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Master of Illusions

By Thessaly La Force

M A S T E R O F

Brazilian artist Vik Muniz makes art from anything – sugar, waste, diamonds. But for all its playful deceptiveness, his work is full of complex, socially conscious ideas. He talks to *Apollo*

By Thessaly La Force
Portrait by Dina Kantor

ILLUSIONS



1. Vik Muniz (b. 1961),
photographed in his New York
studio, November 2015

On a November afternoon, Vik Muniz greets me inside his expansive studio in Brooklyn's Clinton Hill district. A bumper sticker that reads 'I ■ Judd' is slapped across the outer door; inside is an open, sunlit space, in which a trio of low-slung modernist sofas are symmetrically arranged around a coffee table. Scattered across a larger table in the front room are items that the artist plans to take to Brazil with him in just a few days time. Nothing looks too out of the ordinary for an artist of his means and mind: *Froebel's Letters on the Kindergarten*, a bottle of white wine, bitters, knick-knacks, some cordless telephones, a cluster of glass beakers, and a boxed Starfrit Rotato Express mechanical peeler. Muniz explains to me that he splits his year between Rio de Janeiro and New York, shuttling between his two studios in monthly sprints.

Muniz gets excited when he speaks – he is the kind of person who seems spring-loaded with energy. 'I actually cannot focus because there are so many things coming up,' he tells me. He has a gentle manner and a charm that seems to stem from his accessibility, his openness. Even as he takes a work call on his mobile phone, I feel part of his world, comfortable inspecting his studio and the books in his library.

As an artist, Muniz works across several media, though his primary one is photography (to define him as just a photographer is misleading). Muniz typically assembles

an image in three dimensions, like a sculptor reverse engineering a *trompe l'oeil*, and then photographs it from a set vantage point. His photographs are representational, but they also force the viewer to do a double take, to rethink what it is, exactly, that you're looking at. Muniz has referred to himself in the past as an 'illusionist', and much of his work does indeed play tricks on the eye. He's recreated Andy Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe out of diamonds (Fig. 2), Che Guevara's face from black beans (Fig. 5), Dracula out of caviar – even several of Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock action painting with chocolate syrup (Fig. 7). In an art world that takes itself very seriously, Muniz isn't afraid of trying to make you laugh.

On one wall of the room hang two large prints from recent projects, including one from the *Sandcastle* series, in which Muniz worked with the Brazilian artist and designer Marcelo Coelho to etch images of castles on individual grains of sand using a focused ion beam and scanning electron microscope (Figs. 3 & 4). Examples from the series will be included this February at the artist's retrospective at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta (28 February–29 May). The image looks deceptively simple, like something a grownup might doodle on an Etch A Sketch. But I'm reminded of what Coelho has said in a short documentary on the process: 'Over the course of four years, sometimes I asked myself, "Should I just do this in Photoshop?" But you realise that it's not the same

2. Marilyn Monroe, from *Pictures of Diamonds*, 2004, Vik Muniz, chromogenic print, 144.8 x 121.9cm



'Ignorance is fertile ground for the imagination'

Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co. and the artist

thing. In some ways the final image carries with it the history of the process you've developed.'

In a sense, this gets to the heart of the complexity behind Muniz's work. It can be tempting to dismiss him as a prankster, but there's always a depth to his sense of play, a feeling that one needs to decipher his process and its implications in an otherwise recognisable image. In his collaged version of Gustave Caillebotte's *Floor Scrapers*, for example, the lines of the floorboards are composed out of fragments of headlines, and words torn from the pages of magazines. Many evoke the quality of the light or the questions about realism that Caillebotte's painting captures: 'it's true', 'brilliant', or 'a new day'.

