

MANIERE FIAMMINGA

In its simplicity the story of the photographer Hendrik Kerstens is one of great beauty. Around the age of forty Hendrik Kerstens set aside his flourishing business as a wine importer to devote himself to a more creative profession, that of a self-trained photographer. For several years already he had been regularly photographing his daughter Paula. Begetting a child, and the feelings of love, responsibility and vulnerability that accompanied the event, had made a deep impression on him. It goes without saying, then, that his photography should constantly have his daughter as its subject. He acknowledges that for the first ten years his photographing Paula consisted of 'staring': staring at her beauty, her vulnerability and her development. 'I recorded her again and again,' he says himself, 'as if this was an exorcism of time, of forgetting and of the absurd that is inherent in life itself.' Bestowing immortality on the fleeting moment, transforming a snapshot of his daughter into an icon: that is what he strove to do.

The photographs are almost always created in his own home in Amsterdam's Pijp neighbourhood, with few technical aids, and with the daylight that streams through the window into the atelier. There is no large photo studio with extensive resources for manipulation: just a camera taking a large format negative, and several different backdrops. Kerstens uses at the most one photo flash with diffuse light. Props and costumes or hats are from the home environment. It is only recently that Kerstens also involved the landscape in his photographs, photographing outdoors and receiving commissions from external clients such as the New York Times and the Bavarian Staatsopera in Munich. In the course of time the photographs became a product of the Kerstens family. Mother Anna, a cosmetician, concentrated on the styling and the make-up. The older Paula became (at the time this publication appears, she is twenty-two), the more input she had in the ultimate picture as a model. Presently there is also a heavy-duty Apple computer and an Epson printer in the atelier. Kerstens uses the computer in a manner comparable with the darkroom work or the retouching of the photographer in the era of analogue photography.

Hendrik Kerstens regards the creation of a photograph as a process of elimination: the elimination of ever more pictorial or stylistic elements in order to arrive at a core. He recognises his sober realism as Northern European. He speaks of the 'shadow side of purity' that he seeks in his portraits, and also finds in the work of the Flemish primitives. In the beginning, however, this relationship was not consciously present in his work. A decade ago, when Paula was about ten, someone else remarked on the relationship. At about the same time, in Berlin Kerstens encountered the Portrait of a Young Girl by Petrus Christus, from around 1470. He felt the relationship, and began to study the Flemish primitives further. Without this inspiration becoming a dictat, Kerstens plays with elements and the atmosphere from the work of these painters, and gives them a contemporary content.

The term 'Flemish primitive' is relatively new: it is a popular term used for painters who, among others, were studied and described as a group by the German-American art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968). However, he did not employ the term Flemish primitives, but grouped artists who worked in the 15th century, such as the Master of Flémalle, Jan van Eyck, Roger van der Weyden and Petrus Christus, under the name 'Early Netherlandish Painting'. The vast majority of the works that Panofsky discusses are rather complex images, coming from illustrated manuscripts and altarpieces from the Late Middle Ages. The relation of Kerstens's portraits with early-N-Netherlandish painting is to be sought primarily in the portraits painted in that time. Panofsky draws into his

discussion a concept that was used in the 16th century by the Florentine art historian Giorgio Vasari. The latter speaks of 'Flemings', by which he refers to painters from regions in what is today Belgium, as well as in The Netherlands and Germany. In the Europe of the Renaissance people spoke of the maniera fiamminga, the Flemish way, in which artists from these regions painted, as opposed to the maniera greca (the Greek way) or the buona maniera antica (the good, ancient way), which had been passed down from classic antiquity to the Italian artists of Vasari's time through Byzantine art. This distinction between Southern European art, with Italy as its heart, and the Northern European art, with the Low Countries of Flanders and the Netherlands as its heart, is a distinction that persists stubbornly down to the present day.

How can we connect the contemporary photography of Hendrik Kerstens with 15th and 16th century painting in the maniera fiamminga? Panofsky provides us with key terms in his discussion of the magnificent portraits by Jan van Eyck, such as his portrait of Jan de Leeuw and the 'man with the red turban'. Van Eyck was the immediate master for Petrus Christus, whose portrait of a young girl Hendrik Kerstens so admired. Panofsky's words are relevant for introducing the portrait art of Van Eyck and his successors, but can also be easily applied to the contemporary portraits that Kerstens makes of his daughter Paula. The portraits are descriptive, not interpretative. The subjects are depicted in isolation; they do not refer to a narrative, family origins or any body of ideas outside the frame of the artwork. The portraits emphasise the specific, the identity of the person depicted, and not the general, a concept or fine quality. They are about the actual characteristics of the person depicted; they do not idealise. The subjects are serious, their eyes sometimes even severe; they are not charming or attractive. They loom up out of a dark

and austere background, picked out by a simple light source; they are not the centre of an exuberant play of light and colour. And where the first terms in each of these oppositions would apply to the maniera fiamminga of the Northern European Low Lands, the second apply to the maniera greca of the southern European, Italian Renaissance. In each of these contradistinctions Hendrik Kerstens, with his portraits of his daughter, fits completely in the maniera fiamminga.

Today Hendrik Kerstens's photographs, in monumental formats up to 150 x 120 cm, are sold for high prices all around the world. In addition to the Flemish primitives, his work is also regularly associated with that of Jan Vermeer. In 2008 Bag (2007) was one of the three final candidates for the annual Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize at the National Portrait Gallery in London. The work Napkin (2009) travelled across the United States as the publicity image for Dutch Seen, the exhibition of

contemporary Dutch photography assembled by FOAM (Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam) and Kathy Ryan, director of photography for the New York Times Magazine, as part of the activities for the Henry Hudson 400 commemoration of four centuries of relations between Holland and the United States.

What makes Hendrik Kerstens's monumental work so esteemed is a combination of a number of elements: the recognisable visual tradition of Northern European portrait art which returns in a refined form of affectionate family photography, all carried out in the simple surroundings of an Amsterdam residence, in a perfectly honed technique and style.

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