

# ART PULSE

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## THE NEW SPIRIT OF COLLECTING

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ERWIN OLAF  
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# ERWIN OLAF

**“An artist should always try to reflect his personal feelings in his work.”**

Erwin Olaf (1959, Hilversum, The Netherlands) has lived and worked in Amsterdam since the beginning of the 1980s. Classical, contemporary, fantastic, baroque, caustic, ironic, transgressive... many adjectives could be applied to this prolific artist capable of generating great support as well as strong rejection due to the direct and explicit language of his photographs. Over the years, the work of Erwin Olaf has become increasingly complex and more and more introspective and in his scenography “what is said is as important as what is left unsaid.” With “Darts of Pleasure,” Domus Artium (DA2) in Salamanca (Spain) celebrates the greatest retrospective of his work to date, curated by Javier Panera, Artistic Director of DA2. It assembles nearly 200 works corresponding to different photographic series, video-installations, films and advertising material created between 1984 and 2009.

## A CONVERSATION WITH JAVIER PANERA



*Erwin Olaf, Self Portrait - 50 Years Old. I Wish, I Am, I Will Be, 2009. Courtesy Erwin Olaf Studio.*

Javier Panera - A couple of years ago, French art critic Jean-François Chèvrier wrote an essay entitled "Photography between the Fine Arts and the Mass Media" by which he referred to the different assimilation modes of the photographic medium by the art system. In my opinion, the title of that essay fits your work very well. Do you feel closer to the visual arts than to mass media, fashion, and advertising?

Erwin Olaf - For many years I felt very comfortable with advertising and editorial photography. I created numerous ads, posters for theater companies, portraits and stories for magazines. At the beginning of my career, from 1984 till 1990, I did a lot of free series, like squares, chessmen and blacks; thereafter, for about ten years that I tended to be more and more a photographer who only worked for advertising and magazines. I felt very comfortable with it.

However, around 1997, I started to feel the need to express my personal emotions more. And the more I grow older, the more I feel better when I can create my own work, completely free from the restrictive rules of a client. Although I never want to give up working for advertising, fashion or magazines (because working also in those fields keeps me independent from the art world too!), I feel closer nowadays to the visual arts.

J.P. - Your position regarding fashion and advertising is nevertheless paradoxical: you have developed important ads for top brands like Diesel, Levi's and Lavazza, but, at the same time, you conceived an ironical or even sarcastic photo series that is a critique of the fashion system like "Fashion Victims" (2000) or "Mature" (1999). Are you trying to defy the fashion system from "within" or is it just a game?

E.O. - I see the field of visual arts as one big playing field in which I like to play games and tease the viewer. Although I have a critical view of our society, it is only rarely that I make a strong political comment. I prefer the tool of tongue-in-cheek humor as my weapon.

J.P. - In 2005 you participated in the group show "Baroque and Neo-Baroque. The Hell of the Beautiful" at the DA2 in Salamanca. Do you consider yourself a neo-baroque artist? I am asking this because the other references that have become more and more clear in your work are historic painting's Mannerism and Baroque and painting from the nineteenth century, or even artists like Edward Hopper in your most recent series.

E.O. - No, I do not consider myself to be a neo-baroque artist. In my work, I love to explore and refer to all kinds of visual art, especially the art of painting from the deep and recent past. This is because I am inspired more by painting than by recent photography. When visiting in The Prado, the painting of Peter Paul Rubens (*Rape of Hippodamia*) gave me the idea for my series *Paradise* (2001), and the series *Rain and Hope* (2004/2005) are inspired by the paintings of Edward Hopper and Norman Rockwell.

## PAINTING, CINEMA, AND PHOTOSHOP

J.P. - Are you reverting to those pictorial references by way of allegories in order to apprehend the present or is it just a matter of style? Do you consider yourself a frustrated painter or do you consider -as Chèvrier does- that one can "paint" with photography?

E.O. - I do not consider myself a frustrated painter. Although I really admire the profession of painting, I do not have the patience for painting; photography is much more in keeping with my character. For many years I loved the real black-and-white photography,



Hope 5, 2005, From "Hope Portraits" series, Courtesy Erwin Olaf Studio and Galería Espacio Mínimo.

especially when I was working with the human body, because the translation of the skin color in all shades of grey, white and black really inspired me.

However, after the introduction of Photoshop, I started to work in color with passion, because now I was able to manage the colors like a painter. Since then, as a photographer, I look more and more at paintings to learn and get inspired.

