

Ruud van Empel

IDENTITIES
New Photoworks

October 30 – December 20, 2014

Opening Reception Thursday, October 30, 5 – 8 PM



Club, 2014, Archival pigment print, 23.5 x 61.5in (60 x 156 cm)

Stux Gallery is pleased to announce “*Identities*”, an exhibition of new digital-composite photographic works by **Ruud van Empel**. This will mark Ruud van Empel’s seventh solo exhibit at Stux Gallery. Widely recognized and best known for his carefully constructed photo-collages of children in mysterious and otherworldly paradises, his images draw the viewer into a place that is simultaneously illusory and yet undeniably realistic.

Van Empel’s images tackle the problem of representation with the utilization of highly stylized and idealized images. By stitching together fragments taken from an archive of thousands of images he photographs himself, he offers quite often hyperbolized representations of childhood and identity. One may notice the absence of perspective in his photographs and the flattening of images. With this, in combination with the passive stances of his subjects, van Empel removes the figures of any meaningful contextual framework and assigns the viewer a role of uncertainty. One is presented with one’s responsibility in dealing with these idealizations, their relativity and the associated clichés. Devoid of any precisely defined role, the spectator is confronted with his own desires and fears. Closely linked to the genre of portraiture, the moral concept is transformed and oriented towards one’s own conscious and self-reflective commentary.

In his new panorama, *Club*, van Empel’s composite of young boys in varying stages of adolescence are grouped together, prepared for a swim class. In a departure from his usual lush and ethereal landscapes, the background is reduced to the cold and shiny sterility of tiles. Juxtaposed against the minimal setting and dressed in only their bathing suits, the boys manifest their individuality, accented by variations of pose, facial expression, and clothing. Since each face is a compilation of many other faces, each child is equally and simultaneously real and fictive, elevating the work to a universal

level. Most importantly, *Club*, as well as another work titled *Hero*, speaks to a collective memory on the struggles of adolescence in which the subjects are engaged in the formation of their identities individually as well as in relation to one another.

In another series consisting of *Nature #1*, *Nature #2*, and *Theatre #8*, van Empel turns his attention away from human subjects and onto natural landscapes. Specifically in *Nature #2*, he concentrates on the themes of life and death. Dandelions sprout out of the cracked doll's face, which stares blankly out at the viewer with its one intact eye. Although the doll's face represents death, life and rebirth continue around it. A closer look reveals crawling insects and the rich hues of the surrounding vegetation, indicating a pervasive strength in life. Here, van Empel reminds the observer of the beauty in life and death as the dandelions spring forth determinedly from the death and decay of the doll head.

In his newest works *Identity #1*, *Identity #2*, *Identity #3*, *Perception*, *Boy*, *Atmosphere*, *Figure*, *Promise*, and *Nude #4*, van Empel continues to focus on the subject of children. In the eponymously titled *Identity #2*, the figures of three girls emerge from a romantically lush and wooded landscape appearing as though from another time period, a reflection of the viewer's own childhood reminiscences. Van Empel is able to show the viewer an idealized and transfigured image of beauty in a hermetically sealed environment. Interpretation of the subjects and their passive, almost perfect, smooth appearances can be ambiguous: they can become a personification of innocence and simplicity or they can appear as if in judgment of the viewer. The formal clothing of the subjects contrasts with the natural setting; the girls are dressed in their pristine Sunday best. However, the floral pattern of their clothing speaks to an underlying theme of synthetics. The girls themselves are a composite of many other images while their clothing is an artificial extension of the Amazonian background.

"Identities" will also feature van Empel's *Still Life Cristals* and *Still Life Funghi*. In *Still Life Cristals*, various glittering jewels wink out enticingly at the viewer. The jewels mimic the beguiling beauty of the ethereal landscapes that van Empel often depicts. Upon closer inspection, one can notice that some of the stones are formed in the image of natural wildlife. However, as in his landscapes, there is an undercurrent of discomfort and foreboding as the jewels lie scattered and in disarray. Here, van Empel encourages the viewer to look beyond the attractiveness of the crystals and consider perhaps their origin and the lengths and tribulations one may have to go to obtain these gems. In both *Still Life Cristals* and *Still Life Funghi*, van Empel considers the concept of a beautiful decay, as well as life in death and conversely, death in life.

Dutch artist **Ruud van Empel** has exhibited widely across the U.S., Europe and Japan, and his works will be featured in a solo exhibition during the 2015 edition of the Biennial FotoArtFestival in Bielsko-Biala, Poland and the 2015 edition of Photo PhnomPenh in Cambodia. Van Empel is the recipient of multiple awards and his work can be found in the collections of the Noordbrabants Museum (Netherlands), the Museum of Photographic Arts (MoPA, San Diego, CA), the Groninger Museum (Netherlands), the French National Foundation for Modern Art (FNAC, Paris), and the Nerman Museum (Kansas City, KS). His iconic visions can be found as well, in noted private collections such as Sir Elton John, Christian Louboutin, and the George Eastman House (Rochester, NY). Several books of his works have been published such as *Ruud van Empel Photoworks: 1995 - 2010* (2011, PhotoWorks International BV), *Ruud van Empel Photoworks: 2006 – 2008* (2009, PhotoWorks International BV), and *Picturing Eden* (2006, Steidl). Writings on his work have appeared in *Vogue* (Sept 2014), *The Guardian* (2013), *Kunstbeeld* (2013), *Le Monde* (2013), *Tokyo Photo* (2010), *The New York Times* (2008), *Elle Décor* (2008) and many other international publications.

For further information, please contact the gallery at andrea@stuxgallery.com