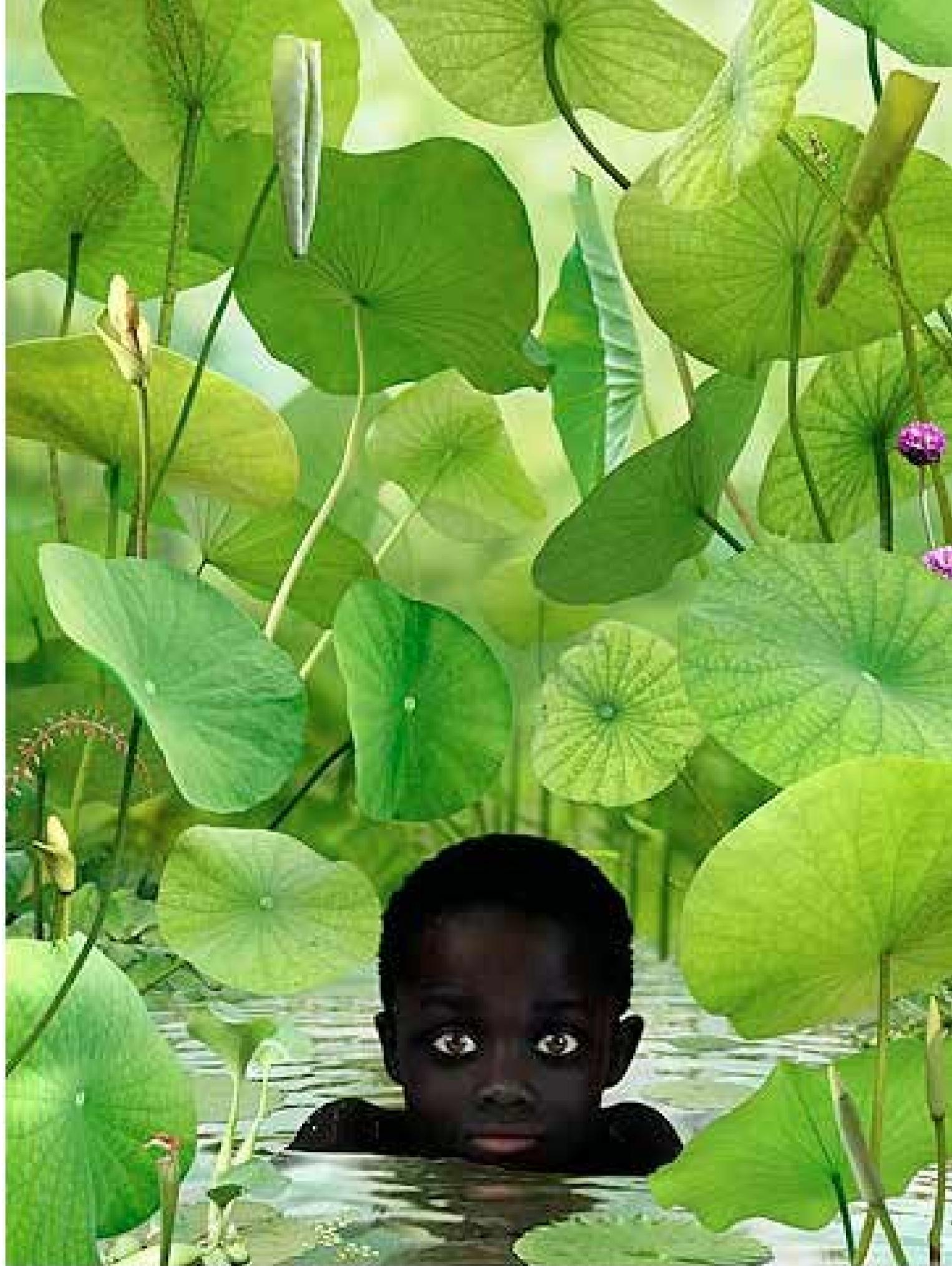


CREATING

REALITY

Ruud van Empel's composites push the boundaries of what can be considered traditional photography, but lay bare the boundless possibilities that can be realised with imagination

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.





