

VIK MUNIZ ART, JUNK AND VALUE

WORDS JONATHAN ROMNEY | INTERVIEW KAREN WRIGHT

A SELF-DESCRIBED 'low-tech illusionist,' Brazilian artist Vik Muniz uses diverse, seemingly unpromising media – sugar, cotton, wire, thread, chocolate – to create pictures that at once are *trompe l'oeil* and yet at the same time fool no one. Stand at a distance from these works and they appear to be quasi-photographic re-creations of famous paintings and other images; look at them close up and what you see is the improbable material he uses, pretending to be nothing other than what it is. And what it is in his latest series is, quite simply, garbage.

A new documentary, *You, Me, Garbage and Picasso*, records a project that the Sao Paulo-born, New York-based Muniz recently undertook in his native Brazil. *Pictures of Garbage* was exhibited in spring this year in Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art, and comprises images of contemporary Brazilians imitating heroic or classical poses: Jacques-Louis David's *Marat* slain in his tub, a Madonna with children, various idealised dignity-of-labour figures in the manner of Soviet or Latin American revolutionary art.

But the pictures are actually 'painted' – or rather, picked out – in garbage. Muniz's models and collaborators are scavengers, people who make a subsistence gleaning discarded but reusable material in Jardim Gramacho on the outskirts of Rio, Latin America's biggest landfill site. Inhabited by some 5000 people, the place is reputed to be hell on earth. Its denizens, Muniz comments – before his first visit, apparently – are 'probably the roughest people you can think of – they're all drug addicts. This is the end of the line... This is where everything that's not good goes – including the people.' The film is directed and edited by Karen Harley, with Joao Jardim and Muniz's wife, artist Janaina Tschäpe, as additional directors. One of the executive producers is Fernando Meirelles, whose film *City of God* did much to bring the poverty in contemporary Brazil to global awareness (albeit arguably glamorising it in the process).

Muniz insists at one point that he is more interested in process than in final product, and this particular process is certainly an ingenious exercise in circularity. Muniz enlists a number of Jardim Gramacho inhabitants and photographs them in iconic poses – images that are themselves recycled from the cultural repertoire. He projects each photo onto the floor of a huge

studio, and has his subjects trace out the image, filling in the dark areas and lines with material that they themselves have collected. Watching the film, you worry that Muniz's subjects, on their hands and knees, seem to be doing all the hard work; but we eventually see the artist getting down and sprinkling coffee grounds, or something yuckier, on the studio floor. He then re-photographs the finished, 'junked-in' images and finally, completing the circle, takes the resulting pictures to auction for the highest possible price – the proceeds going to ACAMJG, the Association of Scavengers of Jardim Gramacho, of which one of his subjects, Tião (Sebastião Carlos dos Santos), is president. The project is the latest of several series in which Muniz has played with ideas about representation and material by recreating pre-existing images in unlikely media. Some of these projects seem primarily conceptual: at the Whitney, he used dust from the museum to recreate some of its best-known exhibits. Other series are more obviously in the political-polemical vein of *Pictures of Garbage*. In *Sugar Children* (1996), Muniz created portraits of sugar workers' children from St Kitts, traced in sugar from their plantations, to comment on the way that labour converts workers' effort into saleable value.

Early on in Harley's film, before such themes fully emerge, we might well feel uneasy about Muniz's intentions. We see the artist wandering round the joyless expanses of Jardim Gramacho, watching mountains of rubbish cascade off the backs of lorries. Then Harley cuts to the glacially white curves of the Guggenheim, where Muniz muses on Picasso's *Woman Ironing*, one of the paintings he will appropriate: an image of poverty contemplated in a temple of cultural and commercial value. On first arriving in Jardim Gramacho, camera strapped on his back, Muniz gazes around like a bewildered tourist, wrinkling his nose while a pair of vultures hop about in the background. 'When you arrive here,' he marvels, 'you have to overcome some sensorial barriers... The smell is wonderful, it's incredibly bad.' You immediately suspect a dubious *nostalgie de la boue* (although the subtitled translation 'wonderful' for the Portuguese *formidável* may be misleading: I suspect the more ambivalent 'amazing' would do just as well).

Gradually, however, the logic of Muniz's project emerges and – given



Left: Vik Muniz, *Marat (Sebastião)*. Right: *The Gipsy (Magna)*, both from *Pictures of Garbage*, 2008. Digital C-prints.

