

RAINER ELSTERMANN

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What matters most in *Photo Studio* nearly goes unnoticed: the men, women and children who appear in this Spartan room are not so much captured by the photographer as they are the ones doing the capturing. Initially, viewers are taken by their “posed” charm and energy, but also by a type of portraiture at home in the world of fashion – if more so in sync with a different world where time and place seem consumed by the atmosphere of a street party in a village while never shying away from the bluntness of a police lineup. Most significantly, however, the more one knows about the photographer responsible for *Photo Studio*, the more the people captured in his images seem to capture him.

After setting the stage for a thoughtfully conceived suite of images, shot in a space offering little in the way of background scenery, German photographer Rainer Elstermann allows imagination to run wild and do something both rare and worth studying: produce a visual arena of self-reflection that relies most on

forthcoming others. The woman with the cone-like bouffant, the singer holding a microphone, the bespectacled athlete stripped to his radiant white underwear, and the music lovers balancing antique radios on their shoulders are not necessarily people who appear shy or caught off guard. If anything, the reverse seems true: whoever sees them is surprised and taken aback, unprepared for so much openness from complete strangers too friendly and too welcoming to remain strangers for very long. In a sense, they become universal and human keepsakes. Moreover, they do this so effortlessly that one hesitates to think of them as performing or entertaining on command. They do, after all, seem like the kind of people who would only perform when in the mood to do so.

In this artistically-reduced setting boasting an understated Mediterranean chic (walls painted subdued colours, one houseplant, curtains with dated patterns, and stray pieces of designer furniture) selected models of African descent evoke moments and sensations

which seem linked to popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s, whether in Africa or in parts of the United States. Despite this time frame being heavily influenced by the Cold War and the African-American Civil Rights Movement – not to mention anticipating the 1976 Soweto Uprising – no tangible sense of the cultural, political and racial strife of the past fifty to sixty years surfaces in the world of these attractive models. Instead, as these people suggest styles and attitudes of previous eras, they continue to lead their full and photographically-suspended lives in a space that Rainer Elstermann has been known to call a “discovered” photo studio – a simple space that exists clearest in one of his journal entries:

“Travelling between African cities like Brazzaville, Bangui, Bamako and Lilongwe, daydreaming of the formidable Samuel Fosso and the energetic Malick Sidibe, I also stopped at Karen’s place, at the foot of the Ngong Hills. There was a little, photo studio. It was used a long time ago as a portrait studio for

ever, he says that he intends to reduce his Internet presence to his essential interests. With a healthy mix of ambition and professional modesty, he plays down the scope of his digital library, likewise an archive of headshots, editorial work and fine art portraits – an electronic portfolio cataloguing his many commissioned works for international magazines, agencies and galleries. With a single ENTER click, a portion of all this arranges itself in lines of faces across the computer screen. The images literally catapult into place. Still, the HTML and JPEG-generated fervour deceives. In reality, Elstermann’s photography is based on a deeply human and boldly hybrid style: a fashion-influenced seriousness focused on fine art on the one hand, and a professional’s knowledge that today’s artists/photographers are not afraid to emphasize commercial influences on the other.

For his *Photo Studio* shoots, Rainer Elstermann enlisted, as he usually does, the help of a costume designer and other professionals. His project partner, Andreas Stamm, oversaw the locating of the clothing and the

props. The end result – a suite of high-definition images with empowering yet understated tints glorifying the models’ skin tones – underplays but never hides the fact that this project is “a piece of fiction,” a photographic series at the same time a collection of visual impressions reflecting a European gaze directed at Africa. Instead of using the Irving Penn Approach to extract people from real life and photograph them against the backdrop of a portable studio, Rainer Elstermann photographs his models against a “mental” backdrop of selected literary, musical and social motifs. His selections include, for example, *Out of Africa*, the book by the Danish writer Karen Blixen as well as Sydney Pollack’s masterly film adaptation of it; a love of jazz music; and references to various Africa-oriented photographers. During the work process, the extremely cooperative and amicable models, who participate in *Photo Studio*, magically turn Elstermann himself into part of this project.

Photo Studio represents the height of mind-portraiture with real people. This visual chronicle never indulges in nostalgia, humour, pathos and forms of visual philanthropy, as we know it. On closer inspection, an original counter-impulse (not easily linked to other photographers) surfaces here, meaning a highly personal attempt to capture a sense of human and geographic simplicity. In place of history, Elstermann creates his own authenticity of the moment. In place of humour, he offers viewers a playful irritation fraught with “cheerful” double meanings. In place of pathos or visual philanthropy, he presents straightforward documentation. Because the balance of these qualities do much more than satisfy the basic requirements of commercial or editorial photography, one could easily assume that many of Elstermann’s satisfied clients have missed the big picture so far: this photographer’s work refers less to carrying out assignments than it does to studies made by a collector-photographer, a modern-day August Sander.