[Previous page]
World #14, 2006
[Right] Dawn, #4
[Far right] Sunday
#2, 2012



INITIALLY trained as a graphic designer, Ruud van Empel has been creating visual art since the mid-1990s. 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 a 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 so I can create a new reality; a world of fantasy that looks realistic."

His recent solo exhibition at London's Beetles + Huxley continued the exploration of lost childhood innocence set against the same backdrop of cultural conservatism we saw in the 'World' series. His 'Mood' images also push the boundaries of what would be considered photography, and our perceptions of reality, with digitally constructed images comprising

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hundreds of photographs. They're the result of "about two years' non-stop" work. "These are simple portraits, and the simplicity of them was important to me," van Empel says of the evolution. "My other works are mostly with a lot of background and details. This time I wanted to keep it a very simple but strong composition so the attention goes to the small details in the face and the hair instead of the jungles behind my other work." Van Empel has created another mysterious series where the children's dark skin tones help to keep the images very dark. This was important to the project: "That is where the tension was for me, that was my challenge, playing with light."

The process for creating the collages is an organic one, often beginning with a simple sketch of an idea that develops 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, that are present in the finished work. "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 van Empel. "When I am working on it I have to make decisions all of 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 who focuses so closely on childhood and innocence, one wonders whether van Empel's



[Right] Moon #7,
2008
[Far right] Analogy
#1, 2016





[Above] Brothers and sisters #3, 2010
[Right] Mood #5, 2016



His 'Mood' images push the boundaries of what would be considered photography, and our perceptions of reality, with digitally constructed images comprising hundreds of photographs.

own childhood, growing up in the Netherlands in the 1950s and '60s, 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, 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."

