European
Portrait Photography
since 1990

BO ZAR BOOKS

PRESTEL

European Portrait Photography since 1990

Edited by Frits Gierstberg

CATALOGUE

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Europe not only represents a continent. It also gives its name to the most successful regional peace project, the European Union. So Europe is more than a continent, a project, an organization. It is also a dream or a *state of mind*. Being European refers to whoever *feels* European.

Identity is not eternally fixed. People can toy with the different layers of an identity. That is why the European Union has adopted the motto 'unity in diversity'. Precisely this unity in diversity – and the diversity of individual unity – surfaces in the work of these photographers.

This exhibition is inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the Iron Curtain. These pivotal events reunited our continent. They led to a new Europe and a new global order. In a world that is no longer divided into two opposing blocks, the European project has gone full speed ahead. Today many of the Central and Eastern European industries that were on the frontline of this divide are blossoming. The end of the Cold War gave Europe a new, common future. The works of the artists originating from these countries reflect this new departure.

Aside from geographic togetherness, there are many other elements that contribute to a feeling of community, like family and lifestyle. Take a look, for example, at the women at the side of the road, as portrayed by my compatriot Paola De Pietri: pregnant, seemingly desolate or abandoned in suburban areas – or are they perhaps willingly choosing new roads, new options ahead of them, carrying the future of Europe?

This exhibition looks for a compromise between feelings of understanding and distance, between the community and the individuals. It is this careful balance that drives our everyday work in the European Union. Our European culture is cherished in many corners of this world and works of art, such as the ones we see in this exhibition, help us relate to our partners around the globe.

This collection of photographs is a wonderful celebration of our shared past. It also gives a glimpse into our common future. I wish to congratulate the three co-producers – the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels, the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam and the Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki – with this multi-coloured cross-section of 25 years of European portrait photography.

Federica Mogherini
High Representative of the European Union
for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

'People, people, people', said the writer James Joyce.

Every day, we encounter faces. Every day, our eyes meet the gaze of other people. Every day, we smile. Every day, we experience what it is to be human.

Thanks to the career I chose in my early youth, I have been able to meet many people during my lifetime; thousands of faces, each of them unique, yet some of them similar. Many faces remind me of others I know, or they look like a collage of parts of different faces. They evoke memories and bring the distant or recent past to life. They never leave me untouched.

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas claimed that all our humanity is present in our face. It is the most revealing part of our body. The mouth, gaze, eyebrows, wrinkles, frowns and respiration all express humanity. The face 'speaks', as it were. It exceeds the sum of its various parts, and words always fall short in expressing what we feel when we are confronted with a face. This is because each face is expressive and expressiveness cannot be described. It is experienced. After all, behind every face there lies an awareness, and that awareness looks inwards, at oneself, as well as at other faces.

This catalogue is a sort of herbarium. It is a collection of faces of people of all ages, ranks, walks of life and origins. Those portrayed are clothed or bare. They are photographed or painted in the most varied frames and poses: traditional, theatrical, static, bizarre, comical, and so forth.

These faces have been photographed in Europe over the past 25 years. The chief merit of this exhibition lies in showing us that the differences between faces are unrelated to time and space. Indeed, the people who came up with the idea of this exhibition have put a number of recently photographed faces alongside painted portraits from 16th-century Renaissance Europe. The similarities are striking.

