

**ERWIN OLAF & HANS OP DE BEECK** *Inspired by* **Steichen**

ERWIN  
OLAF &  
HANS  
OP DIE  
BECK

*Inspired by* **Steichen**



# INTRODUCTION

MICHEL POLFER

*Director*

*National Museum of History  
and Art Luxembourg*

The year 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of photographer Edward Steichen's death. Born in Luxembourg, he emigrated to the United States at a young age and became one of the great innovators in the relatively young medium of photography. Steichen was one of the first artists to experiment with the painterly qualities of the camera. He 'painted' his light images, as it were, looking for unusual angles, moody scenes and poetic moments. In the beginning, he often found these in the nature around him: a tree in his garden that he tracked through the seasons; a small lake surrounded by trees near an acquaintance's house; a view through trees to the Flatiron building in the heart of Manhattan (a photograph that sold at auction for \$12 million as recently as November 2022). This small group of photographs portraying nature was somewhat dwarfed in the following decades, however, by the wealth of portraits Steichen made of world-famous contemporaries such as Constantin Brâncuși, Greta Garbo and Thomas Mann, and the work he did for magazines and companies.

Yet nature remains a wonderful part of his very rich and varied body of work, part of which Luxembourg received in a major donation from Steichen's estate in 1985: 178 original photographs to be exact. These have since been kept at the National Museum of History and Art (MNHA). Together with 44 photographs from the collection of the City of Luxembourg (which joined them in 2018 on a long-term loan), the collection today amounts to a total of 222 works. The eloquence and beauty of these pictures is demonstrated via a quarterly presentation in the Steichen Cabinet, a small room in the museum's Wiltheim Wing, where a different selection of 20 prints is shown every three months. For the first time there is also, since December 2022, a *catalogue raisonné* of the museum's collection, which documents and presents each photograph in great detail – a milestone in the history of the study of Steichen's artistic legacy in his country of birth. The exhibition and the accompanying catalogue, expertly produced by Hannibal Books, are also of great significance, illustrating how to make the lasting significance and inspirational effect of Steichen's oeuvre palpable in our time. The exhibition curator Ruud Priem invited Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf and Belgian artist Hans Op de Beeck to work together, drawing parallels that he saw between their work and that of the 100-year-old Luxembourg photographer in an exhibition that shows examples from their oeuvres, with striking similarities in mood, themes and technique.

The discovery of the picturesque qualities of photography, the beauty of black, white and grey tones, the relationship of man to his natural environment and the worlds between reality, dream and fantasy, pass by our eyes as we walk through the exhibition. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we experienced the bliss of being outside, walking in nature, breathing fresh air, and we enjoyed the sounds around us that, for once, were not cars or planes. The wind, water, animals and, at times, brutal force of nature left a lasting impression on us. This is reflected in the exhibition and the catalogue. The three artists encourage us to think about our humble, fleeting place in a patient world that keeps taking what we do to it. Yet it also gives back, offering moments of peace, beauty and reflection. A huge thanks to Erwin Olaf, Hans Op de Beeck and of course Steichen, whose memory we honour in this exhibition. I am grateful for the extraordinary works of art they have shared with us, and I wish you, the reader, an inspiring visual journey.





EDWARD STEICHEN  
**BIG WHITE CLOUD**, 1904  
printed after 1953  
gelatin silver print, toned

Collection MNHA

# ERWIN OLAF & HANS OP DE BEECK

*Inspired by* **Steichen**

RUUD PRIEM

*Department Head and Curator of Fine Arts  
National Museum of History  
and Art Luxembourg*

## **Nature as a source of inspiration**

One of the few positive side effects of the global outbreak of Covid-19 may have been the fact that, over the past two years, many people have reconnected with nature. We walked, ran or cycled more often. The absence of cars and big crowds meant that animals started to venture into our immediate surroundings. There was less noise overall and more to listen to quietly. A nature outing is good for us: “*mens sana in corpore sano*” (a healthy mind in a healthy body). The natural environment has been an important source of inspiration for artists in the recent period – as it frequently has been throughout art history. This is certainly true for one of the most famous artists with Luxembourgish roots, the photographer Edward Steichen (1879–1973).

## **Steichen and his artistic legacy**

Born in Luxembourg, raised in Wisconsin, and trained as a lithographer’s apprentice, Steichen took up photography in his teens. By the age of twenty-three, he had created brooding tonalist landscapes and brilliant psychological studies that won the praise of Alfred Stieglitz in New York and Auguste Rodin in Paris, among others. Over the next decade, this young man – who was the preferred portraitist of the elite of two continents – was repeatedly hailed as the unsurpassed master of the painterly photograph.

