

His Portraits Got the Blues

The Photography of Koos Breukel

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[T I N E K E R E I J N D E R S]

A good portrait operates in the field of contradiction, its rhetoric confirms and questions. It creates facts and rises upon them, registers and enchants. It does so in an intangible, simultaneous mix. Nevertheless for Koos Breukel a good portrait is no ambiguous secret. Neither is he a mythologist in the sense meant by Roland Barthes, when he called great photographers great mythologists because they give broader meaning to a face, as in Avedon's portrait of a slave, or Sander's lawyer. It is Breukel's matter-of-factness which makes him a great photographer. He does not beautify, seeking instead, to judge by his photos, a sort of intensified, core reality, the beauty of veracity. He does all this clearly and with great precision.

Among Breukel's three portraits displayed at Bozar in Brussels in early 2015 was that of his mother. Amidst the other photos in *FACES NOW. European Portrait Photography Since 1990*, despite its no-nonsense approach, there was a sublime, undefined quality to this image. At the same time the portrait emanates so many glorious nuances between black and white that it forces viewers in the very act of looking to fit it together like a puzzle. The same portrait was presented more informally at the Museum of Photography in The Hague, where it hung amidst a large circle of family members and friends, placed lower and in a smaller format. In The Hague viewers discovered that Breukel's love for photography came from his mother. She was not a professional, as her son later came to be, deriving his reputation from his unparalleled portraits, but the down-to-earth Dutch woman, as we can see from the photo, conveyed her preference for honest simplicity to the camera and to Breukel himself. She gave him his first camera (35mm single-lens reflex) when he was sixteen and stubborn. He honours her in turn with stubborn veracity. As a boy Breukel did not take to school and his mother probably foresaw the opportunity for him to find some direction in life through photography. When he was twenty he enrolled to study Photography and Photonics at MTS in The Hague (now the KABK, or Royal Academy of Art) and was accepted on the basis not of a diploma but of his portfolio. He showed primarily landscapes, his frankness towards people only developing later on. From a technical perspective it was a solid education. Here he became friends with Eric Hamelink, with whom he set up a studio in Amsterdam-West after graduation.



Casper Breukel, Alkmaar 2000
© Koos Breukel



Judith Bloemendaal,
Amsterdam 1999
© Koos Breukel

No one lives life unscathed

In 2013 Breukel published *ME, WE*, a substantial volume displaying his own selection of the photos he had taken over thirty years. This is a breathtaking introduction to his work. Recently, in 2015, this won him the Kees Scherer Prize for Best Photo Book 2013/14 in Naarden. The book was launched alongside the retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Photography in The Hague and is arranged in much the same order: Breukel has done no less than map out the life cycle of man. The portrait remains the leading theme, but there are countless photos in which the emphasis is on the entire body, floating in infinitely sparkling seawater, stretched out on the sofa, in the bath, heavily pregnant and suffering the first contractions of labour. The photographer selects an intimate, open point of view, as if reserved only for his children, loved ones and close friends. In essence he approaches people with his direct gaze, more interested in the sharp moments of existence than in external beauty. Babies in the split second they enter the world, bloodied and still attached to the umbilical cord, with wrinkled hands and red feet. That is where life begins and no one lives life unscathed. Even those fortunate enough to grow very old, at the end of the book, appear marked. A couple stand upright, as if supported by the sturdy fabric of their coats. The tone of the blues pervades his work. Not that it is melancholy or despondent; on the contrary, life is openly celebrated here. It can be derailed, however, at a moment's notice, as sickness and death are inevitable



Sandra and Elf Derks, Bergen 2000
© Koos Breukel



Koos and Riet Breukel, Kijkduin 1993
© Koos Breukel

parts of life. In contrast with Ed van der Elsken, another nonconformist with an inclination towards humanity, Breukel avoids the playful and the reactive. Although like Van der Elsken he grasps the moment of surprise, at the same time he allows the subject to retain a reflective quality, the gaze may briefly slip away or turn inwards. We do not see anyone laughing. There are many portraits in *ME, WE* in which the eyes look straight into the camera, focusing on the viewer, but when the subject looks to the side or slightly upwards, this slows things down by an almost imperceptible breath.

