FREEDOM

ERWIN OLAF

STEDELIJK MUSEUM AMSTERDAM HANNIBAL

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Rein Wolfs
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Foreword

When I spoke to Shirley den Hartog, Erwin Olaf's studio manager, shortly after his death, and the question arose as to whether the Stedelijk Museum should organize an exhibition of his work, I had to admit that my own knowledge of his oeuvre was rather superficial. I was, of course, acquainted with his most iconic photographs. They intrigued me, and I could sense that what he was doing was remarkable. Yet I had never fully penetrated the depth of his work. I had always thought of him only as something of a firebrand—someone who tested boundaries and relished a measure of controversy.

Sadly, one often doesn't realize the true significance of a person until they are gone. The image of Erwin Olaf that reached us through the media, but also through the memories of people around him, was one I did not know well enough. The image of an artist who, in everything he did, fought for personal freedom and refused to conform to social or artistic norms. He built his own world, wrote his own rules, and in doing so created a visual language that is not only idiosyncratic and unique, but also compels us to look at the world through different eyes. Olaf dared to direct, to stylize, to exaggerate. It is precisely because of this that he was able to create worlds that broke through the conventions of what is considered "good photography," or "art," or "activism." That is why, after several weeks of reflection and consultation with colleagues, I answered Den Hartog's question with a resounding yes.

With the exhibition *Erwin Olaf – Freedom*, and the substantial volume before you, we seek to present the full breadth of his life's work: From his early journalistic work in the early 1980s to his development as a studio photographer to the tranquil yet emotionally charged series *Grief* (2007), *Berlin* (2012), *Shanghai* (2017), and *Im Wald* (2020), and finally to the very last works he created shortly before his death. Yet this exhibition also makes clear that Olaf was far more than a photographer. He made films and sculptures, applied the same uncompromising aesthetic to both commercial and social commissions, and hosted legendary parties where he encountered many of the people who would remain his muses throughout his life. His working process was intense and perfectionist, his visual language unmistakably his own. What unites all his work is a profound sensitivity to justice. His engagement with social developments—from the AIDS crisis to gay rights, from 9/11 to climate change—was never abstract, but always rooted in personal experience. He viewed the world through his own frame of reference—his own body, his own life. From that position he reasoned, created, and fought. This book gathers the full range of Erwin Olaf's oeuvre, presenting a wide array of images alongside texts by curators, art theorists, journalists, and his close friends.

Paco Barragán explores the political resonance of Olaf's work through his self-portraits, which run like a thread through his career. Jonathan Turner considers the evolution of Olaf's practice in the 1990s, and his unconventional ideas about beauty. Gemma Rolls-Bentley reflects on his legendary parties at RoXY and other Amsterdam clubs, which

offered a refuge for those who were “different.” Colleagues from the Stedelijk engage in conversation with Hans van Manen and Taco Dibbits, both of whom cherished a special bond with Olaf. Tahrim Ramdjan contributes a critical essay on the portrayal of gay men in Olaf’s work, while Charlotte Cotton examines the representation of women in his later practice. Francis Hodgson reflects on the two main “motors” behind Olaf’s oeuvre and how they prevailed in both his commercial and independent work. Lars Been highlights different themes in Olaf’s work in concise texts scattered throughout the book, drawn from conversations with Shirley den Hartog and exhibition curator Charl Landvreugd. The result is a volume that sets itself apart from previous publications on Erwin Olaf—not only through the wealth of perspectives offered by its diverse contributors, but also through the thematic depth with which it engages with his work.

This publication offers a unique insight into his working process and techniques, revealing how Olaf continually tested his own boundaries, renewed his oeuvre, and translated his personal ideals into images that can rightly be called iconic. Erwin Olaf Springveld passed away on 20 September 2023. With this exhibition and this book, we seek to honor him and to celebrate his life and work. As an artist and as a human being. As someone who resisted the norm, who fought for freedom, and who, through his nonconformism, also gave others the space to be themselves. The firebrand I once thought I saw turned out to be someone who, tirelessly and through great willpower, championed the right to be oneself until the very end. And in doing so, he also opened my eyes.

It is with great pride that we have been able to realize *Erwin Olaf – Freedom.* We could not have done so without the support of many people, some of whom I would like to mention here by name. Above all, our gratitude and respect go to two people who played a central role in Olaf’s life: Kevin Ray Edwards, his beloved life partner, who was his anchor and gave him the space to live and work as he did; and Shirley den Hartog, his business partner, support, and confidante. Without her boundless energy, dedication, and willpower, this exhibition would not have been possible. We also wish to acknowledge the entire team at Erwin Olaf Studio— Andrew Kambel, Petra Keijser, Piek Kock, Piotr Owczarzak, Feriet Tunc, Erwin Venema, and Meyke Werdmölder—whose expertise and professionalism we could always rely on.

I would also like to mention curator Charl Landvreugd, who put together this exhibition in close collaboration with Shirley den Hartog and exhibition designer Marcel Schmalgemeijer. Thanks also to Maz Weston from Paradiso, who carried out research into the parties Erwin organized. Project manager Hedwig Wösten deserves special recognition for her determination and decisiveness in bringing this project to fruition within such a short time. And of course, we also wish to thank all our other colleagues at the museum who, in various ways, contributed to the realization of this exhibition. We thank the authors whose contributions made this publication possible. Designer Tim Bisschop, publisher Gautier Platteau, art director Natacha Hofman, and Sara Colson, along with Masha van Vliet from the Stedelijk Museum, who coordinated the project: Thank you for your care, creativity, and commitment. Finally, we would like to give special recognition to Ron Mandos Gallery, the Rijksmuseum, and the Royal Collections of the Netherlands. And of course, our main partners: the Municipality of Amsterdam and the VriendenLoterij, together with exhibition partners Fonds 21 and the VandenEnde Foundation, whose generous support has made this exhibition possible.

