

Erwin Olaf, Waiting @ Hasted Kraeutler

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / January 27, 2015



Installation shot of gallery entrance

JTF (just the facts): A total of 23 photographic works and 1 video, variously framed and matted, and hung against white and dark grey walls in the entry area and the three main rooms of the gallery. 8 of the prints and the video installation are new works made in 2014. There are 3 gelatin silver prints (each sized roughly 10×19, in editions of 7) and 5 archival pigment prints (sized either 43×31 or 31×56, in editions of 10) on view from this series; all of the works are available in additional sizes/editions beyond what is actually on view. The video is a (two channel) mixed media installation with digital video, sized 90×174×180, in an edition of 3. The remaining 14 works (including 1 triptych) are a selection of images from earlier in the artist's career. All of the prints are chromogenic prints, made between 2004 and 2012. Physical sizes range from roughly 23×42 to 47×67 (or reverse), in editions of 5, 7, 10, or 12; again, all of the images come in alternate size/edition combinations. The second volume of a two volume monograph of the artist's work was recently published by Aperture (here); the first volume was published in 2008 (here). (Installation shots below.)

Comments/Context: We've all done it - sat at a table at a bar or restaurant, waiting for someone, expectantly looking at the door or checking our watches as the minutes click by, the optimistic "might be late" incrementally turning into the quietly annoying and/or depressing "isn't coming". But capturing that agonizing roller coaster of subtle emotion in a photograph isn't easy, mostly because our changing feelings are expressed in nearly imperceptible micro gestures, ones that are only really discernable with patient,

extended observation. A single frame just doesn't account for all of the in-between hypotheticals, recriminations, explanations, and thoughts (good and bad) that bounce around in our heads during such an extended moment of introspection.

Erwin Olaf's new video *Waiting* aims to bottle this elusive essence of creeping discomfort, and does so with gratifying success, assuming you are willing to invest the 45+ minutes that spools out from under you as Olaf's "story" unfolds. Shot in black and white and accompanied by a haunting elemental piano score composed by Sebastiaan Roestenburg, the two channel video documents the behavior of an attractive young Chinese woman as she waits for a companion at a stylish Shenzhen restaurant/bar. To a distracted 21st century eye accustomed to immediate gratification, nothing much "happens" in this video – she sits, and she waits, for nearly an hour. But if we slow down, take a breath, and dig into Olaf's video, the arc of a narrative certainly does appear and it's the plethora of exhaustive details he's captured that matter.

The genre of the video portrait isn't a new one of course; Thomas Struth made video portraits more than a decade ago, and artists from Fiona Tan to Robert Wilson have used fixed camera videos to capture every blink, breath, and miniscule movement of their subjects. Owen Kydd has applied a similar approach to still life and architectural subjects, focusing our attention on every headlight flash and shadow across a storefront window, every small gust of wind across dangling sheets of paper, or every quiet honk or rustle of noise. In all of these cases, a fundamentally photographic exercise is consciously extended, the video allowing a single moment to expand and become richer and more three dimensional. Whether the subject is a middle aged man or bike shop at night, the effect is the same – a deliberate, time-based collapsing of attention, where the overlooked becomes the main attraction.

In Olaf's case, his video portrait is less a picture of a specific Chinese woman and more an attempt to characterize the abstract concept of waiting – it's a portrait of a process rather than any one person. And that process is full of subtle milestones and actions – she sits down, she looks over the menu, she orders an espresso, it comes, her settings are cleared away, her companion's settings are cleared away (ominously), the clink of other diners is heard in the background, the bartender dries wine glasses, she orders another drink, she looks up in expectation with a hint of a smile, she looks down at her bracelets, she slumps her shoulders, she folds her hands, she looks at her fingers, she peers out the window, she sighs, she straightens up, on and on, each moment a fraction of the whole elongated experience. While one screen of the video tracks our protagonist's every movement from square in front, the second screen slowly pans from left to right, her lively fellow diners ultimately pulled out of the picture, leaving the lonely emptiness of the stylish bar as her foil. Her emotions follow a similarly bumpy path downward, where upbeat twinkling expectation gives way to brow furrowing uncertainty, and then on to resigned despondency, each discrete stage in the progression laid uncomfortably bare.

While Olaf's large scale stills attempt to capture some of the graceful nuance of the video, they are a pale substitute for the richness of his intricate extended portrait. The rest of the show moves backward in time, providing a sampler of the artist's earlier work, going back more than a decade. While we've seen many of these images before, in the context of the new video, single photographs of Caroline in a waiting room, Troy in despair at the window, or the listless ennui of models in hotel rooms suddenly feel like stepping stones on the way to this new approach; he's been interested in picturing complex emotional states for years now, and *Waiting* is just his fullest realization of that set of investigations.

Virtually every other viewer who shared the gallery with me during my visit found Olaf's video laughably boring, giving it a full ten to twenty seconds to push their buttons before walking away shaking their heads in bemusement. All I would ask is that you give it a chance to work its magic – yes, it's sleek and stylized and glacially slow moving, but if you allow yourself to be drawn in, *Waiting* is engrossingly squirm inducing (and silently sad), uncovering a complex topography of human emotion mapped with surprising insight, care, and credibility.

Collector's POV: The prints on view in this show are priced between \$11500 and \$38000, with some editions/sizes already sold out. The video installation is priced at \$145000. Olaf's work has become more available in the secondary markets in recent years, with prices ranging from roughly \$2000 to \$44000.

Installation shots of video installation

