 8 + 2AP
Andrew Putter



Maraisburg, 1960s
2012, Oil on canvas, 135 x 115 cm
Karin Preller

Interviews conducted by
Tim Leibbrandt on the
18th and 23rd of May 2012

Interview #1

In conversation with **Chad Rossouw**

Tim Leibbrandt *In the past you've worked with materials such as lightjet prints, producing works easily classifiable as "photography". In contrast, your newer works (the works in this exhibition being an example) often take on a constructed external form (postcards, newspaper photographs, book covers etc). Can you talk a little about the motivation behind this?*

Chad Rossouw Photography lends itself to being constructed. Well, at least it doesn't lend itself which is what it makes it so interesting. We talk about taking, not making photographs. There's a tension between the photograph as an image and the photograph as a window onto reality. It's so much fun to play with that. So it's about exploring that idea through deliberately constructing photographs; making photographs.

In that sense, you mentioned that I'm making newspapers and book covers and postcards. Those are all forms where photographs take on a stronger connotation of the real, because they are actual objects as well. And they are transparent objects, because we don't think of them as bearers of images but as witnesses to truth. Add in the fact that these objects are (artificially) aged and you get a triple sense of authenticity. Once you have this layered sense of deep authenticity, you can unsettle it by the merest splinter of uncertainty.

TL *It's been suggested that, if you look at Richter's photo paintings for instance, there's the idea that they reveal something about photography that photography can't reveal about itself. So if you see blurring or pixilation reproduced or mimicked within a painting for instance, it tells you something about the photographic process that you can't get solely from looking at a photograph. It's something that draws attention to that.*

CR Absolutely, it becomes a marker. Because photographs are so *ubiquitous*, you don't see their flaws and their errors very easily. You look through them really. I was teaching a class the other day and I had to teach them to see JPEG artefacts because my students just look through them; they don't see the flaws within photographic imagery. They look through them to the image. When you change the medium, those things become more apparent.

But that's not the only way of making things visible either. You can make those things visible within the medium.

TL *Could you suggest an example in that regard?*

CR Charles Maggs often works with artefacts that are part of the medium. In the work, *Guard #1* (2008), he purposefully uses a half-tone pattern over the image; to make the "medium-ness" of it apparent.

TL *Perhaps another example would be Stuart Bird's Calling (2011), a video piece that was filmed on a cellphone camera; playing on that "revolutionary language" where documentary footage is captured on low resolution cellphone cameras and instantaneously uploaded to the internet.*

CR I saw a really nice work recently in fact, very painterly. It was by Monique Pelsler called *Bystanders* (2008). She had photographed archive newspapers with just a shitty Nokia cellphone. She did these intense close-ups of people's faces from old newspapers, people in the background of historical moments. She uses the cellphone camera frame to separate them, but because of the incredible blur of going through two technologies, the half-tone pattern and then that being translated into bad JPEG, there's something really interesting that happened. They become quite inaccessible.

TL *Did the works take on an abstract quality?*

CR Well it's still very photographic so in that sense it's not abstract. The works are still recognisably photographic, so the tones and those kinds of

things are instantly recognisable as a photograph. But there's something very interesting in the translation, it almost takes on a creepy quality really, because it's so close up and bordering on abstraction.

It's one medium being changed into another, even though both the mediums are photographic, they are very different. It felt like there was a desperate scrabbling at the surface. There's a great quote by Marianne Hirsch that goes (and I paraphrase) "You can keep on enlarging a photograph to try and get beneath it or through it, to really understand it, but all that you ever get is less and less definition as you get closer". If you don't understand it you want to look closer, you want to get beneath the surface. But all that the photograph ever reveals is less the closer you get. There's only so much resolution and beyond that it becomes just surface.

TL *Despite what those cop shows will have you believe about zooming indefinitely.*

CR Exactly. There's that amazing scene in *Bladerunner*, where Deckard is unsettled by an image. So he zooms in and enhances a ridiculous amount, into a reflection, through a doorway into the deep background of the image, where he finds a mysterious clue. But obviously that doesn't really happen. The impulse is the same, though. Deckard has a desire to see more, to go beyond the image.