Paco Barragán

The Politics of the Portrait: From Self-Image to Zeitgeist

Portrait Erwin Olaf, 1984. Photographer unknown

After twenty years of working closely as a curator with Erwin Olaf, I know it's impossible to look back at his work without understanding his personality. Since the early 1980s, his complex, compassionate, and committed temperament resonated with contingent causes and struggles for social justice, equality and freedom of expression. Olaf's photographs and videos deftly weave identity, race, gender, sexuality, inclusivity, and multiculturalism together to grapple with the anti-liberal, anti-universal, and anti-democratic challenges of right-wing parties and fundamentalist religious groups. Within his prolific oeuvre, his self-portraits in particular stand out as reimaginations of the genre while they materialize how the artistic configures the political, and vice versa.

Alongside artists such as Gregory Crewdson, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, Rineke Dijkstra, Yasumasa Morimura, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, and Joel-Peter Witkin, Olaf is considered one of the forerunners of so-called "staged photography." In other words: narrative photography that, I believe, characterizes the most experimental area of photography during the last forty years and, as such, enables its integration within the realm of the art world. During his career, Erwin Olaf constantly pushed the artistic envelope while making incursions into neopictorialism, hyper-narrativity, interartisticity and meta-photography.

What is surprising is the fact that Erwin Olaf referred so often and so consistently throughout his career to the self-portrait as "politics," understood in the sense that Hannah Arendt used it, as a political action that takes place in the public space "in the society of men."[1] These self-portraits transcend the status of mere self-image to become a metaphor of the zeitgeist between the 1980s and the 2020s. Looking at Olaf's self-portraits is looking at the situational causes that play out in contemporary society.

If we analyze his work chronologically, we see from the year 2003 a clear break in his artistic trajectory: from being more commercial or direct and aggressive in terms of expression, toward a more intimate and introspective approach. This starts with the series *Separation*. This transition heralds not only a conceptual and formal shift, but also a medium-based change through the use and integration of video into his series. His earlier oeuvre reflects a very personal commitment to causes directly related to gender, identity, race, feminism, lack of expression, beauty, and sexuality. From 2003 on, his work becomes more sophisticated, open, and subtle while addressing more general preoccupations related to the failures of grand narratives in twenty-first-century society. Olaf points his camera at a society in which the traditional safety nets—school, church, friends, family, university, parliament—start to fail, condemning the subject to alienation, lack of communication, anxiety, and estrangement under the weight of disparaging social conventions in a rapidly changing world. Yet, his self-portraits traverse these two clear identifiable phases in his oeuvre like a red line, in which the personal and private become a metaphor for the collective and the public.

The Portrait is Political: Self-Image as Battlefield

It's facile to interpret Erwin Olaf's self-portraits as micro-chapters in his personal diary made up of all the photos of his artistic works since the early 1980s. However, there is a strong and undeniable desire for self-therapy, which Olaf himself confirms: "I use the self-portrait from time to time to express my frustrations, mindfucks and questions of life."[2] But we fall short if we interpret Olaf's self-images as merely personal pics, because they transcend the personal sphere to address the key elements of what is expected of a socially just society. While more often than not skewing political correctness, especially in the 1980s and the '90s, Olaf delves into the aforementioned issues in defense of all sorts of invisible, repressed minorities. And as such, his portraits depict the contested social, political, and cultural climate of those decades.

Bullied at school at a young age and after a troubled adolescence—as we can read in Mischa Cohen's biography—Olaf somehow found in photography the tool to channel both his inner demons and artistic ambitions, and combat the idea of not-belonging, of being an outsider.[3]

If we examine his self-portraits from the 1980s, they clearly reveal this particular mix of rage, anger, and aggression, fueled by his need to defend his queer identity, gender and sexuality. "I photograph motivated by aggression. I still have some scores to settle."[4] While his first self-portrait from 1981 (titled *First Studio Shoot*) staged in front of a typical photographer's curtain, shows him somewhat insecure, shy, contained and "unexhibitionistic", the disturbing *Cum – Self-Portrait* (1985), the unabashed *Getting Close – Self-Portrait with Teun* (1985), and the extreme *Self-Portrait, Thirty Years Old* (1989) show an image of Erwin that is more aggressive, authentic, and committed to queer causes.

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pp. 34-35 / p. 37

These black and white portraits seem to be under the direct spell or influence of Robert Mapplethorpe, Hans van Manen, and Joel-Peter Witkin. They are relatively straightforward in terms of composition and the use of light. Yet, one already senses in Olaf the will to experiment with form in search of his own artistic syntax. His presence in the portrait allows him not only to explore his own homosexuality—connecting to 1980s society with regards to the body, sexuality, and eroticism against a backdrop of the AIDS pandemic and large-scale pro-gay protests—but also to endow these images with credibility: It's about exposing the model to an extreme and giving away his own vulnerability. In other words, his nakedness entitles him to demand from his models the same and builds up a more democratic relationship. While this act of coming out of the closet in his self-portraits is a clear testimony to his political engagement with the queer community, it doesn't really make him feel better or relieved, as he still feels at odds with his own sexuality and body. This also motivates three decades later the remake *Getting Close Again – Self-Portrait with Teun* from 2018: an investigation into his own body and its inevitable physical degeneration.

p. 36

The Photoshop Revolution: Hedonism as Self-Image[5]

