

Ruud van Empel
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 Stux Gallery



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PSYCO-SOCIAL STILL-LIFE

by Ben Davis

Ruud van Empel, "Souvenir, Dawn, Moon, World," Jan. 29-Mar. 7, 2009, at Stux Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

Thomas Struth meets Henri Rousseau -- how's that for a formula? That, in a nut shell, is the work of Dutch photo-artist Ruud van Empel (b. 1958), who specializes in hyper-detailed portraits of children in vaguely unreal, exotic environments. What's good about his new show at Chelsea's Stux Gallery, however, is the way his latest series, "Souvenir," takes off from this neat formula, deepening it, even undoing it, exploring its darker recesses and personal implications.

First, however, you have to come to terms with his signature "Dawn," "Moon" and "World" series. Alive with vivid, computer-enhanced colors, they have the feeling of being undigested fragments of dreams. Again and again, they return to the image of children immersed in Edenic nature, bathing in tranquil waters or reclining in beds of flowers. Van Empel's theme, he has said, is "innocence." For the close observer, however, this is complicated by at least four different points:

1) In several cases, the images have a creepy undertone. Figures like those in *World 31* -- two dark-skinned girls in identical blue dresses against a background of lush foliage -- are tropical versions of the terrifying twins from *The Shining*. In general, the default pose for van Empel's children is to stare inscrutably out at the viewer -- and the more you inspect the images, the more it seems that this expression represents a tranced-out state that is not really innocent but alien and weird.

2) In more than one case, the photos have an erotic kick that is clearly deliberate, and disturbing. *Venus 7*, for example, focuses on a pale, red-haired girl in the jungle, nude. Unlike most other portraits, she stares stiffly off camera as if she is unaware of it -- but she also covers her torso with crossed arms as if she knows she is being watched. An out-of-focus tree branch in the foreground gives the impression that we are peeping in on her. Van Empel's affection for "innocence," it seems, owes as much to Count Balthus as it does to Le Douanier Rousseau.

3) There's something weird about race in van Empel's universe. A master of color and texture, he lavishes attention on skin tones, from the delicate freckles dappling the skin of the girl in *Dawn 3*, to the dramatic black of the half-submerged head of a boy in *World 17*, set off against the wild greens of the lily pads surrounding him. "For me it is not important, it is the same for me to use a black child as a white child," he says in an interview on his website, "they are both innocent, there is no real difference between them." And yet, at the same time that he situates his subjects in a blissful wilderness outside history, you can't help but feel that he is reflecting back on some specific idea or place or history -- in photo after photo, the carefully art-directed skin tones are the same. There are no light-skinned black people in van Empel's primal wilderness. There are no tan white people, for that matter.

4) Finally, on the most basic formal level, van Empel's obsession with "innocence" is a bit tortured. His photos' most striking aspect is the hyper-real level of detail that they contain, everything meticulously



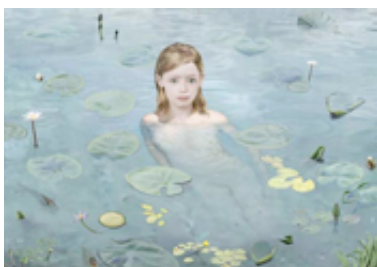
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Moon 7
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Moon 6
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Venus 3
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posed and sculpted. This is due to his technique; his images are actually digital composites of many individual photos. By such means, he is able to achieve the exacting, polished look he wants throughout, with everything in its place. These works about unforced and unfiltered innocence are, it seems, the work of an obsessive control freak.

To sum up: These are some wild, vivid, imaginative, problematic photos. The artist has indicated that his works are deeply personal, an effort to get his imagination out of his head -- and they do have a bit of the feeling of compulsion about them, as if van Empel has tapped into a vein of fantasy that he doesn't quite have control of, despite (because of?) their esthetically micro-managed character. It is only with the newest "Souvenir" series, however, that he really owns his obsessions.

Installed separately from the other works, in the back of the narrow Stux space, the six photos in this series represent a departure: They form an integrated cycle, with a progression, instead of standing as free-floating fragments; except for the first image in the series, they contain no human figures; and each, intriguingly, is accompanied by a small poem by the artist.

Souvenir 1, the prologue or keystone of the series, shows a small boy in a suit and short pants. The full-length portrait and inscrutable stare link the work to his previous depictions of children, but here the figure is set in what appears to be a modern house. The accompanying text describes it as a self-portrait: "It was dark / This could be me, at about 6 years old / Playing with my marbles / The original curtains were drawn."

This description, in turn, brings to mind van Empel's explanation to his interviewer about another work (not in this show), *World 20*, which depicts a small black boy in suit and short pants, in the jungle, which was inspired by "childhood photographs," he says: "when I was a kid I had to wear a suit with a tie and short trousers, I was supposed to look like a young gentleman but of course I only wanted to play wildly in the gardens and fields around our house." The "Souvenir" series, in other words, represents a journey back to the personal material from which the artist's more exotic images have been spun.

