



re-creating reality

Entering the world of art photography to consider interpretations of beauty, Daisy McCorgray chats to RUUD VAN EMPEL to discover how one man's aesthetic vision can incite controversy

Chances are you've experienced the uncanny work of Dutch photographic artist Ruud Van Empel before. With his highly polished mixture of contemporary art and photography, he uses hallucinatory Edenic settings and portrayals of childhood to challenge the viewer's perception of reality. >>

Above: Sunday #1, 2012. A favourite of Van Empel's "because of the mystery the girl has, holding her hand on her stomach, she looks a bit worried; the whole atmosphere is strange and I like that."

Initially trained as a graphic designer, Van Empel has been creating visual art since the mid-90s. However, his best known collection is undoubtedly the provocative 'World' series that uses photo collage to depict black children, in various states of immaculate dress, immersed in tropical paradise. The images have a sense of unease about them, as though the beauty of nature has been restructured. This is achieved through digital collage, a technique that Van Empel favours over the single image for its ability to challenge the viewer. "In Photoshop I can place everything in the frame at exactly the place I want to have it," he says. "I have total control over the picture – I can create a new reality; a world of fantasy that looks realistic."

The process for creating the collages is an organic one, often beginning with a simple sketch of an idea and then developing throughout the process. It takes "from two weeks to sometimes three months" to complete an image from the multitude of photos, shot on his Canon 5D. "It is a technique I developed by cutting and pasting the details into hundreds of layers; that way the image is slowly building to an idea," explains Ruud. "When I am working on it I have to make decisions all the time that change the image and the idea. It doesn't always work out, it often fails, then the montage is deleted and I start all over again. There are no real steps that I take, I just work on it every day and then it slowly starts to grow into the final image that I am satisfied with."

For an artist that focuses so closely on childhood and innocence, I'm interested to find out if Van Empel's own childhood, growing up in Holland, is reflected in his work. "Not as far as I know, but when I see my old childhood family photos I do get inspired – it all looks so old fashioned, more stylish too, in a funny way. I used my own childhood family photos as a model for my series 'World' and 'Moon'. The clothes are particularly inspiring; in my childhood, girls looked like the archetype of a girl and boys looked like little gentlemen, like small adults. Today you can hardly see any difference in clothing between boys and girls. I like to use the children in a symbolic way and that's why I use the old fashioned style of clothes."

Van Empel is quick to point out that his work goes beyond the themes of childhood and innocence. "Not all of my work is about these themes, but at a certain point I wanted to focus on beauty. Innocence is a sign of beauty to me, nature is also beauty to me; I have no wish to show these themes in an ugly manner. I needed to be honest about that and tried to make something that had some real beauty in it." However, the images also hint at the dark side of nature, reflecting the subtle sense of threat that often lurks intangibly in everyday life – by the inclusion of a small animal, insect or reptile hiding between the leaves or branches in each creation. "Nature looks like a paradise but it is also a jungle, a place where the creatures fight a battle for life and death 24 hours a day," he says.

He notes August Sander, Mike Disfarmer, Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman among his photographic influences – yet the hyper-real aesthetic of his work is inspired, not by a singular artist or photographer, but by a move away from the surrealism of the early 20th century. "It is just my taste for aesthetics. I decided I didn't want to make a totally absurd kind of collage, like they did in the 1920s in the Dada or Surrealist movements. I thought it was more interesting to scale everything to the right proportions because, after all, this was now possible with Photoshop. I tried to build a picture completely without losing the characteristics of a documentary photograph."

The captivating, if at times unsettling, beauty was an intentional decision by Van Empel. I venture to ask him whether art should aim to create pleasure through beauty, akin to the age-old slogan of 'art for art's sake'. "Why not give pleasure through beauty – is there something wrong with that?" he replies. "Beauty is one of those things that still impresses me after all these years." Indeed, Van Empel has stated in past interviews regarding his 'World' series, that his work is not about society. However, it has been widely questioned that in focusing on black children alone, the 'World' series suggests a social or political critique. "I was criticised in the past for portraying white children as Arians, because they had blonde hair and blue eyes. "I was very surprised by that; I thought it was absurd. So I made a second version of my work titled 'Untitled #1 2004', but this time with a black girl instead of a white girl. She wears





a white dress, a very old sign of virginity and innocence. For me, there was no difference in the choice of a black or a white girl; they are both innocent. However, society reacted differently – I discovered this was a big issue within society.”

Van Empel anticipated negative responses to his ‘World’ series but, much to his surprise, reactions were predominantly positive. “We still get reactions from all over the world to this work almost every day – the work is enormously popular, even after ten years.” I suggest that those of the art community must react in a different way to the world of photography. “Yes, very differently,” he says. “Especially people that love documentary photography – they hate my work, but also they mostly hate Photoshop! Some people want photography to be truthful and realistic, so it is just a matter of taste. In the art world, I get a lot of very positive reactions. I don’t see my work as photography, it is art created by photographs. Photography is a tool for me to create my images.”

The choice of a pastoral setting was two-fold. “I enjoyed creating those settings. Tropical nature has a bigger variety of plants and leaves than the North European world has, so that gave me the chance to create settings that looked more like a painting. The challenge was to make them as beautiful as possible, and I enjoyed it very much.” Secondly, and perhaps in contradiction to his ambiguous claim that the works avoid social commentary, Van Empel wanted to challenge stereotypical representations in the media with an escapist return to innocence. “Black children are often depicted as starving from hunger, very poorly dressed and looking just terrible – I did not want something like that, the world is full of horrible things and that is not what I want to focus on.”

So, what’s up next for Van Empel’s conceptual photo-collage? “I have been working on four nude portraits and I am currently working on a small series of still life,” he says. These new works will be presented at Flatland Gallery, Amsterdam, on 13 September. And I don’t know about you, but I’m just as intrigued to see the public reaction to these new manipulations of art and photography as I am to view his work. 📷