Although I argued above that we can discern two phases in Erwin Olaf's artistic career, which are clearly separated by the year 2003—as a result of his mourning mood caused by the mix of the 9/11 attacks, the death of his father, and the termination of his long-term relationship with Teun Frieszo in 2001—the first phase can in turn be subdivided into the "black and white photography phase" of the '80s and early '90s and what we can call the "Photoshop phase": the period from 1999 until the 2000s. It's the period of series such as *Mature* (1999), *Royal Blood* (2000), *Paradise* (2001), *Fashion Victims* (2000), and *Rouge* (2005), which would garner Olaf international exposure and a lot of media attention. This phase is followed by more intimate and inward-looking series such as *Separation* (2002), *Rain* (2004), *Hope* (2005), *Annoyed* (2005), and *Dusk* (2009) and *Dawn* (2009).

p. 240 / pp. 30–31, 63, 223

p. 63

pp. 238-39, 248–49, 252–53 / pp. 244–47, 250–51

It's fascinating because we sense that two Erwin Olafs are cohabiting within his artistic mind: the "new" more subtle, calm and inward-looking one and the '"old" crude, aggressive and engaged one, who resists leaving the stage. Curiously enough, his most iconic self-portraits in the 2000s hark back to his earlier activism but this time in color, not black and white, and with a pronounced Photoshop aesthetic.

On the other hand, this gradual shift to color photography with significant Photoshop manipulation—which is pushed over the top in series such as *Paradise* (2001) where some of the clowns are devilishly elongated; or the notorious portrait of Princess Diana, *Di, † 1997* from the year 2000—reflects the neo-liberal zeitgeist after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the advent in the 1990s of Wall Street speculation and "casino capitalism." For Olaf, the '90s embodied what Mischa Cohen aptly called the "RoXY years": exuberant, unconventional, glamorous, wild, nonstop partying in club RoXY–Amsterdam's version of New York's Studio 54.[6] In fact, some of the most extravagant and colorful parties and acts were organized by Olaf himself. I think it's safe to conclude that there is a clear connection or resonance between the cultural climate, Olaf's intense partying, the conceptual and political themes he addresses in his artwork, and the medium and manner he uses to formalize them. All coalesce in a new over-the-top hedonism in which the nightlife has a direct impact on Olaf's photographs and videos to articulate a very personal and engaged dreamworld.

pp. 93–96

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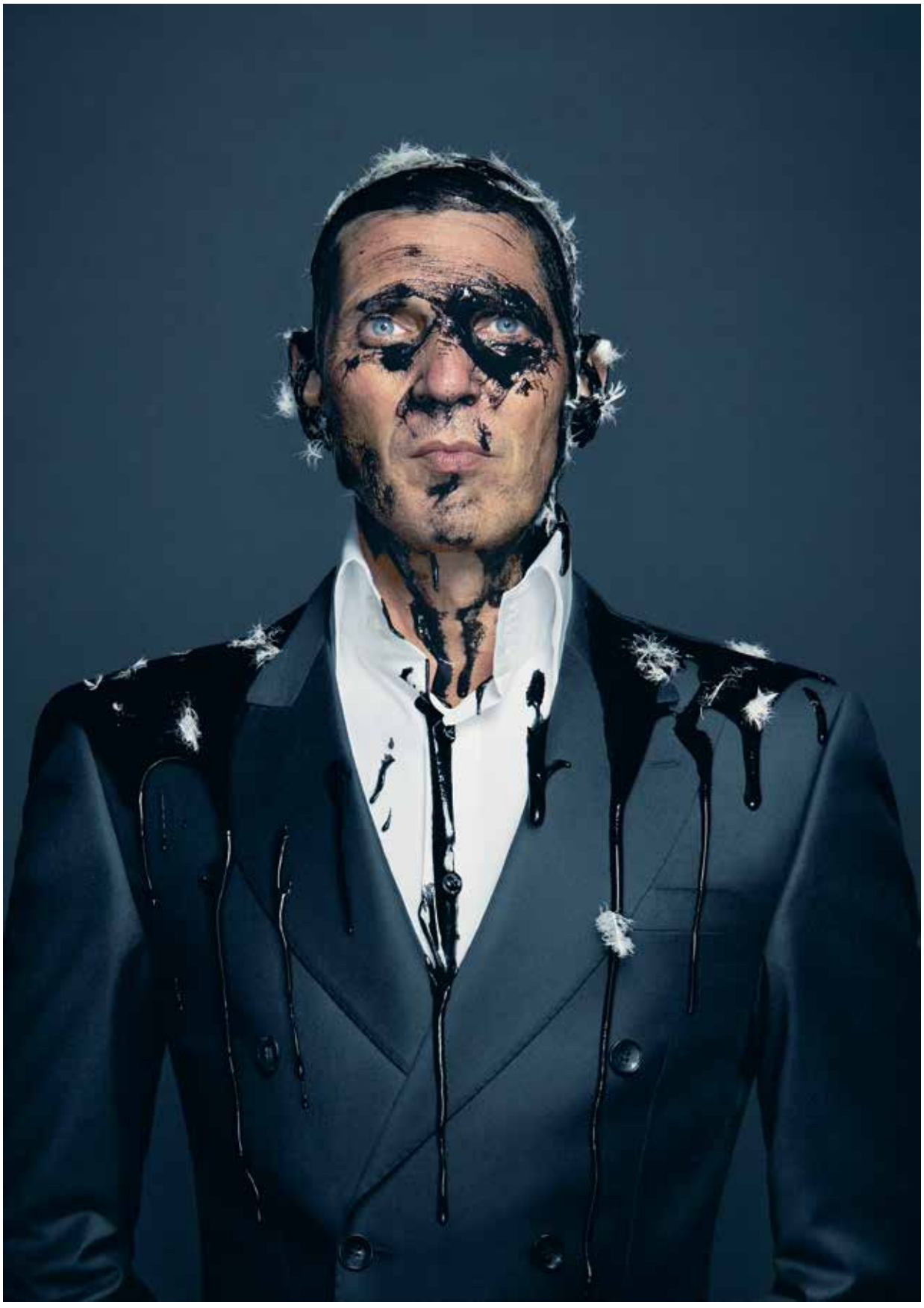


