



'I'm afraid that what I've made will turn out not to be art'

Interview with Erwin Olaf (translated and abridged), originally published in *De Volkskrant* newspaper, 25/5/2018

Photographer Erwin Olaf will turn 60 next year. He is celebrating with three exhibitions and a major donation to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Olaf has evolved from angry provocateur to royal photographer. Recognition at last. But is that enough?

'And this one', says Erwin Olaf (59) as he points to a self-portrait he took when he turned 30. A young, impudent guy in a leather dress with a slit displaying an impressive erection. 'This one is going to be hung in the hall of the Rijksmuseum.' A disarming joke, as only Olaf can make them.

We walk past long tables in his studio on which there are hundreds of prints of his famous dwarves, fat nudes, serene-looking men and women in 1960s interiors – Erwin Olaf in four decades of photography. His assistants, wearing white gloves, are working on the spectacular gift to the Rijksmuseum of almost five hundred images from his impressive body of work. These are the preparations for what we might call Erwin Olaf Year. In February 2019 a retrospective will open at Gemeentemuseum Den Haag and The Hague Museum of Photography, in July next year he will turn 60, and in that same month an exhibition curated by director Taco Dibbits will open in the Philips Wing of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, linking his work with that of the Dutch Masters.

'We'll have to see how fantastic my photographs are in a hundred years. I've said it before, but I'm afraid I'll become the Rien Poortvliet of photography. That I'll find what I've made turns out not to be art.'

The likelihood that Olaf will become a second Poortvliet, who was famous for painting gnomes, seems small, particularly if one considers the early work from the 1980s. Self-portraits with a blob of semen in his face, obese women in bondage, dwarves – his photographs inspired his nickname 'Photographer of Anger', and 'The Angry Eye'. The highly sexual images did indeed have an aggressive tint. They borrowed heavily from American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, who died young, and they brought Olaf instant fame. In 1989 he won first prize in the Young European Photographer competition.

A year later he discovered his own style in *Blacks*, a series of portraits of eccentric figures posing in an imaginative funeral wreath, printed in shades of coal black. Since then, he has always visualised his own imagination in his photographs, rather than reality. Sumptuous, counter to the prevailing tastes of art curators, the light, setting and make-up perfect. Series featuring clowns, murdered royals and strong women of advanced years. From his entire body of work, which comprises an estimated 40,000 rolls of film, the Rijksmuseum will receive a 'core collection' of just under 500 photographs and videos, most of them donated by Olaf himself, some purchased with the assistance of the BankGiro lottery.

If you look at your entire body of work, the dominant emotion seems to be loneliness.

'That's the basic emotion in my life. You arrive alone and you leave alone.'

Does that have to do with getting older?

'No, I've always had that feeling. So does my mother. Sometimes, when she was sitting on the couch among her family, she would suddenly say "I want to go home". You understand? That restless need to go somewhere, to go somewhere even deeper?'

You capture that feeling in stylised photographs of highly stylised women and men. Why not go out into the streets to record the loneliness there?

'I once said that if I want to see the ordinary world I can just open my window. I don't need to go to a museum for that. I like lying. Not in real life, but in my photography. The fact that with your choice of framework, the structure of your

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set, the way you light something, the instructions you give your model, you can direct your viewer's emotions, just like in a film. That you can cry buckets, while it's all just fake. That's probably the essence of an Erwin Olaf photo.'

The striking thing about your photos is that everything is perfect. Can you not stand disorder?

He laughs. '*Ordnung muss sein*. Choreographer Hans van Manen, my good friend and my mentor when it comes to photography used to say, "If one hair is out of place you will look at that hair, not at what I want to say with the photo".'

Perfection can also work against you.

'You mean things can get too slick? That's a risk, yes. On the other hand, however, it would be insincere of me if I didn't do it. This is my vocabulary. It might be my working-class nature, making beautiful things. Beautiful doesn't mean anything in art, but I find it difficult to make something ugly. And I also like to run counter to received opinion.'

Have you ever tried to make something ugly?

'No. Not even when I was photographing obese women, in the beginning, for my first series *Chessmen*. It's so easy to make a fat woman look ugly in a photograph. I did do scandalous things with them, tying ropes around their body, or making them pull a cart. But then I made the lighting attractive, so their skin looked lovely and soft. Or I chose a vantage point that made them look heroic. That appealed to me. And they deserved it.'

Wim van Sinderen, curator at the Hague Museum of Photography, has said, 'We have the strange situation where Erwin has got the royal seal of approval, now he has taken official portraits of King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima, while his early photos are shown less and less because of our prudish morals these days'

'That's right. If I show my portfolio in America it's all over as soon as people see a picture of genitals. Genitals are a huge obstacle there. The body stops somewhere here [he indicates a spot just above the hips], and carries on here. What's wrong with a pussy? With a dick? They're part of us aren't they? In our culture it's always been normal to show cherubs and nudes in art. We have to defend that.'

Asked about the overarching themes in his work, he says, 'In the 1980s it was sex – mainly my fear of it. I was just relieved to have come out of the closet'. In the 1990s it was aggression. 'I was always on my high horse, about to save the world with my lance.' In the noughties, sadness – not just for the world, after 9/11, also because his emphysema began to affect him more and more. One of the key series from that period is *Grief*. Photographs of whining women, he mockingly calls them.

His health has declined rapidly over the past two years, he says. His right-hand woman Shirley den Hartog had already told us he rides an electric bike, takes an oxygen tank away with him, spends the winter in a warm country, and that the breaks between commissions are getting longer. 'When my disease was diagnosed in 1996 the doctors at the hospital in Amsterdam said I would live to 60. Now they're saying at the hospital in Leiden that I'll make 70. I want to live now, not tomorrow.'

Are there any conditions attached to the transfer of your work to the Rijksmuseum?

'I've only said I'm not doing it for nothing. But other than that, my work is in good hands. It is the Rijksmuseum after all. So I'm not going to start whining about how often I want it to be shown after I die. I'll be sitting on that cloud anyway, if it exists.'

Trilogy of exhibitions

From 16 February 2019 to 12 May 2019 Gemeentemuseum Den Haag and The Hague Museum of Photography will be hosting a double exhibition of work by Erwin Olaf.

The Gemeentemuseum will show his non-commissioned work, while the Museum of Photography will focus on the making process, from analogue to digital. The exhibition will also include 25 pictures by photographers who have inspired Olaf.

In July there will be an exhibition at the Rijksmuseum linking Olaf's photography with painters like Vermeer and Rembrandt.

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