The rest of the "Souvenir" sequence consists of photographic still-lives, ensembles of detritus from the artist's childhood, deliberately evoking the naturalistic but highly symbolic feeling of the great Dutch still-lives. *Souvenir 2* is centered on a ragged stuffed animal surrounded by other tokens, spread out artfully for the viewer on a white carpet. The text explains: "The baby-years / On the wall, our birth certificates / They tell you what time me, my brother and my sister were born / How much we weighed and what our names were / Underneath, three little boxes with our teeth / A cup with which we were baptized and an angel with holy water in it / The Babyderm container is still filled with baby powder / It smells good, even after 50 years."

The background subject matter is the same as in van Empel's earlier works -- childhood, innocence -- but while in the jungle pictures it is as if he is trying to force some stylized projection of this idea into reality, here it is presented as an intimate, lost world to be archived. And while in the former photos, the super-styled digital compositions arguably clash with the guileless subject matter, here the same technique projects the sense that you are looking at the past through a filter, that the path to experiencing it directly is barred by the mature lens through which we view it.

In fact, the very next photo, *Souvenir 3*, focuses on van Empel's influences themselves. Here you see the contents of an attic filled, the text tells us, with "the remains of our early creativity" (the artist and his young siblings, that is). These include, among other things,



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something identified as a youthful self-portrait, gazing out at the viewer with the intense, clear-eyed expression familiar from his later portraits; a child-like, primitivist sculpture, supposedly the work of his brother; and an "embroidered picture" by his mother, showing a home set in idyllic landscape, beside a babbling brook. (A few Dali prints are also scattered in there.) *Souvenir 3* is a kind of archeology of van Empel's artistic unconscious, presenting the ingredients that make up the matrix of his later pictures in their raw, pathetic form.

Somewhere amid the detritus of *Souvenir 3*, the text tells us, are also some "half hidden photos. . . made by my father." The fact that they are "half-hidden" yet still singled out seems to indicate a particularly haunting presence -- and indeed, the most important work for unraveling the artist's universe is the series' next image, dealing specifically with his father. *Souvenir 4* focuses on a tabletop with some shiny red flowers at the center, beside an old cigarette box. A saber, a hanging Oriental rug and a carved head of a leering, turbaned man hover in the background. The text that accompanies *Souvenir 4*, in full, is the following: "My father never told us anything / But I knew he was a soldier in our former colony / The Dutch West Indies / It was supposed to be paradise over there / All these objects had been a mystery to me / Except for the empty cigarette box he got from the Tommies / That liberated our city in 1944."

Against the immersive, seemingly unreflected exoticism of the earlier series, this account hits like a splash of cold water to the face. Because this, of course, is the real, traumatic historical kernel beneath the fantasized Eden of van Empel's other series -- the lingering colonial holdings of the Netherlands in the Caribbean, like Curacao and Sint Maarten and (now autonomous) Aruba, legacy of the country's 17th-century slave-trading empire, these days a playground for tourists. Unlike heroic tales of liberation by the British in World War II ("the Tommies" who gave his father the cigarettes), van Empel tells us, this bit of history was ever-present, charged with significance, but left unexplained -- the ideal material onto which to project fantasies.

You cannot say that the "Souvenir" series is a "critique" of such fantasies. Its relation to his other work is more complex and ambiguous than that, a kind of working through, a self-diagnosis, a recognition of a compulsion as a compulsion. "I want to throw them away, but I can't," van Empel writes beside the final *Souvenir* image, a musty ensemble featuring a cloudy fish bowl, flowers, figurines, a framed photo. "These objects have been around me all my childhood / I used to hate them, now I feel attached to them / This could be the sideboard in our living room / I want to throw them away, but I can't."

Van Empel is unpacking his own personal baggage. Nevertheless, the works have a larger meaning. The way he channels his personal history through Dutch still-lives is not just the normal fun with art history -- Dutch still-lives, of course, had their own function as catalogues of the riches of the Empire at its height. The "Souvenir" series is about how the most intimate mental spaces are shaped by symbols that are at once personal and social, sensuously concrete and portals opening onto history. These photos are about how the histories we tell ourselves -- or fail to tell ourselves -- trouble the utopias we dream up. For a man obsessed with innocence, it is note of welcome maturity.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com



Ruud van Empel

World 17

2006

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Ruud van Empel

World 20

2006



Ruud van Empel

Souvenir 1

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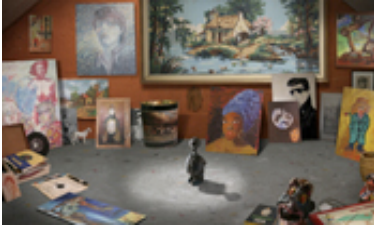


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Souvenir 2

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Souvenir 3
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Souvenir 4
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Souvenir 5
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Souvenir 6
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