TL *Would you say that in a sense it's not enough for photographs to just be photographs anymore? That there needs to be this mediation or translation of the photographic image into something else?*

CR No, not at all. It's just my particular paranoid (if that's the right word) vision of the world: the truth is obscured by invisible forces. Photographs are still more than capable of standing on their own terms. Photography is not "dead" or anything terrifying like that. There is a lot that can be said about the world photographically, and there's a lot that can be said about the world that's not photographic but uses photography in some sense.

TL *Perhaps my question was too general. I think what I was nudging towards was that it seems that the idea of photography as an instantaneous or documentary process may have lost favour to a more laborious (dare we say "painterly") approach. Both in work such as yours (where the photograph is then translated into other means and altered) and in the work of artists like Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson (where preparation for the image can take up to a year).*

CR But only for the reception to be the same. Wall constructs the image so carefully in order for it not to look constructed. It's still got that instantaneous reaction of wanting to believe it, even though you know that you shouldn't. Or at least to a degree. I'm thinking of the works that encapsulate a specific moment as opposed to the more monumental ones like *Dead Troops Talk* (1992), where it's clearly constructed. But it's still playing on that thing that the image looks real, even when it is explicitly constructed. That's what makes *Dead Troops Talk* so utterly creepy and melancholic; it's its verisimilitude. The reaction isn't, "This could happen." It's "This is happening."

TL *That's the sort of thing that you play with in your work *The Cleansing*. Even though it's obvious that the images have been altered because you display the various stages next to each other, with progressively fewer and fewer people, there's still that unavoidable sense of "the truth lies here".*

CR The work is very clearly about photographic truth and it makes that point quite blatantly. It's both believable and clearly made up at the same time. And in fact both of my works [in *SeeingEye*] play with that. The other [*Death Stars*] in a bit more of a humorous way by using a vintage process and then inserting something that is completely anachronistic.

TL *From a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. That was one of your works that incorporated the visual vocabulary of spirit photography?*

CR If I wanted to choose the perfect time period to talk about photographic truth, then spirit photography is it. The spirit photographer

that I was referencing in that work, Mumler was actually put on trial for his photographs for committing fraud, because there was so much belief in photographic truth. Ironically he was put on trial by P.T. Barnum who was the infamous circusman of the time and (allegedly) invented the saying "There's a sucker born every minute". Mumler was found to be innocent in the end, but his reputation and career were absolutely ruined after that.

The other interesting thing about spirit photography is that this desire to see the past (or the ghosts of the past) made real seems to crop up after these moments of national trauma. The original spirit photography movement (Mumler and his colleagues) cropped up after the American civil war. So there was a huge swath of the population that were murdered and so there was this national longing for the past; which comes up in those desires for spirit photographs and even in the still life paintings of the time.

The paintings have this incredibly strong nostalgic feel. I'm thinking of John Peto and William Harnett who both produced these still lifes with a sense of longing for the past. It comes up in all of the art of that time. They're really interesting because they were designed as trompe-l'oeil paintings in order to have this faithful representation of reality, which obviously I find very interesting. But then they also were designed to be very nostalgic for the pre-war period, so they have this double meaning. It's a similar desire as that for spirit photographs.

TL *The printing of Death Star is attributed to the "James F. Gogh Photographic Studio". Is there any significance behind that?*

CR I can't remember: either I made it up or I copied the name from a contemporaneous South African photograph. Either way, I wanted to add the kind of detail that makes it believable. Even though it is a self-portrait I didn't want the viewer to imagine this twit with a DSLR and a self-timer. I wanted you to imagine some dusty man with a handle-bar moustache and a trilby, taking his craft seriously. A man you could trust to take your portrait.

TL *Can you talk a little about the ideas behind The Cleansing and the processes involved in making it?*

CR *The Cleansing* came about quite literally from Soviet censorship of photographs. Years ago, trawling through the Internet, I found a pair of photographs of Stalin walking down a canal with this young man, Nikolai Yezhov in a nasty military overcoat. They were walking “buddy-buddy”; he was the young rising star. Then there was another photograph with Yezhov completely airbrushed out. Just Stalin walking down the canal. They had really done it quite intricately; you can’t even tell that the person was there to the point where they’ve replaced ripples where his head was. Yezhov was executed by Beria in 1940. Later I discovered this amazing book by David King, which documents hundreds of similar incidences

So there was that and then also I read a small section of a book by Milan Kundera. He wrote a passage about a photograph of Vladimir Klementis and Clement Gottwald, the 40s communist ruler in Czechoslovakia. It was exceptionally cold, so this Klementis took off his fur hat and gave it to the president. Afterwards he was executed and systematically removed from the records. So Kundera points to the edited photograph and how all that remains of this man was his fur hat. It is an idea of a trace that is almost untraceable but it’s still there as a fragment. So I thought that was an interesting way of looking at the photograph, how the past still remains in them as traces no matter how they devolve.