Tar & Feathers 01, 2012

Tar & Feathers 02, 2012

Huai Hai 116, Self-Portrait from the series *Shanghai*, 2017

Self-Portrait No. 1 – 48 Years Old from the series *Self-Portraits, Andy Warhol*, 2007

Self-Portrait No. 4 – 48 Years Old from the series *Self-Portraits, Andy Warhol*, 2007

THE

QUICK

BROWN

FOX

JUMPED

OVER

THE

LAZY

DOG

WOMEN'S FREEDOM

Street Photography

**“That camera was his protection.
With his camera, Erwin dared
to venture out into the world.”**

– Shirley den Hartog

From an early age, Erwin Olaf formed a special bond with his camera. It offered him protection and opened the door to unknown worlds. He was reserved by nature, but the camera allowed him to get close to people. He took to the streets of Amsterdam—often with friends—to capture protests and the city’s nightlife. His work in his early days as a journalist, for *Sek*, the magazine of the LGBTQ+ rights organization COC Nederland, and for *Vrij Nederland* magazine, took him to places that would shape both him and his later artistic practice. According to Shirley den Hartog the camera brought out another side of him: “Erwin was not someone who would just walk up to people. If he found someone interesting, there would be something that held him back—unless he had a camera with him. That gave him the freedom to approach people, and they would gladly open up to him.”

Even in risky situations, such as protests or riots, Olaf felt that the camera offered him protection. Den Hartog explains: “He once told me that he was present during the ‘Geen Woning, geen Kroning’ riots [‘No housing, no coronation’—the squatter protests that erupted during the inauguration of Princess Beatrix in 1980]. His then-boyfriend Teun and he were standing at the front, and he thought they were about to be arrested. The police arrived, looked at Teun and Erwin, and simply let them be—because of that camera.”

Hartog continues: “At one point, *Vrij Nederland* asked him to write a report on the S&M scene in the Netherlands—a world he knew nothing about and imagined to be full of eccentric characters, but he actually found them very pleasant. He said, ‘They were as nice as my mother!’ Assignments like that brought him into contact with a wide variety of people—and made him even more liberal.”

According to Charl Landvreugd, Olaf's early photographs carry an emancipatory message: "There is now a whole generation of young gay people who have grown up in the freedom that Erwin and his generation fought so hard to secure. The photographs of protests against Cardinal Simonis—who faced strong opposition for his conservative statements on abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality—are a good example of this. They make it clear that our current freedoms cannot be taken for granted."

Olaf's early work embodies his passionate struggle for freedom. With his photographs of an AIDS benefit evening or a Pink Saturday in Leiden, he takes us into the very heart of the queer community of that era. With images of gay bars and the S&M scene, he breaks taboos and asserts the right to live one's own life, outside the norm. The freedom to love whoever you want and the freedom to be yourself—proud and without shame—are a common thread through Olaf's oeuvre, even in the series from the end of his life.

Text: **Lars Been** (curator at Ron Mandos Gallery), based on conversations with **Shirley den Hartog** (founding director of the Estate Erwin Olaf) and **Charl Landvreugd** (curator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam)

***Utrecht > Amsterdam*, 1984. Photo: Frans Franciscus**

***Erwin Olaf*, 1983. Portrait in a gallery space in a squatted building on Nieuwendijk, Amsterdam**


WERKMANSPALEIS
VOOR AL UW
VRIJETIJDSKLEDING

Mark from the series *Lorena Bobbitt Boys*, 1996

Tonya from the series *Patrick Bateman Girls*, 1995

unexpected side effects and opalescent hues suddenly appeared. “In the darkroom, each time I print the picture and burn the negative, it’s unique. Literally, I am playing with fire.”[6]

At a time when Olaf’s commercial work was also in the spotlight, he created two lesser-known photo series in which the models themselves were served up for consumption: *The Patrick Bateman Girls* (1995; after the serial killer who dismembered his victims in Bret Easton Ellis’s slasher novel *American Psycho*) and *The Lorena Bobbitt Boys* (1996; dedicated to the woman who snipped off her husband’s penis in a fit of jealousy). In his first journey into digital manipulation, Olaf photographed six men and six women, then neatly sliced through their limbs using computer software. The kitchen-clean cuts are reminiscent of advertisements for salami. The models themselves seem happy enough—innocent bystanders to the cartoon violence of slapstick.

Creating an unexpected mix of horror and comedy, part of the joke lies in his subjects’ vacant expressions. “The dumber they look, the more sensual they seem,” Olaf argued.[7] Even so, the artist’s commentary is not derogatory. Except for the initial acts of dissection, his computerized intervention was minimal. “No one is truly perfect. So I’ve left in the goose bumps, the little rolls of fat, the blemishes. I didn’t set out to make my models look better or more beautiful. It’s too easy to simply airbrush out what could be judged to be imperfections. My computer manipulation is more like a sort of embroidery.”[8]

Each of Olaf’s *Patrick Bateman Girls* stands atop her own pedestal. *Tonya* the ice-skater, *Inez* the sharpshooter, *LaToya* the juggler, *Pam* the hoop-dancer, *Ueva* the soccer player, and *Priscilla* the nightclub singer become atomic bombshells bathed in a phosphorescent glow, scantily dressed in shimmering bikinis. Alongside Olaf’s bimbos are his himbos. *The Lorena Bobbitt Boys* are chunks of literal beefcake, their hard biceps sliced through as tasty morsels. Inventing personal backstories for each character, Olaf presented *Robin* the superhero’s sidekick, *Popeye* the lewd sailor, *Bobby* the disco-dancing cop, the quizzical *Joker*, *Freddy* the brazen rockstar, and *Mark* the swimmer. Named after Olympic gold medal winner Mark Spitz, *Mark* holds a trophy in his right hand, but amputation through digital intervention places the prize still out of reach.

