

Art in America

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Rineke Dijkstra

SAN FRANCISCO,
at SFMOMA

by Colin Westerbeck



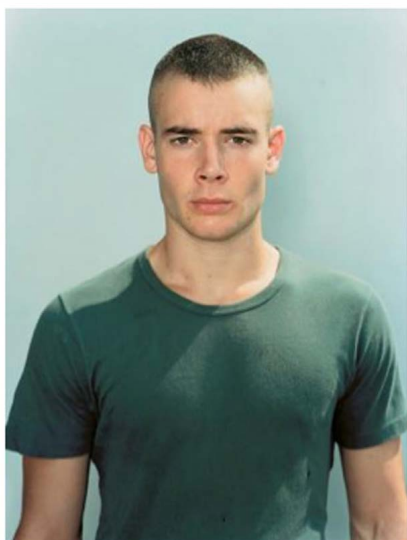
Ordinarily, a portrait photograph isolates a single moment in the life of its subject. Portraits may imply the presence of traits that subjects bring to the studio-qualities that they have acquired over many years and will continue to possess for the rest of their days. Nonetheless, like a biological specimen seen under a microscope, the portrait makes a slice of life so thin as to be transparent under light. Still, Rineke Dijkstra keeps inventing ways to drag elapsed time into her portraits, as this career retrospective demonstrates.

The exhibition illustrates the Dutch photographer's career as a progression that inexorably followed from a 1991 self-portrait. Injured in a bicycle accident that required months of physical therapy, she decided to take a picture of herself after swimming 30 laps in a pool, when her defenses, both physical and psychological, were down. The result inspired her, beginning in 1992, to photograph youngsters as they came out of the waters off beaches stretching from Hilton Head to Croatia. Just as, during her recuperation, a self-portrait marked her transition from an unfulfilling commercial career to a new one in personal photography, so, ever since, have her portraits of others dramatized transitions.

Like the swimmers emerging from chilly waters, the first-time mothers she photographed right after childbirth, or novice matadors exiting the bullring with bloodied faces and ripped suits of light (both in series from 1994), were portrayed in extremis after an experience just preceding the photograph. Shooting subjects serially over time was the logical next step, which Dijkstra also took in 1994, when she began photographing a little girl named Almerisa, a Bosnian refugee living in an asylum center. We track Almerisa for 14 years, until, with babe in arms, she sits before us as a mother fully assimilated into Dutch society.

"In the end," said Dijkstra in 2001, "I have to recognize something of myself in the portrait." In the catalogue, we find three views of her at work, each showing her one-on-one with her subjects. While the pictures suggest that she fully identifies with them, as her remark implies, some portraits have required mediators. Her access to Almerisa came through an arts organization that aimed to document asylum centers; and her other extended series, in which she followed a man named Olivier Silva as he served in the French Foreign Legion for four years, was even more complicated. The idea came from a Belgian dealer who helped her arrange the project; throughout, she was not only accompanied by the dealer but shadowed by a Foreign Legion minder.

Like the transport in time these pictures convey, the candor we see in them is a rare achievement. With the swimmers, mothers and matadors as her subjects, Dijkstra implies the moments immediately before she took the pictures in order to instill in them the spontaneity that all great portraiture must contain. Then she extended the time frame with the serial portraits. Now she is protracting time in a new way, through the medium of video. During a couple of hours I spent with her in the exhibition the week it opened in San Francisco, I was struck by her eagerness to linger over the new video pieces. Some are split simultaneously between two or three screens, and the subjects include teenagers at discos and pre-teens responding to a Picasso painting.



The multiscreen projections are very elegantly orchestrated, and I can understand why Dijkstra is excited about this next phase of her career. Still, I hope that she doesn't give up photographic portraiture. Her still photographs are a singular feat of emotional and esthetic gymnastics. In the serial portraits, Dijkstra would lead me to one picture-always the one in the middle psychologically (though not always literally in the middle of the sequence). Here the subject was teetering between childhood and adulthood, poised on the brink of the kind of transition that Dijkstra has been pursuing ever since she pulled herself out of that Amsterdam swimming pool back in 1991.

The exhibition is on view at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 29–Oct. 3.

Photos: Right, Rineke Dijkstra: Olivier, The French Foreign Legion, Camp Général de Gaulle, Libreville, Gabon, June 2, 2002, chromogenic print, 49 5/8 by 42 1/8 inches. Left, Self-Portrait, Marnixbad, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, June 19, 1991, chromogenic print, 24 1/2 by 20 1/2 inches. Both at SFMOMA.