Among his earliest works is a relatively small group of landscape photographs, including *Moonrise—Mamaroneck, New York* (1904). Steichen shot this view near the home of one of his friends, the art critic Charles Caffin. The photograph depicts a wooded area and a pond with the Moon shining through the trees, its light reflected in the water. It suggests the Moon’s beauty and mystery, the silvery quality of its light and its illusory proximity to the Earth. With images like this, Steichen was declaring photography’s great artistic potential, placing it on a par with painting and drawing and arguing for its inclusion among the fine arts. *Moonrise—Mamaroneck* became an iconic work by the artist. In February 2006, the 41x50cm photograph was put up for auction at Sotheby’s New York by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which already had another, slightly different version of the print in its extensive collection. Although the print was expected to reach a high price, the art world was stunned when it more than doubled the previous world record and sold for more than \$2,900,000.

The National Museum of History and Art Luxembourg (MNHA) has a smaller print of a later date in its collection. It was bequeathed to the State of Luxembourg on behalf of the artist himself and in collaboration with the George Eastman House in Rochester (New York) in 1985, along with 177 other prints. Our museum also preserves and

exhibits the 44 Steichen photographs belonging to the City of Luxembourg. For conservation reasons, both collections are displayed in cycles, presenting around 20 photos at a time. However, it is likely that more works by Edward Steichen will be shown both in Luxembourg and worldwide in 2023, which marks 50 years since the photographer died. Naturally, the MNHA will pay homage to him as well. Our current exhibition at the MNHA highlights the international importance of Steichen’s innovative visual language, themes and techniques for two highly acclaimed contemporary artists: Erwin Olaf (b. 1959) and Hans Op de Beeck (b. 1969).

## **The power of nature and poetic scenes**

The Amsterdam-based Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf is particularly known for his *mise-en-scène* and highly theatrical compositions. His recent series *Im Wald* (2020) will be on display at the MNHA, which Olaf described as follows in a statement from November 2020: “The idea for this series I got when I was visiting Munich, and after the meetings for an exhibition in the Kunsthalle (end of May 2021) I was invited for a tour with some forest rangers, in nature and forests in the surroundings of the Bavarian capital. I was very impressed by this, and also emotional because I have realised for some time that we – humanity – are committing enormous exploitation of nature, without considering the consequences for our own survival. But

above all, the indifference of nature and its silent overwhelming power made a huge impression on me.... It was then that I realised I had a subject for a new series of photography. After the series *Palm Springs*, partly photographed outdoors, I felt the need to make a new start and to leave all 'time travel' and decoration behind, with a subject that plays in the here and now and in which design by human beings would not play any role. The indifferent power of nature, the human arrogance towards that same nature, and the endless need for displacements, with the enormous consequences thereof, have become the theme for the series *Im Wald*."

Hans Op de Beeck, born in Turnhout and living in Brussels, works in a wide variety of media. Be it for his sculptures or expansive installations, his large-format watercolours or videos and animated films, he uses the staging strategies of theatre, film and architecture to create atmospherically dense, dream-like images that seem familiar and yet alien. Op de Beeck spent more than ten years working on a series of large, monochrome watercolours which he paints at night. The original works measure anywhere between 2.5 to 5 metres across and deal with both classical and contemporary themes. In many cases, they are poetic scenes depicting mysterious night-time locations, sometimes populated by anonymous people. As with his entire

oeuvre, the mood of the image is what is important. This is also true for his sculptures, which are generally presented in monochrome environments set in grey: a sleeping girl on a raft floating in the water, or two young lovers sitting together on a cliff. Art and the everyday blur into one another; realistically rendered people and objects mutate into sculptures in a monochrome world where life seems arrested.

#### **New collaborations**

The idea for a collaboration with Erwin Olaf initially arose in Bruges, where I worked for several years as chief curator of the Memling Museum. I invited the artist to visit the exhibition *William Kentridge: Smoke, Ashes, Fable* (2017/2018), hoping to get him interested in a future project at the museum. As I started working in Luxembourg shortly afterwards, the project did not come to fruition. However, Erwin reached out to me at the MNHA, an institution he knew well since he had exhibited a work there for the European Month of Photography (EMOP) in 2015, which the museum subsequently acquired. The renewed discussion and new venue led to fresh ideas. He had just started photographing outside his studio and was working on a series *Im Wald* (2020) that reminded me of Steichen's landscape photographs. At the same time, the monumental watercolour landscapes by Hans Op de Beeck came to mind

which, though impressive, had not yet been shown extensively in public institutions.

