



BERLIN  
PHOTOGRAPHY AND CARBON PRINTS  
BY ERWIN OLAF  
Flatland Gallery, AMSTERDAM

From 07 September 2013 till 12 October 2013

Lijnbaansgracht 312-314, Amsterdam

Mirrors of doomed beauty ...

Is what you see, what you *are supposed to see*? Does the image challenge you to dream, or does it mostly force you into thoughtfulness or even to a sense of defeatism? Does the inevitable doom snatch it from delightful impermanence? With his series "Berlin", in scenes and in portraits, master photographer Erwin Olaf presents us again and again with a mirror: Of the time, a zeitgeist.

From September 7 to October 12, 2013 a selection of 'Berlin' will be on view in the new Flatland Gallery in Amsterdam. It is Berlin during the interbellum. It is there on display, to visit, to reflect, to contemplate; any way you want to see it.

The work of photographer Erwin Olaf is by definition a balanced synergy of stylistic perfection, subtlety and detail. Time and again, the search for and finding the ultimate photographic expression which reflect his goal, his drive, his motive and which is his signature. Then it is emphatically up to the viewer to determine how it is perceived. And how he does this well!. Olaf may call, challenge, imagine and seduce but he refuses to provide answers. Yet 'Berlin' contains much hidden and imaginative symbolism. Berlin, the urban muse of Erwin Olaf. "I am fascinated by the art and culture in the city, both now and in the 20s and 30s when it shimmered of impending doom," he says as he justifies the almost tangible love in this series.

In almost cinematic settings and in lonely portraits Olaf constructs Berlin during the interwar period, as a balancing act of passion. He depicts clean and breathtaking opulence in a hopeless struggle with doomed impermanence. As in a mirror of time: "What do you see and how far do you dare to look?". The photographer has looked and seen: "I see similarities between our time and the wars. We, the Western world, dancing on the edge of the volcano. You feel that something ominous is coming at us, you read it in the newspapers, but we just party on. We are at a tipping point, that is the feeling I want to express in this series."

Unlike his previous free work, "Berlin", is all shot on location, there is no studio nor stage design undertaken. The Olympic Stadium in 1936, the Lodge of the Masonic Association, the Rathaus Schöneberg where U.S. President Kennedy in 1963 declared the historic words 'Ich bin ein Berliner', are just some examples of locations where the series is set. The viewer is again left entirely free to make up their own mind whether to see this series as a tribute to his doomed love of impermanence and then to reflect.



An ancient woman perches expectantly on a bench, wrinkled and cadaverous in a night gown – is she awaiting judgement or salvation? Almost all that remains of her is the intensity of her accusing gaze. The gold band on her shrivelled ring finger perhaps represents a glimmer of transient happiness – now tarnished. Long forgotten and exhausted also, perhaps? Facing the hopeless battle against the ravages of time she takes her last breath of pride in the vestiges of her tattered beauty. She warns me, or is she preparing me for something: This is the mirror, which will see me too...”.

ERWIN OLAF, Berlin, Porträt 8, 2012 Lambda print, Fuji Chrystal Archive digital paper 75 x 56 cm and 120 x 90 cm, © Copyright the artist / Flatland Gallery

Inspired by the 2010 Rembrandt House Museum exhibition, Olaf encountered work by Dutch Pictorialists who used a variety of photographic and photomechanical processes like bromoil prints, gum bichromate prints, gum platinum prints and photogravures.

Maartje van den Heuvel, Curator of Photography, Special Collections of Leiden University Library, ‘Olaf was intrigued by the ‘soul’ and intensity of these historical photographs. He was inspired by the special tactility and the small formats of the photographic prints, the sober style of the staging of the images, and the specific use of light. A selection of the images from *Berlin* were perfectly suited to undergo this first use of the carbon printing technique by Olaf, a technique he learned this year at the studio of Kees Brandenburg in Zeeland’.

‘Berlin’ in scenes, portraits and carbon prints by Erwin Olaf will be on view from September 7 to October 12, 2013 in the Flatland Gallery on the Lijnbaansgracht in Amsterdam.

“Berlin,” a new series of narrative images by this popular Dutch photographer, imagines a city not just haunted by its past but condemned to relive it. ...its air of Weimar sleaze gives it a dark, nasty undercurrent. (Otto Dix, Christian Schad, and George Grosz are key sources.)” *The New Yorker*.

Francis Hodgson, Photography critic, *Financial Times*, comments in his essay exploring ‘Berlin’: ‘You could see Berlin as an opera. There are the grand elements from history, which are like the bits of legend or myth or biblical story that make up the plots of operas.’

\*In Atmospheric Light. Pictorialism in Dutch Photography 1890-1925, exhib. cat. The Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam, 1 April – 20 June, 2010. The Leiden University photography collection is the oldest public museological photography collection of The Netherlands, founded in 1953 and now part of the Special Collections of Leiden University Library.