

Ruud van Empel's strange creations

Dutch artist's digital collages of black children in tropical surroundings are eerily beautiful and decidedly unreal

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Dutch photographer Ruud van Empel's work initially stands out out because of his models, the majority of whom are black children. There was something odd about the entire style, demeanor and surroundings.

Almost all of the children are exquisitely groomed in what looks like Dutch middle-class attire from the 60s and surrounded by an almost perfect scene of tropical nature; quite a wondrous contrast in itself. On top of that, all these different forests seem to breathe a peculiar sort of ambiance. Perfectly ordered yet sinister, the lakes, trees and leafs are inviting and foreboding at the same time. The children don't seem to be intimidated by it, though. They look at you with eyes wide open. Bold. Innocent. Confident.

But there's something uncanny about their look. Their innocence seems tainted. The reason for this oddness, we soon find out, is because we are looking in the eyes of people who don't exist and never have. Instead, they are photoshopped into being through a patchwork of noses, arms, eyes and lips.

This is how the artist goes about creating these images: First he collects all the features he needs by shooting a variety of young models in his studio and by subsequently wandering through Dutch forests, in search of fine leaves, perfect branches and the right waters. Only to tear it apart and spend weeks reconstructing it all until both the person and the setting match his desired standard of photo-realism.

Van Empel calls this digital collage. If we are to believe Elton John, who as a fan even dedicated a song to Van Empel during a concert, his techniques represent what much of modern photography will grow into in the 21st century. His work also deeply impressed the director of San Diego's Museum of Photographic Art, Deborah Klochko. Intrigued by "all the little secrets in his work" she exhibited Van Empel in 2012.

Having worked on it since he graduated from the Sint Joost Academy of Fine Arts in Breda in 1981, Van Empel's style of magic realism did not develop overnight, nor did it take off easily in the Netherlands. Outside of the confines of the Lowlands, however, his work found widespread appreciation. In the last 10 years, he has exhibited around the world, including

in Beijing, Barcelona, Tokyo, Seoul, Tel Aviv and New York City. The United States proved to be a particularly keen admirer. So we decided to ask him some questions about his art.

Childhood and innocence seem central themes in your work. Can you tell us why?

The first large work that I made with a young girl in it was in 2003 and was titled Study In Green#2. It shows a puppet-like girl in a red dress. She is alone in the forest. It was an idea that I had had for over 20 years, so in 2003 I decided to finally make it. The idea was to do something with beauty. Beauty has been a taboo in art for such a long time; I didn't feel like making something that might look very artistic but in fact was ugly. To me, both nature and the innocence of children is something beautiful. Children are born innocent into a cruel and dangerous world. I wanted to do something with that idea. So I gave the girl puppet-like eyes to make her innocence come off even stronger and gave her an almost fairytale kind of forest. But as an effect of the photo-montage technique it ended up looking strange and somewhat frightening. I liked this and decided to explore it further.

Many of the children in your works are black. How did this choice come about?

I grew up in a small Catholic town in the south of the Netherlands. There was only one black boy in my primary school class. In the portrait Generation 1 I expressed this situation. It shows a white class with just one black pupil. With World#1 I decided to work with more black children. It set off a whole new series of work. First I thought of portraying a girl in a dirty, old and torn-up dress, as if she were very poor. I suppose this idea popped up in my head because of the image we westerners are often given. I didn't really like that idea though, and decided to give them the clothes my generation wore when we were kids, especially because those clothes looked very innocent to me. Later, in 2007, the art historian Jan Baptist Bedaux told me this was the first time a black kid was portrayed as a symbol for innocence in western art. He wrote:

The fact that many of the children in his compositions have a dark skin is a facet that cannot remain without comment. Although it is self-evident that a child's skin colour is not important, the iconography of the innocent child was traditionally represented by 'white' children. The earliest examples of this date from the early 17th century. These are portraits in which children are captured in an idealised, pastoral setting. It is a genre to which the children's portraits of the German artist Otto Dix, a source of inspiration to Van Empel, refer. In deviating from the standard iconography by giving the child a dark skin, Van Empel inadvertently assumes a political stance. After all, this child is still the focus of discrimination and its innocence is not recognised by everyone as being self-evident.

How do your photoshopped representations relate to the ways Dutch media present black children?

Dutch media often show black children as sick, poor or starving. I suppose it works, and helps to raise money. It is an image that appeals to many people. Nobody wants to see a lovely young baby starving to death. Media are very simple, the strongest image is the one they'll use to get their message across. I guess Dutch media are no different from most other countries in this pattern.

What, if any, is your relationship with the African continent? And can you tell us more about this picture of a photo class in Kigali, where Rwandan pupils are looking at your work?

I don't have a special relationship with the African continent. I have only been to Egypt and Tunisia, but I would definitely love to visit more African countries. The photo you refer to is called Looking at Ruud van Empel in Kigali, and shows a group of learners discussing my work during a photo class. I felt incredibly proud when I found out about this class. I received some positive responses from black audiences, who said they liked the way my work portrays black children in a respectful and beautiful way rather than as a victim.

Can we expect you or your work in Africa in 2013?

I am afraid I will not be visiting the African continent yet. First I have an exhibition at Fotografiska in Stockholm – Pictures don't Lie from until the 2 June. After that I will exhibit at the Fotomuseum in Antwerp in Belgium. The solo exhibition Ruud van Empel is curated by Joachim Naudts and runs from 28 June until 6 October.

For more information on Van Empel, his work and upcoming exhibitions, visit his website

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