A new phase in Erwin Olaf's photographic oeuvre, Hans Op de Beeck's relatively unknown water-colour drawings and recent sculptures, combined with the small group of landscape photographs by Steichen, seemed to offer exciting material for an exhibition. The idea appealed to Erwin and Hans, who had never met but admired each other's work and Steichen's photography. Their first-ever collaboration is now on show in the Wiltheim Wing of the MNHA, running from 16 December 2022 until 11 June 2023. The exhibition features some 43 photographs, large watercolours and sculptures. The works by Erwin Olaf and Hans Op de Beeck present surprising links with Steichen's landscape photography, while at the same time allowing us to revisit the Luxembourg photographer's familiar oeuvre with fresh eyes. Although very different, the three artists come together like virtuoso musicians creating a new harmony, a richly variegated presentation of imagery in black, white and grey tones that is strikingly unified and coherent. As an enticing encore, Olaf and Op de Beeck also agreed to serve as guest curators for another presentation at the MNHA, selecting 20 original photographs by Edward Steichen from the museum's extensive holdings, on display in our Steichen Cabinet from 7 March to 4 June 2023.



ERWIN OLAF & HANS OP DE BEECK:

# THE NARRATIVE POTENTIAL OF IMAGES

KATJA TAYLOR

*Interview on behalf of the National Museum  
of History and Art Luxembourg*

For the first time ever, Dutch photographer Erwin Olaf and Belgian visual artist Hans Op de Beeck are presenting work together in an exciting new show at the National Museum of History and Art, staged to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Edward Steichen's death. A muted colour palette of black, white and grey tones dominates the immersive exhibition entitled *Erwin Olaf & Hans Op de Beeck: Inspired by Steichen*, which highlights nature as a key theme and spans photography, watercolour and sculpture.

Drawing on the modes and motifs of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism, Olaf's series of atmospheric black and white prints entitled *Im Wald* (2020) conveys the silent power of nature and the insignificance of human beings. The series was something of a departure for the photographer – instead of his usual studio setting, he captured his images outdoors in the Bavarian woods. The resulting large-scale photographs show figures in dialogue with the elements, often dwarfed by sweeping mountain ranges, ancient trees or waterfalls and rendered with painterly precision.

With their focus on nocturnal landscapes, Op de Beeck's monochromatic watercolours provide the perfect counterpoint to Olaf's series. Painted at night and spanning several metres, these works frequently depict moonlit forests, dramatic seascapes and starry skies in the delicate medium of aquarelle. Two of Op de Beeck's trademark grey

sculptures complete the show – featuring figures framed by natural surroundings, the works arrest moments in time, presenting scenes over which dust seems to have settled, Pompeii-like in nature.

Bound by a fascination for light, a keen interest in pictorial traditions and the narrative potential of images, Olaf and Op de Beeck both plunge viewers into carefully staged scenarios in their work, actively calling on them to reflect on and interpret what they see. We caught up with the two artists ahead of the show to speak about the ways in which their practices connect and converge, specifically in terms of their approach to storytelling and their meticulous crafting of images.

***I'd like to start off by talking about something rather obvious, which is that the show is completely monochromatic. Erwin, your black and white photographs from the series Im Wald are on display, as are Hans' nocturnal watercolours and trademark grey sculptures, in addition to Steichen's landscape prints. Everything is stripped back to focus on the stories the images tell. I was wondering if you, as artists, can better grasp the essence of things when you work in black and white, or indeed grey?***

**Hans Op de Beeck:** As a visual artist, I don't feel I need to make use of the full colour reality. Just because we see colour doesn't mean we have to reproduce it. By reducing colour, you go to the

essence of light. In my monochromatic watercolours, for example, the white paper is the source of light, so if I overwork the painting, I kill the light. In Erwin's photographs, the light source is also the carrier of the image. Light is what animates the image. That's what makes Vermeer's work so immersive and atmospheric – the quality of the light in his paintings.

**Erwin Olaf:** Yes, light is key, especially in black and white photography. If the light is shit, the image will be shit. Also, when you reduce the world to black and white, you come back to the essence. I was struck by that in one of your installations at Art Basel, Hans. You step into a world reduced to the essence of being.

