

PhotoWhoa

Erwin Olaf Interview: A Retrospective of Waiting, Images Caught Between Stillness and Collapse

January 20, 2015 by Freddy Martinez

"Something so animal-like: hunger, lice, slime, these crazy sounds ... something horrible, but nonetheless something powerful ... under no circumstances could I miss it!"

Over the past ten years, Erwin Olaf has won some of the most prestigious awards in art, including a Johannes Vermeer Award, a Lucie Award, and a Photographer of the Year selection by International Color Awards. He has also had his work exhibited in many of the world's top galleries: the Annenberg Space for Photography; the FNAC Collection in Paris; and the Hague Museum of Photography in the Netherlands.

Selections from his entire work are now on view at the Hasted Kraeutler Gallery in New York City until February 15th. The images were pulled as celebration of his most recent publication with Aperture, *Olaf: Volume II* (2014). They form a retrospective of Olaf's stellar career and also showcase Olaf's attention to capturing unnerving subtractions of life, moments freed from having to begin or end.

In this brief interview, Olaf talks about how he got his start, explains his debt to Otto Dix, and reveals what a photographer should do to stay true to his or her voice.

As you've gotten older, your work has gotten more personal. To echo a great question from Luisa Zielinski at the Paris Review: do you think drawing from your own experience and history is always good? Is it something all artists must do?

First of all I would like to point out that my work has not gotten more personal, it has always been personal. There is a shift in focus. The work is more about small emotions, more internal emotions instead of wanting to let the world know that I exist with my (personal) work. I think an artist should always draw from themselves, at least. There should be something in the work that says something about them. This can be something that is on their mind, or something clearly from or about themselves personally. If not, the art becomes flat.

Do you remember the moment you knew you wanted to be a photographer?

It was at the school of journalism, where I started taking pictures. It was a mutual love, and I felt at ease and good at it.



Keyhole 3, 2011

Have you ever been unsure of your talents? Have you ever felt like giving up?

I am always unsure. There are so many photographers, so many images: What is the point of all these images that keep coming at us? Who are they for? Are they good or bad? Who is to decide all this? But then my focus shifts back to my own work again. I have never felt like giving up.

The New Yorker described your photographs as "narrative images." They also noted your debt to Otto Dix and other Weimar painters. Would you agree with what they said? If so, what inspiration, if any, have you taken from Otto Dix?

I agree with what they said. I love Otto Dix, the way that the narrative is told, the exaggerations, the colors, the sharpness, these are all elements that drew me to his work. The Weimar painters were living in a very interesting and volatile period. It is a huge inspiration.

You say that your work reflects your feelings toward the world, and that what's going on is really dark. How does photography allow you to express these feelings?

Photography helps me understand better what I am feeling. Sometimes

it's just an undercurrent that you feel, and you don't know why you are anxious or restless. Then, after a period, and after finishing a series and reflecting on it, I realise what the feeling was, what the mood was that inspired me to do this work. By doing it, the work, I feel more at ease.

Do you ever think about how your photography will be viewed in a century's time?

Not really. I would like to leave behind a body of work that consists of only my good work, and not all of it is fantastic, so I am currently working on editing. I hope they have some nice things to say, but they probably have more important things to do in the future! ;-)

I really love this one. How did you approach direction? Did you plan from the start to have her on the verge of tears, or did it just pop into your mind on set?

Photographing is action and reaction. Together with the model I am going somewhere, sometimes I lead, sometimes they do. It was a natural progression with this image. The tears just started flowing.



Irene Portrait, 2007

How did you approach lighting in this shot? Did you have a light coming from the camera? I read that you think it's necessary to always have a light coming the camera.

I don't think it is necessary, but it helps to take away the harsher overall shadows. It softens the look a little, and gives me more options afterwards when retouching.



Berlin, Clarchens Ballhaus Mitte, 10th of July, 2012

This might sound precious, but could we talk about beauty? You've said that what initially draws someone into your work, beauty, isn't what your image is all about. But to even get to the point of misdirecting through beauty, you must understand what catches the eye. What catches your eye more often than not? What elements of a photograph do you always find beautiful?

I love beautiful, interesting light, an interesting confronting subject, and strong images that show beauty or vulnerability. It's very diverse, but I love craftsmanship, so well-made or well-taken photographs catch my eye, but to define what that means is very difficult.

You have mentioned many times that, to succeed, aspiring photographers should stay true to their voice, no matter how idiosyncratic it is. But how does a photographer actually do this? I imagine there must be compromises. Have you ever asked yourself why you like the things you like?

I don't have the recipe for success, otherwise I would bottle it and sell it! There is always a balance between what you want to do and what a client requires. Currency and how much you need of it or want it dictates what you are willing to give up. What I mostly mean is that aspiring photographers should have their own signature. Be recognizable. Especially in this world with so many images, it is important to have your own style.

Check out all of Erwin's work on his website and at the Hasted Kraeutler gallery!