We can draw one conclusion from this: people are both different and identical. They are different because there is an incredible variety of heads, mouths, noses, eyebrows, et cetera. The possible combinations are virtually countless. They are identical in that the similarities between certain faces are unrelated to the cultural or geographical situation of those portrayed. In ths exhibition, we certainly see people in all sorts of 'situations': families at home, children on the beach, aristocrats in their monumental drawing rooms, schoolboys and girls in the playground, Orthodox priests against the backdrop of the azure Greek sea, farmers in their golden-brown fields, and so on. Even if these scenes show a certain closeness between people, they take nothing away from their individuality. If we just note similarities between faces, these transcend borders and centuries, which becomes clear when we see a young swimmer in her bathing suit alongside Botticelli's Venus, or the portrait of the Duke of Urbino by Piero della Francesca next to a woman with a resolute, eagle-like gaze.
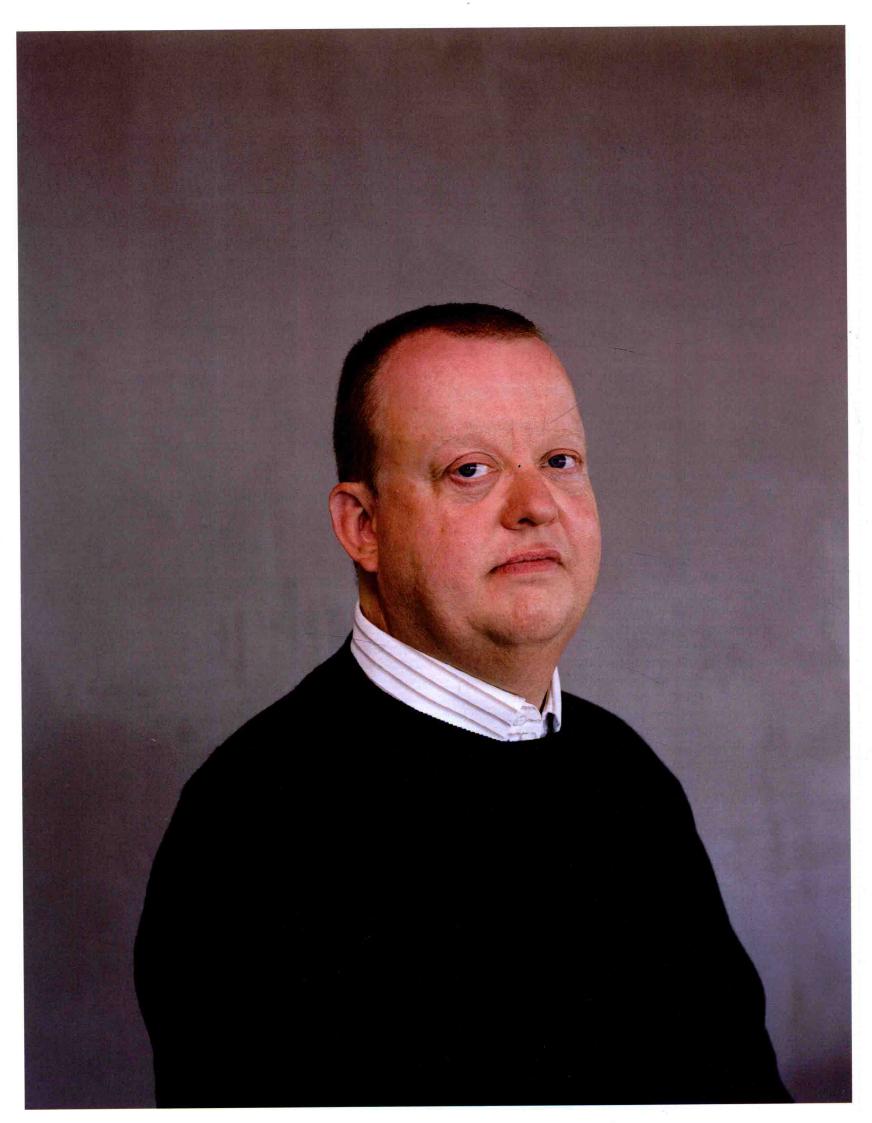
It is in this respect that people are the same the world over. What I mean is that while there are certain differences in face, character, stature, and so forth, there are also 'types', and it is these types that are common to all mankind. Incidentally, Jean de La Bruyère tried to draw these 'characters' in a book of the same name: *Les Caractères*. The intrigues in the comedies of Plautus remind us of the films of Woody Allen. The tragedies of Aeschylus have much in common with some modern television series that present powerful men and women. Everywhere we find psychological motives that human behaviour has in common across different periods and genres.

All these faces tell us something, yet we cannot fully fathom them. They still conceal a certain confidentiality within them, an inner life that we imagine, but cannot reach simply by looking carefully. To do that, we have to interact with the person and enter into a relationship. We assume that behind all these faces there is finiteness, fragility and vulnerability.

Another common feature of these faces is that they are all portraits. These people all adopt a pose. Time stands still. Movements become rigid. This is characteristic of a portrait *in itself*. A genre that has existed for centuries. After all, a portrait has to record an image – the image we have of ourselves whenever we think of ourselves.

This last point raises the question of our identity. Who are we really? When we pose for a portrait, we are not our natural selves. But then are we actually anything by nature? A portrait is always a construction. We try to live up to the image of ourselves that we wish to project. But what this exhibition also demonstrates is that we come across differently to others because of the gaze they cast in our direction: the different photographers, each in their own way, reconstruct the reality they deal with. There is no such thing as unprocessed reality. There are only gazes on faces. Only faces. Different yet similar.

Charles Michel
Prime Minister of Belgium

Jitka Hanzlová, *Untitled (Holger)*, in 'There is something I don't know', 2011. Archival pigment print on cotton, 35.4 × 27 cm. Courtesy the artist

Portrait photography has a long history of both documenting and creating identities of individual people, thereby harking back to important European painterly traditions of the Renaissance. In this tradition, the individual and his or her personal development, expression and vision lie at the heart of community life, with no loss to social coherence and community spirit. Looking at a portrait, one is confronted with 'the other' as a fellow human being.