TL *Can you tell us a bit more about the technical processes involved in order to “airbrush” someone from the record as in your two examples?*

CR They would take a negative and print a large positive from it and literally paint it. Using an airbrush (a clunky 40s version), paint or ink and masking fluid they would paint them out. Then they would re-photograph it and that would make the new negative.

TL *There seems to be quite a curious painting/photography intersection within that process.*

CR Even though my version is more Photoshop than airbrush, there is something decidedly painterly about it. Not physically in the action, but rather

in the painter's capacity for reworking a surface. They call it *pentimenti*, when an artist leaves visible traces of reworking. If you x-ray old paintings you can see the painter's shifts and changes underneath the surface. There is always something very sad about those x-rays, history reasserting itself. Even painters have their little fur hats. And something poetically visceral too, like a scar or a bloodstain. *Pentimenti* literally translates as repentance. In contemporary painting, when a painter deliberately leaves the traces of their mistakes, there is something incredibly vulnerable and intimate. I'm thinking here of Marlene Dumas.

TL *In some of your more recent works (and I'm thinking definitely of your series of postcards), you have oil paint listed as a material. Can you talk a bit about this encroachment of painting onto a photographic work?*

CR On the postcards the oil paint was used to make the cachets, the date stamps, because it has sufficient opacity. I was using ink and I got frustrated because it kept on being too liquidy so I used oil paint. It was accidental, my girlfriend Lauren [Palte] is a painter and I begged her for something opaque. But I liked the way that oil paint in the list of media introduced a hint of artifice. Ironically, I bought oil paints after this and had them lying around. I used them in the end to make my monumental sculpture *Cenotaph* believable. Lauren kept on telling me, you get more scope with oil than acrylic and I ended up finding that I got quite a bizarrely photographic effect on *Cenotaph*.

TL *Photographic effect?*

CR Perhaps faux rather, it became quite believable. The sculpture itself was carved, but I painted it with a sort of faux-stone effect. There's something embarrassingly 70s about it really. Rag rolling your walls or something. Then I scumbled the surface as if light was falling on it.

TL *It becomes interesting then that you're using paint in order to make all of these other things seem more believable or "real".*

CR It seems a little counter-intuitive, but paint has this amazing capacity for mimicking surface. I have started a love affair with Burnt Sienna, which is like liquid rust. You can make anything seem authentically old with it. I'm actually spending most of my time painting at the moment. Though, the painterly real and the photographically real are vastly different. Painting always retains a sense of illusion, while photography has something else. Transparency, maybe.

Interview #2

In conversation with Karin Preller

Tim Leibbrandt *You've been working with your signature method of reproducing photographic imagery in paint since around 2001, what motivated you to start producing work in this manner?*

Karin Preller The first exhibition in which I used photographs (in the form of snapshots) as source material was 'Family Album' in 2001. The banality of the snapshot interested me, and this inevitably involved consideration of memory and loss. But it was working with something that is so familiar that it becomes overlooked that was my initially focus.

TL *The photographs for 'Family Album', were taken from the 1940s through to the 1960s, meaning that they would have been taken by your parents, grandparents, their family and friends etc. As such it is interesting that you refer to them in terms of memory and loss as they obviously predate your birth. Do you feel that through your painting process, there is a connection made between you and these snapshots?*

KP The images which made up 'Family Album' appear random, but of course the process involved looking and relooking at the photographs, and in the end images were selected for the way in which they resonated with me personally, whether because of the people or places depicted or because of some detail that triggered memories, perhaps not known or experienced by me personally but as part of the family history or archive; stories told and retold.