As we walk around the studio, Muniz tells me to touch a bust of Mona Lisa that sits by the window. She looks to be carved from Styrofoam, her nose and hair crumbling into layers of synthetic white beads. 'Go ahead,' he urges. 'It's really cool.' I place my hand on top of hers – already aware that it won't be what it seems – and find myself surprised by the cold, dense sensation of marble beneath my palm. The sculpture could be a Muniz, but it's not – it's the work of the Italian sculptor Fabio Viale. Muniz tells me he is planning to work in marble, however, and that he has been experimenting with 3D printers, considering how best to capture the faces of famous actors in various Shakespearean roles, and then to carve those printed sculptures into larger-than-life marble busts

that resemble their crude plastic. Trying to remember the name of an actor with whom he's working, he draws a blank and tells me that he's recently decided to stop looking everything up on Google. 'Ignorance is fertile ground for the imagination,' he says.

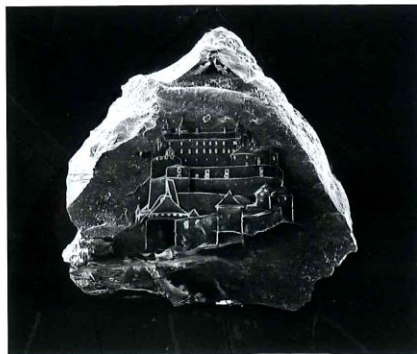
Muniz offers me coffee and banana bread as we continue to discuss the impact of new technologies on his art. 'On my profile on Instagram, I say I'm a "Student of Media";' he tells me. 'It comes from [Marshall] McLuhan. I'm part of the first generation of artists to have lived under the influence of electronic media. I only decided to become an artist after I saw the work of people like Cindy Sherman or Jeff Koons. It was art based on the same experiences I had. When I first saw the film stills of Cindy Sherman nobody had to explain them to me.' But to Muniz's eyes, the world has now become cluttered with images: 'You wake up from a dream and you don't know if it is based on a film, a book, a play or something you saw on the screen when you were taking the elevator to your room in a hotel in Calcutta. It doesn't matter. It's huge, it's a junkyard.' This is a nifty metaphor, not just for the world but for Muniz's work – an art that involves sifting through the vast array of objects that we discard, and marvelling at what else they can be.

Muniz likes to tell the story about how he, a poor kid from Rio, ended up as a successful artist in New York. As a boy, his drawing talents landed him a scholarship to an

3. *Sandcastle #10*, from *Sandcastles*, 2014, Vik Muniz, digital chromogenic print, 180.3 x 220.6cm



4. *Sandcastle #3*, from *Sandcastles*, 2013, Vik Muniz, digital chromogenic print, 180.3 x 214.6cm



5. *Che (Black Beans)*, after Alberto Korda, 2000, Vik Muniz, digital C print, 149.9 x 119.4cm



VIK MUNIZ



6. *Marat (Sebastião)*, from *Pictures of Garbage*, 2008, Vik Muniz, digital chromogenic print, 76.2x61cm

Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

art school; by 18, he had snagged a job at a billboard company, and soon became something of a sensation for his designs (one wonders about the number of artists who have escaped the clutches of commercial advertising). One night, on his way to a black-tie gala, clad in a rented tuxedo, he broke up a brawl between strangers. 'Somebody was hitting somebody else with brass knuckles,' he says in his 2003 TED Talk. 'Very ugly. And also, advertising people do that all the time'. He goes on: a gun was drawn, a bullet fired, and Muniz was shot in the leg – he's able to sketch the drama of the scene with a disarming vividness. The man with the gun offered Muniz money as an enticement not to press charges, and Muniz bought himself a ticket to America. This was in 1983. He got by at a framing gallery in the East Village, and started to absorb the artistic expressions of those around him. By 1988, he had his first solo show at a gallery.

The pivotal moment came in 1996, shortly after a trip to Saint Kitts during which Muniz had taken Polaroids of children whose parents or grandparents worked on the island's sugar plantations. He remembers being struck by the contrast between the children's bright innocence and the existential fatigue of the older generation – it was sugar, he realised, that had forever changed their lives. He decided to recreate the children's faces with grains of sugar and photograph them. The effect – all shadows, mounds, and softly blurred lines – is textural and poetic, conveying nostalgia and a sense of the island's

complicated history (Fig. 8). MoMA included *Sugar Children* in its 'New Photography 13' exhibition in 1997, and Muniz's career began to take off.