***Erwin, you also spoke about the emotion of the silver bromide print in your artist statement about Im Wald. Can you elaborate on that?***

**E.O.:** An artwork can touch you not only with what it portrays, but how it's produced. This is especially true of painting, as Hans mentioned with regard to Vermeer's treatment of light, but you can also do this through the process of printing. As a photographer, I feel that hand-printed work evokes real emotion, it just hits you differently.

***Something that's also highlighted in the show is the theme of nature. Erwin, your series Im Wald is, amongst other things, a comment on the***

*power of nature and the insignificance of humans. And Hans, your watercolours often present landscapes devoid of people – seascapes, forests, a night sky. Is there a sense in which you're both highlighting nature, precisely at a time when it's most threatened by the climate emergency? In other words, is there an environmental concern at play here?*

**H.B.:** I don't see my work as a place where I should focus on what's happening in the world today. Implicitly, it's always there, digested through the image making, but it can flatten possible readings of the work. I also don't want to preach – who am I to patronise people, you know? What I like about Erwin's work is that it's a reflection of us as humans – our smallness in the face of time, history, nature, the sublime... There is common ground there, I feel – this concentration on every last detail, the crafting of the image.

**E.O.:** *Im Wald* was inspired by a trip to Munich and its natural surroundings. I never really got the landscapes depicted by German Romantics like Caspar David Friedrich – it's not in our Dutch imaginary, everything is flat here! But when I visited the Bavarian forest I understood that painterly fascination for the first time and drew on it for the series. I also felt so small out there and quite nervous when there wasn't a road nearby. I wanted to express that sense of smallness in the face of nature through large prints.

*Of course, your works don't just show nature and landscapes, they also show humans and their stories. And I feel that there are some connections to be made here in the way that you both stage scenes that prompt speculation – we get the sense that there's a story there, but there's a lot that's left unsaid. The boatman and his two passengers in Erwin's photograph, for example, or the young couple sitting on the cliff in Hans' sculpture. Would you agree that you both craft open-ended narratives for the viewer to interpret and reflect on?*

**E.O.:** I have always celebrated imagination in my work, so I definitely encourage viewers to create their own story based on the scenes I stage in my photographs. I'm always so curious to find out what they come up with.

**H.B.:** I think we both work in a very narrative way, the term I often use to describe it is visual fictions. We both have fictitious components in our work: Erwin stages his photographs and I produce paintings and sculptures – it's an evocation rather than a simulation of reality. We offer the possible beginning of a story and give the viewer a point of departure, so to speak. For my part, I want to be the companion of the spectator, question with the spectator and, in a sense, be the very first spectator of my own work.

*To finish, I'd like to turn to the work of the Luxembourg-born photographer Edward Steichen and consider the subtitle of your joint show, which is Inspired by Steichen. What do you think Steichen has to offer to contemporary artists?*

**E.O.:** Edward Steichen belongs to a certain tradition and generation. I'm very aesthetic in my photography, so I feel a certain affinity to Steichen in that respect. I am most struck by his night-time landscapes, though, where light plays a crucial role. *Moonrise—Mamaroneck* (1904) is a very interesting image, for example. Young photographers are always drawn to contemporary practices, but I think there is value in going back to older photographers. Steichen's experiments with light are quite inspirational.

*You're going to be curating a selection of photographs for our Steichen Cabinet at the MNHA in March 2023. How do you plan to approach that?*

**H.B.:** The selection will be very personal. We won't be approaching the collection from an art-historical perspective or looking at the prints in terms of what is considered to be valuable or not. I think we're both highly intuitive and work a lot with free association, so I'm really looking forward to the collaboration.

EDWARD STEICHEN  
**MOONRISE | MAMARONECK**  
**(MOONLIGHT | THE POND), 1904**

printed after 1953  
gelatin silver print

Collection MNHA







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HANS OP DE BEECK  
**LAKE, CLOUDY DAY, CANOE**, 2014  
black-and-white watercolour on Arches paper  
in wooden frame