«TO ME, BEING A SCAVENGER IS BEING A HERO»

the artist's approachable, no-nonsense affability, even blokishness – you start to root for him and his subjects. The scavengers he recruits, some eight of them, are a charismatic and articulate bunch, godsend for film-maker Harley as much for Muniz himself. Two of the women, Isis and Suelem, are exceptionally chic and photogenic, although their glamour is very much their own and not something Muniz imposes on them in his pictures. Some of Muniz's collaborators express a defiant pride in their occupation, notably Tião ('To me, being a scavenger is being a hero') and Zumbi, a father of nine who insists that scavenging is a lifestyle he has chosen because he likes it. Tião himself is an activist given to quoting Machiavelli: he once found a discarded copy of *The Prince*, dried it out, then devoured it. The women, however, eschew heroics and mystification: 'This is no future... It makes me ill,' declares Isis, while Suelem, who eats whatever she can salvage, expresses the bottom line of the scavenger's life when she says of her diet, 'If I don't die, it's not bad.'

Once we have followed Muniz through the process of turning junk quasi-alchemically into a visual commodity worth big money, then the project makes perfect sense. Muniz is out to prove that there is something new beyond 'the end of the line,' and indeed that the line itself can be reversed: he wants to take products, and people, beyond the supposed limit of their socially useful lives, to grant them new value and dignity.

Even so, watching the project in its early stages could set off any sceptic's alarm. When Muniz photographs the handsome Tião, nobly decked out as the dying Marat – in a bathtub that the model himself has obligingly hauled over a hill – we could be watching a parody of poverty-chic fashion photography, perhaps an outtake from *Zoolander*.

Yet everything begins to cohere as the film follows the elaborate, absurdly roundabout process of transformation by which Muniz and his collaborators painstakingly form debris into images. The reclaimed scraps and chunks are transfigured into a kind of solid 'paint,' yet at the same time acquire a new value as themselves, junk becoming a sort of ideal quintessence of junk. In the image of a sack carried on a worker's back or head, the container itself becomes a cornucopia made of, and spilling over with, garbage

at its most imposing, fruitful, *formidável*. The process that Muniz has devised reaches its conceptual climax in the auction itself, at Phillips in London, where the picture of Tião as Marat sells for £28,000. Muniz brings Tião to London to enjoy the auction, and for a potted lesson on the relationship between art, junk and value: they admire a Gavin Turk bronze cast of a bin bag, and a Manzoni worth \$300,000 (presumably, given the theme, a can of *mierda de artista*). Seeing his likeness on sale, Tião professes, 'I feel like a pop star here' – and you have to admit he carries himself like one too.

Muniz finally gives copies of the pictures to their subjects, who are delighted and moved, and even admit to being empowered by the experience: one woman says that she had never felt able to tell people what she did for a living, until working with the artist allowed her to. The subjects each get their moment of stardom, but we don't feel that they are being led into the media mincer and cast aside: this is not, as far as we can see, an X Factor process. Tião might get to appear on a glitzy Brazilian TV chat show, but he uses the occasion to make a political point, correcting the host that the proper term for what he and his co-workers deal in is not 'garbage' but 'recyclable material.'

You, Me, Garbage and Picasso is essentially a functional 'making-of' document rather than having major artistic aspirations in its own right. Director Harley does an honest, effective job of storytelling and explanation: getting us on Muniz's side, getting us to see both the joke and the serious social point of his undertaking. The film leaves some questions unanswered: it would have been good to know exactly how Muniz recruited and selected his collaborators, and – given the supposed roughness of the Jardim Gramacho population – whether he got the bum's rush from any hostile locals who didn't take kindly to arty types. And it could be said that the film spends too much time in the art studio, not quite enough in the garbage fields. But then, to do cinematic justice to Jardim Gramacho's strangeness, squalor and austerity, it would really have taken a Werner Herzog – or indeed, a Fernando Meirelles.

Jonathan Romney is a journalist and film critic on The Independent on Sunday. You, Me, Garbage and Picasso will be released shortly.



Vik Muniz, *Atlas (Carlão)*, from *Pictures of Garbage*, 2008. Digital C-print

«THE GARBAGE DUMP IS CLOSING AND THAT IS A SOCIAL TRAGEDY»



We caught up with Vik Muniz on a crackling mobile phone in Brazil, late at night. He had just returned from opening his show in the new Fundação Inimá de Paula, Belo Horizonte. Despite sounding tired, he revived as he talked about his project of making contemporary art accessible to all.

KAREN WRIGHT How and when did the garbage project start?

VIK MUNIZ The project started three years ago when an English couple wanted to do a project with me. They said I could work with a film maker, Lucy Walker, who had done several brilliant films. I didn't want to do a film about me but to do something about a specific body of work.

KW Tell me about Jardim Gramacho, the site.

