

ERWIN OLAF: RECENT WORK

The avant-garde fashion photographer talks about the genesis of his haunting investigation into human loneliness

Text by John-Paul Pryor | Published 17 May 2010

The fashion photography of Erwin Olaf has always displayed a taste for the mysterious, unsettling and surreal. Whether he is mutilating aristocratic beauty in his Royal Blood series, creating scenes of sexual tension in iconic works such as Schoolgirl or shooting androgynous models puking up clutches of pearls, he never fails to challenge notions of beauty and evoke a universe of moody, air-brushed perfection that is one-part Edward Hopper and two-parts David Lynch. In the exhibition Recent Work, currently being exhibited at London's Hamiltons Gallery, Olaf explores existential angst and isolation against the backdrop of dimly-lit and slightly sinister 1950s hotel rooms in his Hotel series, and investigates race and fashion in Dusk and Dawn. Dazed stepped into the half-light to find out more...



Erwin Olaf, Hotel Kyoto - Room 211, courtesy of Hamiltons Gallery

Dazed Digital: You certainly seem to be reaching for the cinematic in the Hotel series. What led you in that direction with your work? Did you feel disillusioned with mainstream fashion photography?

Erwin Olaf: It's not so much a question of me being disillusioned with mainstream fashion photography, I enjoy and love good avant-garde fashion photography. It is more about the influence that cinema has had on me, and still has. I am very much influenced by 70s movies by the likes of Pasolini, Visconti, Fellini. I love their slow, precise look at human emotion, and I aim to translate that into my photography, and combine it with the aesthetics of the 50s and 60s. Those decades are very interesting periods in design, fashion, hair and make-up... It's not really the nostalgia of that time that catches me, but more the aesthetic.

Dazed Digital: Is the Hotel series an expression of loneliness?

Erwin Olaf: The Hotel series is about alienation and the subtle range of dark emotions that they can give a person. The hotel rooms that I sleep in when I am travelling are all different but the feeling that they give is the same, there is a certain disengagement that takes place.

Dazed Digital: What does the term beauty mean to you?

Erwin Olaf: Beauty is a term that is always in development, it's not a fixed thing and is very much subjective, so to me it's a perception. In my own life, I seek beauty in nature, for instance the noise of sparrows in the morning, fresh flowers or beautiful design.

Dazed Digital: Can you talk to us about your process?

Erwin Olaf: It differs from project to project, but usually I have a certain feeling or emotion that I want to explore. For instance, with the Grief series I wanted to explore the geography of sadness, so I tried to find out what the range of sadness is. Most of the time, I get ideas when I am lying on the couch, and am just relaxed enough to catch and remember the thought. You never know if the final image is perfect, but I am really happy with an idea when it fulfills the quest that I had in mind.

Dazed Digital: What did you want to communicate about the African-American experience in the Dusk series?

Erwin Olaf: I was intrigued by the fact that there are few African Americans featured very in fine art. Recently, I had a show in North Carolina, and the people of an African-American background had a very strong positive reaction to the works that had black people in them. After being back in Amsterdam, I came across The Hamptons photo albums, and somehow the idea came together.

Dazed Digital: Would you agree that there is a tendency in fashion photography to create an almost aryan vision of the human animal?

Erwin Olaf: In my eyes, the tendency in fashion photography to create an aryan vision of the human animal, as you say, comes from the fact that most fashion photography is created in countries with a mostly white population, or where the lighter population has a strong economic power. In the end, magazines try to sell copies. This is not my opinion, but I think this is one of the things that drive what you call the aryan ideal in fashion photography.

Dazed Digital: What do you think of the argument that fashion creates unattainable images of beauty that perpetuate depression and body dysmorphia?

Erwin Olaf: Fashion does create unattainable images of beauty, and I think that that is the charm of fashion – it is all about desire, about wanting something that is just out of reach. I do think the industry has a responsibility to make people aware that they are served with illusions, but mostly I think it is a parent's responsibility to bring up their children, and make them aware of the fact that magazines are not reality.

RECENT WORK exhibits at Hamiltons Gallery until June 4