

ERWIN OLAF'S HYPERREAL BERLIN

A photographer's haunting new images capture the German capital in an ambiguous light

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Photographer Erwin Olaf's latest exhibition 'Berlin' at the Hamiltons Gallery London shows the recent Vermeer Prize-winner stepping into new territory with his work. Olaf is renowned for shooting on elaborately made sets spawned from his rich cultural influences. 'Berlin' is set and shot at six different historical locations throughout the German capital. These photographs boast the same decadence and cinematic drama that Olaf is famous for whilst haunting the viewer by hinting at the city's painful past with his images of porcelain-faced, leather-clad, Aryan children. In seeking ambiguity, the meaning behind many of these images is unknown, as he prefers 'Berlin' to suggest narratives itself rather than to impose them.

Dazed Digital: Why did you choose to do this particular project on Berlin?
Erwin Olaf: Berlin has so much history, horrible history. Now it is the most liberal continent in Europe. You have this underground youth movement, the gay world. I am captivated by the art and culture of Berlin, there is this gathering of free minds.

DD: Your previous work is mostly shot using built sets. Berlin was entirely shot on location using historically important settings. Why did you choose to do this?

Erwin Olaf: There are limitations of set building and Berlin has so much space. It's also down to the stories behind the locations that are integral to Berlin's past.

DD: Why did you choose these particular locations?

Erwin Olaf: The locations that I used all existed at the beginning of the 20th century and they each are important to Berlin's history. The Rathaus Schöneberg for example was where President Kennedy said those famous words, 'Ich bin ein Berliner.' The Berlin Olympic stadium was where Hitler refused to shake the hand of the great athlete Jesse Owens because he was black.

Another reason is the stairs. I have emphysema so climbing them is increasingly difficult. Berlin is also a confrontation of my own demons and that's why I have integrated stairs into a lot of the photographs. That's me photographed on the stairs of Berlin's Olympic stadium.

DD: You have used a lot of children in this project, why is that?

Erwin Olaf: I only tend to work with mature people but with this project I wasn't happy with the results. Whilst at the airport in Spain I watched children and their parents together. Children have so much control over their mothers and fathers and adults do listen to children. I started to think what if one day it was children that were in charge. It would be terrifying as they would not know how to handle power, on top of that they can be erratic and irrational. This is the same for adults but with children it's more extreme.

DD: Can you tell us about some of the meanings behind these images?

Erwin Olaf: Some of them touch on historical events associated with the buildings while others are completely abstract. The photo depicting the clown standing on a diving board at the Stadtbad Neukölln for example. I could never tell you what is in the letter he is holding or why he is presenting it to the boy sitting beside the pool. It was all instinct. I had been studying a lot of art from the 20th Century and I wanted to start a dialogue with the viewer. Photographs often don't do this as well as paintings. I want the viewer to come up with their own story and create his or her fantasy.

DD: Your trademark is large format colour prints. At this exhibition we understand that you will be presenting small, handmade carbon prints. Tell us about these and the process of making them.

Erwin Olaf: I started to think, is big better? I doubt that, so I looked into carbon printing. This technique is 150 years old and I was helped by one of the two people in the Netherlands that could do it. The process is incredibly delicate and difficult and it could take 24 hours before you end up with a print you are happy with.

Text by Kezia Parkins