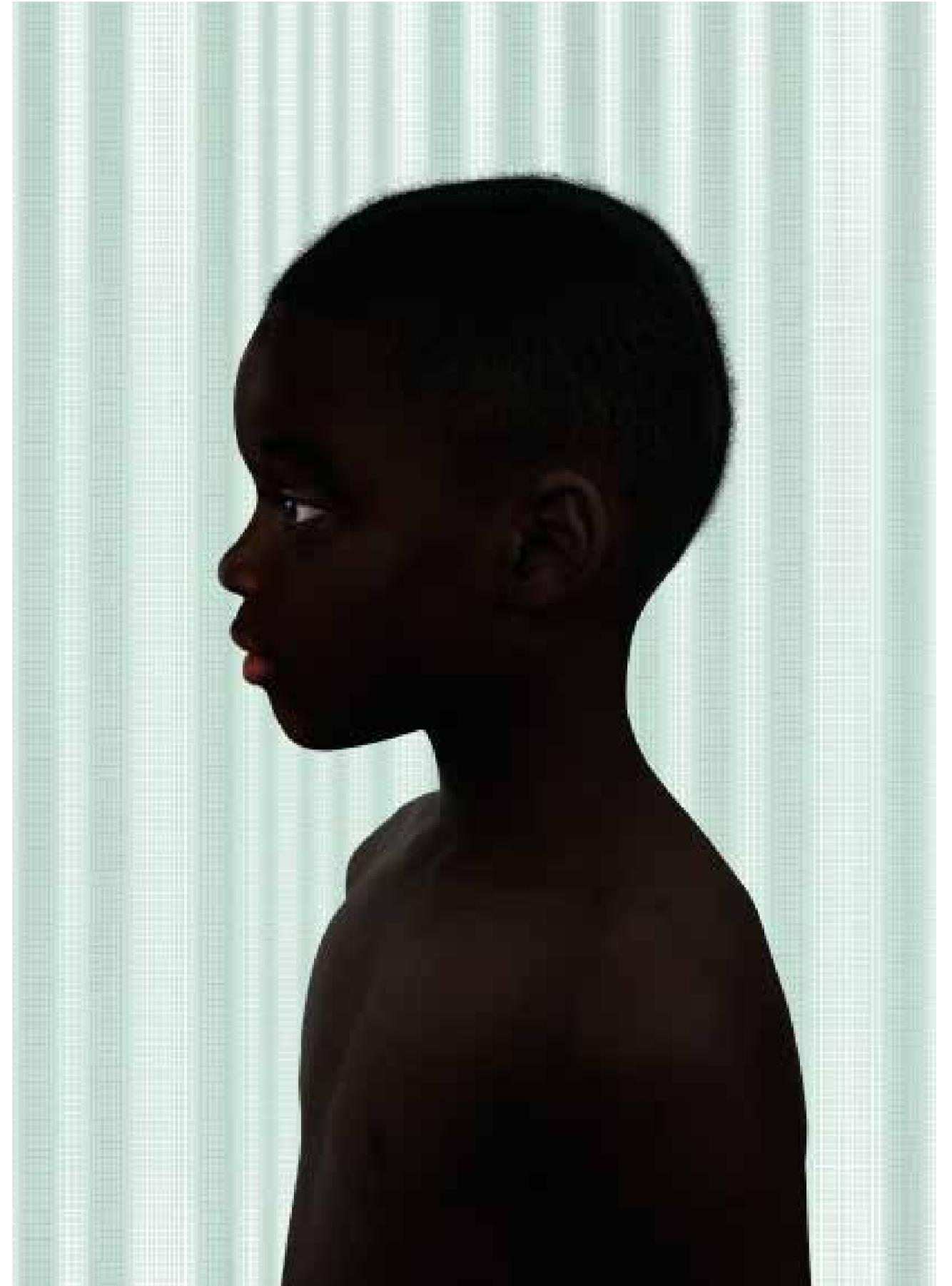
Van Empel is quick to point out that his work goes beyond the themes of childhood and innocence. "Not all of my work is about these themes, but at a certain point I wanted to focus on beauty. Innocence is a sign of beauty to me and nature is also beauty to me, so I have no wish to show these themes in 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 uglier side of nature, by the inclusion of a small animal, insect or reptile hiding behind the children among the leaves or branches in each creation, reflecting the subtle sense of threat that often lurks intangibly in everyday life. "Nature looks like a paradise but it is also a jungle, a place where the creatures fight a battle for life and death for 24 hours a day," van Empel 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 single 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."