One of Elstermann’s clients, however, showed more feeling and emotion than the others. After purchasing a *Photo Studio* image and reading Elstermann’s poetic journal entry, he confessed that he planned to travel the same route the photographer travelled, and that

he planned to see, with his own eyes, what the photographer saw: the public and private worlds of people discovered in and around a small African photo studio at the foot of the Ngong Hills – the same worlds that produced these flattering and thought-provoking portraits of people forging a new existence.

But like photography itself admits to being in the end, Elstermann’s journey too, is primarily a profound journey of the mind and eye. The “photo studio” is, after all, Rainer Elstermann’s photo studio in midtown Berlin. Concurrently, his vivid imagination and private history, coupled with his acquired tastes, are what give birth and life to an imaginary Africa whose very real protagonists were “discovered” with the invaluable help of various European casting agencies. So all this figures into what inspired the photographer to create, as it were, portraits of his own tastes (brilliantly masquerading as the tastes of others). Moreover, through the collaboration of the models, through the dream of another continent, and through the accompanying knowledge of other photographic artists, viewers are cleverly reminded of the extent to which discovering and understanding are determined by taste. One of Susan Sontag’s most quoted essays carefully investigates this notion: “[...] Nothing is more decisive. There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotions – and there is taste in acts, taste in morality.” But *Photo Studio* adds something here: There is also taste in history.

Elstermann was born in Berlin. His parents were “*Kriegskinder*” (“war children”), who, as the photographer explains, were raised during World War II under refugee circumstances and lost their own world. In turn, Elstermann feels that the fate his parents endured indirectly links with his present-day urge to have his photography create entirely new worlds (without disruptive politics attached). One feels that his much-appreciated freedom constructively addresses something irreversible in the past (of others), and that his artistry is largely based on combining selectivity with optimism. As opposed to creating just any world (ideal or not), Elstermann creates a world/room/studio at the same time the framework for welcoming a culture-enamoured existence.

In this “studio” the viewer constantly feels as if historical and social truths (past and present) are playfully integrated into the picture frame and meaning of each photograph: reserved and stately black women were once the convincing messengers for an improving self-image in the wake of racism; muscular and godlike African boxers were also the much respected social heroes of their day; many important singers transferred the aesthetics of love and politics to their audiences through ballads and unforgettable melodies; and new generations of forward-looking young people were also living proof of societies in states of transition.

Whether visible or not, the home-grown milieu of *Photo Studio* always seems to know what Elstermann finds humanly important and artistically essential. It hears, loves and, in a sense, produces the “bar tunes” that served as one of the photographer’s sources of inspiration. Here, at the latest, it becomes hard if not impossible to overlook how this physically bedazzling milieu mimes the photographer’s own heart – and how it both entertains and haunts viewers. *Photo Studio* does exactly what the title of the 1956 song by Screamin’ Jay Hawkins (a tune famously reinterpreted by Nina Simone) claims to do: “I Put a Spell on You.”

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emigrants who wanted to show their families and friends how well they were doing abroad, in their new life. Music was always in the air. Next door was an old bar, where once, in a husky voice, a beautiful woman sang slow songs of longing and of a zest for life into a golden microphone. Here I set up a studio for a few days. I rented it from the owner, just like Irving Penn did in Cuzco (Peru) in 1948. Some of my new friends came by, and I took their pictures. I dressed them up in old clothes that I found in the backroom, using the props lying around, and I dreamed a dream of Africa.”

To consider what Elstermann’s *Photo Studio* initially references is to embark on a uniquely inspirational, art journey of the photographer’s own design. The traveller departs from the “port” of Irving Penn’s 1974 *Worlds in a Small Room* monograph in which the recently deceased master photographer extracted people of every age and type from their natural circumstances and placed his models in front of the

camera not simply to isolate them, but rather (as Penn tells us) to consciously transform them. Then (as Elstermann’s journal entry tells us) the journey crosses the African plains of Peter Beard’s photo-collages, whose cluttered imagery often features scratchy headshots of wild animals. Not much later, the social intensity of Malick Sidibé’s both grim and uplifting photography comes into view. Finally, the traveller arrives at the provocative, self-referential and identity-swapping portraiture of Samuel Fosso. All things and all photographers considered, this impressive journey reveals an obsession with the kind of artistic achievements not merely photographic masterpieces of the 20th century but also photographic works numbering among the previous century’s cultural masterpieces. Just the same, this all-encompassing, world-wise, history-conscious and art-world-hopping journey says less about what inspired and created Photo Studio than the photographer’s own history does.

One glimpse at Rainer Elstermann’s website proves he has thousands of stories to tell. In conversation, how-