J.P. - I have the impression that in your early series like "Chessmen" (1987-88) you were more focused on identity and telling stories, and in the most significant part of your work, you used prostheses and masks. From 2000 on, I perceive that your work has become more complex in terms of composition, and in series like "Paradise The Club" (2001) and "Separation" (2002), it has also become more narrative, even cinematic, leading to series like "Hope" (2005) or "Grief" (2007), which could be defined as a "one-photogram film." At the same time, video has assumed the protagonist role in your work. Has cinema become more important than painting as a reference?

E.O. - Strangely enough, the older I get, the more I get inspired by the movies I saw when I just started out in life, when I was about eighteen years old. The cinema of the sixties/seventies and early eighties can touch me deeply, due to the enormous amount detail, like Visconti's *Ludwig*, the politic message as in Passolini's *Salo*, the aesthetic eye for violence and sexuality as in *A Clockwork Orange* by Kubrick and the incredible acting, as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, of Burton and Taylor.

These movies and many others are all stored in my head. Once in a while, they pop into my mind and give me an idea for my photography.

J.P. - What has been the role of digital technology in the treatment of your images? In the works of the 90s, you were fascinated by the artistic possibilities that new technologies opened up; however, I see now that bit by bit you have gotten rid of unnecessary artifices and have achieved a more refined style.

E.O. -When Photoshop was introduced around 1992, at first I was absolutely not interested in using it. It took till about 1997, when I had to use it for a commercial assignment, for me to slowly get interested in its possibilities. This resulted in the series “Mature” (1998), in which I mostly used it to make the models look a bit more sexy and to take away some disturbing details.

Later my interest in the use of Photoshop “exploded,” which resulted in series like “Royal Blood” (2000) and “Paradise” (2001). I really wanted to celebrate the possibilities and existence of this fantastic invention. After this explosion, I started to use Photoshop more and more as a color tool, to manage the use of color and atmosphere as a painter would.

### SEXUALITY, AGRESSION, INTROSPECTION

J.P. -Black humor and irony have been distinctive traits in a significant part of your work, but in your most recent series like “Hope” (2005), “Grief” (2007) or “Dusk” (2009), I have the impression that your work has become more introspective and the sense of melancholy or the concept of “suspended time” –partly associated with death- has become an essential element in your photographs. Are your motivations of a more personal kind? Has Erwin Olaf turned into a more “serious” person?

E.O. -I think that an artist should always try to reflect his personal feelings in his work. I like to use my own projects to reflect some of



Erwin Olaf, *Sisi+1898*, 2000, From “Royal Blood” series, Courtesy Erwin Olaf Studio and Galería Espacio Mínimo.



*The Classroom*, 2005, From “Grief” series, Courtesy Erwin Olaf Studio and Galería Espacio Mínimo.



the emotions and feelings that are keeping me busy at the time I am making my photographic series.

When I was younger, I was struggling with my sexuality; this was reflected in series like squares and chessmen. Later in my life, I had quite an aggressive period which translated into series like "Royal Blood" and "Paradise."

The older I get, the more I start to realize that we are all born on our own and that we will all disappear alone; this may be reflected in series like "Separation," "Rain," "Hope" and "Grief." Of course I get more serious or melancholy the older I get; such is life. Although I still like to party sometimes or do things that God has forbidden, I increasingly like a more introspective life.

*J.P. -The other element that appears continuously in your work is power relationships. Can we do a political reading of series like "Hope" or "Grief" or are you talking much more about personal relationships?*

*E.O.*-When power relationships are reflected in my work, it is sometimes political and sometimes more personal. It is for me a very interesting theme to work with, and to be honest, I never know where the

personal element starts and where the political stops. And I like it to be not so clear; it makes the story more deep and interesting.

*J.P. -Your exhibition "Darts of Pleasure" in Salamanca covers 25 years of work in which we experience significant changes in your photographic work; however, at the same time there are still many characteristic elements. In what ways does the Erwin Olaf of 2009 resemble the Erwin Olaf of 1984, and in what ways has he changed?*

*E.O.* -For me, it is extremely difficult to look at myself as a person who has changed significantly. Of course I know that I grew older and that I am more mature nowadays, but I think this has to happen in one's life; otherwise, you become a caricature of yourself. I think I am still very restless and still like to discover a lot in photography, film and the field of art.

I also think I am less aggressive. I realize a bit more nowadays that one can shock many people with a simple picture; however, at the same time, I refuse to censor my own work.

Nowadays I am sometimes a bit more sentimental and sad for no reason, which is translated into some recent works.

I have achieved all my goals in life and I love to celebrate this. ■



*Erwin Olaf, Jerry H 75 from the "Mature" series, 1998, Courtesy Erwin Olaf Studio and Domus Artium, Salamanca*