Olaf depicted his new fairy-tale stars as protagonists in their own soap operas. The “girls” and “boys” were like spark plugs providing a decadent charge of glamour. But whereas Cinderella merely misplaced her crystal slipper, in Olaf’s version of the fable, his princess has lost both her feet.

This storytelling and sense of narrative is key to the underlying richness of Olaf’s photographs. Throughout his career, Olaf’s pulp-fiction backstories were often hilarious. In preparation for his 1996 exhibition *Stars in Black & White & Colour* in Sydney, Olaf invented mini-biographies about his dozen models, driven by the unhinged actions of Patrick Bateman and Lorena Bobbitt.

“*Tonya* is the culprit, caught in the act,” Olaf said about his portrait of the vengeful ice-skater, making up the narrative as he went. “She’s just done the dirty deed, slugging her rival, Nancy, and now she’s skating away. However, she’s been captured in full flight by a newspaper photographer. *Tonya* is wearing a pair of nice, full-blooded American skates, and though it looks like she’s gliding on ice, she’s actually standing on a big cake. The icing is made from kitchen tiles. There’s a number 45 in her hair. It’s not her measurements or anything. It’s there for no reason. But that’s what *Tonya* is all about. She’s as senseless as she is mean, the bitch.”[9]

“No-one is truly perfect. So I’ve left in the goose bumps, the little rolls of fat, the blemishes. I didn’t set out to make my models look better or more beautiful. It’s too easy to simply airbrush out what could be judged to be imperfections. My computer manipulation is more like a sort of embroidery.”

— Erwin Olaf

Olaf himself discounted some of his early experimentation with digital effects, having quickly recognized the potential pitfalls of relying too heavily on postproduction. This helped shape his emerging direction toward scenes of emotional honesty and invisible retouching. He retained his respect for classical techniques, so much so that years later, after winning the Johannes Vermeer Prize in 2011, he decided to spend time studying traditional photography and printing techniques in the darkroom, harking back to his days working at his studio in the late 1980s.

This also allowed Olaf to continually ping-pong and mix his inspirations, ranging from such masters of black and white photography as Paul Blanca, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Hans van Manen; Jan Steen and the painters of the Dutch Golden Age; more modern Dutch artists as diverse as George Hendrik Breitner, Carel Willink, and Gerrit Rietveld; and the American painters Edward Hopper and Norman Rockwell. Similarly, he shuffled between highbrow and kitsch, royalty and Eurotrash. He included elements of calendar pinups, suburban Dutch decor, and the cheap tears of US TV soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful*. His pictures didn’t need to be seen in a prescribed context. They were equally at home on the walls of an art gallery or museum as they were as part of a children’s television program or a poster for a theater company.

Another of Olaf’s recurring themes was aging and death, both in terms of female iconography and his reflections on his own gradual demise. Without fear, Olaf turned the camera on himself. For more than forty years, his unflinching self-portraits functioned as a visual diary of his own life. His triptych

I, The Helena Slicher Wedding Dress, 1759. For the exhibition *Catwalk* in the Rijksmuseum, 2015

Saskia, aged 8 from the series *Mind of Their Own*, 1995

Self-Portrait 50 Years: I Wish, I Am, I Will Be (2009, pp. 25–29), shows three versions of himself, progressing from handsomely idealized to realistically honest, ending up with him looking elderly, sad, and frail. Much of Olaf's photographic portraiture and video imagery specifically questioned the pressures that society places on women. *Shocking pink* (1996), created for a Dutch national advertising campaign about the dangers of drunk driving, shows a blowsy older woman holding a pampered poodle. She stares back at the viewer, defiant, not acting her age. In *Fischweib* [Fishwife] (1997), a disgruntled woman hugs a large fish to her naked body in a portrait that is both brackish and clammy. For decades, Olaf poked fun at the trope of growing old gracefully.

"I've always tried to make jokes about beautiful people to try to put the whole stupid, overvalued fashion model industry in a new perspective," said Olaf. In his *Mature* series (1999, p. 240), Olaf portrayed a group of Dutch women, aged between sixty and ninety. He gave them the names of the ubiquitous supermodels from the 1990s—Cindy C., Claudia S., Naomi C., Jerry H., Helena C., and Christy T.—women whose names were shorthand for glamour and unattainable perfection. Olaf's revised models pose as sexy pinups in see-through negligées, shiny black stilettos, and string bikinis. These women glow as icons of uncommon pride, standing in sharp contrast to their drab settings. The floral wallpaper, cheap carpets, and pot plants are reminiscent of a stuffy waiting room in a retirement village.

"The outside part of getting older is the skin," said Olaf about his *Mature* series. "But with the help of makeup, wigs, and revealing clothing, plus a bit of computer manipulation, I changed these women into actresses."[10]

Di, † 1997 from the series *Royal Blood*, 2000

Shocking Pink, 1996. Campaign for the Dutch Road Safety Association

Fischweib, 1997. Commissioned by Schauspielhaus Vienna

Each woman is captured in a distinct emotional state: sultry, bemused, seductive, sporty, aroused. While presenting a satire on the commercially limited concept of sensuality, including the way in which society tends to overlook the sexual urges of the elderly, these images are neither cynical nor exploitative. Each portrait shows a woman clearly in control of her own destiny.

