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## Interviews

## An Interview with Vik Muniz

By Linda Benedict-Jones

**LBJ:** This is the first Artist-in-Residence Program at the Frick Art Historical Center. It was inspired by the program at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. The Frick has asked you to wrap your creativity around something on their site and it seems that you are most interested in Clayton, Henry Clay Frick's historic home. The Frick is known for 19th-century work so the mere fact that they are doing a project with a 21st-century artist is really quite incredible.

**VM:** It's interesting that you mention I'm a 21st-century artist. I've never really felt like a 20th-century artist to begin with. Being able to work at the headquarters of the nineteenth century is a pleasure for me. If a person is required to make art at the end of the twentieth century, perhaps it is necessary to take two steps back in order to continue the project of art in general. I've always been fond of 19th-century art. In the nineteenth century photography was invented; in the nineteenth century machines and the whole spectrum of social life, the reconfiguration of the family came into being. Even though I was born in the twentieth century, everything that has ruled and structured my life and my knowledge of society has been based upon ideas that were primarily developed during the previous century.

With photographs you can see history through your own eyes and you can make your own judgments and interpretations. I decided to work at Clayton instead of with works from The Frick Art Museum because Clayton has something a little bit more personal and a little bit more particular to offer. When you walk in, you see children's shoes at the entrance. You see little things here and there that help you have an understanding of the history at that time. The way we learn history is always through very interesting sources.

Clayton looks like a photograph, to begin with. I've always been drawn to places that are set up or organized in a way to provide visual references. Dioramas in museums, or wax museums, become very confusing when photographed, because they're things that were made to be seen in person.

**LBJ:** You say Clayton looks like a photograph. Can you explain that a bit more?

**VM:** The impression you have when you go into Clayton is that people are still living there. It's like they have left for fifteen minutes just to allow a tour to go by. There's something about the placement of the objects in the rooms that's clearly organized, developed, and maintained due to a photographic documentation of the place.

You know, I was in Arles a few years ago and I saw that somebody had bought the café; where van Gogh had once been and they had painted the entire café; with the colors that van Gogh painted with. It was pretty weird and funny at the same time. I remember they tried to make the place look like the painting. Clayton has a little bit of that because the organization and display of objects in the rooms is probably based on photographic sources. So when you take a picture, you are actually taking a photograph of a photograph. In my work I have always favored this layered type of image organization and I'm drawn to images like that. When I look at Clayton, I see many, many layers of representation worked one upon another. When an image is already very complex to begin with, adding to it makes it harder to read and a little bit slower to interpret. So I like images like that—slow images. I'm a slow visual artist. So I think I'm an artist of the nineteenth century.

**LBJ:** Process seems to be important to you. Am I right about that?

**VM:** Yes, Process enters my work as a form of narrative. When people look at one of my pictures, I don't want them to actually see something represented. I prefer for them to see how something gets to represent something else.

Sometimes it starts with a subject and then I search to find the most suitable process to make that subject and then, sometimes, I just go backwards from there. Other times, I find a different process for making an image and I go looking for subjects, but either choice is based on the relationship between one another. Starting with the subject or ending up with a subject is pretty irrelevant.

**LBJ:** You have been thinking a lot about your choice of lenses, your choice of film, your time of day, how you are going to age these prints, how you are going to work with them. As a result, you have worked out a lot of that before even making your first exposure. I find this intriguing because I think many photographers work the other way around.

**VM:** You know what, it saves film.

**LBJ:** Yes . . . (laughing).

**VM:** I edit the work a lot before I do it. It's economical. Even if I work outside, I have a studio photographer's mind. I know that every single choice I make will change the meaning of the image. It becomes very important to orchestrate these choices so that they contribute to a very solid, closed, structural concept. Once I define the concept, I go about trying to find the best way to do it. In many cases, the best way has nothing to do with good quality of image or good photography of any kind.

For the work at Clayton, I decided to use period equipment, you know, 19th-century optics and 19th-century hardware. And I'm printing in the most primitive way possible, now they call it "alternative," to create the sense of a document that may point out to another time period.

We're very well trained as far as identifying traces of the development of media in photographs. We know what an early 20th-century movie looks like because people walk funny in them, and we think people walked like that in the early part of the century. We always think that people in Vietnam were kind of yellowish-green because of the way Kodak made the film at that time.

That's one of the ways to convey messages through the work, by choosing a language—a technological language to speak through. It entirely changes the meaning of a photograph: the way you shoot, the way you decide the angle of approach, from where you want to see it, if you want to see it from the eyes of a 20th-century person or a 19th-century person. You can coach yourself like an actor and place yourself into that time and try to take pictures like that person.