Private collection,  
courtesy of Galerie Krinzinger

ERWIN OLAF  
**AUF DEM SEE**, 2020  
archival pigment print

Studio Erwin Olaf















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HANS OP DE BEECK

**WAVES, 2021**

black-and-white watercolour on Arches paper  
in wooden frame

Private collection

HANS OP DE BEECK

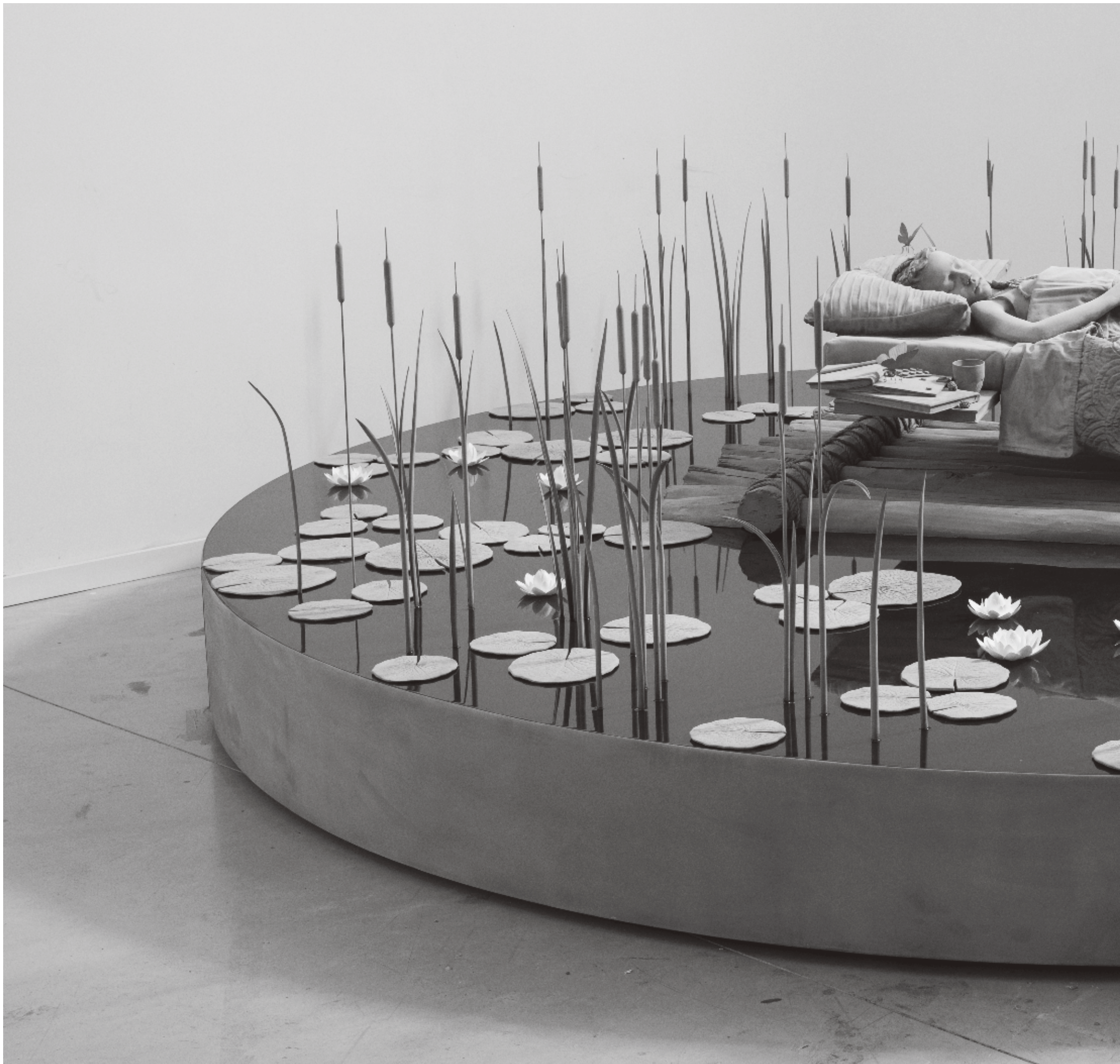
**MY BED A RAFT, THE ROOM THE SEA, AND  
THEN I LAUGHED SOME GLOOM IN ME, 2019**

