



Dutch photographer captures telling moments in Hong Kong show

by Edmund Lee - April, 9th, 2015

Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf's fine art pieces may well share the lush and polished look of his commercial assignments, but there's no mistaking the subtle emotions in his works.

From capturing the split-second look of models while they blinked, to bringing out the complicated feelings of waiting in solitude, the former photojournalist has been showing an interest in overlooked moments in human existence since he got serious with his art in the late 1980s.

"It's more the choreography of the body and the distance that we take," the 55-year-old Olaf says of his interest in the subject, before declaring himself a long-time admirer of modern classical ballet.

"When you're in an airport or a restaurant, you observe people; you can see that when people have shoulders like that or a face like that, it's sadness. We communicate by the way we look at each other, by the way we don't look at each other, and by the way we turn a little bit away from each other."

Among the three series currently showcased at his exhibition of recent works at Art Statements' gallery, at least two were based on Olaf's daily observations.

During the conceptualisation process for his 2010 series *Keyhole*, he was hoping to evoke the growing distance between people despite their being physically closer than ever.

Olaf built a set of two big rooms in his Amsterdam studio but failed to come up with an idea that worked.



Keyhole 1, 2011

"Then this boy, one of the models, was getting bored because he had to wait for [the setting up]. There was this door in the set, and he turned around and peeped into the keyhole. It was a very simple way of looking from one world into another; it was what I wanted to communicate."

Olaf would channel that moment into 11 other photos. Each appeared to offer a different expression of the model's state of mind. Continuing from *Keyhole*, his fascination with the youthful perspective and the ambience of the 1920s would go on to define the *Berlin* series (2012).

Out of the six locations used — many of which have historical relevance to the interwar period in the German capital — the artist has created a series of dream-like scenarios in which "the youth is accusing the generation before of all the damage that has been done," he says.

"I wanted to do something with the interbellum time," Olaf continues. "But I don't want to be a political photographer. So I went to this swimming pool — where one of the Nazi generals swam every day — and I told myself I had to photograph a clown on a diving board with a letter."

The artist asks of the piece *Berlin, Stadtbad Neukölln*, “Why? I don’t know. There’s a surreal element in this. Later, I had the idea that he is bringing the letter to this young boy. Is he bringing sad news or good news? I don’t know. That is up to you.”

The pleasure of figuring out the back stories to Olaf’s work is part of the appeal of his 2014 series *Waiting*, which was inspired initially by his 2008 visit to Hong Kong, and later, a growing realisation that people are no longer waiting alone due to the advancement of mobile devices and social media.

“Years ago, people would read a book — or just wait,” he says. “I got interested in the emotions involved with waiting. How can I see that somebody is waiting for something or somebody? There is some very strange body language involved.”



Waiting Shenzhen 2, 2014

“When you’re younger you’re shouting more: ‘This is my opinion!’ ‘This is what I want!’ ‘Look at me!’ The older I get, I’m more like, ‘OK, let me sit down and wait for my plane. What is everybody doing?’ It’s one of my sources of inspiration to observe.”



Olaf in front of his piece, *Berline Stadtbad Neukölln*.
Portrait: May Tse

The result is a series about three women — in Shenzhen; Nairobi, Kenya; and La Défense district in Paris — who “are all waiting for the men in their lives. You see her coming in, you see her waiting and you see her disappointment,” says Olaf. “I’m concentrating on their eyes.”

The artist says he has been “again in the dark” since completing the *Waiting* series. “I decided for myself that ‘the beautiful women who have a terrible problem’ period is now closed,” he says, adding that he’ll next be exploring the classical theme of nudes in photography.

Difficult though it might sound, it’s a safe bet that Olaf will imbue his acute awareness as a passive observer into the new works.