

# Wall Street International

During the last few months Erwin Olaf has been working on a new series of photographs in Berlin. They are about the conflict between young and old, between ignorance and knowledge. 'I want to evoke an emotional reaction.'

Erwin Olaf has taken twenty photographs for Berlin, his latest photographic series. There are seven scenes, thirteen portraits and two self-portraits. The portraits are of the models that figure in the scenes. The portraits will be presented together with the scene that contains the model. The self-portraits, which incidentally are seen from behind, stand alone.

Berlin was created due to the Johannes Vermeer prize, a state prize for the arts, which was awarded to Olaf in 2011. The idea behind the prize is that the winner creates a 'special project' with the € 100,000 prize money. When accepting the prize Olaf mentioned that he would go to Berlin for the project. Now he adds: "I wanted to get out of the studio anyway, for the dead simple reason that I couldn't move the camera any further back here. The space is too limited. I wanted more space and architecture. Berlin is currently the new centre of Europe. It is a city that breeds history like no other. We are living in a time that in many ways is comparable to the twenties from the previous century, when Berlin was also the place to be. Once again we are dancing on the edge of a volcano, sitting in a sort of inter-war period. Everything could come crashing down tomorrow, no today even because of the crisis."

Well, maybe his theory is wrong. He doesn't want to appear to know more than he does. "It's a feeling." Olaf says that he always approaches his work associatively and now he finds himself unsure about Berlin. "I never usually am but with this series my thoughts alternate between: it's good, it's bad and what is it actually? Does it need more meaning? But I precisely want the emptiness and fewer elements."

Sigh. Then "The problem with staged photography like mine is the emotion. Reality is present in documentary photography as a matter of course. You have to create it yourself when setting the scene. How do you do that? What does sadness look like? I have been asking myself that question since Separation (a series of photographs from 2003). I still don't have the answer."

He points to a photograph: should that child be there or not? Silence. Another sigh. And a roar of laughter. Brat.

Looking back at history he considered the Magic Realism of the painters Pyke Koch and Carel Willink; the emptiness, the threatening architecture and the absurdity. "I always start with a dream. And then I use the ingredients that present themselves. The props. The models. They spur my imagination on."

The figure of a black model with an athletic stature stands in one photograph. His chest is draped in medals. Is he a reference to Jesse Owens, the black athlete who to Hitler's annoyance won four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games? You could see it that way, says Olaf: although it wasn't his first thought. A little white boy poses in the Masonic lodge in Berlin he has antique roller skates on and points an accusing finger at the black man. He wears a double-breasted suit, black leather gloves and has an impeccable parting in the centre of his hair. An uncomfortable image.

"I arrived at the conflict between young and old and between ignorance and knowledge through association. Those aspects are more or less included in all the images but it's up to you whether you see them. I'm not trying to make any specific claims with it; that baby-boomers are currently under fire from the younger generations or such like. My task is to create tension."



He photographed on seven locations. In the historical Ratthaus, where John F. Kennedy said the legendary sentence "Ich bin ein Berliner". In the fencing hall at the Olympic Stadium and the Masonic lodge steps which were reserved for the Fuehrer. He visited thirty to forty locations. At a certain point Olaf, who suffers from lung emphysema, couldn't continue. "I was gasping for air from all the trips and mainly because there were stairs everywhere. You need the puff for that. They even became a theme within the photographs. You can see at least one step in every photograph and in some the staircase takes on its own role because, for example – very dramatically! – I had to climb one."

According to Olaf himself he is elaborating on his previous work. The atmosphere in Berlin comes very close to that in Dusk (series from 2009), also shot in settings with panelling and heavy curtains. Yet on a technical level the series forms a new step. All his previous series were lambda prints with a perspex layer, for the Berlin photographs the photographer experimented with carbon pressure induction printing, a very laborious nineteenth century technique. "Not only has the durability of lambda prints been called into question, I also wanted to combine digital technology with old-fashioned, artisanal techniques. A painting is pure, tangible matter; photography is a glass plate, perspex. It can easily make your work unapproachable. I didn't want that. I wanted warmth – also because I want to evoke an emotional reaction."

