



ERWIN OLAF RAIN

In *Rain*, Erwin Olaf's most recent photo series, we observe solitary figures from an icy distance. These six photographs have a post-war aura; they are advertisements for the sensation of loneliness, rather than commercials for a saleable product. The colors are muted—olive green, puce, ochre—an imitation of the decors of 1960s hospitals, schools and institutions, as well as the heightened reality of such Technicolor films as Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959). It is a Northern Hemisphere, Protestant world of wood veneer, wallpaper, linoleum and furniture upholstered in vinyl; a world of snapped elastic, broken promises and the all-pervading odour of boiled cabbage.

Dull rain spatters against the window, a device linking the six interiors. In *Rain*, we see cold-blooded creatures on display (unlike the joyfulness and sensuality demonstrated by the elderly models in Olaf's series *Mature*, 1999). It is as though we were looking at sluggish gold-fish in an aquarium, their reality separated from ours by a pane of glass. Nor is there any direct contact between the various models. Olaf's comment is that everyone has an invisible wall built around them, be it self-constructed or imposed by society.

"It all began with the drawings of Norman Rockwell. I like that sort of nostalgic feeling. Originally, I wanted to do something really happy, up-beat, after all the depression of my last series, *Separation* (2003). So the starting point was that everybody was going to be beautiful, and that I would ask the models to act funny. But then it somehow became terrible. I realized this was a world which has vanished. So instead, I radically simplified the images. Now, everybody is just waiting for nothing, it's the moment after happiness. I suppose after *Separation*, comes the well of loneliness. It's also been a difficult process because for the first time, I have worked without purposely using eroticism or any sexual jokes."

The two dispirited cheerleaders in *Gym* show none of the fervor usually associated with contact sports. The innate irony of a morose cheerleader reveals much about Olaf's particular brand of humor. Similarly, in *Ice Cream Parlor*, in an interior of polished steel and drab khaki, even the dog (obviously a mongrel) looks slightly down at the paw. The sullen boy-scout holding a melting icecream cone, seems immune to the joys of a sweet, summer's treat.

Dancing School is a dreary party which no one attends. The evening has been carefully mapped out, right down to the dance-steps printed on paper and placed neatly on the floor. Sheet music is open on the piano. It is just after six in the evening, but despite the party hats, this is an event reserved for eternal wall-flowers. The mood in this room is in sharp contrast to the antique print of dancing damsels at play, hanging on the wall behind the two isolated guests.

The dreadful silence of unspoken emotions also weighs heavily in *Boardroom*. Office politics become a mute melodrama, enacted by what we can only assume is a secretary and her love-struck boss. Meanwhile, in *Hairdresser*, the cheerful posters for beauty products belie the sodden atmosphere of a salon without clients on a wet day. The hairdressing salon, usually a lively place of gossip and activity, contains only a sad barber and a woman with sore feet.

Bedroom depicts the plight of the single white male. A pale-skinned, athletic youth stands alone in an attic, dressed only in his briefs and a pair of old socks. Although his face is expressionless, the impression is one of loneliness and embarrassment. Gradually you realize he is in someone else's

bedroom. A cast-off 1960s ballgown lies rumpled on the carpet. An open wardrobe reveals the prim clothes of a maiden aunt. Sheer stockings draped over a chest of drawers hint that maybe this youth conceals shameful secrets about his true identity. Nothing, though, is obviously stated.

The theme of painful silence is further explored in Olaf's short film, *Rain* (5 minutes). This brings together several of the characters who appear alone in the photo series. They are seated around a dinner table, while the black "maid" holds a roast turkey on a platter. The film contains citations from the photo series, and vice versa. "I steal from wherever I can," says Olaf.

Tensions lurk below the apparent perfection. It is a formal tragedy. The actors' expressions are significant, but significant of what? Boredom? Insecurity? Perplexity? Anger? Embarrassment? Terrifying anticipation? It seems to be a Thanksgiving feast, but what is there to give thanks for? The clock ticks, the rain drips down the window, no food is served. There is the atmosphere of jangled nerves and unexpressed cruelty, where the biggest threat is the threat of the unknown. The viewer has to invent a storyline, but the scenario is heartless. Nothing begins, nothing happens. The action stops before the symphony starts.

"Now, in my films and photos, I like to create a whole environment, to build an atmosphere. With *Rain*, it really comes together—the film explains something about the photos, the photos explain the film, but what it all actually explains isn't clear. As a viewer, you start to think that the six photos are somehow connected. Perhaps all the people are part of the same family. The scenario becomes much more open, posing new questions. But this time, with *Rain*, I honestly don't have a clue what story I am really telling."

Rain is not the bi-product of a dramatic thunderstorm, but the relentless torpor of dismal weather. Beyond the facade of the house, there is nothing. Only the rain.

Jonathan Turner