A thin black line wandering around a house

That sense of modesty evidently grew over the years. However, a couple of events in Breukel's life compelled him towards premature seriousness. His life of travel and photographing international and local stars for magazines changed course after a serious car accident in 1992, six years after his graduation. It took place in the Schiphol Airport motorway tunnel. The photographer himself was not driving, but it was his car which caused the accident. From that point on he showed a special interest in people who had endured horrible experiences or were burdened with a handicap. He worked more thematically, for instance in 1997 photographing survivors of the aeroplane disaster at Faro Airport, in which dozens of Dutch citizens lost their lives, and later parents of children who had died in the Volendam café fire next to other parents of Volendam who had lost a child. He also begins to document the progression of illness in two of his friends. Michael Matthews, theatre director and friend of Breukel, asked him to do so, which took courage, on both sides. This resulted in the book *Hyde*, 1996, a coproduction. Matthews wrote the lines of poetry. Seldom has physical deterioration led to such a clarion call as in this photo series. 'Just a thin black line wandering around a big house,' writes the AIDS patient of the skeleton his body has become. It is enclosed in a strange, silvery, scaly skin. 'The illness of time and want / has made me magnificent.' The second half of *Hyde* repeats the first half in the opposite order, but this time in negative, printed on silver paper. Anyone who sees that as an easy way of evoking transcendence is forced to swallow their words on considering the cover: what lies in the hand bears a disconcerting likeness to diseased skin.

A couple of years later his colleague from the very beginning, Eric Hamelink, turned out to be suffering from a brain tumour. The cheerful photos of a good-looking Eric and his girlfriend in the countryside, included in *ME, WE*, are drowned out by a face that loses its beauty, becoming improbably bloated with the medication. I still feel the same sense of disbelief as when I first saw the series. Surely such extreme ugliness cannot really exist? They began to take photos of one another during their studies in 1986 and more than ten years on Koos Breukel continued.

A photo explains nothing

In 1992 Willem van Zoetendaal, then head of the photography department at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, invited Breukel to come and teach there. He did so until 2003, spanning a period when the department was a hotbed of talent, with names such as Rineke Dijkstra, Hellen van Meene, Charlotte Dumas and Leo Divendal. Van Zoetendaal exhibits excellent judgement, having, not only as a teacher, but also as publisher and gallerist, encouraged many new photographers. Among other things, in 2006 he exhibited Breukel's series *Cosmetic View* and published the book by the same name. This series involves colour portraits of adults and children with eye problems, generally due to illness or accident. Some have their own eyes but little vision, others have artificial eyes. One feels somewhat uneasy staring at the photos for long and we can clearly distinguish the eye which focuses correctly. Moreover the photos are so sharply lit that

every scar, blemish, dry patch, birthmark or hanging eyelid is clearly revealed. Mainly, however, you feel like a voyeur for looking to see whether other people can see. Despite the dazzling ambiguity of the girl pictured on the cover, various portraits in *Cosmetic View* lack the tension of Breukel's more successful portraits. These did not make it into *ME, WE*.

A good portrait remains a puzzle for which it is impossible to pin down hard criteria. 'A photo explains nothing,' says Breukel in an interview. 'It maintains the mystery.' His talent enables him to make quick, intuitive decisions. Whether a portrait retains its strength in the long term becomes apparent when it remains hanging on the wall of the studio. 'His studio is a confined space,' writes Van Zoetendaal in *Cosmetic View*, 'containing a wooden, large format camera on a tripod, and a plain background sheet. Although daylight streams in through the roof, it is mainly artificial light that is being used.' Recently he has also worked with a digital camera. People who come to have their photo taken, generally Dutch celebrities, politicians, actors and artists, are often surprised that the severe photos are created in such a homely atmosphere. Studio, home and family life run together.

An interesting observation by Vincent van Gogh on the painted portrait appears in his letter from Arles to his sister in the Netherlands: 'Is such a figure not in all cases something different from a photograph? You see, in my view impressionism is above the rest in that it is not banal and one seeks a deeper resemblance than that of a photograph.' That deeper resemblance is an outstanding example of a motif which the viewer seeks in the work of a contemporary photographer such as Breukel. His fascination, after all, is with humanity as it is and has become, by stumbling and getting up again (only to go down in the end).

A place of honour for the skin

His strength may well be that he succeeds in clothing individuals in something universal or in a certain aura, however vague those notions may be, but meanwhile the individual remains the focal point. As a viewer can you read the depth, the imprint of a person's innate character, in a portrait? Can you read the portrait better if you know someone? This is an unanswerable question. Of those pictured whom I know because they are artists, I notice that they are presented with a twist, their appearance bent into monumental seriousness. This is particularly noticeable where two or three family members appear together. Roy and Céline Villevoeye, father and daughter, are presented right next to one another. Nothing in the photo indicates that Roy is the artist with whom Breukel made the long, dangerous journey to Asmat in Papua to stay with a community, resulting in the collective photobook *Ti*. The photo has an innate logic of its own. Sandra and Elf Derks are mother and daughter; you do not see that Sandra is a painter, but you do see the solid balance between *en face* and *en profil* and the fact that both are natural beauties, which makes the photo unusual. You also see the silence which pervades the portrait, the stillness and poetry of momentary nothingness. Photos clearly derive their strength above all from the rhetorical power of what is visually postulated and that is the pure language of imagery.



