

Foreword

Erwin Olaf

It must have been about fifteen years ago when I received a letter in the mail, containing some photographs of a boy from a village not far from the Netherlands' largest harbor. The letter was signed by Ruben van Schalm, and from the pictures, Ruben himself watched his spectators with a mixture of embarrassment and ambition. I was intrigued by his fragile, pale appearance. Offering himself as a model for me to work with, it certainly seemed worth the time to extend him an invitation for a photo shoot in my studio.

Our photographic introduction resulted in some interesting photographs and ever since then, I have had the pleasure to work with Ruben on several occasions in photography and film, as well as the hedonistic parties that I have organized in Paradiso (Amsterdam's liberal temple of pop culture) with an emancipating goal, for often suppressed (sexual) minorities in our society. As both an actor and model, Ruben always contributed to the process. In every project we have worked on together, he has given his full 100 percent. I remember the time when he asked me, dressed as *Commedia dell'Arte's* miserable Pierrot, if I needed some *real* tears to work with for the photos, that needed an extra 'kitsch' element. When I answered affirmatively, it was a matter of seconds before

tears began to run down Ruben's face, his eyes expressing an immeasurable sadness. Just the detail I was looking for in this over-the-top, theatrical setting. Just like myself, Ruben has a profound love for scenes of staged reality.

What caught my eye during our time together was how interested Ruben was in the technique behind the craft of photography. It came as no surprise to me when, after a few years, I learned he had taken up photography and had taught himself how to shoot and edit his photos in Photoshop.

Initially, I was not overly impressed by his subject choice: beautiful, muscular men are — obviously — pleasant to look at, but it quickly struck me as shallow and voyeuristic. I was not enthusiastic when Ruben told me he had the ambition to produce a book exclusively with 'sexy boys'. And I told him that. Soft porn is dull.

But Ruben's ability to take constructive criticism to heart, improve from it, and further incorporate it into his work, impressed me. A few years after his first attempts, he sent me a series of photos which would later be published in the very book you are holding. I am pleasantly surprised to see how his style has developed.

While the aesthetic of the nude male is still a leading subject of his work, Ruben nowadays combines it with

the power and poetry of nature. The artist has not only succeeded in capturing the beauty of man, but also the fragility of our surroundings as soon as we are outside of our urban bubble. And this has been captured and arranged in a beautiful rhythm for this publication.

The photographer paints a world in which he evokes a delicate balance between man and nature, illustrating how we must approach, respect and cherish the vulnerability of our natural surroundings. Ruben van Schalm stands on the shoulders of male nude photographers of prior generations, paying a tribute with this series of photos to the work of these men, the very source to which Wilhelm von Gloeden attributes his work.

I am particularly curious and eagerly looking forward to seeing how Ruben's work will develop over the years to come.

Erwin Olaf, Amsterdam, 2020

