

## High Stakes

### The Photographs of Erwin Olaf

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[ TINEKE REIJNDERS ]

It is as if Erwin Olaf is navigating the River Styx and, in passing, captures something of the silvery darkness from the underworld. He has a penchant for draping the panoramas of life in funeral weeds. Several times he has based a photo series on the complex symphonies of blacks and greys. But rarely has he drawn out so many colourless nuances from the photographic process as in his recent series *Berlin*. Every one of the 13 photographs in this eponymously located series exudes an unadulterated melancholy, and even the colour photos have been tinted with a muted palette. We are just one remove from decay and death here. Erwin Olaf has always been a man of extremes, an *ensceneur* of extraordinary beauty and intense experiences, usually based on intimacy. In some of the photographs in this series, he has penetrated the unfathomable rhetoric of black more deeply than ever before. The series *Berlin* (2013) speaks volumes in this regard.

Berlin is a city which exerts a strong pull on artists to this day. It is a city for the new, but also a city to which history clings like ivy to a brick wall - several histories, in fact, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 perhaps being the one that has touched us most. German reunification and the years that followed saw freedom celebrated in every way imaginable. Erwin Olaf was a regular visitor in the 1990s and enjoyed the excessive celebrations. Now that, like others of his generation (Erwin Olaf was born in 1959), he is concerned about developments that threaten our existence on earth, he has gone back to Berlin with historical images in his head. 'I see correspondences between the present day and the interwar years', he says. 'We in the Western world are dancing on the edge of the volcano. You can feel that something ominous is coming; we read about it in the papers, but we carry on celebrating regardless. We are at a tipping point. That's the feeling I wanted to express in this series.'

Perhaps it is the element of reappraisal that is encapsulated in the idea of revisiting Berlin, this time with contemplative intentions, that imbues the images with a sense of sincerity, of wisdom, despite the fact that, as usual with Olaf, they are born of a wild theatrical fantasy.

The Berlin series is situated in the interwar years, a period when the people of Berlin nervously sought their entertainment in an elegant and avant-garde metropolitanism, and the locations also date from that era. But the voice of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the 18th-century art historian, can also be heard



Erwin Olaf, *Portrait 05*,  
9<sup>th</sup> July 2012, Carbon Print,  
ca. 17 x 22.67 cm.

resonating in this series. His famous expression *Edle Einfalt und stille Grösse* ('noble simplicity and quiet grandeur'), his description of the true nature of the 'classical' Greek art, appear to have had an unintended influence on several photographs in the series.

### **Noble simplicity**

*Portrait 05*, 9<sup>th</sup> of July 2012 is a small carbon photograph of a girl. She sits ram-rod straight and gazes at us from her armchair, without giving away any hint of her feelings. Her blonde hair is drawn tight, two round plaits echoing her ears. Parts of the image remain swathed in shadow, contrasting with the details that are picked out by a Caravaggesque shaft of light: the left side of her face, the leather coat she is wearing, the row of leather buttons, the arms of the chair,



Erwin Olaf, *Berlin, Clärchens Ballhaus Mitte*, 2012, Lambda print, Fuji Chrystal Archive digital paper, 60 x 90 cm. and 120 x 181 cm.

the tops of her laced boots. Her hands are hidden in black leather gloves, resting on the arm of the 1930s chair. We see nothing more of this nameless girl but that one half of her perfect face. In the upper right quadrant, a sculpted head protrudes from the wainscoting, as round and well-defined as the head of the young blonde. There is also a second wooden head, that of an older person; we can imagine the slanderous whisperings between the walls of the old room. As usual in this oeuvre, however, the photographs reveal no meaning. They are full of references, but convey no message. That message perhaps lies in the atmosphere, the mood, the limbo of what is beautiful and perfect – and thus mortal, threatened. Surely a child like that cannot be sitting in this upper middle class interior simply in order to merge with the decor? To appear as implacable as the great aesthetic care with which the other objects are arranged? It is as if Erwin Olaf is trying to squeeze all liveliness out of the image in order to leave an exalted extract, a web of mystery that challenges viewers to project their own ideas onto the image. Is she wearing modified shoes? Perhaps she is disabled? Do her Aryan features and haughty gaze not arouse emphatically painful associations whilst at the same time her age exudes innocence? The viewer is invited by this exceedingly precise print to search long and carefully in the matt sea of blacks and greys. For this and a few of the other photos in the series, the photographer has used the 19th-century technique of carbon printing. With this technique, negative and print are exactly the same size, contributing to the feast of nuances.

