

FANTASY WANTED: PHOTOGRAPHER ERWIN OLAF ON CRAFTSMANSHIP & VULNERABILITY



Portrait by Feriet Tunc

Male Olympic gymnasts, take note: if you lose during competition, invite Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf onto the floor and he will gladly be your shoulder to cry on.

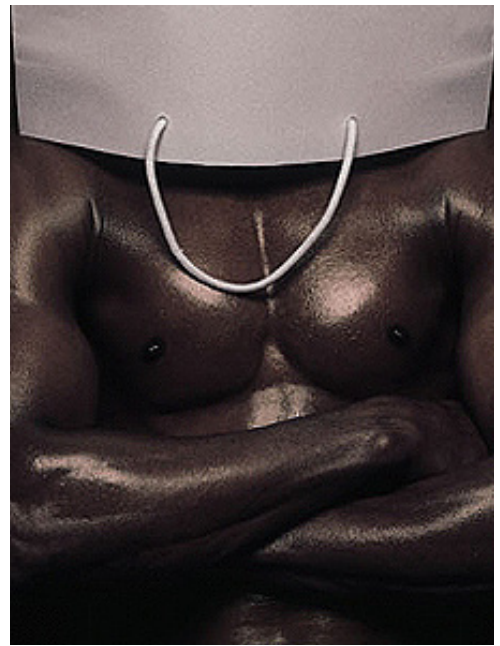
With a stunning degree of vulnerability rooted in principles of neo-classicism, fashion photography and the spirit of the Velvet Underground, Olaf has constructed a formidable artistic practice over the course of two decades. Kick-started with his Chessmen series in 1988 (for which he was awarded the young European Photographer Prize), Olaf's career has crossed the borders of studio photography, photojournalism and film leaving impressions of near-flawless models bearing the weight of the modern world in metaphor. Olaf's self-titled monograph was published by the Aperture Foundation in 2009, with his most recent book *own* released this year. Recent achievements include the 2008 Lucie award and a special portrait commission series with Louis Vuitton for the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Laden with Victorian melancholy, vibrating with luminescent internal energy, Olaf's work has graced the walls of the museum of modern art in Moscow, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Bilbao Art Centre and the Chelsea Art Museum in New York. Dirty goes behind the lens...

Dirty: What developments are you finding in your practice as time goes on?

Erwin Olaf: The biggest change in my photography has been the introduction of Photoshop and the digital camera. These are the biggest revolutions in the last, well, 20 years. Content-wise, I think when I make my personal portfolio, I also want to give a reflection of who I am and what I think at that moment in my life or my career. I've changed from a quite aggressive punk and nightlife influence into a more mature 52-years-old artist with his ups and downs common to age.

D: Speaking of age (in the 'Hotel' series and your 'Self-Portrait' series) there seems to be an emphasis on youth and the cult of youthfulness in your photography, true? Is this an ongoing fascination?

EO: Let's be honest, for a long time I've been obsessed by different human shapes. In the past, I've photographed a lot of nudity — this has a lot to do with analog photography, black and white was fantastic under the influence of Mapplethorpe and Joel-Peter Witkin — and I like to make studies of the body in all sizes, kilos, lengths and every kind because I'm interested in the phenomenon that the human body is so different. Later, after I explored this source over and over, I've been getting more interested in skin: the aging skin and the young skin and the beauty of



being young, the beauty of aging. When I was 19, I was already studying my wrinkles. I'm getting more and more relaxed with it, but it's also sad. I'm looking with a sad eye with a man who's getting older versus the beauty of youth.

D: Even if subtly referred to, there seems to be a reference to an aggressive, sexual nature like Mapplethorpe...

EO: Of course. Even though I'm gay, I'm looking at women where you're looking for a hidden sexuality. If you can talk about another deformation, my sexuality at the beginning of my career was out in the open. But you start to get interested in the layers that are going on in sexual communication—

D: Or dual personalities...

EO: Yes! Exactly. It's also sensuality. Even when somebody is sad or grieving, — like a crying person or a loser at the Olympics- nothing is better than somebody losing at the Olympics or in athletics — can be very sensual, very sexual.

D: Being so engaged in the larger photography field, there must be something you're getting tired of seeing?

EO: Oh yeah! Documentary photography [laughs] of the German school. The aggression I felt against it has been fading the last few years and I've learned from it as well, I've just returned from Paris Photo where I saw these trillions and trillions of 'normal' people in 'normal' situations. With seven billion people on this planet, give me fantasy, give me some craftsmanship, you know? And not registrations of normality. A few years ago I saw Tim Burton's film Big Fish, and it was a celebration of fantasy. It really brought tears to my eyes that for the first time, in 20 years, somebody says 'let's celebrate fantasy.' It's a gift of nature.

D: Getting onto dirty things: what makes you feel dirty?

EO: What I think is really dirty is the politics, when people are smearing and blaming other people for, let's say, their sexual behavior. I think sexual behavior has nothing to do with politics. We don't have anything to do with each other's sexual lives and politicians (or the people behind

politicians) are misusing sexual morality to blame and shame other people.

D: Change of context, in a dangerous, sexy sort of way...what makes you feel dirty?

EO: Don't put me in a locker room with beautiful sportsmen! What may be the most dirty is going to the London Olympics and getting... You give me an assignment to comfort the guys who do diving and gymnastics and they come to me and I will be the shoulder of the number two and number four...

D: Describe your most current project. What are you working on now?

EO: I received, in the Netherlands, the state prize of the arts so they gave me 100,000 Euros on October 31. I had to spend 70 percent on a project that I had to specify during the laureate speech; so I defined four ideas, one of which I started to test going back to an old theme. I want to make a morphing film of nude bodies moving from one into each other, say, from a baby into a woman of 90. The second one is a short film this spring on Ibiza, it has to deal with fashion and architecture and the power of the child. I'm getting more and more scared of children and the power they have in our lives.

By Shana Beth Mason