



**COLLECT** |  
**contemporary** | **photography**

jocelyn phillips  
edited by malcolm cossons

with 153 illustrations, 139 in colour

 **Thames & Hudson**

## ruud van empel

born: 1958, breda, netherlands

Ruud van Empel creates striking large-format photomontages – collages of hundreds of photographs, combined to form one photorealistic image. The process takes many weeks and originates with a single idea. Van Empel first takes photographs of models and various settings, then merges them with images from a large database of pictures he has compiled over time, gradually developing a single image. The resulting picture is extremely high resolution, allowing him to obtain large-



study for 4 women #2, 2000

OPPOSITE  
souvenir 1, 2000

format prints of extraordinary quality and detail. His inspiration comes from painting but also, crucially, 'from snapshot photography – because that shows real life without any manipulation'. Realism – life 'as it really is' – is a strong theme in his work: 'My ideas need to be expressed in the most realistic way possible.' It is, in fact, this ambition that drew him to photography in the first place. 'I tried painting,' he confesses, 'but the problem was that one always creates a personal style, which is something I do not like.' By his own admission Van Empel did not possess 'the craftsmanship to create realistic painting' and so he turned to photography instead. Painting still has a strong pull for him, however, and he lists artists Edvard Munch and Lucas Cranach, alongside photographers such as Cindy Sherman, among his influences.

Van Empel has won worldwide recognition for his images; asked which project is his favourite, he cites *World*, a series created between 2006 and 2008, depicting children immersed in a 'paradise on earth' (pages 2–3). His stark use of digitally filled-in black and white skin tone has been the subject of some debate, with commentators asking whether the artist was trying to comment on racial politics. Van Empel asserts that race is irrelevant to his work: 'It is the same for me to use a black or a white child – they are both innocent; there is no real difference between them. It is strange to find that some people do not like my use of skin colour.' These photographic series, coherent as they appear when presented in their finished state, are not fully planned in advance. It is during the lengthy process of creating each image that a series begins to develop in the