Notwithstanding the personal, the fragility of memory as such, embedded in the very small, faded photographs, was a primary concern. Barthes's *Camera Lucida* was an important starting point for working with photographs. His account of the unnameable in some photographs, that sense of shock that alters the sense of the image, influenced the way in which I looked at these photographs. The absence and loss implied in a photograph were at the heart of my initial process - and I was interested in how the process of painting could be used as a vehicle to inscribe these memories into the medium of paint. The photograph as fragment, as only one part of a narrative, as staging the family 'romance' instead of any kind of 'reality', is central to the paintings.

TL *You mentioned Camera Lucida and particularly the personal; which Barthes refers to as the "punctum". Barthes's other primary concept in that book is the "studium", the traits that arouse a general initial interest in the image and allow a more objective recognition of the content of the work. Would you say that there is a double layering of this in your work, whereby the images are recognised first as photographs and then as paintings of photographs?*

KP Yes, I think that the translation of these photographs into paint - the 'labour' of painting as signifier in itself - results in that shock of recognition that ultimately makes visible, in paint, the inadequacy of the photograph as an objective representation of the 'real'.

My intention was never to mimetically outdo the photograph in the tradition of photorealism but rather to investigate a particular type of photography-based painting which results in a blurring of boundaries between photography and painting. And this plays out on the surface of the canvas. The viewer,

upon looking at the work from a distance, might initially perceive the paintings as enlarged photographs. But, unlike photorealism, the artist's mark is not totally negated. The surface is at once 'photographic' and painterly, the artist's presence both asserted and denied. The technical shortcomings of the 'failed' snapshot are deliberately enhanced: the simplification and intensification of shadow and light; the blur; the inadvertent cropping. But while these are specific to photography, the brushmarks that are visible on closer inspection draw attention to the artist's hand and the medium of paint. It forces the viewer to initially project onto the painted surface and not on the subject depicted.

TL *Photorealism is after all a fundamentally Sisyphean gesture and definitely not something I read into your work. Once one's perception shifts to reading your works as paintings rather than photographic enlargements, they are undoubtedly very painterly in their aesthetic.*

KP Yes, regardless of the subject matter, the focus is on the mediated nature of both the photograph and the painting as constructs or conventions, and it is the ambiguous surface that registers this effect of immediacy and of mediation. There is a double layering in that the affective quality of the paintings depend on the ambiguity of the surface itself. It is at once recognisable and strange. The very familiar becomes unfamiliar, estranged - and it points to the shortcomings of both painting and photography as a means to access the 'real'.

TL *You have mentioned in some of your previous writing that the painterly reproduction of faults in the source images allows them to be scrutinised in a way that the photographs themselves can't be. For example, the blurred edges and white border on your painting *Chris, Montgomery Park, 1960s* (2000) causes it to be read as a Polaroid; which (a bit like a daguerreotype) existed as a single image without a negative. If one wanted to reproduce it then it would require re-photographing it. Would a re-photographed and enlarged Polaroid play into a similar space of drawing attention to the shortcomings of the medium or would it be read entirely differently.*

KP The intersection between photography and painting is important in my work and I was influenced by the work of artists like Gerhard Richter (most obviously). The exaggerated blur that Richter uses to almost obliterate the photographic image makes visible the elusiveness of any kind of reality. It makes visible the constructed nature of representation as such.

And in the translation of the idiom of photography into painting, one can ironically 'see' more clearly the shortcomings of photography, and, ultimately, of painting. It becomes a comment on the 'screen' that exists between us and the world. Painting enhances the snapshot - it gives it a certain 'presence', but it also makes visible the fragility of photography's claim to represent the real, as well as the absences that are so much part of the photograph (in that it is a fragment of a narrative). For me, part of the affective quality of a photograph is that which is not shown - that which falls outside the frame. And this is enhanced when a snapshot is translated into paint.

I do not think that enlarging a polaroid would be read in the same way since it would be merely a technical restaging of the photograph, lacking the unsettling ambiguity and tension set up by the ambiguous surface.

TL *This notion of labour is an interesting one, particularly with regards to the painting/photography discussion. It is a notion intrinsically linked to the time taken to produce a work and often the physical labour of the artist's hand.*

KP Of relevance here is that advances in image technologies have led to images becoming mediators, filters through which we see and experience the world. Painting, historically, is a medium that is more obviously mediated. By painting a photograph, 'reality' is in a sense twice removed. The poignancy of the photograph is enhanced by its translation into paint, as if time is inscribed into the surface of painting. Painstakingly enlarging and further simplifying the snapshot points to the elusiveness of memory and of trying to capture a moment in time. It is a physical interaction with medium, a denial of the instantaneous capturing of an image that perhaps alters the sense of the image. The viewer is confronted with an ambiguous surface, resulting in the snapshot rendered inexplicably strange.

