



Penetrating a world that is closed to most – Arab sheikhs behind their palace walls – Wouter Deruytter's photographs document a life that is as fascinating as it is rare.

By Richard Buckley, *Vogue Hommes International*, Spring/Summer 2001

"When you travel," Elizabeth Hardwick wrote in *Sleepless Nights*, "your first discovery is that you do not exist." Authors have always made the distinction between tourist and traveler. The former is just passing through, while the latter, often on an odyssey of self-discovery, is searching for something deeper beneath the surface. Belgian by birth, and a nomad at heart, Wouter Deruytter is both a traveler and a photographer. Using his camera as his "mask," Deruytter's work takes him into the closed worlds and marginal societies of such groups as American cowboys, Egyptian circus performers, New York drag queens and rich Arab oil sheikhs. While the lives of his subjects may seem theatrical or eccentric, Deruytter's images make no judgments, but merely attempt to offer an objective documentation. His work does, however, explore the "cross-pollination and fusion" between those inside and outside these groups, like the inherent tension between the myth and reality of cowboys, or gender identity with the drag queens. His images of the Arab sheikhs reveal them as a people who have one foot firmly planted in the East and the other in the West, ancient traditions versus modern aspirations. Examine the photo of a Saudi crown prince being driven over a road of carpets, or men kneeling in prayer on a Dubai street beside their stretch limousine.

Deruytter's noble images of the Arab sheikhs are not a folkloric representation of a people, but rather an unblinking and clear view of the realities of their lives in the modern world, set in an environment of extreme wealth. He says that what we in the West may perceive as flamboyant or theatrical is merely practical in the remote Arab countries. "It is a convenience to have a cell phone on a camel," he says. "Or a private jet where there is no airline. It is a convenience to have gold taps, it just means no cleaning." In their own countries, he observed, these people lead a low-profile life and live by the rules. "The Arabs love beauty," adds Deruytter, "women, jewelry, horses, palaces, but they don't want to show it to anyone else but family and friends." The trappings of ostentatious wealth are shrouded behind the protection of thick walls. Deruytter's discovery of photography came at age 17, during a Belgian television strike when they continuously broadcast Roman Polanski movies. "I wanted to be Polanski." While still in art school at Ghent's Royal Academy, he began his first series of photographs of Brussels nightlife and a collaboration with artist Keith Haring. From Belgium, he went to New York to study at the International Center of Photography. Since, then, Deruytter has been traveling and taking pictures. It was his Belgian dentist, also a horse breeder, who took him to the Dubai World Cup and introduced him in the world of the Arab sheikhs. Looking beyond their subject matter, Deruytter's photos reflect the lyrical humanism of Robert Doisneau and the formal classicism of Robert Mapplethorpe, two of his influences, but mostly they celebrate originality in a world of increasing uniformity.





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OPPOSITE PAGE, HRH CROWN PRINCE
ABDULLAH BIN ABDUL AZIZ, QIPAH,
KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA, 1995.
THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT, SAUDI ARABIA, 1995.
LOWER LEFT, SHARJAH, UAE, THE CAR
OF HIS HIGHNESS SHEKH DOCTOR
SULTAN BIN MUHAMMAD AL QASBI, RULER
OF SHARJAH, 1995.
BELOW, ROYAL FAMILY, DUBAI, UAE, 1995.



WOUTER DERUYTTER
PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER BECK

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RIGHT, HRH SHEKH DOCTOR SULTAN BIN MUHAMMAD AL QASBI, RULER OF SHARJAH, UAE, 1996.
BELOW RIGHT, A PRIVATE JET, DUBAI, UAE, 1997.
BELOW, INSIDE THE AL BEWADIVA FARM OF HRH PRINCE SULTAN BIN ABDU, AZD, KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA, 1996.



LINKS



WOUTER DERUYTTER is represented by Wessel + O'Connor Gallery, New York, Tel (1) 212 242-8811.
COWBOY CODE, Wouter Deruytter, Arena Editions, 2000. **WOUTER DERUYTTER: KNIGHTS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE**, Steching & Kunstboek, 1997.

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