Roy and Céline Villevoye, Amsterdam 2009

© Koos Breukel

In Van Gogh's time a photo was mainly something for a calling card, a visual identity coupled with a name, and of course recognition still forms an important first step towards reading a photo. A panoramic overview of the photography collection was shown under the title *Modern Times* at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in winter 2014/2015. A high wall was covered in black and white faces by Stefan Vanfleteren, portraits crammed so close that the penetrating profusion was enough to make the viewer's head spin. Close by hung a map with captions. Towards the end of the exhibition the name of Princess Beatrix, the popular former queen, was completely worn out from visitors lingering with their fingers over it while picking out her portrait.

Does this first step apply to Breukel's work too? Many Dutch celebrities have appeared before his lens. Men from politics, women from the world of theatre and art. The dark background and isolated position alone ensure an abstraction

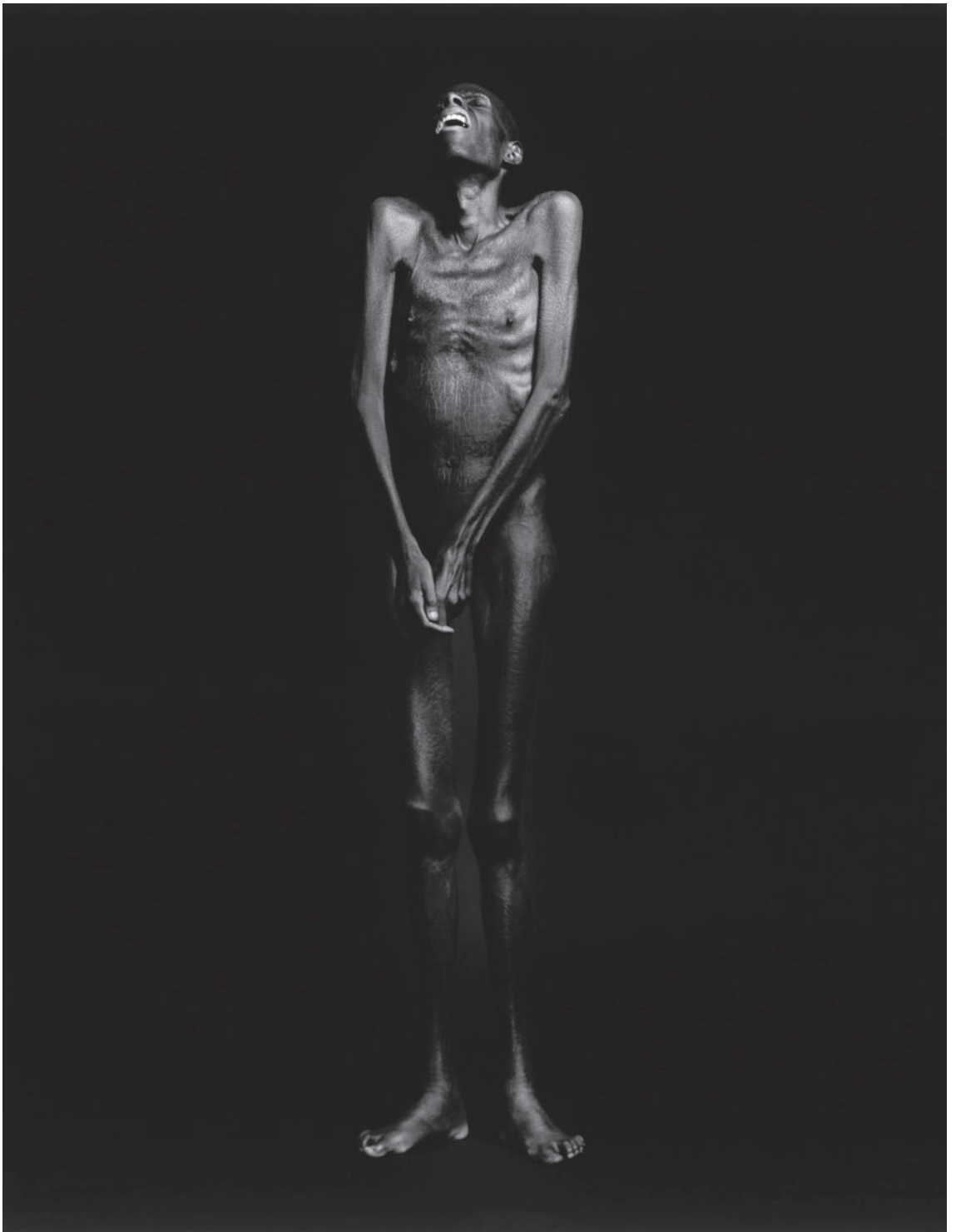
which demands a longer look. Actress Sylvia Kristel, for example, appears in such an honest, unglamorous snapshot that you forget for a moment who she is. A hint of sparkle in the gaze raises the photo above the ordinary. Photo historian and friend Hedy van Erp writes in the book that photos were also taken of King Willem-Alexander, presenting him as warmer and more sensitive than the designated official state portrait. Small prints, under embargo, hang in the studio along with photos of the photographer's three children.

