PAN
AMSTERDAM

FLAT // LAND



Barbara, portrait, Grief, 207

C-Print, 80 x 60 cm, in original frame, signed en verso by Erwin Olaf

Erwin Olaf was born in 1959 in Hilversum, The Netherlands. He was an internationally exhibiting artist whose diverse practice cantered around society's marginalized individuals, including women, people of colour, and the LGBTQ+ community. In 2019 Olaf became a Knight of the Order of the Lion of the Netherlands after 500 works from his oeuvre were added to the collection of the Rijksmuseum. Flatland Gallery represented Erwin Olaf from 1988 till 2020. In 2025 Olaf received a solo show at the Stedelijk Museum.

For Erwin Olaf the illusion of liberty carries different layers of vulnerability.

Olaf, a true free spirit, starts his career as a journalistic photographer in the late eighties. When he is confronted with the work of Mapplethorpe, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Lichtenstein and Joel-Peter Witkin, he no longer is satisfied with mere registration. This is when Olaf makes his mark in society with his provocative series Chessmen, Blacks, Mature, Fashion Victims, Royal Blood, Paradise 'the Club' and Separation.

With a deep wish to present a different, more optimistic society in which we do truly interact with one another and dare to explore the unknown, Olaf turns for inspiration to Norman Rockwell’s illustration of the happy American family life in the fifties. But when working on this idea, he drops the happy part, since in the aftermath of the September 11, Olaf feels the world dictates prudence and nourishes suspicion. He felt it as a twilight zone, a space between, where we look into the future with fear, because of the confrontation with evil. Servility to a kind of censorship we have swallowed voluntarily.

In his series Rain, Hope, Grief and Fall Olaf's approach to expose the illusion of Liberty, he depicts scenes in which the paralysing hope for a safe life crushes any whish to explore opportunities that lay ahead. Especially in Grief and Fall the ability to act truly free is mournfully, grievingly absent, whereas in Rain and Hope it is perhaps still potentially present.

The work comes from a private collection, with provenance Flatland Gallery.