At first sight, not all the photographs in the series match Winckelmann's description of 'quiet grandeur'. In the colour photograph *Clärchens Ballhaus Mitte, 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 2012*, the main subject is a young girl – at least she is the most high-lighted subject, dressed in a pink top and light blue culottes. She is looking at the



camera, while behind her three older women sitting at a cafe table are watching her from their seats against the wall. They look as if they have stepped out of a Goya painting. Two of them are heavily made up and still fairly attractive; the third cares nothing about decorum, with her slipped shoulder strap and hostile gaze. She is just as authentic as the girl, but is at the other end of the spectrum of life. This photograph, too, has an alienating effect. The ease of the cliché, women of a certain age who can no longer recapture the image of their youth, is subordinated to the value of a philosophical observation that goes beyond time and place.

Equally timeless and sober is the photograph in which we see the artist himself ascending a staircase: *Olympia Stadion Westend, Selbstporträt, 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2012*. It is a broad staircase whose steps fill the bottom of the image and which narrows towards the vanishing point as it ascends. It is illuminated by daylight. The subject has his back to us. He is wearing a sober suit. As he climbs from the dark tunnel towards the light streaming in from above, the camera captures a tiny ray of light on his left hand, coming from an unidentifiable source. The picture is a perfect example of 'noble simplicity', but also of an over-orchestrated symbolism. Nevertheless, no one will deny that this is a masterful image, brimming with underlying intensity. Yes, this is Berlin; this is where the Olympic Games were held in 1938; there are echoes of Adolf Hitler here, of Leni Riefenstahl. And at the same time this is also Erwin Olaf, a man whose creativity and career are in the ascendant. He is the man who shot a triptych self-portrait in 2009 with the titles *I wish, I am, I will be*, the last of which shows him hooked up to oxygen tubes. Just as Erwin Olaf has always been open about his homosexuality, so he has always spoken spontaneously about the pulmonary emphysema which will increasingly restrict his physical functioning in the future. Climbing the stairs is therefore a tremendous effort for his body.

*Berlin, Berlin, Olympia Stadion, Selbstporträt, 2012*  
Lambda print, Fuji  
Chrystal Archive digital paper,  
60 x 88.85 cm. and  
120 x 177.7 cm.





Erwin Olaf, *Chessman I*, 1988, Lambda Endura  
Print on Kodak Professional Paper, 100 x 100 cm.

### Mythical, grotesque source

*Berlin* is a high point to date in a career spanning more than three decades. Erwin Olaf has time and again proved to be the indefatigable builder of new, completely original images. His signature is always present, and even the photographs with an unexpected twist are unmistakably recognisable as the work of Erwin Olaf. His work is characterised by oppositions (black/white, naked/clothed, young/old, successful/excluded) and by a deep aesthetic quality which embraces both the human figure and the decorative element. From the start, he has divided his free work into series and published them in books. His photographs are collected all over the world and exhibited in important places. The weighty tome *Own*, which contains his most important photographs, was published in 2012.