Although artistic changes and renewal of the photographic medium have taken place throughout the 20th century at different stages, the period starting in the early 1990s seems to have been extremely inspiring for artists and photographers. This period coincided with major social and political changes in Europe after the collapse of the communist and socialist states and the opening up of borders between East and West. This exhibition links these two developments - artistic and social - by placing the work of portrait artists in the light of Europe's new search for identity and its shared historical and cultural values.

The exhibition is travelling from Brussels to Rotterdam to Thessaloniki. In each venue it resonates in another environment, with a different history, identity and outreach. The Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels (BOZAR) stimulates the dialogue between cultural heritage and the living arts. It encourages reflection on and research into Europe's cultural commons. As a pendant to *European Portrait Photography since 1990*, BOZAR is simultaneously staging the exhibition *Renaissance Portraits from the Low Countries*. Visitors are invited to make mental connections between the photographs and the 16th-century paintings, and to compare the changing views on individuality, intimacy and community-building.

The Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam is keeper of a major part of the photographic heritage in the Netherlands. As such, it aims to reach out to a large audience with the story of photography, connecting the past with the present and placing the medium and its social, political and artistic implications in the broader context of our society. *European Portrait Photography since 1990* is a perfect illustration of this ambition, as well as an ideal example of a successful international collaboration between European cultural institutions.

The Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki is the only state institution in Greece dedicated to photography and falls under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Sports. The museum's goals are to present photography in all its uses, preserve the national photographic heritage, collect Greek and international works, and to support contemporary activity. Part of its mission is to endorse collaboration between other institutions, especially when it yields projects, like this one, that stimulate dialogue and bring unanswered questions to the fore.

This book and its accompanying exhibition showcase work by more than 30 artists who have been living and working in Europe since 1990. Both the publication and the exhibition were realized through a unique collaboration between three cultural institutions that share the ambition to play a role in the ongoing artistic and cultural debates of our time. We would like to thank all these institutions and their teams, for their efforts, energy and vision, and especially the following: Sophie Lauwers from BOZAR EXPO and her team - Exhibition Coordinator Christophe De Jaeger and Publication Coordinator Gunther De Wit; also Barbara Basdeki from the Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki. Furthermore, we wish to thank all the lenders, without whom this exhibition would not have been possible; the head curator, Frits Gierstberg, and the board of advisors, consisting of Christophe De Jaeger (BOZAR), Gautier Platteau (Hannibal), Alexandra Athanasiadou and Vangelis Ioakimidis (Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki) and Olga Sviblova (House of Photography, Moscow); the publishers Hannibal and Prestel for the wonderful catalogue; and of course, a very big thank you to all the galleries with which we collaborated for this exhibition.

Last but not least, we thank the artists for accepting our invitation to show their work and to share it with people all over Europe. We hope their work will be inspirational, serve as a mirror, tell us something about Europe and its people - even if this raises new questions in our minds. Whatever the outcome or effect, we are sure these portraits will touch you.

Paul Dujardin
Director-General and Artistic Director, BOZAR, Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels

Ruud Visschedijk
Director, Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam

Vangelis Ioakimidis
Director, Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki

Lucia Nimcova, *Principal*, in 'Unofficial', 2007. Archival ink-jet print, 80 × 60 cm. Courtesy the artist and Krokus Galéria, Bratislava

European Portraits: an Introduction
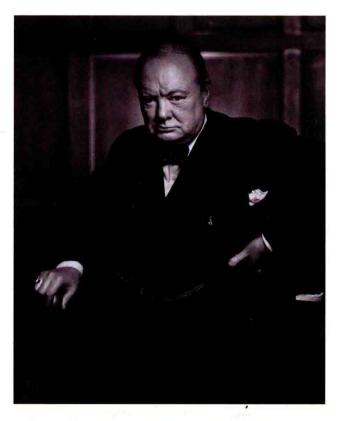
Frits Gierstberg

Renaissance

We live in the age of the portrait. Never before in history have portraits been so popular, albeit mainly in the form of a selfie. Similarly, never has it been so incredibly simple to make a portrait to show to the whole world. The rise of the Internet, social media and the smartphone have all given the photographic portrait an unprecedented strong impetus. Yet not all portraits are the same. There are many different sorts of photo portraits (passport photographs, family portraits, self-portraits, profile photographs, writer portraits, glamour portraits, official portraits, etc.) and just as many applications and uses (the pop idol in a teenager's bedroom, the king in the courtroom, the mayor in the town hall, the dictator in the town square, the loved one in the purse, the deceased on the mantelpiece, the writer on the back cover, the artist in the museum, and so on). Portraits often have great personal or social significance. They are part of social customs, rituals and protocols.

