

In Dramatic Portraits and Genre Scenes, Erwin Olaf Complicates Conventions

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Keyhole 3, 2011

In his recent works, Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf alludes to classic Americana, such as paintings by Norman Rockwell, at once materializing and undermining their conventions and mood. His critical eye creates a portrait of a person, but also a culture through several eras.

Now at Hasted Kreutler, a solo exhibition of his recent work presents a mixture of portraiture and genre scenes. The exhibition coincides with the publication of *Volume II* (published by Aperture), the second in a series of monographs detailing the artist's work and life. Olaf began his career studying and practicing journalism; his love of storytelling comes through in his photographs. As his works suggest, he has a particular affinity for the history of narrative painting, including the light of Caravaggio and the hallucinatory storytelling of the Surrealists.

Much of Olaf's work refers to earlier artists and their work. The photographs in the exhibition make reference to styles

and imagery from much of the 20th century. *The Boxing School* (2005), with its rich browns and warm whites, features two sparring opponents in a gym, facing the viewer while their backs are turned to one another. The tones and the opposing fighters resemble the pugilistic paintings of George Bellows. Similarly, Olaf's *The Dancing School* (2004), draws parallels with the don of American genre paintings: Norman Rockwell. However, the typically jovial tone of Rockwell's work is here subverted by a critical consideration of depictions of race and gender relations.

Of his interest in identity, Olaf explains, "I'm obsessed with masks: with taking away identity or with revealing the mask." As a fashion photographer, much of his work has dealt with clothing and gesture as sources of masking and self-presentation. *Portrait 5* (2005) and *Keyhole 3* (2011) both present young girls in dresses, each finely tuned in their mannerisms and clothing, both shot from about the same distance in similar light. In the former, the model appears innocent but seductive, the doorway behind her inviting the viewer to look into the picture. In the latter, the girl's coarse-cloth dress, turned back, clenched hands, and the wall before her block the viewer's gaze and keep spectators at bay.

Panoramic scenes, such as *Caroline* (2007), create more complicated but no less iconic tableaux: a '70s-era woman conflicted by domesticity. Here, his protagonist sits pensively near the edge of her seat, another settee before her empty, the room bright and dense with apprehension. The drama of Olaf's pictures is largely expressed through the careful deployment of details such as the furniture, clothing, and his protagonists' styles. Such precise imagery can conjure whole worlds and eras.

"Waiting: Selections from Erwin Olaf: Volume I & II" is on view at Hasted Kraeutler, New York, Jan. 8–Feb. 28, 2015.