The title *ME, WE* is borrowed from Muhammad Ali, the famous boxer. It is the complete text, the back cover states, of an improvised poem which came to him when addressing Harvard students. The title succinctly sums up the relationship with others and is appropriate for a selection of photos culminating in portraits of Breukel's nearest and dearest. The statement, coming as it does from this icon of effective physical power, forms a subtext, with an occasional emphasis on masculinity. In a few places the predilection for sturdy indomitability is so strong that people like Van Zoetendaal and even the critic Lamoree appear to be brothers of the daring agricultural or construction industry labourers who also have a place in the book. We have the male gaze to thank for the equally sublime depiction of a female nude such as Caitlin Hulscher a year before she gave birth to Breukel's eldest son Casper. That male gaze, however, must be curbed in viewing the babies, as the blue marbled skin can only come from a tender onlooker. The skin is in any case a prominent aspect of this work; unique in diversity and meticulously printed on baryta paper, the skin is placed in a position of honour unthinkable in the continual movement of daily life.

National Portrait Gallery

While the majority of the photos in the studio are taken indoors, a mixture of commissioned photos and initiatives by the photographer, the prize-winning book also contains various outdoor photos. The artists' village of Bergen is a favourite location, as is Vinkeveen, a lake with summerhouses near Amsterdam. These images are in no way exuberant, but they are more relaxed and breathe a greater sense of pleasure, with an important role for Breukel's children. In Bergen Breukel photographed his very elderly but girlish colleague Ata Kandó (1913), who once created *Droom in het Woud* (Dream in the Forest) with her children. Kandó had a studio in Paris before she came to the Netherlands as the wife of Ed van der Elsken (a relationship which did not last). Of the many portrait photos he took, that of Rineke Dijkstra is a particularly classic example. He is reported to have asked her to stand still on entering. Wearing her winter coat, her hair half covering her face after her cycle ride over, her observant gaze emerges from the shadow just sufficiently to be present. What an eminent counterpart for the photo she once took of herself during a rehabilitation project, in a swimsuit, with a swimming cap, a paragon of the vulnerability which became her style.

Koos Breukel's fondness for portraitists is clear not only from the fact that he included them in his photographed circle of close friends, but also in his attempt to launch a *Dutch National Portrait Gallery*. He used the Kees Scherer Prize funds to set up an exhibition as an initiative towards an institute which has yet to find a permanent location.



Michael Matthews, Amsterdam 1995
© Koos Breukel

This exhibition, *H2O Humans*, took place in June 2015 in the Commandeurshuis of the Marineterrein in Amsterdam, displaying photos, drawings and videos of close colleagues. The plan for the Portrait Gallery is based on idealism; it 'seeks to contribute to the appreciation of humanity through portrait art. Portraits tell us how we see one another, how we like to see ourselves.' Hopefully soon people less closely tied to the Netherlands will also find a place on the wall.



Lucian Freud, London 2008

© Koos Breukel

No space for mediocrity

When leafing through *ME, WE*, we almost forget the role of passing time, so compressed and concentrated are the moments of life depicted. It is as if memory, inherent in photography, is cancelled out. Breukel goes beyond anyone else in capturing life's decisive moments. He shows his dead father, laid out in the coffin, his mother too, dead and ready to be taken away. This is done in the same modest, succinct manner as his depiction of the living, and, despite his matter-of-fact approach, with great love. For although affection may not be a conspicuous feature of these photos, you only need to look at the photo of Carlien Huijsmans and their daughter Lisa Breukel in Vinkeveen and you know that in this respect Koos Breukel is definitely a mythologist: he takes love as his theme.

There is just one photo in *ME, WE* showing Koos Breukel himself, standing beside his mother as they visit the house where he was born. The parallels between the two are remarkable. Both stand still because the remote shutter release in Breukel's hand needs time to do its work, but activity remains visible in their positioning. Time is visibly suspended. What makes this photo in my eyes the most beautiful in the book are the looks in their eyes. They do not look into the camera, but their attention is drawn to something that lies before them. Their gaze is identical, full of seriousness, concentration, devotion, expectation. It is a gaze that leaves no space for mediocrity. ■

Translated by Anna Asbury