A little bit is fear, too. Starting a project is always hard. You have to be over a cliff to do it.

**LBJ:** Your process is very intriguing. I see how your approach does reflect that of a 19th-century studio photographer.

**VM:** I'm more interested in how pictures get conveyed. What's the language of the thing I'm photographing and how do I learn about it? How does a photograph bring to mind somebody, and how can I photograph them? I'm interested in the linguistics of an image. I want to see where the verb is, and the subject. Is there an article? What's the object? It's like when you go to have your picture taken and the photographer says, "smile." You know, you are not really smiling. You are just answering to a command of some sort.

I try to break images down like that and analyze them. So, in a way, it's a very analytical approach, but I try to make it seamless. I don't want the images to look conceptual because the moment it looks like I'm trying to come up with some idea or some intellectual scheme, it will scare people away and they'll become defensive, you know?

**LBJ:** They'll become alienated?

**VM:** Yes. I want the pictures to be beautiful and I want them to be easy to look at and have a residual effect. I also want them to be intelligent. I want to keep that edge to them, but I don't want people to know that.

**LBJ:** I'd like to go back to Clayton for a minute. You seem to be interested in this notion of presence, but you are also interested in concepts that are related to children. I've seen you photographing children in the kitchen, for example. How are you choosing what to really focus on?

**VM:** I think that it's probably based on the little experience I have with theater and sculpture. There's a great difference between gesture and posture, and there are clearly elements of Clayton that are gestural.

**LBJ:** Such as . . .

**VM:** I think somehow when you walk in, there are places like the bathrooms or the kitchen that seem to leave more marks of existence. My favorite room is the library, where everybody seemed to spend a lot of time together.

When the house was occupied by the Fricks, it was a kind of museum even then, because a lot of it worked at the level of display and appearance. Those are the rooms that I really don't care much about because they seem less real than the other parts of the house. The other parts look more like people lived there, not just, you know, "Henry Clay Frick and His Family."

**LBJ:** Right. Appearance was tremendously important to the upper classes during the Victorian era.

**VM:** The Frick's were just people, and that's the human perspective that I'm trying to emphasize through these pictures. History has been written about the house and the people who lived in it. I wonder if there are other kinds of histories that could be written at different levels about the use, say, of a railing or the way a doorknob looks polished because it was handled so often. Things like that.

**LBJ:** Details?

**VM:** Yes, but history can be seen and can be told in many different ways. I've taken the tour of Clayton with different tour guides and every single one tells a different story. Although they all have the same text, they emphasize different parts—just in the way they raise their voices. Their enthusiasm is different in each room of the house.

History itself works in many layers, and I would like to approach not only the way the spaces of Clayton lend themselves to many interpretations, but also why the people who work during these tours are interested in different things. The interaction between the employees and the space is part of the preservation and maintenance of this history, and it's also the way it evolves.

**LBJ:** Absolutely.

**VM:** History changes, because it's like the game of telephone. Once it enters the realm of human interpretation—and especially when you pass things verbally from one person to another—inadvertently you interpret it and you change it.

**LBJ:** I don't think that anyone has ever gone to Clayton with the purpose of interpreting the house visually before. Your kind of interpretation is rich, in part, because it's of a different kind.

**VM:** Well, it's rich and it isn't. An image is not like a statement or a command, unless it comes with some text attached to it. I thought that by photographing Clayton I could convey a sense of the complexity about the way in which many stories have been told and have favored one person or another, or have taken sides trying to portray somebody as a one-dimensional character in a play when, in fact, people are not that simple.

I know the story of Henry Clay Frick just a little through the story of labor in the nineteenth century. That's all I knew about him before I visited Clayton. When you walk into the house, you have access to a different set of factors that you can go by when thinking of his personality. There is an incredible presence of children in the house too. You feel the sense of a family, of a man who was deeply devoted to his children. That affects me in a sense because I've worked with children many times. And I'm a father myself. Maybe that's why I asked myself this question: Would I be as affected by this man's dedication to his children if I wasn't a father, especially a father who doesn't live with his son?

**LBJ:** You've talked about illusion and how it informs your work, but that making illusions is not what you want to achieve. Would you explain that idea a little more and how it may or may not apply to what you are doing at the Frick?

**VM:** I'm still a maker of illusions, you know, I draw. I'm an artist. I don't feel a need to work against that because I think it's the most natural way for me to express myself. I am making interpretations of Clayton or trying to devise interpretations for things that may have multiple meanings. It never changes.

