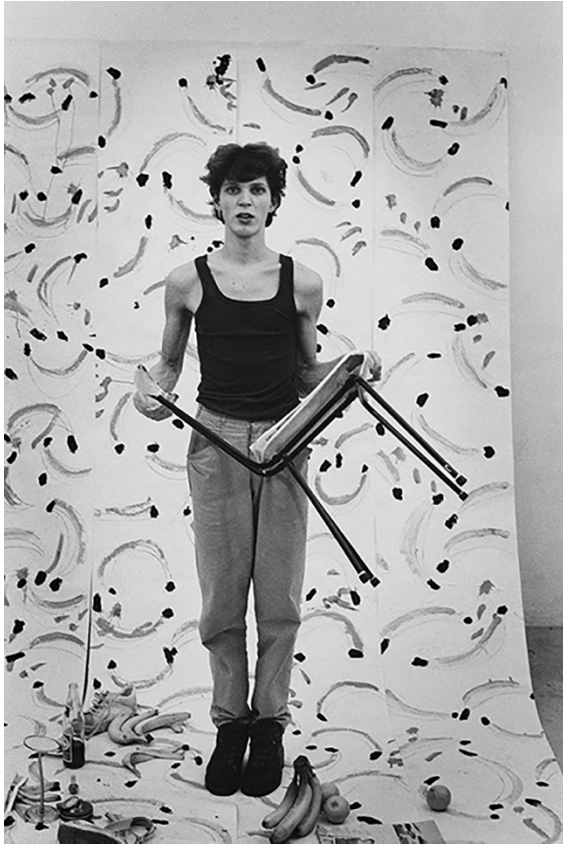


# EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

## Edwynn Houk Gallery presents *Erwin Olaf: Stages*, a retrospective exhibition



*First Photo Shoot*, 1981

Edwynn Houk Gallery presents *Erwin Olaf: Stages*, an exhibition of key series centered on the concept of performance, a recurring theme in the artist's four-decade career.

*Stages* includes Olaf's 1980s documentation of Amsterdam's gay and nightlife scenes, highly produced series such as *Hope* (2005) and *Grief* (2007) that dramatize social norms, and ongoing engagement with dance. These tableaux – whether occurring on a social stage, theatrical stage, or studio set – portray beautiful but not necessarily camera-ready moments, often lit by a flash of unscripted emotional experience.

Erwin Olaf emerged onto the Amsterdam photography scene in his young 20s. His first formal self-portrait shows influence from New York artists such as Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe, while also signaling the signatures of his aesthetic throughout his career. His compositions emphasized layering props and details in open-ended narrative relationships, leading viewers to fantasize about what story is being told.

Throughout the 1980s, Olaf became a well-known and well-loved artist and gay rights activist in The Netherlands, photographing drag queens, bodybuilders, fetishists, and celebrities at discotheques and performances. Olaf's artwork illuminated and celebrated underground scenes, claiming a spotlight for LGBTQ+ identities that expanded everyday possibilities for gay people throughout the country.

Olaf's meticulously crafted scenes, most of which were produced entirely inside his studio, launched his career onto the international stage. His series such as *Gay Couples* (2008), *Keyhole* (2011-13), and *Palm Springs* (2018) show elaborately designed mise-en-scene and beautifully coiffed ensembles, yet each detail alludes to emotional tension and mystery. As the artist described, each photograph shows "a perfect world with a crack," as if projecting a private moment to the public, holding a magnifying glass to the uncanny elements of taken-for-granted domesticity. Perfectly polished yet transgressive, these scenes peer into rooms we were told not go into, addressing social issues, taboos, and conventions. Similar to preceding artists such as Mapplethorpe, Olaf also became preoccupied with still life photographs of floral arrangements in his studio, compositions that could be read as evading or embodying these human dramas.

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Olaf's intimate and formal relationship with dance is this exhibiton's final lens onto the stage. The artist discussed ballet as a major source of inspiration for his personal work, in particular the precision and tension between beauty and gritty strength the genre requires. *After Rodin* (2016) evokes the sculptural characteristics of the dancers of the Dutch National Ballet, paying homage to the founder of modern sculptor and Impressionist artist August Rodin by emulating the poses of his sculptural masterpieces. Olaf's final completed series, *Dance in Close Up* (2022), represents a collaboration between the artist and choreographer Hans van Manen, celebrating their shared vision of evocative gesture and the gifts of the stage.

**Erwin Olaf** was born in 1959 in Hilversum, The Netherlands and passed away in 2023 in Amsterdam. His work is in international permanent collections such as the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; and also circulates on the Dutch Euro coin. In March 2023, Erwin Olaf was awarded the Medal of Honor for Art and Science by the Dutch Royal Family. In honor of Olaf's lifetime activism for the right to self-expression and queer rights, the **Erwin Olaf Foundation** was founded in 2023 to sponsor projects and educational initiatives that support vulnerable minorities in The Netherlands.

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## **ERWIN OLAF**

### *STAGES*

Exhibition reception: Saturday, September 21, 3-5pm

September 3-October 26, 2024

745 Fifth Avenue, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York

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