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Vik Muniz by Mark Magill

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Interview
Art

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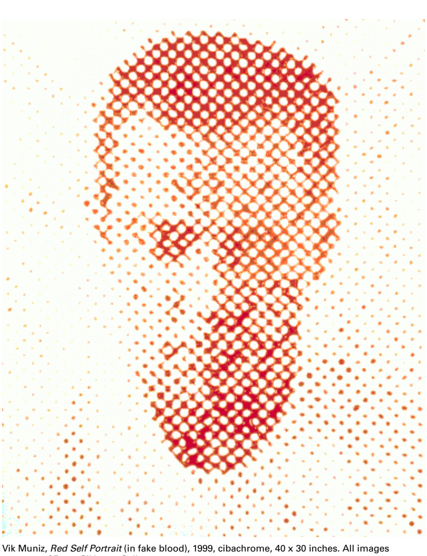


Vik Muniz, *Red Self Portrait* (in fake blood), 1999, cibachrome, 40 x 30 inches. All images courtesy of Brent Sikkema Gallery.

Vik Muniz might be billed as a photographer, and photographs are generally the end product of his work. But in another age he might have been an alchemist, transforming base lead into refined gold. In Vik's case, lead has been replaced by light. He is clearly a visual artist who tinkers equally with light and the mechanisms of perception that decipher the messages light conveys. He tricks the eye to reveal the tricks the eye itself can play and how that trickery has been used by "shamans, priests, artists, and con men" throughout history to evoke both power and belief. Vik works with the most rudimentary materials—sugar, soil, string, wire, chocolate syrup—to reconstruct images that we carry in a vast collective reservoir of visual memory. The quality of his draftsmanship with these rude materials displays a gift for bringing brilliance and humor to the commonplace—not unlike the physical genius of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton. Vik photographs these images, and then discards the originals, so that we are left with a tantalizing representation of the illusion he has created.

I met Vik Muniz for breakfast in his pristine Brooklyn studio during a torrential rain shower this spring. The day was gloomy and Vik freely admitted his dislike of the dark, the result of a waterskiing prank where he wound up drifting for four hours in the dark, during a rainstorm, before a search party found him. This may go some way toward explaining his passion for light in all its forms. His studio contains an intriguing array of optical devices from the history of vision: stereopticons, pantographs with half-silvered mirrors, microscopes, prisms and lenses. The studio is dominated by an impressive camera stand holding an 8 × 10 camera, for which Vik designed the lenses. We began by speaking about his fascination with optics, gimmicks, and Buster Keaton.

Vik Muniz
I've always been ashamed of this thing that I have about mechanics because it seems like a macho statement. Buster Keaton once said that if he hadn't become an artist he'd have been a mechanical engineer. I can relate to that, I've been studying Keaton for years. There's something about the mechanics of a gag—the more accidental it looks, the better. Keaton goes through all this trouble to create something that looks as natural as if it could have happened anyway, to make it as close as it gets to life, because life has that sort of narrative quality.

Mark Magill
The quality of accident.

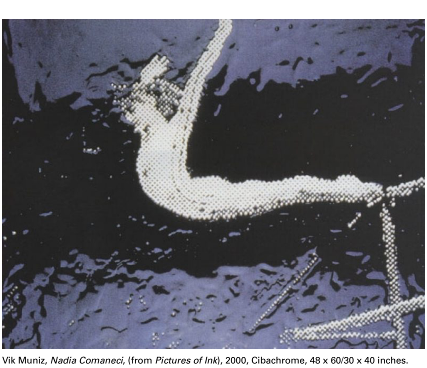
VM
Exactly. A lot of things I do look as if they were found. Because that's also what makes something interesting—that it could almost have happened by itself. At the same time, it has this whole structure. It's like a dancer who makes jumping look easy, but what goes into that jump is tremendous physical intelligence.

MM
Like Shakespeare said, "There's more than meets the eye."

