

Galerie Daniel Templon
Brussels

VIK MUNIZ

DAMN, mai-juin 2015

Picking and Grinning

Vik Muniz mixes it up

Brazilian artist Vik Muniz has been flirting with materials for some time now. Whether it is peanut butter, junk, caviar, or indeed sand, he has found a way to express imagery in his particular way, with a photograph thereof serving as the precipitous tool, the means by which to convey his meaning in the form of a final work. His latest project, consisting of splices of anonymous photographs used to configure new pictorial arrangements, is powerful both in terms of its content and its message. The artist is convinced that photography has become completely obsolete, in that its original purpose of depicting reality has vanished.

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IMAGES: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE DANIEL TEMPLON, PARIS & BRUSSELS

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Vik Muniz
Photo: Lucas Blalock

Facing page:
Beton Girl
Album series, 2014

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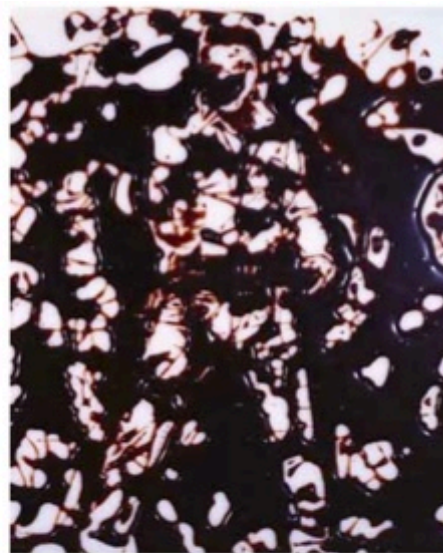


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Vik Muniz has long specialised in conceptual photography, with illusion and appropriation best defining the nature of his work. Diversity is evident in such pieces as *Double Elvis*, dripping in chocolate, based on a Warhol screen print; *Elizabeth Taylor glittering in diamonds* after a Hollywood portrait; Cranch's painting of *Apollo and Diana* recreated from junk; and Edvard Munch's *The Scream* rendered in pigment. The Brazilian artist's latest offering, *Album*, sees him remaking vernacular black-and-white pictures by piecing together thousands of fragments from anonymous people's photo albums. Exhibited until the end of May at Galerie Daniel Templon in Brussels, the series captures happy moments, like a wedding, a couple's holiday, a fisherman's catch, and a tourist's camel ride. The starting-point is more poignant than Muniz simply searching his mind for subject matter. It has to do with the preciousness of images and how this is in the process of slipping away in the digital age. The 53-year-old, who lives in Rio de Janeiro (after three decades in New York), has been assiduously collecting family photos for 15 years. Initially he bought them at garage sales and flea markets, later ordering them online in bulk.

"When I was growing up in São Paulo, my entire visual history came down to nine photographs", he says. "We didn't own a camera, we were very poor. My aunt who lived in Miami came to visit us once a year and would bring along a plastic Kodak camera to take pictures. I'd have to wait a whole year to see what they looked like. All of my childhood photos were taken by this aunt, and I cherished them. One of the times, my father had just lost his job as

Double Elvis
Pictures in Chocolate series, 1999

Elizabeth Taylor (Diamond Divas)
Pictures of Diamonds series, 2004

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a waiter and my mother was working long hours as a switchboard operator, but we're all smiling in the portrait. I love it because it's what we wanted it to be. When I got to the US, I couldn't understand why people were getting rid of personal pictures that had been passed along from generation to generation. I didn't have much money, and at first I would buy one here and there. In the last 15 years, with the emergence of digital, a lot of photos have made their way to eBay. Now I buy 2000-3000 at a time."

PICTURE / STORY

At the age of 20, after redesigning billboards in Brazil, Muniz moved to New York using the money he was given as compensation for having been shot in the leg in a street brawl. He started making sculptures and then experimented with redrawing photography; for his first series, *Sugar Children* (1996), he took Polaroids of kids working on Caribbean sugar plantations and redrew their portraits by arranging sugar on black paper, and then photographing the compositions. Chocolate, peanut butter, jam, diamonds, caviar, junk, garbage, dust, toys, magazines, pigment, and puzzles have all been employed in Muniz's venture of reworking well-known imagery. His pictures are an ironic double take, challenging recognition and perception.