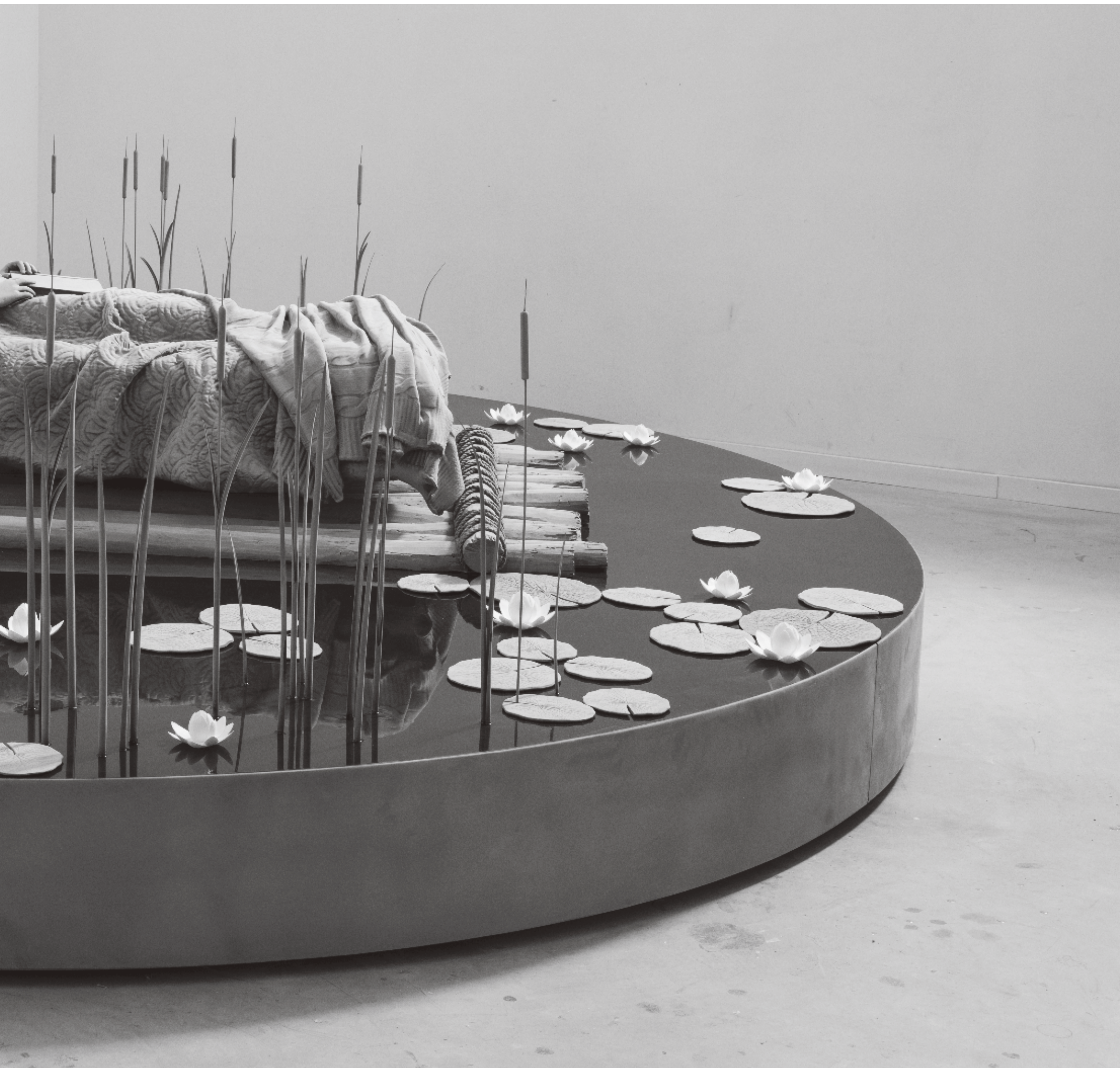
polyester, polyurethane, steel, polyamide, epoxy, wood, coating

Studio Hans Op de Beeck











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HANS OP DE BEECK

**NOCTURNAL SEA, 2017**

black-and-white watercolour on Arches paper  
in wooden frame

Private collection

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HANS OP DE BEECK

**MIRROR BALL, 2011**

black-and-white watercolour on Arches paper  
in wooden frame

Private collection

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HANS OP DE BEECK

**CONSOLING MOON, 2021**

black-and-white watercolour on Arches paper  
in wooden frame

Private collection

EDWARD STEICHEN

**DEAD SUNFLOWER, 1920–1960s**

printed after 1953  
gelatin silver print, toned

Collection MNHA



EDWARD STEICHEN

**NOCTURNE | ORANGERIE STAIRCASE, C. 1910**

printed after 1953

gelatin silver print

Collection MNHA



## COLOPHON

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**MNHA**



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Ministère de la Culture

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