TL *Our friend Barthes referred to photography as “flat death” drawing attention to the fact that the photograph is fundamentally a dislocated fragment frozen in time. Yet many of your works (for example the works in your ‘Aperture’ exhibition) take on a very animated quality. It seems to restore the “before” and “after” moment that falls (as you say) outside of the frame.*

KP The ‘Aperture’ exhibition was perhaps more of a comment on how we see the world through the lens. The focus was on the importance of capturing and controlling what we see, on documenting our very existence by means of photographic evidence that this moment in time existed, that we were there. The photographs are similar to thousands of others but the impulse is always to capture the same scene again and again. But I still think it is a reminder of the fragility of the moment, of absence and loss. Perhaps because it alludes to our attempt to document and store lived moments - always to be disappointed when we look at the photographs, to see how far removed they are from that remembered moment. Every photograph is in a sense an attempt to restore the before and after - to capture the whole narrative, but it must ultimately fail. What is interesting is that viewers will fill in the gaps based on their own perspectives so that the before and after is in a sense restored, only to slip away as soon as this happens.

TL *Speaking of time, your ‘City and Suburban’ exhibition is very interesting in this regard. Viewed as a series they bestow perhaps a more narrative sense of time than your other works; there is a sense of linear progression. It’s quite different to the idea of a “snapshot”. Can you talk a bit about those works?*

KP The intention was not so much to depict or portray any kind of narrative, but to perhaps again enhance the futility of trying to capture a narrative, even by means of frames in sequence. Pausing the fleeting moments and translating them into paint resulted in the narrative, instead of becoming clearer, becoming perhaps more enigmatic. I was drawn to the strangeness of the scenes, the possible reasons why they were filmed in the first place – and this was strangely enhanced by the repetition in paint. Some of the images are

differentiated merely by different gestures, opening up different possibilities for interpretation. Perhaps it is the absolute insignificance of those few seconds, captured on film, that highlight the fleeting nature of lived moments, paused and rewound, enhanced by means of painstakingly reproducing each separate moment in paint.

TL *There seems to be a middleground here defined by a sense of futility in terms of going to great effort to produce something that initially seems like it was created in an instant. It's quite a mutualistic space between painting and photography and allows for both your process as a painter producing photography-influenced paintings and, conversely, someone like Jeff Wall, who is sometimes cited as being an artist who produces painterly photographs.*

KP This is where I think that medium specificity comes into play, or again comes into play. It is trite knowledge that boundaries between media have become blurred, but the very history of each medium (loaded as it is in the case of painting) when used as a signifier in itself, becomes part of the content of a work. The interaction between photography and painting in the work of artists such as Richter or Wall sets up a dialogue between the two media that is crucial. The translation of one into the other, or the citing of one medium in another, has the effect of the one redefining the other. Painting a photograph indicates the inadequacies of photography, for example. In Wall's work the art historical references, the careful and laboured staging of his photographs, the meticulous attention to detail - the making of a painting by means of photography - mean that painting's fraught history is part of the content of the work.

This is a subject that I intend to research further, especially in Wall's work. But in a society in which images play such a central role, the citing of one medium in or by means of another is part of an ongoing reconfiguration or rethinking of different media - of different 'orders of the image', different ways of seeing - ultimately part of a critique and questioning of representation as such.

Interview conducted via email on 23 May 2012.



Sanell Aggenbach (b.1975)
Lives and works in Cape Town.



Karin Preller (b.1962)
Lives and works in Johannesburg.



Roger Ballen (b.1950)
Lives and works in Johannesburg.



Andrew Putter (b.1965)
Lives and works in Cape Town.



Zander Blom (b. 1982)
Lives and works in Johannesburg.



Matty Roodt (1989)
Lives and works in Cape Town.



Alex Emsley (b.1973)
Lives and works in Cape Town.



Chad Rossouw (b.1982)
Lives and works in Cape Town.



Matthew Hindley (b.1974)
Lives and works in Cape Town.

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