**LBJ:** Narrative seems to be an important element in your work. Are you creating a new story for us about Clayton?

**VM:** I'm not creating a new story. I'm just trying to feel what my story looks like. I'm pointing out the complexity of interpretation that a place like Clayton can offer. I realized that there are no photographic documents from the nineteenth century or even in the early twentieth century that share a child's point of view. Cameras were mainly displayed in a perpendicular angle to the image. The lenses were about five feet above the ground, which would have been about eye-level to a grown man.

I decided to document the place using a much lower perspective, one similar to that of a girl of four or four and a half. I even tried to look at the places, the objects, and everything around the house like a child would. I don't know what many of the objects are for, but I think that maybe even a girl of four wouldn't either. I'm very drawn to these particular objects and I want to focus on them.

**LBJ:** It seems that working with children keeps the idea of innocence alive for you. Is that true?

**VM:** I'm going to Brazil next year to do pictures of children who work in coal mines, like Lewis Hine all over again. I like to observe children looking at things, because they are pretty clear about the way they look at them. It's a very primitive state of perception. You learn a lot from looking at the way they perceive the world, and it works a little bit in the way that I would like photographs to be. I would like everybody to have that.

The project at Clayton is one of the first times that I have done work that is about children and deals with the idea of the child's perception but doesn't really involve children directly.

**LBJ:** I understand you did a one-month residency working with street children in Brazil for Projeto Axé. Weren't you more or less helping kids to express their wants and desires, in visual terms, something that must have been quite a unique experience for them?

**VM:** Yes.

**LBJ:** And here you are . . .

**VM:** . . . using childhood as the subject.

**LBJ:** In Pittsburgh you'll be meeting with some elementary students from schools near the Frick. What are you going to talk to them about?

**VM:** Children, until a very advanced age, cannot differentiate between fact and fiction. They see the news the same way as they see a soap opera. They are not told that there are subtleties and that there are differences between reality and TV. It's all a big soap and that soap has to be sorted out later on.

As images become more eloquent than words—because they are much more powerful than words—words seem to be just an excuse to have a very powerful image. As you are reading something underneath an image, you are being totally overtaken by what you are looking at without knowing it. So, in learning how to see images that you see on television, computer media, or even in a magazine, it's essential for you to speak the same language as the people who make them. This is very important for kids to learn in school. Kids know about blacks and whites in photographs, you know, once they are ten or eleven, but some people spend their entire lives not seeing the variety of ways that a picture can have.

**LBJ:** Seeing is Believing, as your book title states. You know, even in college-level classes on the history of photography it's necessary to spend a significant amount of time on the subtleties of "reading" an image.

Vik, I want to ask you something about Brazil. We all think of you as a New York artist, but —

**VM:** Really?

**LBJ:** Well, yes. I mean, you live in New York and so we've come to know about you by reading about you in the New York Times and the show that you did for the International Center for Photography and your other shows in New York, and yet you are Brazilian. There are so many wonderfully creative people from your country: your great novelist, Jorge Amado, and the education theorist, Paulo Freire, and so many celebrated musicians like Antonio Carlos Jobim and, my favorites, Vinícius de Moraes, Baden Powell, and Maria Bethânia. When I listen to you speak you speak with a certain fluidity that is reminiscent of the flow and the fluidity that I feel about your fellow countrymen. You have mentioned in other interviews different artists who have inspired you, but I've never heard you make any reference to Brazil.

**VM:** My Brazilian education is more of an education of the senses, not names and biographical and historical elements—not that they are not there—it's just that I go beyond their names. It all becomes kind of a sensual thing.

I am a Brazilian person rather than a Brazilian artist. I grew up in the '70s in Brazil and that has had a profound impact on what I do, and it has had a profound impact on the art that I really like. Music that was done during the '70s was done under a climate of extreme repression by the government. Artists resorted to metaphors because, although they had things to say, they couldn't just say them. You became aware that there were many ways to say these contraptions are inside every single image, every single statement, every single song.

There are many devices that I use, like Caetano Veloso and the Tropicalia People—like Sunday in the park. But they were actually talking about other things. If you were young and intellectual and had some access to the information of the time, you could read through all their codes and you could realize that there were very powerful messages within those love songs.

Instead of screaming some kind of truth, somebody comes and it just sings a beautiful song, but that song tells you things on a secondary level, and it is much more effective. That's why I don't like shocking images. I prefer images to be like love songs, to be easy, you know, so you open yourself to them.

Brazilian literature, especially Portuguese literature, is an enormous influence. See, I've only given you schizophrenic references. The mind of the intellectual Brazilian in the '70s was trained to be schizophrenic. It was trained to absorb many things that weren't represented, many things that were in 19th-century Portuguese literature or early 20th-century, like, for instance, Pessoa.