There are many photographers who focus on the human body, but none have sought out the extremes with as much passion as Erwin Olaf. He once said that the books of Gerard Reve had opened his eyes to possibilities that had previously been considered inappropriate. And his work is indeed not for the prudish. It is striking that the playful Groninger Museum organised a retrospective in 2003 to mark its 25th anniversary, entitled *Silver*, with eponymous catalogue, whereas the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam has to date not purchased a single photograph. And I myself must confess to quickly leaving an opening at a Paris gallery for his black photographs from the *Dusk and Dawn* series, because the darkroom-like atmosphere which dominated is not my natural habitat. His own mother, Olaf likes to recount, was initially very shocked by the photograph of her son in ejaculatory pose. Homosexuality is undoubtedly a driving force behind the far-reaching aesthetic of his work, and there is a clear thread of the gay sense of the theatrical running through his photographs. It generally does not dominate, however, though it initially seemed as if it would; Erwin Olaf made his debut with photographs for gay magazines and his name hit the headlines when naked photographs were removed from the Foto '84 exhibition in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. However, his work is too rich in associations to label it purely sexual.

The book *Chessmen* was published in 1987, in which the 32 chess pieces were depicted in a series of bizarre compositions. Olaf moulded bodies and attributes for the pieces; children's wartime clothing from the dressing-up box is combined with vibrators, dildos and horns. The models are eccentric, while their faces and features are hidden behind veils or under helmets and funnels, focusing all attention on the bodies, the flesh of which is sometimes bound with thick ropes or hung with gossamer. It is a parade of naked bodies, originating from a world that is between Venetian carnival and a Mediaeval Underworld – with women fat and thin, large and very small, and with men in impossible poses, floating, hanging, kneeling. A couple of male arms stretching heavenwards support a real baby: the king. According to Olaf, the black-and-white chess piece series was inspired by the enthusiastic chess reports that were broadcast by chess master Hans Böhm on Dutch radio and TV. The photographer saw great battles in his mind's eye and tapped into his own mythical, grotesque source, a source which has never ceased flowing.

Olaf is an eloquent man who will never forget to thank his models for placing their confidence in him. Following the major photographic tableau *Leidens Ontzet* ('Relief of Leiden') which Olaf created in 2012 for Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden, a documentary was shown on the creation of the series. It shows how he draws people into his magic with his natural decisiveness and goes straight for the goal he is trying to achieve. The perfect composition is a question of a moment; if necessary, details can be altered later on the computer.

### How far can I go?

Before becoming a photographer and taking the name Erwin Olaf, Erwin Olaf Springveld studied journalism at the Utrecht School of Journalism, being admitted on the basis of his school essays. His studies were not helped by his tendency to continue polishing a text *ad infinitum*. One day he interviewed the painter Marte Röling and, because the real photographer was ill, took some photographs too. One of his lecturers recognised their quality, and that is how Erwin Olaf came to bid farewell to his studies and become an assistant to the professional photographer André Ruigrok, in whose studio he learned all the tricks of the trade. 'Erwin worked for me for two and a half years', remembers Ruigrok, 'and we parted on very good terms. He wanted to become famous, and he's succeeded.'

There are very few Dutch artists who have made their drive so emphatically clear. Fame could not come too soon for Olaf, and he was not always able to hide his impatience. Already warmly embraced by an international array of followers, until recently he still complained about the lack of attention given to his work by museums of modern art. This was perhaps an understandable lament from someone who for a long time lived from commissions and whose reputation was also earned in the world of advertising. He worked for large companies such as Diesel and Heineken, and succeeded in exploiting his own style within the advertising codes, landing him a Silver Lion award in Cannes. He also carried out assignments for magazines and made an impression with striking posters for what was then the Zuidelijk Toneel theatre company led by Ivo van Hove. An important mentor in his early years was the choreographer and photographer Hans van Maanen, who Olaf claims taught him the philosophy of simplicity.







His commissions in recent years have been extensions of his free work, such as the impressive series of theatre sets that he created several years ago for the Nieuwe de la Martheater in Amsterdam. He was also commissioned to produce the likeness of King Willem-Alexander for the Dutch euro coin, which was revealed to the public on 31 October 2013. Unexpectedly, he produced a faceted rather than a flat portrait, in what experts commented was an Eastern Bloc style. In a TV interview, Olaf said: 'I wanted to see how far I could go with cropping the portrait without losing his recognisability.'

