

VIK MUNIZ

MORE INTELLIGENT LIFE (THE ECONOMIST), November 25th, 2014

VIK MUNIZ RIPS UP PHOTOGRAPHY

~ Posted by Georgia Grimond, November 25th 2014

"Garbage is fascinating," says the Brazilian artist Vik Muniz. "I'm kind of addicted to it." He knows his subject well. For three years he worked with a group of rubbish-pickers in a Rio de Janeiro *favela*, helping them to create giant self-portraits from the trash. The project culminated in an Oscar-nominated documentary, "Waste Land" (2010). "I had so many ideas being in among the garbage," he goes on. "I started to see the back of my mind as a dump, then I began to think of what an image looked like inside there. It was fragmented, pulled together by myriad little pieces of references and bits of ideas."



Since then Muniz has transferred the collage of his mind to paper. Using scraps and shreds of found images he has created several series of collages, which he then photographs and enlarges. One of these series, "Pictures of Magazines" (2012), is exactly that. Snippets of film stars, celebrities and models from magazine pages have been used to make a version of, say, a Stubbs zebra or an Edward Hopper townscape. "Postcards from Nowhere", which he's working on now, follows the same formula, but uses pieces of postcards to depict cities and seaside scenes. In them you can see shards of addresses handwritten on cards once sent across continents. Postage stamps litter the scenery, and you recognise the dazzling blue sky from every postcard you have ever seen. It is a demonstration of how little bits of each of our lives contribute to our collective cultural and visual memory.

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The interplay between the personal and the communal is explored more intently in his new series, "Album". It is a touching and more sobering look at family snaps, created from the discarded black-and-white photos Muniz has been buying at car-boot sales and on the internet for years. He uses them to remake the pictures that appear in every family's photo album: the couple cradling their baby, the man posing proudly beside his new car, the woman reclining on a beach, the boy on a bike. In a moment of meta-nostalgia, there is even a large portrait of the artist himself. "Vik, Two Years Old" (*above*) shows a young Muniz dressed up in a pom-pom hat, mouth agape, eyes glistening, seemingly alone in the frame but in fact comprised of the images of hundreds of other kids (*detail below*). It's based on one of only nine cherished photos that Muniz has of himself as a child in 1960s São Paulo, all taken by his aunt, who was the only person in his family with a camera. The collage is sweet, endearing even, but on closer inspection a little unnerving. Who are all these children? Where are they now and why has no one kept their photos safe? You begin to understand why he refers to them as "orphan photos".

Once the image has been assembled by Muniz and his assistants—the picture fragments glued, overlapping, on to a sheet of A3 paper—it is cleverly photographed under light to produce subtle shadows that add depth and texture to the eight-foot-high blow-ups. It is possible to get lost in the result for hours, picking out amusing details and familiar faces, like the pages of a "Where's Wally?" book. Each photo is packed with splinters of other worlds, of other



people's lives, crudely ripped up to contribute to something bigger and more beautiful. The affect is arresting, poignant and nostalgic too.

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Muniz's larger point is about what he sees as a watershed moment for photography. For more than a century we have used it to document our history and communicate our past. The photo album has been a time capsule for families to pass between generations—a way to spot similarities, and a way to be remembered. The photograph was something physical and unchanging that could survive for years, and only a few people had the specialist knowledge to manipulate and modify the reality it captured. Now, we are incessantly taking digital shots which everyone can tinker and fiddle with, to the point where we don't know if what we are seeing is accurate. "The photo album has become obsolete," Muniz says. His "Album" marks this transition, where the photograph lies somewhere between the physical and the digital, and photography somewhere between honesty and trickery.