This book brings together the work of a number of photographers and visual artists who have made photo portraits somewhere in Europe over the last 25 years. The selected works stand in a long European tradition of the portrayal or imagination of an individual person or a group of individuals. That tradition includes certain stylistic aspects and social customs that arose with the portraiture of the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries. We think here, for example, of the lifelike depiction of an existing person, the symbolic image of his or her social or public status, and the specific place where, or the way in which, the portrait is created, depending on the purpose for which it was intended. The Renaissance tradition is based on the view that the individual human being takes on value and significance within the wider community of people.

Renaissance portraits were clearly physically framed and meant to be hung on the wall, and with good reason. They possess an intensity, stratification and measure of elaboration, but also a significance that demands more than a fleeting glance from the viewer. The same applies to the portraits in this book. In the 21st century, however, people no longer go to church buildings, palaces or town halls to look at public portraits, but rather to the consecrated hall of the art museum. It is possible that every (photo) portrait might in some way or other find a place in the Renaissance tradition. Basically, every portrait is based on the lifelike reproduction of an individual, usually with a focus on the face. On the other hand, today's photographic portraits, as compared with portraits at the time of the Renaissance, are so omnipresent and 'common' that further comparisons soon fall down. In the context of journalism, commerce, publicity, fashion, glamour and the private sphere (such as the aforementioned selfie), millions of portraits are produced every day all over the world. However, the majority of them are doomed to a brief and fleeting existence or, typically for our modern age, no one will ever see them. Yet this in no way detracts from the fact that the social significance of the photographic portrait can be properly understood only within all the functions and customs in the field between art and the mass media.

I myself, the other person, and the maker

Looking at a portrait is like looking at another person. Whether full-length, frontal (face, head and shoulders), three-quarter or in profile, a portrait 'communicates' a look, a glimpse, a facial expression, and even more. It expresses something, aims to tell us something about the person or persons portrayed: a presence, a status, a type or 'character', or a frame of mind - but then why are there so few portraits of people laughing or crying?

Yousuf Karsh, *Winston Churchill*, 1941. Gelatin silver print, on fibre paper, 50.8 × 40.6 cm. © Yousuf Karsh / Camera Press

With photographs, we are perfectly aware that what we are looking at is an image, a fabrication, a construction, and not a person as such. Yet a portrait does allow us to experience a confrontation with 'the other person'. As we look at a portrait, we see the look first of all. We search out the eyes first, almost instinctively. Within a fraction of a second, we have assessed that look, his or her facial expression and the posture. The image then becomes the fleeting abstract substitute for a meeting *in the flesh*. This gives a portrait a special aura, which is foreign to photographic landscapes, still lifes and street scenes. This makes a photo portrait an exceptional genre, even within photography itself. The portrait has an effect on our experience of being human. It appeals to our sense of humanity. It postulates an identity for the other person or it raises questions, which leads to a degree of empathy as we put ourselves, rationally or emotionally, in the depicted person's place. Secondly, in questioning our identity as a beholder, the portrait acts as a mirror. We have to relate to the other person, and by doing so, we see ourselves. This happens only if the image of that other person is a credible one.

Sometimes, the person being portrayed does not look the viewer in the eye, gazing instead at a point outside the frame. Such portraits belong to a different category, one that is less confrontational: since there is no eye contact, we are free to observe unobserved, like a voyeur. Yet we still feel that the person in the portrait really is present in some way or other. The powerful presence of the depicted person, that aura, compels us to treat the portrait with respect, to cherish and preserve it by embedding it into our personal or social rituals. We do not tear up portraits of loved ones. Portraits of hated dictators, however, get stamped on.

When a portrait is being made, both the sitter and the photographer try to anticipate the (desired) effects that the portrait will have on the viewer - engaging in a mutual endeavour to channel the way it will be interpreted. They do this without revealing their 'bag of tricks': pose, incidence of light, facial expression, camera angle, background, clothing and, if necessary, any relevant props. The pose relates the portrait genre to that of the theatre, where people act and pretend, projecting something with their bodies and facial expressions. Context, culture and tradition form the broader connection in which portraits are made, understood, used and appreciated. Like a painted or sketched portrait, a photo, too, is the product of a relationship - however transient it may be - between the maker of the portrait and the person depicted. A legendary example is when photographer Yousuf Karsh plucked the cigar out of Winston Churchill's mouth, provoking a scowl that Karsh was able to capture just a