

Wonder

Ruud van Empel

Soloshow

October 30 - December 4, 2010 - **Flatland Gallery**

OPENING SATURDAY 30 OCTOBER in the presence of the artist

From 5 pm - 7 pm

Review

In Ruud van Empel's newest works, the Dutch photographer has moved away from the lush leafiness of his previous jungle settings and has opted for the buttoned-up formality of the traditional class portrait, with rows of school children in their picture day best outfits, standing on risers against a yellow curtain. Squint your eyes to blur the details and his ten foot wide panoramas look like any school picture taken in the past 50 years.

But when your eyes come back into focus, it becomes clear that van Empel's children are unlike any you have seen before. Using Photoshop to composite together hundreds of images, he has created a signature style that has become the hallmark of his work: glossy perfected children with big eyes, staring out from the plane of the picture with an almost surreal oddness - what seems at first glance to be idealized comes out more than a bit unsettling. In past works, he has highlighted a single child, or perhaps a pair of kids, sometimes in matching fancy dresses or sport coats, sometimes with bare skin. These new works amplify and expand his cast of characters, allowing him to play with clothing, hairstyles, and facial features to create a kaleidoscope of different personalities.

On one wall, all of the school children are black; on the other, it's a predominantly white class with a lone black student. Subtleties of culture come out in bow ties and sweater vests, braids and barrettes, Peter Pan collars, striped turtlenecks, and bold, candy colored patterns, a range of faces lit by sparkly eyes and hiding underneath big glasses. In his prior work, van Empel used the natural environment of lily pads and flowers to create a kind of protected paradise for his subjects; in these works, he pushes on this concept of childhood innocence, but from a less fanciful and whimsical perspective; the formality of school creates boundaries and limits. The flatness of the compositions and the "optimized" children still make for an unnerving scene, but the entire effect seems better balanced with reality, closer to real life to make his tweaks and constructions all the more resonant. [Text by Loring Knoblauch of <http://dlkcollection.blogspot.com>]

Based in Amsterdam, Photographer Ruud van Empel (Breda, 1958) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Sint Joost, Breda from 1976-1981. He was awarded the St. Joost prize in 1981, the Charlotte Köhlerprize in 1993 and the H.N. Werkmanprize in 2001. His work is represented in major public and private collections, including the Sir Elton John Collection, Atlanta, U.S.A and London, UK, George Eastman House, Rochester NY, USA, Groninger Museum, Groningen, NL, MoPA Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, Ca, USA and Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Van Empel's photographs have been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including in 2008 CB Collection Roppongi, Tokyo (solo), in 2007 'Picturing Eden', MoPA-Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, 'Dangerous Beauty', Chelsea Art Museum, New York, 'An Instinctive Eye', The Sir Elton John Photography Collection, Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev and in 2006 'Picturing Eden', George Eastman House Rochester, New York. **In 2011 a large retrospective is held at the Groninger Museum Groningen, from September 9 - November 27, 2011.**