He points to a photograph taken in the Clärchens Ballhaus in Mitte. Three withered theatre stars sit next to a prominent staircase; they look like they have escaped from a canvas by the German painter Otto Dix (1891-1969) or a performance by the German choreographer Pina Bausch. Decay, faded glory, tragedy, they are nearing the end. Their gazes inspect a young girl wearing a flounced skirt, who is in turn looking provokingly into the camera. In the background an old man sits sleeping, souvenirs from the First World War, crutches, lean against the panelling. "What is that?" Olaf asks rhetorically. "An ode to youth? Or precisely to old-age? Or does it point to the life that is passing, of the cycle of birth and death?" Silence. Then: "I want to encourage contemplation. That moment of realisation and calm when the viewer thinks about their own life." Burst of laughter. "Yes, I am slowly becoming an old man myself, that will be it!"

Erwin Olaf was born in 1959 in Hilversum, Netherlands. He is living and working in Amsterdam since the beginning of the 80's.

Before moving on to urbane social portraits, the Fauvist Van Dongen painted the brothels of Paris. Before immortalizing the peaceful hills of Somerset, the great reporter Don Mac Cullin photographed the horrors of war. For certain artists, maturity becomes a time of reflection and the dissociation of themselves

with ancient demons. This may well be the case with Erwin Olaf. If he began his career under the scandalous patronage of Robert Mapplethorpe, Helmut Newton and Joel-Peter Witkin, he became known to collectors, twenty years later, when the themes of mourning, loss and solitude transformed him into a "settled" photographer, besotted by melancholy. The artist who once sought the direct impact of the image evolved into a virtuoso of allusive photography.

For those who have discovered Erwin Olaf during the last ten years, it is difficult to imagine that the abnormal, the deformed, the obese, clowns, drag queens and gypsies were his first heroes. During the first twenty years of his career, he glorified the latter with an extraordinary energy and audacity. He used a contrasting black-and-white or resorted to a very bright palette of colours, close to that of advertising. In contrast to his ultimate series, which is enshrouded in an almost arctic brightness, the older series confront the characters with scabrous shadows.

Key figures in the alternative pantheon of Olaf, clowns were the subject of two very elaborate series in 2001. In "Paradise Portraits", the demonic clowns engage in all manner of depravity in the course of their orgiastic carousing. This series was conceived after a big soiree based on the theme of circuses, organised by the photographer in the temple of pop, the "Paradiso" in Amsterdam. Struck by "the horror and the decadence of nocturnal life", Olaf conceived of his project some time later when he discovered, in the Prado museum, the Rubens painting "The Rape of Hippodamia". He conceived six images in vitriol. These are scenes of a great spectacle, six paintings of debauchery and crime which offend the eye as much as the mind. Nevertheless, as Jean Cocteau wrote, "the crudest, most aggressive spectacles contain an escaping angel". In the following series, "Paradise portraits", the clowns have suddenly gained in humanity. In these close-up shots, their masks of sinister demons or "Pierrot Lunaire" (an image derived from the poem cycle of Giraud) form a disturbing constellation. The make-up streaks, revealing skin defects, wrinkles, the signs of age and pathos.

"Paradise" and "Paradise portraits", taken in 2001, portray a sort of apocalypse, in bringing to a close his openly provocative works. In 2003, Erwin Olaf shot "Separation" and entered into (as he himself stated) the second part of his life. The nine images of this series are again immersed in shadow. The photographer for the first time takes up the theme of ontological solitude, and stages the impossible union of a mother and her son. In "Separation", the mother, perched on very high heels, is entirely covered in a black latex second skin, as is her little boy. This suffocating combination does not evoke sadomasochistic fantasies, but rather the destitution of a body separated from the outside world. The mother's eyes are covered, while those of the child are wide open, seeking an exchange of glances which will never materialize. Deprived of visual contact, deprived of touch, mother and son are reduced to outstretching their arms in vain, in a domestic setting plunged into darkness.