VM Chaotic and artistic! At times you feel you are surrounded by broken and shredded things. You feel you are losing it a bit. But it's very beautiful – it's also very aggressive on the senses. It's 55 meters high, built on mangroves; one side is beautiful mountains, very pointy and beautiful. At first there is an unbearable smell, you want to vomit. After 30 minutes you get used to it and focus on other things. But at the same time it is visually enticing, it causes a cognitive challenge and you need to adapt to it.

KW How did you choose the people you worked with on the portraits?

VM There are 5000 people working on the site and some were reluctant to be filmed. We went through the process of selecting different characters. What I liked was there was a strict work conduct. You imagine it would be very chaotic but it's not.

KW Did you run into aggression?

VM There are extreme rules necessary to coexist. We chose to go to more friendly people. They were very suspicious, and had no idea what they were doing until I brought them into the studio. You have to remember that these people had never been to museums and knew nothing about art, not to mention contemporary art.

KW It was very touching to see the process in the film, but has it made a long term difference to people on the project?

VM This has changed their lives. If they went back, they went back with a different attitude, and some didn't go back. Tião, the guy who I brought to London, has done some amazing things since the film. He has spent his efforts getting support for his class. He's been on national television, on the equivalent of the David Letterman Show. 80,000,000 people watch this programme. Tião was so comfortable in front of the camera, I was more nervous than he was. He reads Machiavelli, he is comfortable talking to politicians. We are trying to get him an audience with the governor, trying to get recycling on the agenda. The garbage dump is closing and that is a social tragedy.

KW Has it changed you? Did the characters surprise you?

VM Yes! Fabio, who runs the studio, and I both have been changed. We didn't know whether it would work and we thought that we would be working with rough types. Once we got past their suspicions they were very smart. They contributed to the project and had such enthusiasm. They were so eloquent about the project and how it affected them. Many of us – artists, curators and collectors – are not so clear. And I will never look at garbage in the same way! (Laughs.)

KW What was important about the project for your work?

VM I was already established with my work, I had reached a curve, but sometimes I must betray my public. I wanted to work with different people, to have other input.

KW How did you choose the paintings?

VM I chose familiar paintings that carry the baggage of the viewer so they bring context to the work. At first I wanted to produce images based on

peoples' identities, but I chose the images instinctively. I had been to places of impressive endeavor before – gold mines where people were moving things from one place to another. This was different. People were picking up already used things. The movement seemed choreographic but when I left the site I was thinking about work.

KW Was there a specific period of art you thought of?

VM I chose paintings when people started glamorizing work, this would be after slavery. I wanted to mine a genre of work, people like Jean-François Millet and *The Gleaners*. The *Marat* picture was pure coincidence. Tião was carrying a bath and I saw it, and thought of the painting.

KW Does this come out of Duchamp's ready mades?

VM No, it is more Picasso than Duchamp – which is strange as all the garbage is ready mades! I am against the idea of found objects, everything can be found there, but the end result is that the garbage becomes formal.

KW How big were the portraits when you made them?

VM 20 by 30 meters.

KW Where did you do them?

VM In my studio, which is a huge hanger, in a rough area of town, Parada de Lucas, and which is conveniently next to a huge junkyard. We were up a very tall tower, 23 meters high. We were shooting down from an angle, giving the viewer a shot of normal perspective. People come to visit the studio when they are in town for Biennales. We tell them it is like life in a *favela*. On the other side of the street is the other gang in the narcotics war, the area is called the Gaza Strip. It sounds worse than it is. (Laughing).

KW Do you feel part of the Latin American scene?

VM I feel very lonely most of the time. In Brazil there is a huge influence of the history of Neo Concretism coming into the work of artists like Ernesto Neto, but I am not into that.

KW What was your artistic background?

VM When I was young and growing up my parents were poor and we didn't go to museums much. I was more influenced by art in Europe of the 60s and the 70s – pop, minimalism, Arte Povera – than in Latin America. To me, Joseph Beuys was amazing! A natural shaman. Warhol was also really important. As to my market I say I am American, but as a person I am Brazilian. I was in advertising before I was an artist, dealing with marketing. I wanted to make art about what I disliked in advertising.

KW Has Latin American art changed?

VM When I was growing up there were things you could not say but Brazil has become more open. There is a new generation of artists – Rivanne Neuenschwander and Os Gêmeos (the graffiti artists) – more communication and more openness.

KW What is important to you now?

VM My quest is designing an exhibition to which 300,000 visitors have already been [the show just opened at the Fundação Inimá de Paula, Belo Horizonte.] There are three more venues and we are hoping that before it closes 600,000 people will have seen it. I want to make contemporary art more relevant now. I want to play with conceptual art, how to use it for a more general public. I don't have a specific public and I have proved with this project that anyone can understand it. Making art – anyone can be part of it – it is an amazing effect. ■