



Erwin Olaf | Hope Portrait #5 | 2005

‘I don’t have
to convince
the world
anymore’

Erwin Olaf @ the Rijks

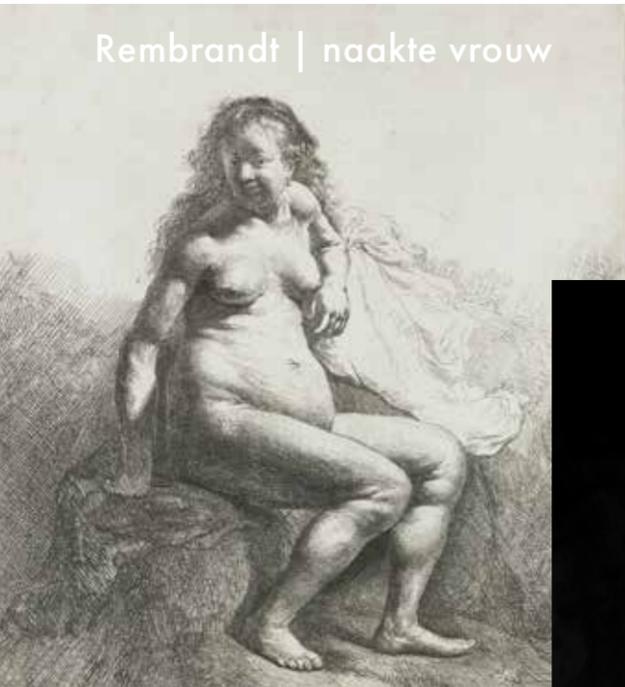
In The Hague he just closed ‘the most visited photo exhibition ever’ in The Netherlands, and on his 60th birthday – July 2 – he opens a prestigious expo at the Rijksmuseum. After years of working his head off, Erwin Olaf can finally take some rest.

Approaching his 60th birthday, Erwin Olaf is sitting at the kitchen table in his Amsterdam studio. It’s just the morning after his appearance on a popular talk show on the national TV. In The Hague two museums (Museum of Photography and the Gemeentemuseum) just closed a major retrospective in honor of the international well-known photographer. Drawing 330.000 visitors it was the best photographers exhibition in The Netherlands ever. And that’s just the beginning for Olaf.

On his birthday, July 2, Amsterdam Rijksmuseum will open the exhibition “12x Erwin Olaf”, in which Olaf’s images are placed in dialogue with Dutch painters of the Golden Age. He is tremendously successful and in the picture. How does it feel to be a star photographer? “Overwhelming”, he says. “It’s like finding your presents under the Christmas tree. There is that big package in which the exhibition in

The Hague is wrapped and there is that other tiny box. In it I find a diamond ring: that’s the Rijksmuseum.”

Erwin Olaf started his career as photojournalist in 1980 documenting the nightlife of Amsterdam. His trademark is to address the raw fringes of society, to look for abnormalities hidden in the ordinary. In his early work - influenced by Robert Mapplethorpe and Joel-Peter Witkin - he boldly approaches social issues and sexuality, breaking taboos, daring and provocative. Commercially he breaks through by photographing fashion and advertising campaigns for international brands as Nokia, Microsoft and Levi’s. His work represents a strong sense of aesthetics and orchestration, mixing realism and imagination. His work has been exhibited in major institutions worldwide and he won numerous international and media prizes. In the Netherlands he’s also known as



the court photographer of the Dutch royal family whom he portrayed in an informal and unusual honest style.

