

Phenomenology Of Waiting: Real Emotions Found in Unreal Scenery

By Mischa Cohen, November 8, 2014

It was high time for an investigation into the waiting, Erwin Olaf thought, a phenomenon that is disappearing according to the photographer. *'I want to portray the pure waiting, from the time before the smartphone.'*

On his daily bike ride under the Rijksmuseum Erwin Olaf (55) considered that he had really learnt the most from the great masters hanging there. And especially from Vermeer, because of the light and the composition, but also because he paints so narrative. So he decided that his new book *Erwin Olaf Volume II*, published this week by the American publisher Aperture, had to be presented in the museum. A temporary installation would be built in the hall of the new wing of the Rijksmuseum. With photos from the new series *Waiting* outside and two video screens showing the films he had recorded of the same scenes inside. It did not go ahead because the fire department thought that the structure was not secure enough to fit into the nevertheless generous entrance hall, the photographer says, looking a little crestfallen. "Please don't use the heading 'Rijksmuseum is too small for Erwin Olaf,'" he adds. "I do really want to exhibit at least once in the Philips Wing!"

JUST TOO BARE

In his new series Olaf looks, both as a photographer and filmmaker, at three women in a setting devised by himself: a four-star hotel somewhere in the middle of nowhere, with a restaurant at the top where 'Joe Bloggs has a much too posh dinner'. He often finds himself in these kinds of places on his way to exhibitions abroad, such as recently in the Hungarian city of Debrecen or in the Polish city of Gdansk, and also in China, "in such a large provincial city where everybody does really well but which is neither tasteful nor cheap." He carefully established the design arrangement for this especially staged waiting built setting. "It must be just too bare; we can't have just that one comfortable chair." The window offers views of the surrounding apartment buildings, which makes it even less pleasant. It is a timeless world which can be in the present but also in the future, says Erwin Olaf. "The important thing is that you realize that you're watching a totally unreal world but are actually seeing a real emotion. That, despite the artificiality, I still manage to grab you by the balls."

FINALLY A DATE

Olaf dropped off three successively different women in his melancholy laboratory: a white actress, a black model and a woman without any significant camera experience who has just moved from China to The Hague. "She doesn't know anybody there yet, so the scene touched something in her. She shone the most in her role, she is mesmerising, with her fringe cut too short." The women got to hear a short story from him before starting work with him. "Leave the fantasies to me." He described how they finally had a date after a months-long loving chat relationship. How the hope and the desire made way for a slow onset disappointment. "It ends up being a no show but I led them to believe a little bit that a man might turn up after all. If you had a really nice enjoyable chat, I think forty five minutes is then the maximum time that you will wait for a date. Not that I myself have ever had to wait, though." They were then left to wait at a table in the setting, while the photographer started working and a film camera wheeled



Waiting, Portrait 2, Shenzhen, 2014

through the room very slowly, over a period of exactly forty five minutes, while another recorded the model close up in order to capture any movement and facial expression. "The Chinese model was amazing, crazy, The close-up camera was focused directly on her face and you see that she very slowly, but surely collapses. You cannot lie when the camera is focused so intently on you."

A KIND OF HALF DEAD

It was high time for a thorough investigation into the real waiting, a phenomenon which, according to the photographer, is disappearing. "I want to portray the pure waiting, something you hardly encounter now everyone is constantly connected. If you were waiting somewhere unobserved in an unfamiliar environment on your own in the time before the smartphone, you were a kind of half-dead. Waiting has a very strange choreography, a private body language that you immediately recognise as such."

He also searched for the boundaries of photography, he says, while he occasionally shoots a deliberate embarrassed glance at the laptop where the forty five minute shots can be seen. "Aren't you bored yet? I use it disassembled, which is more merciless to those who pose and also more difficult for me." Soon the music of Sebastian of Roestenburg will accompany this, inspired by a requiem of Arvo Part. "It sounds like muzak but it is also dramatic, because it also leads to the undoing of that woman."

The photos and the film, combined in a triangular structure, form the *Waiting* exhibition. In the space inside that triangle hangs a clock ticking back three quarters of an hour to zero. The viewer can have a quick look but can also wait along with the woman in the film. Forty five minutes can then take a long time, Erwin Olaf admits. "It has something meditative. But you do not have to watch it all; it's even a nightmare for me to watch this whole film."