

# Portfolio Jeroen Hofman



All images from the series, *Playground* © Jeroen Hofman.



# Playground

INTERVIEW BY  
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“My brother and sister are both corporals in the Dutch Royal Navy. My grandfather was a miner, and my parents both work in health care. Since childhood I’ve been intrigued by people in tough jobs and, in 2002, I graduated in photography from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague with a project on that very subject,” says Jeroen Hofman. “Afterwards, I pursued the subject further: I sailed with Alaskan crab fishermen, I photographed miners in Wales, and I witnessed Russian firefighters attack forest blazes armed with no more than rakes and spades. My work deals with these close-knit communities that I would love to be a part of, realising full well that they are far from perfect. I’m fascinated by the conformity of group behaviour that is an essential part of the dynamic in that world.”

His most recent project, *Playground*, takes this latter theme and explores it in panoramic detail, using a subject closer to home. The Netherlands has around 80 training centres available to the fire service, the army and the police, each equipped with full-scale locations within which they act out every conceivable emergency situation. The Marne 04 facility, for example, has an entire fictitious town, “Marnehuizen” [page 55], consisting of 180 houses complete with a town hall, a bakery, a butcher’s shop and a bank, surrounded by man-made forest so troops and armoured vehicles can practice tactical approach scenarios. On one level, it’s a peculiarly Dutch phenomenon, which Hofman puts down to the

country’s knowledge-based economy, specialising in areas such as logistics or, on a smaller scale, industrial firefighting, in which it is a world leader. It may also have something to do with the country’s precarious geography – a quarter of it below sea level – and its history of disastrous floods, which in 1953 caused the deaths of more than 1800 people.

On another level, his subject is reflective of wider global trends. “The entire world is consumed with fear about natural disasters and terrorist attacks. These facilities are our answer to those threats. Risk analysis and control are a major part of Western civilization.”

He has photographed 65 of the training centres so far, and plans to shoot them all, each one captured from the top of a cherry picker crane that costs €500 per day. The project has cost €35,000 to shoot so far, part-funded by his advertising work, and the rest through grant support from the Anna Cornelis Fund and the Sem Presser Archief Foundation.

“I spend some time walking around [each location] looking through my viewfinder to establish the vertical limits of the frame. I can only guess what it will look like once I’m on the cherry picker. I use a technical camera made by Cambo with a Phase One digital back, and I always take into account the position of the sun, even when it’s cloudy – it’s no fun finding yourself out of position in your cherry picker once the sun breaks through the clouds. It always

takes some time before you’re able – or allowed – to move. Then I wait for the scenario to unfold. Often they act out the same scenario several times, allowing me to photograph the exercise several times in different light. My personal best is waiting for six hours at -50°C, which I don’t recommend. I wait until all the figures are in the best spots, and for the light to be just right. And I aim to clearly portray the exercise.”

The results, he hopes, contribute something to our understanding of modern society, documenting its hidden infrastructure. But there’s also the sheer pleasure of looking at these artificial scenarios, which take on surreal and humorous qualities when reduced to still moments shot from afar, captured like postcards of a model village. This distance belies the very real dangers the participants may one day face close up, but does he feel the scale and number of the training facilities is a little excessive?

“Well, there are a lot of them for such a small country,”

Hofman admits. “The drive to be able to anticipate any and all events seems a bit obsessive. But I must say that I do think the training is so realistic and so thorough that, in my opinion, they contribute substantially to providing an adequate response to real calamities.” *BJP*

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