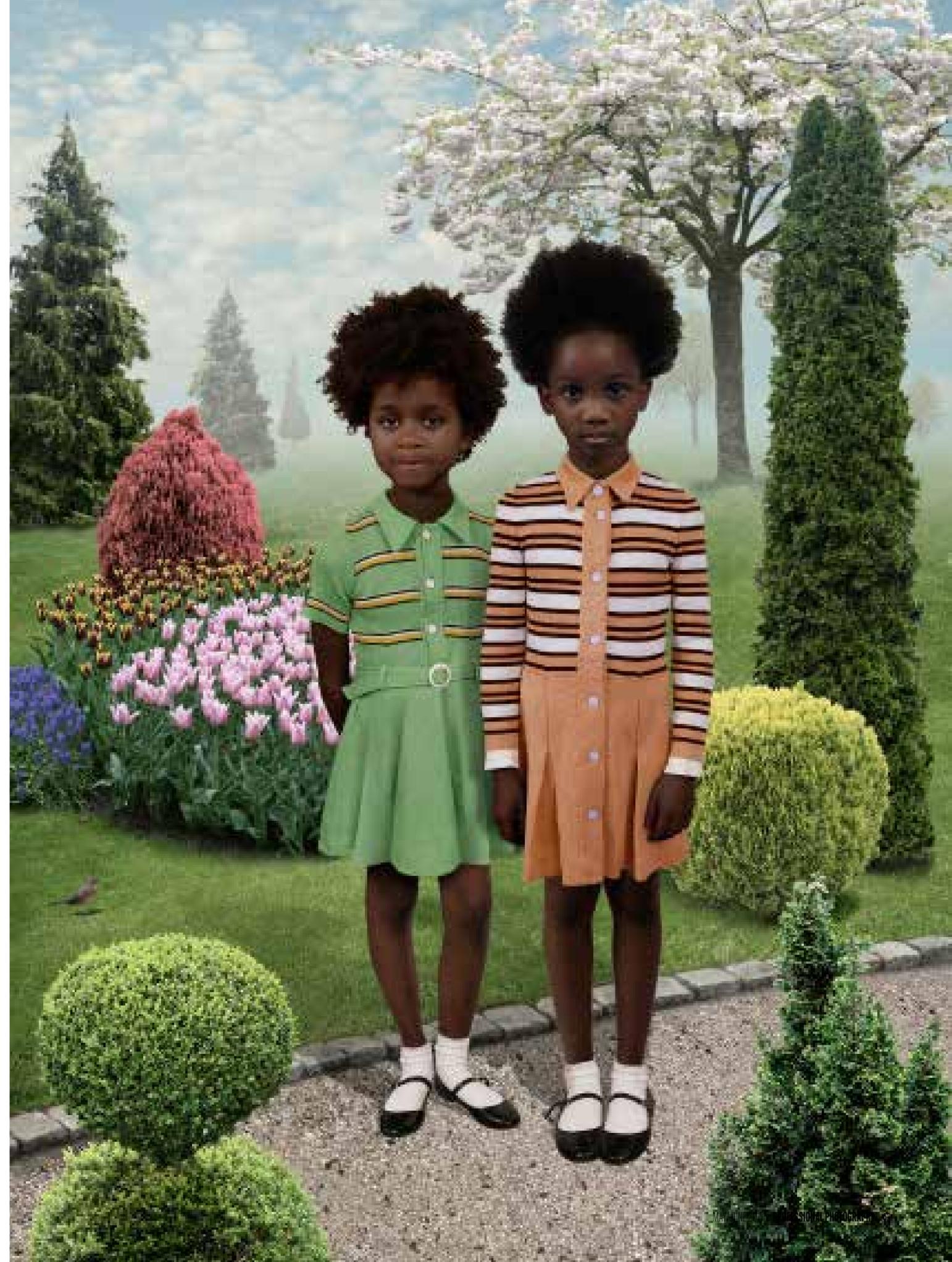
The captivating, if at times unsettling, beauty was an intentional decision by van Empel. We venture to ask him whether art should aim to create pleasure through beauty, akin to the age-old slogan of 'art for art's sake'. "Why not give pleasure through beauty – is there something wrong with that?" he replies. "Beauty is one of those things that still impresses me after all these years." Indeed, van Empel has stated ➤➤

[Right] Mood #6, 2016
[Far right] Mood #7, 2016





[Above] Wonder, 2010
[Right] Sunday #4, 2012



in past interviews discussing 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 Aryans, 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 Untitled#1, 2004 but this time with a black girl instead of a white girl (called World #1, 2005). 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 12 years." Does the art community react in a different

“People who love documentary photography hate my work, but also they mostly hate Photoshop! Some people want photography to be truthful and realistic, so it’s just a matter of taste.”

way to those in the world of photography? "Yes, very differently," he says. "Especially people who love documentary photography – they hate my work, but also they mostly hate Photoshop! Some people want photography to be truthful and realistic, so it's 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 northern 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 photo collages? "Right now I am making large landscapes with no people in them" he says. It's a step away from the controversy-courting subjects of past projects, but we're waiting expectantly to see which direction van Empel will take: shall we expect Henri Rousseau's jungle... or Lowry's scenes of matchstick men?

Author Name

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[Right] Mood #11, 2016
[Far right] Moon #4, 2007

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