That 'how far can I go' sounds like a device. In 1991, not long after the publication of *Chessmen*, he was invited together with the painter of dreamlike images, Frans Franciscus, to make a film at the Oud Amelisweerd estate. The pair based the film on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and for the title part in the film, a beautiful boy named Tadzio, they chose Aat Nederlof, a Dutch actor with Down's syndrome. In order to break away from the image of an endearing boy with Down's syndrome, they made his role rather mean. The film lasts half an hour and is an exuberant ode to the absurdities of life. Olaf, with his weakness for mavericks, dedicated his next photo collection to people with learning disabilities. *Mind of their Own* (1995) is a series of colour portraits set against a psychedelic background that celebrates the beauty that in their case is not uncommonly disregarded. In the epilogue he describes how the theme continued to occupy him after *Tadzio*. 'Aat and his single-minded mother taught me that people with learning disabilities are independent people, with their own emotions and their own external beauty.' 'It became a series of eyes', he wrote. 'Eyes in which the absolute surrender to the camera dominates.'

That makes this joyous series a total contrast to *Blacks*, a series of photographs that was published in 1990 as the Focus collection. Here, the eyes are covered with small objects and everything is painted black, including the models. They are shown either full or half-length, richly adorned with fetish objects, framed by a mandorla, a sort of laurel wreath in which all manner of objects have been

Erwin Olaf, *The Mother*, from the series *Dusk*, 2009,  
Lambda Print / Dibond / Wooden frame, 121 x 229 cm.

Erwin Olaf, *The Soldier*, from the series *Dawn*, 2009,  
Lambda Print / Dibond / Wooden frame, 121 x 229 cm.





incorporated, including the trumpet, the horn of Fama, or fame. Full of youthful exuberance, Olaf gave full rein to his creativity; later, he would revisit the theme of 'black' with more control, not just in the Berlin series referred to earlier, but also in *Dusk*, the second part of *Dusk & Dawn* (2009). Here, the scenes could have been taken from a film; styled with frightening perfection, scenes which are played out in prominent houses and in times gone by. In *Dawn*, the interiors and clothes are white; in *Dusk*, everything is dark. Their premiere in the Hermitage Museum on the River Amstel in Amsterdam, the 17th-century annex of its St Petersburg namesake, provided a fitting setting for the series.

Erwin Olaf, *The Ice cream Parlour*, from the series *Rain*, 2004,  
Lambda Print / Diasec, 70 x 70 cm. and 120 x 120 cm.

## Provocative photographs

The amazing thing about the excessive dedication to beauty is that it never detracts from the sense of urgency that marks out Olaf's oeuvre. All his work has this urgency, even where the subjects have their backs to the camera or give off a sense of lethargy and abandonment. He seeks out the extremes of these feelings in the series *Rain, Hope, Grief, & Fall*, which were created between 2006 and 2008 and which were exhibited together for the first time in Fotomuseum Den Haag in The Hague. With their perfect 1970s interiors, the photographs depict the 'green widows', prepared down to the last detail to greet the world outside, yet for the time being doomed to stay at home, waiting. The plot sounds simple, but the refinement with which the viewer is also led through a series of almost depressive moods is inimitable. Yet nothing is dictated, and the scenes smoulder with indeterminacy. It is probably for precisely that reason that the photographs remain so tenable artistically. And because they continually provoke us. Erwin Olaf without doubt celebrates the absurdity of life with so much energy in order to prevent the waters of the Styx from flowing over our feet too soon. He is playing for high stakes. Phenomenally high stakes. ■

All images © Erwin Olaf / Courtesy Flatland Gallery (Amsterdam, Paris).

Erwin Olaf, *The Hairdresser*, from the series *Rain*, 2004,  
Lambda Print / Diasec, 70 x 99.3 cm. and 120 x 170 cm.



Translated by Julian Ross