Though he is by no means an outsider, Muniz's side-step into the art world does betray how comfortable he is working without its approval. As Roberta Smith wrote in the *New York Times* in 2011, the artist 'operates with impunity in the Bermuda Triangle bordered by commercial, popular and fine art, which can drive the art world a bit nuts'. This is partly because Muniz is one of those contemporary artists (others include Kehinde Wiley or Theaster Gates) interested in exploring how the process of art-making can have a socially responsible dimension. After all, we now live with an art market in which a photograph from Muniz's *Sugar Children* series can easily sell for five figures while its subject presumably still lives in a condition close to poverty.

This aspect of Muniz's work was best explored in *Waste Land*, a 2010 documentary by Lucy Walker that followed the artist over the course of three years as he worked with the *catadores*, or garbage pickers, at Jardim Gramacho, which, until its closure in 2012, was one of the world's largest landfill sites, located on the outskirts of Rio. 'I'm at this point in my career where I'm trying to step away from the realm of fine arts', Muniz explains in the film, 'because I think it's a very exclusive, very restrictive place to be. What I want to be able to do is to change the lives of people with the same materials they deal with every day.'



7. *Action Photo III (after Hans Namuth)*, from *Pictures of Chocolate*, 1998, Vik Muniz, cibachrome print, 102 x 76.2cm

8. *Valentina, the Fastest*, from *Sugar Children*, 1996, Vik Muniz, gelatin silver print, 35.6 x 27.9cm





9. *Verso (La Gioconda)*, from *Verso (Back of the Painting)*, 2012, Vik Muniz, mixed media, ht 102.9cm

Muniz selected six of the *catadores* as subjects-cum-models for a series of photographic works recreating Old Master paintings out of trash picked at Gramacho. When, as the film draws to a close, the portrait of Tião Santos, who Muniz styled in a discarded bathtub as David's Marat (Fig. 6), sells at auction in London for close to \$50,000, Muniz donates the proceeds from the sale to the worker's cooperative.

Now Muniz is focusing his efforts on primary education. He has recently opened a small school – 60 students in four classrooms – in Favela Vidigal in Rio. 'I'm seeing if we can actually provide experiences to children to change the way they see things,' he says. 'It's not a formative school, it's about giving them one encounter with a great book that will put them on another path. See the world differently. That's how you do it. You don't have to change someone's life forever, you just have to steer it in subtle ways.' The school is intended for children aged four to eight (who will attend for free), with an emphasis on draughtsmanship and technology. 'I've been working with NGOs in Brazil with kids aged 16 to 21 for over 15 years,' he jokes. 'I'm tired of recuperating young adults. I prefer to make one good from the very beginning.'

As I eat my second slice of banana bread, Muniz tells me about an ongoing series that he is working on, called *Verso* (Fig. 9), which involves him replicating the backs of famous paintings such as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *Starry Night*: 'They are posters: you can get an umbrella, postcards. I only like to work with stereotypes.' A number of *Verso* works will be displayed at the Mauritshuis in The Hague this summer (9 June–4 September), including versions of the backs of important Dutch paintings from the museum's collection. For the series, Muniz has consulted whoever he can – milliners, carpenters, even forgers – in a bid to be as authentic as possible, an enormous effort considering how for many viewers such works will be virtually indistinguishable from each other beyond their differing dimensions. But then again, this is Muniz. 'I'm not making objects or images. I'm mostly interested in making processes,' he says. **A**

Thessaly La Force is a writer based in New York.

'Vik Muniz' is at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, from 28 February–29 May (www.high.org). 'Verso: Vik Muniz' is at the Mauritshuis, The Hague, from 9 June–4 September (www.mauritshuis.nl).

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