Last year the Rijksmuseum received almost 500 objects from Olaf's core collection. The exhibition "12x Erwin Olaf" is being held to mark this transfer. Olaf: "It's a tremendous honor. And also a little scary, my images alongside Rembrandt... isn't that haughty?" Olaf maintains a special relationship with the museum, "a friendship" he calls it. "I was a 12 year old boy when on a school trip when I first visited the "Rijks". We walked to the Nightwatch, but instead my eyes were drawn to a self-portrait of Rembrandt as a young man. It was like I was struck by lightning. It was so beautiful. Especially the shadow in the portrait and the way Rembrandt imposes himself boldly in the frame, fascinated me. And they still do. I still try to work with shadows in my photography as Rembrandt did." At the exhibition Olaf resembles the portrait of a boy with a hat with this Rembrandt portrait. "He has the same innocent open and fresh look towards the world as the young Rembrandt has: world, here I come."

The 11 images and 1 video selected for this exhibition, already existed. Much of Olaf's work is inspired and influenced by the painting masters of the Golden Age. The boy with the hat for instance comes from Olaf's series 'ladies hats' (1985-1994). 'I noticed that all those men in paintings of the Golden Age were wearing hats like ladies nowadays. So I found the faces with



Erwin Olaf | Squares | La Penseuse | 1987

it, bony, marked faces referring to the rustic characters in the paintings of Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Johannes Vermeer. They are people from the street, old men, fuller women. Photogenic.'

NUDE WOMEN

Olaf always photographed the nude. In his early work his images of old naked people, men with erections, extreme fat naked women, often in bondage clothing, shocked the world. 'La Penseuse', one of the naked women that he made in 1987 is now coupled with Rembrandt's 'Nude Woman'. 'In the past I photographed the nude rather aggressively,' he admits. 'Nowadays I approach the human body in a more muffled way. I am looking for the stillness and the reduction of emotions. Like the Portrait of a Girl dressed in Blue by Johannes Verspronck. Only this girl has a feather in her hands. It is the texture of the dress, the look in her eyes and the casual position of the hands,

there is an emotion in it. I coupled it with Hope-Portrait 5, a girl in a yellow dress and look how she places her hands. I once saw the painting 'Fatherly Admonition' by Gerard ter Borgh. You only see a woman on her back, her neck is bowed. And in a split second you know: this girl is guilty. It inspired me to the series 'Keyhole'.

"Why I am so successful? Honestly I don't know. I am a street fighter and I was lucky, I guess. Since 2002/2003 I really started to receive acknowledgment. Maybe because I stopped shouting and trying to proof myself at that time. I realized that I didn't have to convince the world anymore. Instead a deepening in my personal work appeared. Like in my own personal life. That way my images of realism and imagination are always reflecting my inner self. I make who I am. However, I'm still in search of what "being me" exactly means in my images. And I guess that search will never stop."



Olaf loves Amsterdam, he says. Living on one side of the city (Jordaan) and working on the other side (Rivierenbuurt) he crosses it every day by bike. "And I always try to take an different route letting centuries of beauty pass by. From the Golden Age to the beginning of the 20th century with it architecture of the Amsterdam School."

Favorite spots

1. Morgan & Mees Restaurant (Tweede Hugo de Grootstraat 2-6, corner Nassaukade)

"I love sitting on the terrace, watching people come by. Just the right spot for it. They serve great white wine. And you can cross the street to Café Same Place, the sex club and most exciting place of Amsterdam."

4. ArtZuid: yearly sculpture route in Amsterdam Old South (till 15/9)

"Every year the collection of sculptures is so well put together. I enjoy the unpredictability and the energy of the exposed work. I'm always touched by it and it's a great walk alongside the houses from the 30th of last century."

2. Museum Het Schip (The Ship) at the Spaarndammerbuurt

"My mother was from the Spaarndammerbuurt, so that's a connection. I'm always drawn to this beautiful house block built in the early 20th in the Amsterdam School style. It's so Dutch with the bricks and the roof tiles. And it's an important exponent of social housing, which we shouldn't lose sight on in this city."

3. Sculpture "Onbevangenheid", Brug 420

"Near the Apollohal you find a beautiful sculpture by Amsterdam's 'city sculptor' Hildebrand Lucien Krop (1884-1970). It's a little girl that carries a horse. Its abstract and somehow there is a threat in it, a small fringe."