VM
It's like the fur in Vermeer's painting, *Mistress and Maid*, at the Frick. You get up close and you can't see fur anymore, just a blur of brushstrokes. Oscar Wilde used to say that the mystery of the world existed in the visible things, if not the invisible. I think art, without the pretense of being more than a visual exercise, can indeed be powerful and complete. I am quite annoyed by the "aboutness" of contemporary art. I find that it's not enough of a mission when art is supposed to be about one thing or another because to be art, to begin with, it should be *about* everything at once. It should present a kind of all-encompassing world. When you look at the portraits of Rembrandt, you see an artist who looked at his whole world—everything is there. I just saw a show in London of his self-portraits, and in every portrait you see an entire world. It's simple and enormously ambitious at the same time. Rembrandt makes me want to be an artist, and sometimes he makes me want to quit being one.

MM
Have you heard this theory about Rembrandt's self-portraits, that he combined the movements of facial muscles in ways that are not really possible? In other words, smiling and frowning at the same time, so when you look at the face your eyes get caught between the two.

VM
That's an art historical license, like the talk about Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and Caravaggio's use of the camera obscura. But it's hard to tell these things. Rembrandt probably just painted the thing without giving a damn about all those little details. There are things you do when you paint that are visually automatic. All this information is flowing through in ways that you don't always understand or control; vision is too complex for you to have a full grasp of what you're doing. An artist like Shakespeare is not looking at the world or showing you the world; he is the entire world. He is trying to become everything and permeate all the realms of subjectivity so that he can fully transport it to you. The subject is a mere conduit for any possible reading to flow through. You have that truth when you see a Rembrandt and when you read Shakespeare. The vision of their art is immense. When you look at these things you really want to make art. I think art starts by not being political or conceptual, it starts by being art. And whatever political or conceptual repercussions the art may evoke come later.



Vik Muniz, *Nadia Comaneci*, (from *Pictures of Ink*), 2000, Cibachrome, 48 x 60/30 x 40 inches.

MM
We've had art for a long time, as long as we've had anything else, right?

VM
And how many times have we read it differently? There are distinct meanings for each person who looks at it.

MM
Is there an art gene? One that provides a kind of pleasure for the maker and the viewer—to keep art evolving?

VM
Biology is always a good metaphor. Maybe we're in a time now when science and art have to look at each other, not as illustrations, but as a comparative understanding of their own patterns.

MM
Like scientists.

VM
I'm experimenting with these things as a student of media. We're at the point where in order to perceive a phenomenon, you have to change it, like particle collisions in physics. What else can you do without relying on the actual reality of things? Art is just as important as science because it completes it; one is about phenomenon while the other is about mind. One thing is totally dependent on the other; that's why I am very drawn to cognitive science. How many artists spend their entire lives making visual objects and never pick up a book to study how the eye works? They never studied the physics of light to see how light behaves. They never bought a prism, and held it against the sun, or any of these really simple things. I'm a visual artist, not a conceptualist. I make things that deal primarily with the eyes. In that regard, I'm totally old-fashioned.

MM
The mind plays a big part in what the eye sees.

VM
Vision is a form of intelligence, even more so than hearing. Our human eyes are not nearly as good as birds' eyes or many other animals'. Instead, we have a huge visual cortex devoted just to analyzing visual stimuli. That is our true eye. I have a theory that the intellect has evolved from our inability to see everything in focus, the eye has to move to see things and by doing so it introduces the concept of narrative and the attention that is necessary for any complex idea to form.

MM
In the Middle Ages, they used to think that visual perception went both ways, actively projected by the eyes.

VM
What they called Platonic vision. Plato thought the eyes sent out a beam and sort of hit something. Platonic vision is interesting; it's not the way it physically happens, but it's the way it mentally happens. You see things the way you want to see them.

MM
Is there a little feeling of pleasure in that?

VM
Recognition is a kind of comfort. It confirms your capacity for looking at something and analyzing it, but it also reinforces your familiarity. What is good, however, is to be able to produce that warm feeling where you recognize something and at the same time you're able to subvert that recognition. This brings us back to the joke and the gimmick, like Buster Keaton. I exaggerate the gimmick in my work because I want to engage the viewer with a mechanical image that is almost inescapable, where they not only see the art, but they feel the artist's vision.

