

Ruud van Empel: Floresta Negra

Work / Photography

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Ruud van Empel's uncanny photographs blend artificiality with naturalism

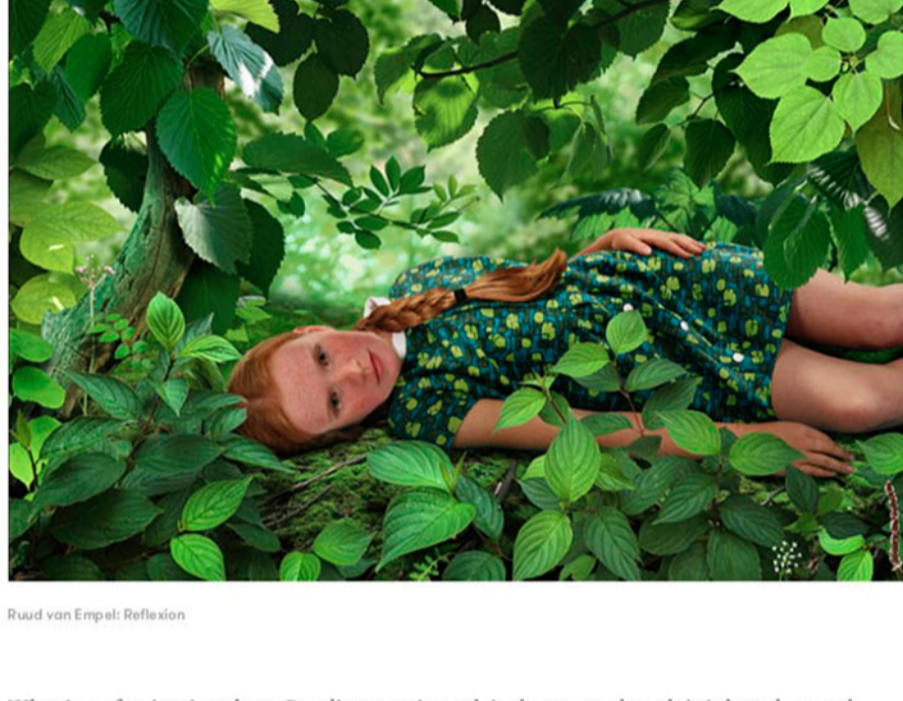


Words by Rebecca Irvin, Friday 24 May 2019

Realist methods in painting often strive for a photographic quality, leaving the viewer amazed and disconcerted by the uncanny closeness to reality. In the photography of Ruud van Empel, however, this trope is inverted. Rather than creating photo-realism within painting, Ruud constructs a kind of photo-artificialism with his photographs that verge on the painterly. In other words, where you might look at a painting by Chuck Close and mistake it for a photograph, you're likely to take Ruud's photographs for paintings.

Working with a painstaking collage process on a minute scale using digital techniques, Ruud builds photographs that draw on the compositional techniques of traditional painting, particularly in portraiture. His attention to light, shade and chromatics similarly reflects the influence of painting upon his photographic style, and he speaks of artists like Edvard Munch, Otto Dix, James Ensor, Henry Darger and Walter Spies as sources of inspiration.

Ruud refers to his mode of working as a "photomontage process". He tells us: "I started working in Photoshop in about 1994, and I experimented intensively with this programme until the year 2000, first working from scans and later from the photos I made myself. First I built offices, kind of decors or film-sets, then I started to build human figures out of hundreds of small pieces of photographs, and then I focused on creating natural landscapes and forests. My technique originated during this period – the miniature construction of an image from many small pieces."

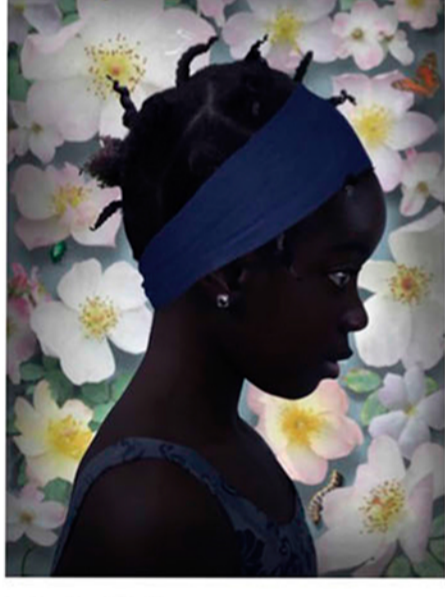


Ruud van Empel: Reflexion

What is so fascinating about Ruud's portrait work is that, even though it is based on real photographic records of real people, the realities he constructs are artificial ones – these scenes never existed. He says: "First I photograph models in my studio; these models are eventually mixed with each other so that new, non-existent persons arise. I do not use morphing techniques but do everything manually, digitally cutting and pasting." His process occurs on the level of pixels, tiny fragments with which he creates his figures and scenery. "I take many photos of different environments, such as nature, or interiors. I photograph everything separately – loose trees, branches and leaves, and also just walls or windows, doors and cupboards. All those photos go into a database, and from there I choose the ones I want to work with. I have built this database since 1997, and after I started photographing digitally in 2002 it has grown enormously. It now contains more than 100,000 photos."

Using reality to create a semblance of reality in this way generates images that eerily mirror the world we know, and yet there is the disturbing sense that something is wrong in the scenes we encounter in Ruud's photographs – something strange and unsettling about the perfection of the images, the symmetry of the faces, the opulent lustre of the foliage. As Ruud describes it: "The photomontage process is an intervention in reality, and that always brings frictions, creating a tension in the image that I find interesting." At the heart of this tension is Ruud's narrowing of the gap that separates the real and the artificial to produce something that sits in the uncanny valley somewhere between the two. The disquieting gaze of his figures and the unnatural naturalism of his settings encroaches on our experience of the real world and gives it the vaguely distorted quality of a dream.

Currently, Ruud is turning his technique of manufactured naturalism to the photographic construction of artificial visions of the natural world. His most recent exhibition, *Making Nature*, shown at the Museum Belvedere in The Netherlands, focuses solely on foliage, forests and flora. He tells us that "no people can be found in this work, no portraits, only nature – sometimes very organised and beautiful, sometimes chaotic, sometimes sweet, and then dark and threatening." It is that combination of the beautiful and the threatening that has us so mesmerised by Ruud's photographs. In their uncanny resonance with reality, their almost alienating strangeness, they are utterly compelling.



Ruud van Empel: Mood



Ruud van Empel: Mood



Ruud van Empel: Mood



Ruud van Empel: Sunday



Ruud van Empel: Study in Green



Ruud van Empel: Voyage Pittoresque