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By Gilbert Rook

Can you live entirely in the past? Photographer Wouter Deruytter loves fictitious worlds and the retreat into an artificial paradise. "Imagination is so much more interesting than reality."

LIGHTER THAN GRAVITY

"I see a fairytale and I press the shutter," Wouter Deruytter says. His book of photographs, *Knights of the Impossible*, immerses us in a totally disparate set of worlds: drag queens, artistic dandies, oil sheiks, Egyptian circus artists and rodeo cowboys. Yet somehow we find the same thing in each case – **a flight from reality into a universe of one's own invention, from which the rest of the world is shut out.** Rich or poor, king or outcast, these people can only feel at home in fictitious worlds. Only there, freed from the restraints of dull, everyday life, can they reinvent their existence. It is a bubble-like illusion, lighter than gravity. Men become women or emigrate to a bygone age. At the end of the day, even the laws of nature cease to apply.

As a student, Deruytter (30) photographed the seamy side of life in the Marolles district of Brussels. It was there that he met transvestite Jem Jender, who was to act as his guide through the eccentric world of New York's drag queens. All glitter and glamour beneath the spotlights, but when the make-up comes off, the slightest anatomical difference can become the object of derision.

McDermott and McGough, a pair of New York artists, also spend their lives in disguise. On the cusp of the cyber-era, they have resolutely decided to look the other way. "All times exist at the same time", is their motto. Not only do they paint and take photographs the old-fashioned way, they also live entirely in the past. The 18th century, the era of the horse-drawn buggy, at their cottage in the mountains, 1880 at their house in the East Village, which has neither electricity nor telephones, and the 1930s at their Brooklyn studio.

These artistic dandies stage-manage their lives down to the smallest detail. However, even they cannot escape the dictatorship of the modern

world. The IRS recently froze all their US assets, leaving McDermott and McGough to live as tax exiles in a studio in Dublin. Nevertheless, they have not given up their battle with time, says Deruytter, a friend of the family: "They're about to move into a 19th-century mansion outside the city."

In their own way, the fabulously rich oil sheiks of the Gulf States are also dandies who pass their days in the void of a non-existent world. "Private jets and cellular phones are a kind of theater to them," Deruytter confirms. "Basically, they're still Bedouins – in their heads they're still living in the desert. They don't give a damn about Wall Street, provided their stallion wins its next race."

Deruytter went to Dubai to watch the World Cup horserace – the region's most prestigious social event, the winner of which rides off with a \$ 4 million prize. He owed his introduction to his Belgian dentist, but has since become a regular guest of the Sultan of Sharjah, one of the smallest of the Emirates.

The photographer is equally happy amid the grubby magic of an Egyptian circus or scouring local rodeos in the American West – the cheapest model of the *paradis artificiel*. "I'm looking for dreams," he says. "To me, play is better than reality."

That's how Deruytter tries to live himself, too. Having exchanged Roeselare – "the grayest town in Belgium" – for the metropolis of New York, he spends most of his time traveling. When he's not living it up with the rich and famous in Cairo, he's enjoying a life of ease in Sharjah or taking an old-fashioned ocean cruise with McDermott and McGough on the *Queen Elizabeth II*. What he never does is stay put. He is here, there and everywhere – invariably one step ahead of reality.

"That's the advantage of photography," he explains. **"It gives you an excuse for immersing yourself in one environment after another. You get to be there, but you don't have to be completely involved.** I spent a great deal of time with McDermott and McGough, but I never felt a hundred percent at home. Otherwise I would have stayed. To be honest, I'm always happy when the time comes to move on again."