Vik Muniz, *25,000 Yards (Home on the Hill)*, 2000, toned silver print, 40 x 53 inches.

MM
The transformation of feeling seems important. You have images like the Hindenburg exploding or the terrorist on the roof in Munich. The first time one encounters those images in the media, they're horrific. Now we encounter them in a gallery and that whole feeling has been transformed.

VM
Not really. It just has to be negotiated in a different light. That brings us to the idea of the copy. Art is primarily a copy. I don't believe in originality as much as I believe in individuality. I see a straight line of visible imagery from cave painting to the present. We have improved our copying skills through technologies and it is through these developmental implements that we see how we have evolved; the subject in its aura of originality is just a mere excuse for copying. We can trace this development because the introduction of a new medium does not destroy the existing ones, it simply forces them to adapt to a new reality. I am a very traditional artist, as a draftsman as well as a photographer, but the unlikely encounter of these two media is what gives my work a contemporary character. The moment of the meeting of two media is a moment of truth where new forms are born. It's nothing that's very technical. On the whole, I prefer to work on a very low-tech level. There's something redeeming in using the barest mechanics to produce an image. I don't want to amaze you with my powers to fool you. I want to make you aware of how much you want to believe in the image—to be conscious of the measure of your own belief, rather than of my capacity to fool you. You see it, but at the same time you see how it works. I have been called an illusionist, but I have always considered myself a twisted kind of realist.

MM
When you bring two media together, in your case, photography and drawing, it's almost like mating. Something new arises. It's not just auto mechanics, where you're repairing something, or maintaining something in the same form.

VM
Well, you haven't seen creative auto repair, like what people do in Cuba. Fixing bikes with machine gun parts and that kind of thing. I saw a piece by Chris Burden in Europe, an enormous robotic structure, used to make paper airplanes. And people stayed there for hours looking at the thing, going from one point to another.

MM
Because of narratives again?

Vik Muniz, *Dan Rather*, 2000, Duraclear with lightbox, ed. 3 + 1, 72 x 48 inches.

VM
Yeah, because we are all suckers for whatever will happen next. That's the beauty of that Fischli and Weiss video *The Way Things Go*. The same goes for cooking or home improvement shows on public TV. There are many lines of narrative, even in still images, because the eyes never stop moving. One in particular that people often fail to see when they're just looking is photographs in a magazine. A photograph is never the same the second time you look at it. I make photographs to be placed on a wall, because I want people to have a physical relationship to an image that's not limited by the length of their arms. I'm not an editorial type of artist. I would like people to walk toward a picture, to see how it changes as they walk. Pictures mean different things at different distances. There are always micronarratives being played. In a film, it's not just a story that goes from beginning to end. There are a lot of little stories that make up parts of it, little scenes within each image. To understand media, you have to go back to the most basic forms of art. I think it started out as two kinds of art—art that comes from embodiment, which is theater, dance and music, and art that's a graphical projection like drawing. These two arts were probably developed by primitive shamans. They understood they were exercising a kind of power. Because the shaman, like a mechanic, knew how to create something in which belief could be produced. Whereas a king or a chief has power and knows how to use it, but he doesn't know how it's produced. That's the secret that shamans, magicians, salespeople, con men, and artists hold. In many ways I am still perpetuating the idea of somebody who studies the mechanics of power through representation. If there is power that comes from any other source, I don't know about it. Power comes from representation. And all kinds of actions that hold a certain continuity of narrative come from an understanding of representational mechanics. I try to slow down the perceptual input of the image in my photographs so that you actually see them as a form of narrative.

MM
You slow it down to expose the machine?

VM
Yeah. The reason there's all this fascination for things such as the iMac computer is that you can see the workings inside. What I want to show you is that there is a machine inside your head. I don't want to show you exactly how it works; I want you to guess a little bit. I don't know how that thing inside the iMac works. I can see it, I know it's not just coming from some god, but I can guess how it works, even though I don't have a full understanding of it. That's an important part of it.

