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FINANCIAL TIMES

***How to photograph a stranger:
an interview with Rineke Dijkstra***

*The Dutch artist is particularly interested in portraying teenagers,
for whom 'everything is still possible'*

By Andrew Dickson (March 6, 2020)



'Sophie and Alice, Savolinna, Finland, August 3 2013' ©Rineke Dijkstra.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

The upstairs back room at Marian Goodman Gallery in central London is a crowd of faces. In a corner, resting on foam bolsters, there's a large photograph of two young women in a forest. One is standing, the other sitting on the ground. Both wear bikinis: they look a little combative, as if daring us what to think.

On the opposite wall, another six photographs of women are lined up. With their identikit white backgrounds, they resemble mugshots or passport photos. It takes you a moment to notice the resemblance, eyes especially: three sisters, photographed at different ages. Similar but different. Variations on a theme.

Few contemporary artists have focused so obsessively on the human form as the Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra. For 35-odd years, she has photographed little else. Often the people she captures stand full-length in the places she encountered them, on the beach or in parks.

Printed large, near life-size, these images both offer and withhold information; all we're usually given is a first name or a place and date. You find yourself conjuring stories — this schoolboy looks like he'd be cool to hang out with, that teenage girl seems wise beyond her years.

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'Arden and Miran, London, February 16 2020' ©Rineke Dijkstra.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

Those two boys perched together on a single chair in a bay window — a new photograph — look curiously old-fashioned, with their identical poses and sober expressions, as if they inhabit a previous century. Like all great portraiture, these pictures invite us into the frame.

Dijkstra, 60, isn't sure, even as she prepares to open a new exhibition, what draws her to these people. The most she can say — hesitantly, almost shyly — is that somehow they capture her attention. She'll be on the street or in the park, and she'll be caught by an outfit, or the way someone has styled their hair.

"It's difficult to explain — there has to be something that makes you look a bit longer," she says. She scans the faces surrounding her and shrugs. "I just have to like looking at them, in a way."

The exhibition, her first in the UK since 2010, provides visitors with plenty of opportunity to come up with their own theories. On display will be some of the series that have become her signature: those three sisters, captured in Amsterdam between 2008-14, and a pair of identical twins from Israel, depicted over the course of their adolescence. Standalone images of family groups are here too.

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'Chen and Efrat, Herzliya, Israel, November 18 1999' ©Rineke Dijkstra.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London



'Chen and Efrat, Herzliya Israel, May 21 2005' ©Rineke Dijkstra.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

As often with Dijkstra's work, teens predominate: though these are stills, by and large, the effect is of people changing almost before our eyes. "I like this dynamic feeling, that things aren't fixed yet," she reflects on photographing young people. "Everything is still possible."

Born in the southern Netherlands and trained at art school in Amsterdam, Dijkstra began photographing professionally in the 1980s, shooting people in clubs for magazines and doing corporate jobs. But she chafed at the formulas of commissioned work; she wanted to create images of people that went more than skin-deep.

Recovering from a bike accident in 1990, she began to take portraits of herself emerging from a swimming pool. A series on children and teenagers on the beach, by turns unguarded and provocative, followed. It led to other projects on naked mothers with their newborns, as well as on bloodied bullfighters emerging from the ring.

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'Hel, Poland, August 12 1998' ©Rineke Dijkstra.

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

Each series is shot in a similar format and using the minimum of props. "I think it's always better not to show too much; you have space for your own interpretation," says Dijkstra. Even now, she uses the same tools: a large-format, 4in by 5in analogue camera and colour film. From a technical point of view, she's proudly old-fashioned, she laughs. "The camera works slowly, so people understand that it is going to take a while. Exposures can take a couple of hours, every exposure a couple of minutes. It demands some concentration, but at the same time it creates an intensity that involves the sitters."

Though she's sometimes compared with Diane Arbus, that master of the confrontational portrait, Dijkstra herself feels an affinity with the great German photographer August Sander (1876-1964), who made it his life's work to capture his fellow citizens, from boxers and circus performers to politicians.



Emma, Lucy, Cécile 2011', from the series 'Three Sisters' 2008-14 ©Rineke Dijkstra.

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

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Emma, Lucy, Cécile 2012', from the series 'Three Sisters' 2008-14 ©Rineke Dijkstra.
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"It's a very open-minded gaze," she observes. "If it's a gypsy or an aristocrat, you always feel it's the same approach. The same dignity." Is she attempting something similar? She nods. "I'm interested in people's strengths, maybe also their nobility. I mean, it has to be truthful and honest as well," she adds.

It's an interesting point. Some of her images, in particular the beach ones shot in the 1990s, feel raw, almost exposing; would she be able to take them today? She isn't sure, but perhaps not. "If you compare it to 20 years ago, 30 years ago, people are more suspicious. They don't know what will happen to the picture. Will it be put on the internet? Will it be bad for me?"

Sometimes there's a sense of danger in these images, I say, a battle of wills between photographer and subject. Dijkstra smiles: although she works carefully to build trust, sometimes over years, she's the one in charge. "I decide when the picture is good. If they were choosing, they would look for different things."



'Night Watching', Dijkstra's 2019 video installation of people looking at Rembrandt's 'The Night Watch'
©Rineke Dijkstra. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

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Dijkstra's aren't the only portraits to feature in the new show. Also included is arguably the most famous group shot in art history, Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" (1642) — albeit seen aslant, via a three-screen video work Dijkstra filmed at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

In it, groups of people stand in front of the painting and discuss it. Schoolchildren coo over the cute dog in the foreground; Japanese businessmen debate the painter's profit margin. Twentysomethings flirt while wrangling over its symbolism.



'The Grandchildren of Denise Saul, New York, October 15 2012'
©Rineke Dijkstra. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

For Dijkstra, this is a way not only of facing up to Rembrandt, but an exploration of what portraits are really about. We're looking at people looking at people; a nice circularity, she reflects, and a testament to the power and mystery of the form. "With Rembrandt, it feels so real," she sighs. "I can only be jealous."

*"Rineke Dijkstra" is at the Marian Goodman Gallery, London, from March 12 to April 25;
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Images courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

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