They exist in opposition to the young models in the series *Royal Blood* (2000), who impersonate eight historical figures who met with violent deaths. Wearing white costumes to better show their bloody wounds and red-rimmed eyes, Olaf's models pose as Julius Caesar, Poppaea, Marie Antoinette, King Ludwig II, Empress "Sissi" of Austria, Tsarina Alexandra of Russia, Jackie Kennedy both before and after the assassination of her husband, US president John F. Kennedy, and, most controversially, Lady Diana. In this final portrait, the Mercedes emblem is embedded in Diana's blooded arm. When this portrait was exhibited in Ireland several years after her death, there were calls to have it removed due to its supposed sacrilegious nature. Olaf was surprised.

In the *Royal Blood* portraits, the subjects stare back at the viewer with expressions of accusation and condemnation. As Olaf was keenly aware, a well-publicized, violent death is also a shortcut to eternal fame. He often commented on the public obsession with the magical triad of youth, beauty, and blue blood.

After his baroque and extravagant photos from the late 1980s/early 1990s (*Chessmen*, *Squares*, *Blacks*), *Mind of Their Own* (1995), and *Fashion Victims* (2000), Olaf pared back the artifice and steered clear of representations of older models, overweight women, and subjects with unusual bodies. He began to produce more stylized, minimalistic photographs that posed deeper philosophical questions, revealed by his series *Hope* (2005, pp. 244–47, 250–51), *Grief* (2007, pp. 255–67), *Keyhole* (2011–13, pp. 229, 273–75), and *Palm Springs* (2018, pp. 16–17, 307–23). Some of his subjects are clearly mourning.

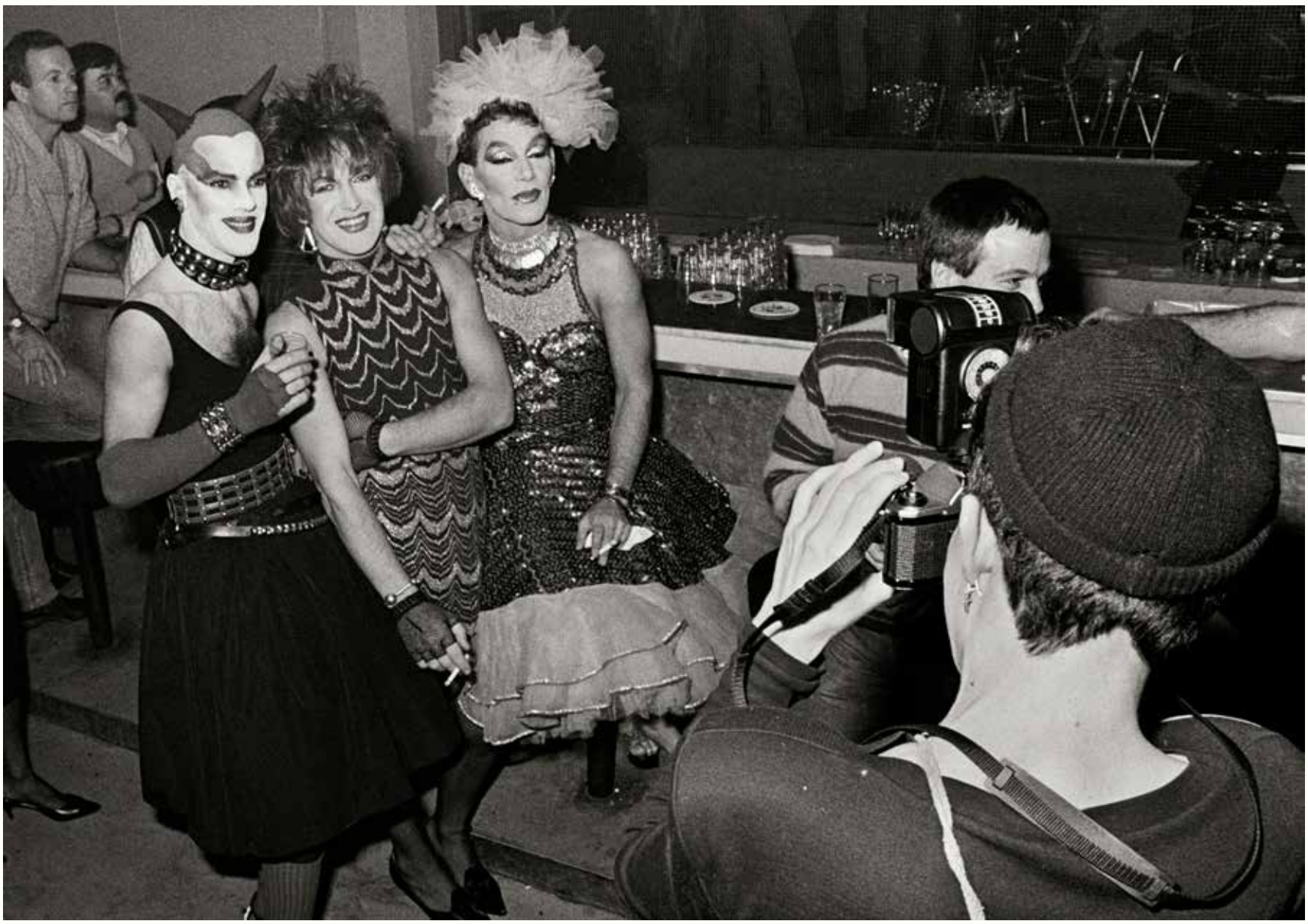
In the 1990s, while much of Dutch contemporary realism was about subterfuge, ambiguity, and sublime duplicity, Olaf remained honest, unequivocal, and direct. His work effortlessly bridged many strata of society. With a sumptuous sense of aesthetics linked to painting and cinema, he straddled the worlds of art, advertising, journalism, and fashion photography. Later, this enabled him to make several state portraits of King Willem-Alexander, Queen Máxima, and the Dutch royal family (p. 279), while simultaneously being known for his strikingly theatrical nudes, his early photographs recording fetish subcultures, and his organization of the outrageous Fucque les Balles party events in Amsterdam.