Like his contemporary Gregory Crewdson, Erwin Olaf took his photos in his studio, thanks to an army of set designers, makeup artists and stylists. Ninety percent of his images were taken in his big studio in Amsterdam. Up until his final series "Berlin", in which certain scenes are situated outside, one hundred per cent of his photos feature interior scenes, cut off from the world, as if the photographer was bringing to light the secrets of a sealed box. This "box" may well be his own cranium.

At first sight, Erwin Olaf may seem to be more of a stage director than a photographer. The scenography for each image is meticulously arranged, as in a cinema plan. The lights are all artificial, and the photographer added a digital back to his Hasselblad to enable him to check each of his shots. The scenery was the result of painstaking documentary research, which is revealed in the obsessive precision of the detail. The electrical sockets or the skirting boards of the apartment are reconstructed with the same meticulousness as the colour of the wallpaper or the design of the lights. Every model used is

subjected to extreme casting. However, behind the apparent cold and polished style of his photos, beyond the evident desire to thoroughly master all aspects of his production, Erwin Olaf also exhibits a taste for the unexpected, which enables him to radically circumvent stereotypes. Far from being a prisoner pinned underneath the weight of his own machinery, of the inertia of his decor, Olaf keeps a weather eye open, remaining open to chance opportunities. His style is not far from that of Henri Cartier-Bresson, who waits for the "decisive moment", and extols the necessity of "setting the head, the eye and the heart on the same line of vision." In this respect, to borrow Jean-Luc Godard's quip, Olaf aims not to create "just an image" but rather "a just image".

The extreme aestheticization of this final series may shock some viewers. In the emblematic series shot beginning in 2004, the distinction of the characters, the elegance of the apparel, the sophisticated haircuts, the softness of lighting, the luxury of the decor and the furniture all contribute to the pleasing of the eye. The prints themselves, which are of an almost unreal lucidity, comprise veritable objects of desire. One could imagine them decorating the type of bourgeois salons featured in Georges Perec's novel "Les Choses" (translated as "Things: A Story of the Sixties"). However, Olaf's portrayal of beauty does not represent the concept of sharing and harmony between people, but rather portrays it as a tragic cause of isolation. Just as money does not create happiness, for him, beauty promotes neither sharing nor harmony. This paradox charges Erwin Olaf's images with emotion and humanity. In all of his works of the last decade, the characters are alone, or worse, they ignore each other. Zero physical contact, zero physical attraction. The mothers of "Dawn" (2009) and "Dusk" (2009) are cut off from their relationship with their children, and in the series "Separation" (2003), which Erwin Olaf considers as being his seminal work of the 2000s, the title speaks for itself.

The series "Le dernier cri" (2006) combines the portrayal of two foppish idiots, deformed by plastic surgery and placed opposite plants which are so featureless that they seem to be artificial. These plants, always placed in very refined vases, are omnipresent in Olaf's final series. They do not represent opulence and sensual pleasure, as do the copious bouquets of the masters of the Dutch Golden Age. On the contrary, Olaf carefully prunes the branches and leaves of his floral compositions, transforming them into veritable sculptural objects. Severed from the very idea of nature, these inert, almost anaemic plants allegorize the rigidity and the puritanism of a world where all outpouring of emotion is forbidden. We are far from the "Fleurs du mal" of Mapplethorpe, sensual and poisonous, and closer to the Japanese ikebana plant, which accentuates the effect of the graphical arrangement.

Previously, Erwin Olaf showed no hesitation in exhibiting his fantasies and in offending our viewing sensibilities. More recently, he has skillfully portrayed the unsaid of western society. Now goading us to liberate our own chimerae, he remains the master of the forbidden.