MM
But what is that guessing, then? That sounds almost like what used to serve as theology in earlier times.

VM
Oh no, they didn't guess. They believed. There was no guessing. They knew the power of representation. There are two types of visible images, things that are illuminated and things that are luminous when the image is shot right into the eye—the first time that was done was on stained glass windows. There is real beauty in this, because light is pure information. I'm almost religious about light. Everything is there. We divide it, we organize it so we can understand it a little better. We perceive it in a wave that is broken, so we understand shapes and forms and everything else we see, but it's all in there. It's the closest thing you can think of to God itself, this pure light. But we always need somebody human to tell the story. There's always a trickster who carries the message of the gods. In African religions, there is only one god who can actually talk to humans. In Greek mythology there's Hermes, who can come and mess around with you. The saint, in a way, is a trickster of his own kind. He's the one that's beyond this pure light, and he can work the mechanics of it so that you understand the light; you are fooled by it, and you believe. He's a maker of belief. And in the stained glass of the cathedrals, we have pure light being shot through the image of a saint into the eyes of the person down below. Now you have television, one of the most recent forms of light that comes through as an image of a person. In the case of newscasters, you have somebody telling you everything that is happening in the world through this pure light. Basically, a head telling you a story. Why do they have the same guy there every day? You recognize him, you trust him. The newscasters are similar to saints in that respect. You have to be a good person to be a newscaster. Try to be a newscaster that gets caught sniffing cocaine! You're gone. I love conversations where people talk about who's their favorite newscaster. It's like who's your favorite saint or your favorite Greek god.

MM
It sounds like a mixture of science and belief, like alchemy.

VM
Yeah. Belief is a big part of it. The alchemists said they could turn lead into gold, and for years and years people said they were wrong. But it turns out they were right—you can do it. You just have to change the atomic structure of lead, and you get gold. It's possible with a particle accelerator. They've done it. It just costs a lot of money.

Vik Muniz, *The Sugar Children; Valentine*, 1996, gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 inches.

MM
That brings us back to transformation again.

VM
Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is my favorite book in the world. I've read it again and again, practically every morning since I was six. I keep it by my bed. It starts with a beautiful line, "My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms." Novelty is nothing but a kind of oblivion; everything that exists has existed before in a different form. I'm always looking at how a thing ends up like it does. *Sugar Children* is an example of that. I was down in the Caribbean when I saw sugarcane workers' children. They were wonderful. But their parents were so sad, really hard people. I realized they take the sweetness out of the children by making them work in the fields. It's very hard work. All the sweetness from them ends up in our coffee. So I made drawings of them from sugar. I'm interested in that kind of transformation.

MM
What happened to the Sugar Children? Did they ever see those pictures?

VM
Yeah. We sent them to the local post office. Children for me are very important. They are in that class of people who understand power, like magicians and con men. We are born with everything. But I think we forget.

MM
Thanks to education.

VM
Yeah. When photography came about, it released painting from factuality. Artists had to step back to reconfigure the painting project in order for it to continue. They had to go backward. Some of them went to psychology, like Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoshka, or to primitivism, like Picasso. Some went to a childlike perception, like Dubuffet or Miró. Some started looking into the images and realizing what those marks were, like the Impressionists. There was a retrograde movement with painting in response to photography.

MM
It separated into its elements again.

