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**Vik Muniz @ Rena Bransten**



Summer in the City, after Edward Hopper, 2011, digital c-print, 74 ¾ x 103 ½”

Vik Muniz blurs the distinction between the real and the fake so convincingly that one wonders whether such distinctions even matter. With humble materials, uncanny technical skill and great imagination, Muniz put these issues in play in the early '80s, well before the digital revolution made them a topic of everyday conversation. Blending elements of Pop, Conceptual, Fluxus, Dada, set-up photography and appropriation in art-about-art photos, Muniz has, for years, operated in a realm of his own invention. This latest series, *Pictures of Magazines 2*, about which I'll say more, ranks among the year's best exhibitions.

If you've seen or imagined Jesus on a tortilla or Abe Lincoln in a cloud, Muniz's photographs will likely resonate. They light up that part of the brain that revels in free association — in generating what Alfred Stieglitz called “equivalents”: visions of real things in abstract forms.

He starts with photos of famous paintings, which he replicates using nontraditional media such as wire, jelly, toys, machine parts and dust. He then photographs the resulting objects, displaying prints at sizes of up to ten feet — far larger than his original reproductions, which are quite small: about two feet on the longest side. This extreme magnification allows us to see the details of the artist's craft in sharp relief, which, in turn, encourages viewers to perform a crazy two-step, continuously shifting between macro and micro views.

The most arresting aspect of Muniz's art is how convincingly he employs different media to “paint” and “draw”. He's made Corot landscapes from thread, copied pieces from the Whitney's collection in dust, remade Caravaggio's *Medusa* in marinara-soaked spaghetti, constructed a double *Mona Lisa*, in the style of Warhol, out of peanut butter and jelly, and with chocolate syrup copied Hans Namuth's photo of Jackson Pollock making a drip painting. Oftentimes there's a mimetic relationship between media and subject. He once portrayed plantation workers using sugar, and in another equally notable instance, he constructed movie star portraits out of diamonds, which he photographed and multiplied.



Detail: Boy Blowing Bubbles, after Edouard Manet, 2011, digital c-print

In what may be his greatest triumph, Muniz, in 2010, became the subject of a documentary film (*Waste Land*) in which he taught scavengers in a Rio de Janeiro garbage dump how to make representational “paintings” out of refuse. The film’s culminating scene shows the sale of one such picture at auction in London for \$50,000. In it we see the worker who modeled for the image sobbing in amazement.

The film is an apt summation of the artist’s life and modus operandi. Muniz grew up poor in Sao Paulo, and through a freak incident (a shooting) that resulted in a cash settlement he was able to move to New York. From that point forward, his life and artistic ambition unfolded like a fairy tale, one in which the artist, through pluck, luck, and no small amount of genius, rose to the top.

In recent years his method of copying old pictures has, at times, felt formulaic. *Pictures of Magazines 2* arrives as a corrective. He recreates iconic paintings, only this time he does it with scraps torn from glossy magazines. Muniz literally “paints” with paper, creating the illusion that it is a fluid substance. *Summer in the City*,

after Edward Hopper, *Picking Flowers in a Field*, after Mary Cassatt and *Fairy Roses*, after Fantin Latour are so richly textured, you could easily take them for palette knife paintings from across a room.



Washington Crossing the Delaware, after Emanuel Leutze, 2012, digital c-print, 63 ¾ x 112”

Close-up, they reveal dizzying arrays of small details: celebrity and supermodel faces, body parts, foliage,

cartoons, and lots of text: headlines and ad copy that comment directly (and sometimes obliquely) on the source images. Homages to Manet (*Boy Blowing Bubbles*), Emanuel Leutze (*Washington Crossing the Delaware*), George Stubbs (*Green Monkey*), Corot (*Girl Reading*), Caravaggio (*Sick Bacchus*) and Vilhelm Hammershoi (*Sunbeams*) follow suit. Each is composed of pop culture detritus whose density functions as an analog for media overload. To view them is to experience that condition – and, photography’s and mass media’s role in creating it.

While photography represents the smallest part of what Muniz actually does, our experience of his art would be vastly different without it. It is not a medium known for tactility. Yet in Muniz’s hands, the extreme magnification it affords produces the kinds of illusions that are critical to our perception of it. In this case, torn paper takes on the texture of frayed cloth, resembling what Roberta Smith called “a kind of rag picker’s folk art.” The difference, of course, is that Muniz’s art is packed full of meta-narratives built around the disjointed interaction between pictures, words, ripped paper and the historic paintings they represent. On a less exalted level, you could build an engaging parlor game around identifying all of the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture heroes “woven” into the “fabric” of these images.

Muniz first discovered the possibilities of combining disparate media when he happened upon Lorenzo Ghiberti’s *Doors of Paradise* (1403) in Florence. Ghiberti, according to Muniz, achieved a revolutionary breakthrough when he combined two forms of representation, *haute relief* and three-point perspective. “The combination of the two approaches,” he writes in his spellbinding autobiography, *Reflex: A Vick Muniz Primer*, “overwhelms the senses and confuses the eye, which, unable to decide what language to follow, is arrested in the surface of the picture. The uneasiness of shifting focus ... generates a pictorial experience of transcendental proportions: a new way of looking at an image. By combining a three-dimensional element and a pictorial one, and engaging in two different techniques, Ghiberti spliced two readings of the images into one — an impossible task for the senses to follow. In so doing, he forces the viewer to become aware of the image’s syntax, to assume an active role in the apprehension of the image.”



Green Monkey, after George Stubbs, 2011, digital c-print, 50 ¾ x 43 ¼”

The word, apprehension, he goes on to note, “means capture, arrest and control, making something your own – but it also means hesitation, trepidation and uneasiness.” *Pictures of Magazines 2* induces all those feelings and more. Its contents make us complicit in our own illusions, accomplices to the artist’s astonishing sleight

of hand.

–DAVID M. ROTH

*Vik Muniz: “Pictures of Magazines 2” @ Rena Bransten Gallery through November 10, 2012.*