As an unrivalled social commentator, Olaf was forever shattering stereotypes, queer and otherwise. His photographs variously incorporated the themes of shame, femininity, the worship of youth, the terrors of cosmetic surgery, the marketing of blatant sexuality, the beauty myth, and living in defiance of old age. As he once said to me with his characteristic deep laugh, referring to his own fear of aging, "Anyway, you don't get any older than dead."

All quotes by Erwin Olaf are from interviews and conversations with Jonathan Turner.

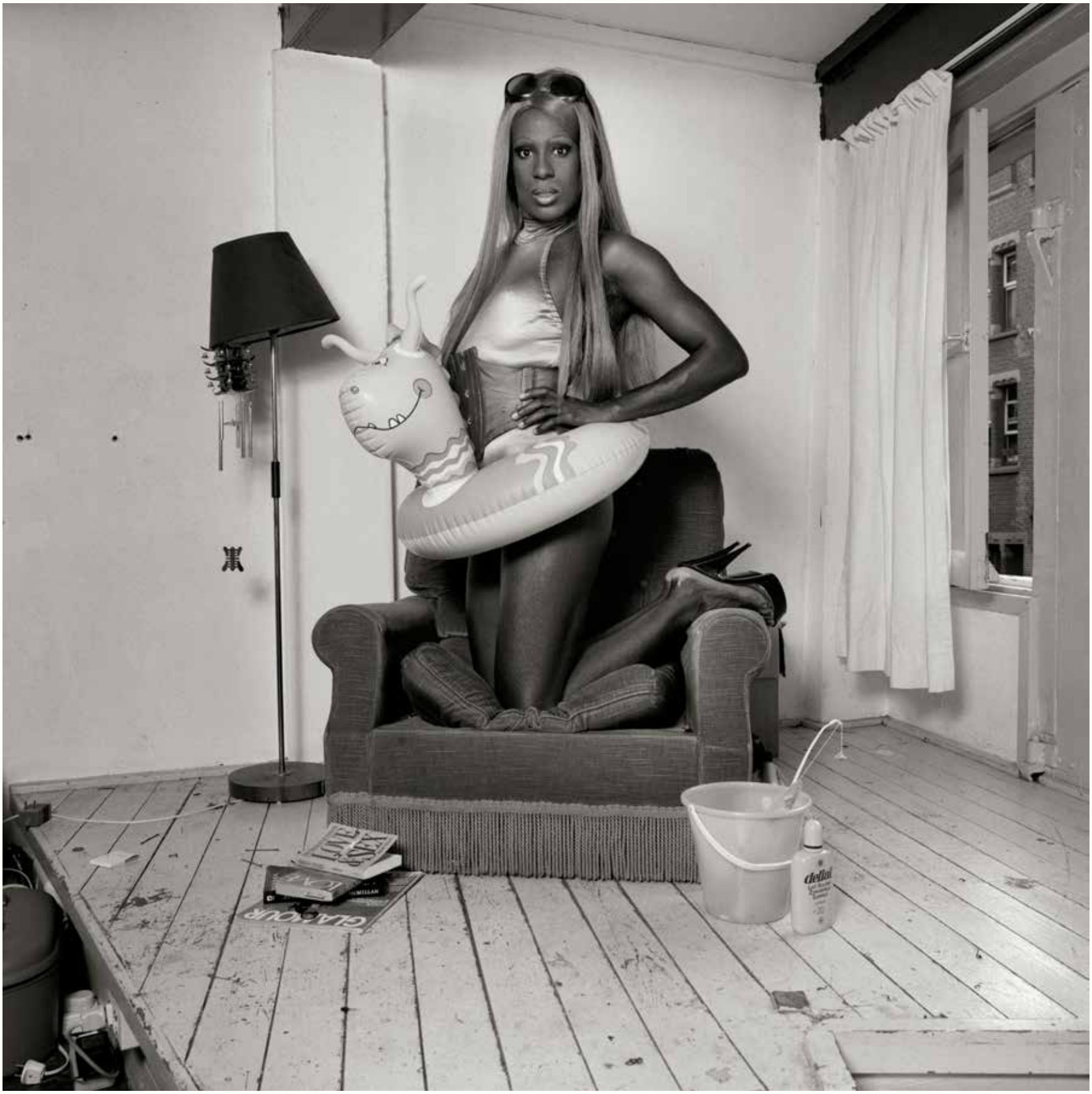
1 Jonathan Turner, *Double Dutch. Il realismo nell'arte contemporanea olandese* [Double Dutch. Contemporary Realism from the Netherlands], exh. cat. (Sala 1, Rome, 1992), 46–49. The 12 artists in this group show were Paul Blanca, Marinus Boezem, Jan Dibbets, Paul van Dijk, Teun Hocks, Max Kreijn, Inez van Lamsweerde, Seymour Likely, Erwin Olaf, Pink, Lydia Schouten, and Int. Fi$h-handel SERVAAS & Zn.
2 Turner, *Double Dutch*, 47.
3 Jonathan Turner, "Unabashed Beauty," *The Weekend Review, The Australian,* February 3–4, 1996, first page.
4 Jonathan Turner, *L'Ottobre degli Olandesi – 12 solo shows by 12 contemporary Dutch artists in 11 Roman galleries*, exh. cat. (Rome, 1994), 68–75. The 12 artists were Hannie van den Berg, Cor Dera, Marlene Dumas, Petra de Goede, Max Kreijn, Jos Kruit, Inez van Lamsweerde, Dirk Lansink, Erwin Olaf, Lydia Schouten, Harald Vlugt, and C.A. Wertheim. Olaf's work was shown in Galleria Planita.
5 Jonathan Turner, "Mind of Their Own," *Art + Text*, no. 53 (Sydney, 1996), 34–36.
6 Turner, *L'Ottobre degli Olandesi*, 72.
7 Jonathan Turner, *Stars in Black & White & Colour*, exh. cat. (Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne, 1996), 17.
8 Turner, "Unabashed Beauty."
9 Turner, *Stars in Black & White & Colour*, 18.
10 Interview by the author with Erwin Olaf, 1999. Reprinted in *Erwin Olaf*, exh. cat. (24e Internationaal Fotofestival, Knokke-Heist, 2002), 26.

