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Creepy meets fascinating in compelling Dutch photographer's new work

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Posted: 2:33 p.m. Monday, Sept. 29, 2014




By Felicia Feaster - For the AJC

Dutch artist Ruud van Empel's photographs are apt to inspire a range of responses: discomfort, fascination, revulsion, infatuation. In a new exhibition at Jackson Fine Art, the celebrated photographer continues his patented form of Photoshop-enabled collage, returning to his familiar images of small children so altered and perfected they shine like jewels in a shop window.

Van Empel's images of children – tiny, glowing humanoids with expressive eyes and flawless skin often captured against Edenic backdrops of jungles and gardens – can be utterly magical. His portrait subjects are sci fi perfect, and hypnotic to behold with their enormous Margaret Keane eyeballs – clear as marbles – crisp outfits and serene expressions.

In this current show at Jackson, van Empel enlarges his focus. There are plenty of his iconoclastic portraits of children, but his reach has expanded to include still life photos of everything from crystal baubles to soap bubbles to hunks of meat. Throw in some nudes and “Ruud van Empel: New Work” adds up to a strange juxtaposition of directions that may be too unresolved to entirely work as a whole.



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Dutch artist Ruud van Empel's "Still Life CRISTAL" is on view at Jackson Fine Art.

First, a bit about van Empel's technique and the odd effect of his Frankenstein portraits of stitched-together bits and pieces. Van Empel shoots his child models in his studio but uses Photoshop to blend various eyes, noses and lips to create entirely new beings and an

utterly constructed reality. Settings are constructed too: composed of bits of flora shot separately in the Netherlands and combined to create lush, verdant backdrops to his portraits. Van Empel's images are a new form of photographic wizardry, using the power of Photoshop to transform reality into something surreal and new.

While photographers like Rineke Dijkstra dwell on the fragility and imperfection of youth, van Empel and other perfection practitioners like German photographer Loretta Lux take a page from the fashion world and hone and polish humanity into something doll-like and perfect. The effect is both utterly mesmerizing and uniquely creepy.



Ruud van Empel's "Hero" appears at Jackson Fine Art.

Van Empel's images of black children – many of which are on view in this show – are especially seductive: offering romantic, visually delightful, even glamorous images of black children in a popular culture that doesn't always cherish them. "Identity #1" is a typically delightful and seductive van Empel work, featuring two neat-as-a-pin pre-adolescent girls in crisp white collars, black framed glasses and perky pink barrettes. In their

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perfectly ironed dresses, they look like straight-A students posing on school picture day, the picture of well-scrubbed innocence made more complex by the glowing green vegetation behind them. The effect is both charming and off-putting, suggesting innocents consumed by a lush, devouring wilderness.

An equally arresting photograph that strikes a very different note, “Club” is a long rectangular image featuring a large group of bare-chested young boys posed against a flesh-toned wall and floor. Dressed in swimming trunks, they look painfully vulnerable, quite different from the serene children in his other works. The chubbiest child crosses his arms protectively around himself; the lone black child seems distinctly apart from all of that pink flesh. It is a compelling portrait of the awkwardness of childhood, and how ill-fitting our own flesh can seem at times. That image shows an interesting new direction and a footbridge between van Empel’s idealized images of children and other works in the show that tread into darker territory.

It’s hard not to be seduced by van Empel’s portraits of children, which combine beauty and menace in equal measure, satisfying a desire for the former, but with the grit and intelligence of the latter. But with the peculiar, discordant selection of works in this show at Jackson, van Empel can wander from delightful to off-putting in his nudes that transpose faces onto other bodies. The disturbing effect of those nudes is pushed over into the yuck zone with a painterly tableaux “Still Life MEAT” on a facing wall of cuts of meat, organs and offal, lovingly arranged like an oil painter might arrange a still life of fruit or flowers.



Dutch artist Ruud van Empel uses Photoshop to create a beautiful, slightly unsettling alternate reality in images like “Club.”

An idea of decay and mortality and old age has sneaked into van Empel’s vision of a child’s paradise, and the scent of honeysuckles is suddenly marred by the stench of rot. It

doesn’t seem more complicated, merely debased, and you may find yourself longing for a return to Eden.

ART REVIEW

“Ruud van Empel: New Work”

Through Nov. 29. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Jackson Fine Art, 3115 E. Shadowlawn Ave., Atlanta. 404-233-3739,

www.jacksonfineart.com.

Bottom line: The odd juxtaposition of images in this show may prove difficult for even fans of this Dutch photographer's mesmerizing work.

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