

106 **MARCEL VAN EEDEN**
THE ARCHAEOLOGIST – THE TRAVELS
OF OSWALD SOLLMANN



We have come five hundred miles by rail through the heart of Ireland, what a bewitching land it is! – What a garden!

Ah, the golden age of travel: exotic locations, idyllic settings, the air of intrigue and mystery, all captured in picture-perfect postcards from the far reaches of India and Somalia. The romantic rhythms of train journeys, the wistful evocation of train stations and train tracks. Though here, scrawled in rushed cursive over one image, someone has written, "Please do your bit for him! He's innocent!" The suggestion of espionage or murder is in the air but never spelled out, it is between the lines, or rather in the gaps between the seventy-seven drawings of Marcel Van Eeden's installation *The Archaeologist: the travels of Oswald Sollmann*. Our protagonist, a fictional character whose name is derived from the infamous gunman Lee Harvey Oswald and lesser-known pharmacologist Torbald H Sollmann, is never seen or identifiable, but judging by these glimpses into his globe-trotting life he is an archaeologist of the glamorous Indiana Jones variety, caught in an unspecified film noir drama that is reminiscent of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

But Sollmann's escapades are perhaps closer to the more pedestrian archaeological reconstructions of Tony Robinson's *Time team* than might first appear. Van Eeden's practice involves finding photographs in magazines, books, and newspapers that date before his birth in 1965, reproducing them in A5 size charcoal drawings before re-inserting them into one of his ongoing narratives. His presence at the 2006 *Berlin Biennial* consisted of over 150 of such drawings detailing the fictionalised secret life of real-life botanist K M Wiegand, who somehow also managed to be a boxer, art collector, and top-rank Cold War spy. (Wiegand features here elliptically, as the recipient of an illegible postcard from Sollmann sent from Brussels.) Van Eeden's method enforces a gap that emphasizes his and our own experiential distance

from these images, opening up a playful space between the past and the present. History books, newspapers, official records, and personal letters are some of the narratives that fill this gap, and here it is made into a crystalline, spatial relationship which the viewer navigates to create their own.

The majority of the drawings here are postcard images: landscapes and snapshots of streets featuring a town name, as we follow from Mogadishu to Utrecht. Van Eeden makes use of the salon hang to present a multiplicity of concurrent moments, and though there is no prescribed movement through the exhibition, it seems it moves conventionally clockwise, taking us from Morocco to finish up in Ireland. Interspersed are several brief, claustrophobically close-up glimpses of murky figures or unknown details, and it is apparently upon Sollmann's return to the Netherlands that things begin to unravel. Some form of wreck or bomb site, gloved hands pointing to a map, possible blood stains, and of course men shadowing their faces with fedoras. The pace quickens by hanging several drawings in neat succession, and it is a series featuring a man travelling by train with an important-looking suitcase followed by a knife-wielding scuba-diving scene that seem to be the dramatic climax of the narrative. What results is a set of numerical measurements taken from this underwater excursion, the intelligence value of which can only be guessed.

Van Eeden's work is undeniably cinematic in its use of the composition of images from the mystery and thriller genres, but his installations are the closest I have seen to the narrative workings of comic books in a gallery space. His deliberate muting of narrative particulars only highlights that the act of narration itself is performed by the movements of the viewer, while the rhythm and

pace of his placement on the wall echo the layout of comic-book pages. The K M Wiegand series carried with this a political and cultural commentary that was at once humorous and relevant, casting the known historical developments since World War II as a clay to be moulded. *The Archaeologist*, however, seems more a formal exploration of the dramatic techniques of this narrative structure, making the construction of plot and character itself into detective work. While not nostalgic in its evocation of the past being enacted in the present, the intentional distance to this golden age still lends it the flavour of a mildly observed period drama. As such, the meta-narrative workings of the show remain involving and interesting, but the story you uncover is like a film that is engaging, suspenseful, but ultimately light-hearted and forgettable.

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(opposite)
 Marcel van Eeden
 from *The Archaeologist – the travels of Oswald Sollmann*
 courtesy Chadha Art Collection/
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