***Smile*, 1984. At nightclub Flora Palace, Amstelstraat 24, Amsterdam**



First Aids Benefit, Club Flora Palace Amsterdam III, 1983

First Aids Benefit, Club Flora Palace Amsterdam I, 1983



Beachwear III – Nicky*, 1993. Commissioned by the weekly magazine *Nieuwe Revu

***Sisters* from the series *Squares*, 1985**

198 *Kleines Requiem IV* from the series *Dance in Close-Up: Hans van Manen seen by Erwin Olaf*, 2022

Kammerballet I from the series *Dance in Close-Up: Hans van Manen seen by Erwin Olaf*, 2022 /
Opening from the series *Dance in Close-Up: Hans van Manen seen by Erwin Olaf*, 2022

Felix from the series *Fall*, 2008

Keyhole 2A from the series *Keyhole*, 2011

Caroline Portrait from the series *Grief*, 2007 / *Barbara Portrait* from the series *Grief*, 2007

Margaret Portrait from the series *Grief*, 2007 / *Sara Portrait* from the series *Grief*, 2007

Album cover for Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* by the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, featuring a photo by Erwin Olaf, 1997

Album cover for Richard Wagner's *Der Ring* by the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, featuring a photo by Erwin Olaf, 1997

The Mother from the series *Dusk*, 2009

would have left him. But he went to Palm Springs and Shanghai as well as Berlin and made great series there pondering the sheer weirdness of human vanity and folly in the period of late capitalism. History was real for Erwin, and he did not for a moment think it was over. In a commentary for Dutch daily newspaper *de Volkskrant* on his series *April Fool 2020*, made during Covid lockdown, Erwin wrote, "The supermarket shelves, emptied by hoarders, made me realize that for decades I have assumed that everything would always be there, that our dancing on the volcano's edge would never end. Nothing could be further from the truth, and here I stand, speechless. Vacantly I walk around, waiting for the utter unknown, afraid of an enemy who I cannot see, and who I fortunately cannot feel yet. The house of cards is collapsing, and we are all the joker."

pp. 347–57

If that's a particularly melancholy sentiment, Erwin had personal reasons for melancholy. It is well known that he had emphysema for many years, and that he knew that his own time would be short.

Erwin made himself a virtuoso of many things. He quickly mastered Photoshop when it came along; he taught himself carbon printing to make his Berlin work as rich as could be. He was a considerable scholar of photography too. His 2009 series *Dusk* was inspired, at least in part, by his admiration for the 1899–1900 Hampton Album by the pioneering American photographer Frances Benjamin Johnson. When he was working on *Im Wald* (2020), I had a long email exchange with Erwin on the different translations of the word *Unheimlich*, as used by Freud (it means "uncanny" but has different overtones and undertones). As we emailed each other, I remembered that, years before, I had picked up somewhere an old vinyl LP of orchestral selections from Wagner's *Ring* because the cover showed some frankly alarming Rhinemaidens by Erwin.

pp. 14–15, 326–45

Maybe that's as good a clue to Erwin's trajectory as I can find. He went from persuading the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra's comms people to let him illustrate Wagner to making fully Wagner-scale works of his own.

He worked and worked at his technical skills, and it shows. For sheer photographic mastery, he had few equals.

But I don't think those skills alone explain his brilliance. It's more that those two powerful motors in his thinking were perfectly attuned. The passion for history was one, and it became his way of finding a vocabulary in which to address the other. That was the anger he felt at the present day—at stupid, cruel injustices that he saw everywhere he looked. Using both engines made it possible for his audiences to see them too.

His Majesty King Willem-Alexander, March 2018.
Created as a companion portrait to the series of Queen Máxima and their daughters, marking the occasion of King Willem-Alexander's fiftieth birthday (April 2017)

Her Majesty Queen Máxima, April 2017.
Photograph taken on the occasion of King Willem-Alexander's fiftieth birthday

Princess of Orange, April 2017.
Photograph taken on the occasion of King Willem-Alexander's fiftieth birthday

Princess Alexia, April 2017.
Photograph taken on the occasion of King Willem-Alexander's fiftieth birthday

Princess Ariane, April 2017.
Photograph taken on the occasion of King Willem-Alexander's fiftieth birthday

Fu1088, Portrait 01 from the series *Shanghai*, 2017

Colophon

Exhibition

This book is published on the occasion of the exhibition

Erwin Olaf – Freedom

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
October 11, 2025 – March 1, 2026

The exhibition is curated by Charl Landvreugd in collaboration with Shirley den Hartog and Studio Erwin Olaf, and Marcel Schmalgemeijer

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Erwin Olaf, *I Am*, 2009

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