**LBJ:** Fernando Pessoa? The writer with multiple pen-names?

**VM:** Yes, Fernando Pessoa is a great influence on my work. He was schizophrenic, but was not schizophrenic, but aware and very organized as a somebody who I think that's a wonderful position.

I didn't really look at Brazilian art very carefully until I was out of the country. Now I go back and I realize that there are a number of coincidences and a number of things that I share with artists from my country, not because I learned art the same way they did, but because I lived in the same time as they did. I find it interesting that when I decided that I wanted to become a visual artist I was living in the United States. My references were mainly American and European. I was looking at European and American art through the eyes of a Brazilian person.

**LBJ:** Exactly. What you have just described as the layering of meaning in Brazilian music, art, and literature is also something that takes place in your visual images.

You've also told me that you like the Portuguese epic poet, Luís de Camões.

**VM:** Oh, yes. I like ethnic literature of any kind. I like the Bible too, because I read it as a big adventure story like the Iliad. I like mythology too. I haven't had much time to read the last two years because I've been very busy, but I've been looking at fairy tales again because they are very simple and they are very complicated at the same time.

**LBJ:** When we started talking the other day about when we would do this interview, I sensed a certain saudade on your part because you said, "We'll do it in the Brazilian way," and I wondered if you could explain that?

**VM:** It means very late, you know, when there is really no other way to do

it, like you have to do it, so that's the Brazilian way. You cannot procrastinate any more. That's Brazilian. I work like that.

**LBJ:** Is saudade a word that Brazilians use? It's a central concept in Portugal.

**VM:** Well, it's a word that there's no translation for. The closest thing is longing, but longing with pleasure. It's like thinking of a memory of somebody but thinking of the good things that person left with you.

**LBJ:** Vik, you may not know this, but many highly regarded photographers in the twentieth century came to Pittsburgh to make images: Lewis Hine, Margaret Bourke-White, Edward Weston, W. Eugene Smith, and Lee Friedlander. But here you are, the first one in the twenty-first century. How do you feel following in the footsteps of all these characters?

**VM:** That's a lot — you just created a situation which demands a lot of responsibility.

**LBJ:** It's a little intimidating, but I can make you feel better because actually what distinguishes you is that they all came—Alvin Langdon Coburn came too. . . .

**VM:** Wow.

**LBJ:** . . . they came because Pittsburgh was such an important city in the history of this country.

**VM:** It's a pretty city.

**LBJ:** It's a pretty city and an ugly city at the same time in the sense that what made it pretty —

**VM:** Made it ugly.

**LBJ:** And what was ugly made it pretty, and it was all very entangled in that way. In fact, Coburn loved to come here because of the smoke, you know, from the steel mills.

**VM:** Yes. He didn't have to labor too much on those prints. They would have been foggy by themselves.

**LBJ:** That's right. And you are here not looking at the city, but you have a focus, Clayton, that's much more specific than any of them.

**VM:** Yes and no, because through the story of Clayton, you get to understand a lot about the story of the city, and also there's a little bit of that entanglement along with that. I mean, I understand the city of Pittsburgh now a lot better because of what I saw and what I read and what I researched at Clayton. Aside from that, it's one of the few cities in the United States where I feel that I'm somewhere else. I have the feeling wherever I go it's always the same, apart from New York, San Francisco. It's almost like Pittsburgh could be a different country if you just, you know, let a few details go by.

Because of the geography and the architecture, there's something very specific about Pittsburgh that's interesting. I don't know many cities in the United States with geography as complex as Pittsburgh's. Maybe it's just that I haven't been around enough, but I have never seen so many bridges and overpasses and things.

Because of so many rivers and so many bridges, it's interesting and visually engaging. It's also the deep ravines—once you are down there, it's really point to take a camera straight up. I grew up in a place that was hilly and very far from the sea, so that may be something that I find comfort in.

**LBJ:** Pittsburgh is somewhat different from the places you've shown your work in recent months: Paris, London, São Paulo, New York. What do you hope your new Pittsburgh audience will garner from your work?

**VM:** I try not to cater to specific audiences. I just hope the viewer is somebody who can be a child or an intellectual. I try to make work that's open enough to trigger some kind of train of thought in either one of these extremes.

**LBJ:** Will this experience nourish you in some way?

**VM:** Is there any experience that doesn't nourish you? I haven't had one.

Linda Benedict-Jones is Executive Director of Silver Eye Center for Photography in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She interviewed Vik Muniz in February, 2000.

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