VM
Now the ghost of painting has come back to haunt photography in the form of digital media. And we've liberated photography from factuality. The greatest thing about being a photographer today is that photography is not a believable substance anymore, it doesn't prove anything. The greatest reason for doing something artistically is that you don't need to do it in any other way; you do it because you want to. We're talking about pleasure again. Photography no longer holds the claim on reality that it once did; it's time to stop and try to understand it a little better. How do you do that? You step back. Not in terms of psychology or going back to a childlike perception—painting has done that. But what painters didn't do—and it's amazing that they didn't do it—is to go back into the history of the medium itself. I think with photography, we can. The most interesting work done today is by people who are going back into the medium, trying to understand it and then make very simple but captivating images. They see something that they find wonderful, and they see themselves falling into the trap of the image itself. They realize how simple it is and how it's done. Photographers now are going back to making pictures without cameras, like Adam Fuss, or pictures done with pinhole cameras, like Barbara Ess, or in my case, by following the idea of graphical developments. I started doing line drawings with wire. Then I went to things that looked like engravings done with string. I kept going, on to the grain of the photographic image, pixelation, halftones, all the ways of representing an image. As I get more sophisticated in producing an image, I get a bit cocky. I do something a little more difficult every time. But basically, as I develop, I'm always talking about things that are primitive in relation to technical means of production.

MM
When you started speaking about looking back you mentioned the children.

VM
I've worked with children so many times and every time I do it I learn more. I'm doing a project right now in Salvador, Brazil, where I was invited to work with homeless children who basically live in the street. There is a sculpture by Giacometti called *The Invisible Object*, which is an African-looking Yoruba figurehead attached to a frame. It's holding a void. It's holding nothing. It's a very poignant sculpture that talks about bondage and desire. There are mostly black children in the city of Salvador. They're very poor but they are cultivated people. They know all kinds of traditional dance and music, how to drum and how to samba. They know the names of the African gods and the cults. The rich only hang out in shopping malls and buy expensive, imported clothing. I showed the Giacometti image to the kids and they knew it was an African copy. They knew it was holding nothing. They could relate to this image done by a white Swiss man almost a century before them. I developed a series of exercises with these children where I asked them to describe a thing they wanted but couldn't have. They see things all the time on television and inside shops. They want them and they are miserable because they are exposed to these objects of desire. So I inverted the whole thing. I asked them to really think what that thing would be that they could hold in their hands, that they desired the most. It was wonderful; they came up with magic lamps, a lot of cash, a teddy bear, a radio. And they wrote about it and got involved in the whole concept of the thing. Then they drew the object—and I always asked them how they wanted to reproduce it. They asked if they could do it in ceramic or papier-mâché. And once they made that object, they painted it, and after that I asked them to touch the object. I videotaped them holding their objects and then I took the object away and asked them to feel it *without* holding it. This is all on video, and I took pictures. The art work is 22 pictures of them holding invisible objects and pictures of the objects. You have to guess which object is in which hand. After that we got the objects and we

put them in a black bag and we closed it forever. They're showing what you can't have, because they're holding it inside their minds and you cannot have it. They know the people who go to museums are the kind of people who are involved in producing and showing them the things they can't have. They turned the tables for once and learned to be the ones producing desire.

art history alchemy materiality representation transformation perception

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It's a relatively limited *type* of adjective that clings to recent abstract painting: intricate, quiet, lyrical, seductive, mysterious, atmospheric.

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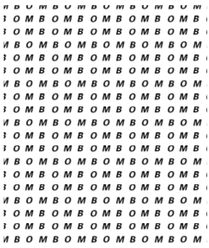

Rachel Foullon builds what she calls fluid hosts, decklike staircases that hold, in juxtaposition, her paper and pulp sculptures.

Issue 103
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Artists on Artists

Thiago Rocha Pitta by Botika

An artists on artists text on sculpture artist Thiago Rocha Pitta by Botika, accompanied by several photographs of mixed media sculptures and film stills by Thiago Rocha Pitta, the first titled *Uma Trilogia*.

Issue 102
Art
Artists on Artists

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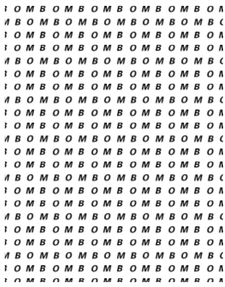
Featuring interviews with Vik Muniz, Shirin Neshat, Madison Smartt Bell, Javier Marias, Misia, Michael Frayn, Karyn Kusama, and Michael Roth.



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I believe that each of us is given one sentence at birth, and we spend the rest of our life trying to read that sentence and make sense of it.

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