With *Album*, however, Muniz is dealing with photographs of ordinary people, picking out images that are as mundane as possible. "What's beautiful about people's photo albums is that they're exactly the same – pictures of the baby, of school, graduation, first communion, the wedding, ...", says Muniz. "To make a really good picture, it had to be banal and simple, so that you would imagine it in your own photo album." The project sees Muniz putting use to his hoard of 200,000 such photographs. "I had a room full of boxes of albums that I had adopted", he says. "I was standing in a huge mausoleum! There was something a bit morbid about it, so I thought I should do something with them." Muniz worked thematically, composing wedding pictures using cut-outs from wedding pictures, sometimes basing his composition on an original photograph that he'd blown up, sometimes making an amalgamation. "There's a wedding picture where I've wedded a groom from one picture with a bride from another, and a birthday picture where every single kid comes from a different photo", he explains. "As long as it represents a particular moment, it's interesting."

Wedding
Album series, 2014

Military Band Member
Album series, 2014

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The Thinkers
Album series, 2014

New York Postcard
Postcards from Nowhere series, 2013

ing through other people's photographs, but when you're cutting them up, you're abstracting them a little bit. You go back to Cindy Sherman. These things have narratives and stories. Yet, the narrative of a photo album being passed down from one generation to the next is now in demise, as people are uploading images digitally", Muniz notes. "There's been a rupture in this whole process, and people have stopped relating to them like they used to."

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

Muniz creates his compositions flat on the ground. Has he ever thought of exhibiting these collages that serve as the basis of his pictures? "When an institution buys a piece of work, I normally offer the collage for educational purposes, but an agreement is made that it should never be shown alone as an artwork", he replies. "I don't do that with private collectors because the work changes hands and you can't control where it's going to be." As Muniz points out, "Before, I used to make stuff like chocolate and throw it into the garbage, so the picture would justify that perishable moment", he says. "These collages [for Album] are very delicate because I stick things together using wax. When you put them in a vertical position, pieces start falling off."

Concurrently, Muniz has been working on another series titled Postcards from Nowhere – namely, Paris, Venice, London, New York, Hong Kong, and Shanghai – that has required cutting up thousands of postcards to recreate large-scale pictures inspired by his own memories and experiences. "I could not find a single picture that felt like New York, and

CHOPPING AND CHANGING

The fictional aspect finds an echo with Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), when the American artist cast herself as the various characters in imaginary American movies – a point that Muniz concedes. "When I first saw her work, I bought one of those *Untitled Film Stills*", he recounts. "I paid something like \$3,000 and it took me two years to pay for it. We were the first generation of artists to be exposed to visual, electronic television, and a lot of what I do has something to do with that." Another commonality between Muniz's *Album* series and Sherman's work is voyeurism, although handled differently. "It does feel voyeuristic to be look-



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then I found one of the Twin Towers in Italy, and saw the city as I remembered it", he says. But after three decades of pumping the art market with thematic renditions, the potency of surprise has slightly dimmed in Muniz's work, and it's looking a bit branded. He readily admits this. "The challenge for a mid-career artist like me is to continue to be culturally relevant."

With this in mind, Muniz embarked on a four-year-long project with researcher Marcelo Coelho at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US, to etch castles onto grains of sand using electron microscopy. An image drawn by Muniz of the Château de

Chambord in the Loire valley was engraved by Coelho – using a focused ion beam – onto a single grain of sand less than half a millimetre across. The resulting photograph resembles a blown-up white engraving on black stone. The first in the series, Sandcastle #01 (Château de Chambord), 2014, was presented at Paris Photo last year by Galerie Xippas (Paris/Geneva/Athens). "It's so insignificant and yet so monumental", comments Muniz in a video made by The Creators Project. "This is a great time to be a photographer, because photography is completely obsolete in terms of its relation to reality", he remarks.

Muniz's sense of vocation lies beyond the art world. As a UNESCO goodwill ambassador, he is involved in three NGOs and is setting up a daycare centre for five to nine-year-olds in a favela to the south of Rio. There will be animation courses, so the children can make things. The initiative follows on from his collaboration with art students at an educational centre he established to create Pictures of Junk (2006-2009), and another with the catadores (garbage pickers) from Brazil's Jardim Gramacho landfill, for Pictures of Garbage (2008). A documentary, called Wasteland, chronicled the artworks Muniz made in cooperation with the catadores; one of these, Marat (Sebastião), was sold by Phillips for £34,850 at auction in London, the proceeds benefiting ACAMJG, the Association of Recycling Pickers of Jardim Gramacho. While those two series are the most politically engaging, Album is the one that vividly conveys the evolution of photography since the advent of family photo albums at the end of the 19th century. <

Album is at Galerie Daniel Templon in Brussels until 30 May 2015.
danieltemplon.com
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Sandcastle #1
(Château de Chambord), 2014
Marat (Sebastião)
Pictures of Garbage series, 2008