

Vik Muniz @ Rena Bransten

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Handmade Fragments in four dimensions (large), 2017, collaged painted and ripped archival inkjet prints (unique), 44 x 58 inches

by David M. Roth

“Can you tell which one is real?” The question ricocheted repeatedly around the room during my recent visit to *Handmade*, Vik Muniz’s latest foray into perceptual monkey wrenching. The question, if taken at face value, would seem to be political given the speed at which the fabrication of lies has become a growth industry. But it also pertains directly to Muniz, who, since the late-1980s, has used that same query to power an entire career. His prodigious and highly diverse includes drawings made from sugar, dust, wire, thread and marinara-soaked spaghetti; sculptures carved with the aid of a microscope on single grains of sand; and replicas of old-master paintings made from cut-up magazines, garbage, industrial machine parts and much else.

The connecting thread – and the key to viewer engagement – Muniz long ago discovered is combining dissimilar modes of representation, the most vital for his purposes being photography. It’s the salable end product of his efforts and, most critically, the catalytic, transformational device for whatever experiment in visual tomfoolery Muniz happens to be engaged in at any given moment. Few artists have probed the porous membrane separating fact from fiction as deeply, and even fewer have made conceptual photography as intellectually and aesthetically compelling. The success of his experiments rests on how you perceive Muniz’s transformation of detritus into photographs. Banking on the human predilection for detecting and organizing otherwise incoherent visual information into recognizable patterns, Muniz has constructed an oeuvre in which nothing is what it seems to be.



Handmade Tears (horizontal), 2017, collage of strips of archival inkjet prints (unique) 71.3 x 47.5 inches

The same holds for *Handmade*, but with some significant differences. Rather than photograph collages or constructed scenes as he has in the past, Muniz displays actual objects: ripped drawings, crumpled pieces of paper, lengths of string, color swatches, bits of clay. These he integrates with photographic reproductions of those same objects, arranged them in ways that make differences between the originals and the copies difficult, if not impossible, to detect.

Try, for example, to discern whether the ripped, brightly colored pieces of paper in *Handmade Tears* are photographs or original drawings. I couldn't. Each time I thought I had, seams and shadows – the very things I expected to provide telltale clues – only conspired to raise doubts. *Handmade Fragments in Four Dimensions* left me similarly flummoxed. It, too, is a collection of scraps. They overlap like Pick Up Sticks, that old Zen exercise disguised as a children's game. Here, as with other pieces in the show, advances in digital photography and inkjet printing make the "real" and the "counterfeit" virtually indistinguishable.



Handmade- Two sheets (diptych), 2017, archival inkjet print, paper, 48 1/4 x 38 3/8, unique

Not everything in the exhibition confounds to such a degree. Some pieces just pretend to. One such work consists of two framed sheets of off-white paper placed side-by-side; another is a grid of color swatches (painted and/or printed) on 5 x 7-inch pieces of paper. In both cases, if you keep in mind how photographs collapse depth and distance, telling the originals from the replicas is easy. (The topography of the shadows is the giveaway.) Other works, like the vortex Muniz constructed out of pushpins and black yarn, stand as a great example of Op Art, but it tells us only that perspective-based illusions depend on one's vantage point. Which is not exactly news. *Bound* presents a more engaging trompe l'oeil variation on this idea by crisscrossing a photo of a rope-bound package with *actual* lengths of rope.



Report: Eight Color Spectrum (Set of 8), 2017, digital c-print, 30 x 20 inches

On display in a separate room is a group of collages that vaguely recalls *Pictures of Magazines 2*, a series shown here in 2012. Where the latter used mash-ups of photos and text snippets as pictorial elements to depict famous paintings, the digital C-prints that comprise this eight-part series (*Repro: Eight Color Spectrum*), present a blizzard of art-historical images — all of them culled from books. Combined in layers at stupefying density, they rival in complexity and virtuosity collages made by Hannah Höch, Romare Beardon, Jess Collins and Bruce Conner. But to what end? To give us a visual literacy test? If so, they're essentially color-coded parlor games.

Shortcomings aside, *Handmade* deserves to be on your list of must-see exhibitions. “Like a vaccine,” Muniz once wrote, “the work...acts an antibody, administered to help the audience accumulate critical defenses against the slick intrusiveness of pictorial meaning.” Muniz’s sleights-of-hand convey a unique kind of truth, revealing the fictions that both aid and undermine perception.

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Vik Muniz: “Handmade” @ Rena Bransten Gallery through October 28, 2017.

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