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Fabricated Tales | Paolo Ventura at Hasted Kraeutler

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The photographer Paolo Ventura was raised on stories. His father was an author of children's books, who, as Ventura remembers it, was "always inventing stories for me and my brothers." Over the past five years, Ventura, a former fashion photographer, has established his own voice as a storyteller building highly detailed, miniature sets from found objects, and then shooting them to appear life size. The resulting images demand a closer look, drawing the viewer into Ventura's often haunting narrative worlds.

His "War Souvenir" series from 2006 traced the horrors of a fictionalized war that in fact took place in the closet of Ventura's apartment. "Winter Stories," from 2008, followed a man through the metaphorical winter of his life. (This time around, the handmade sets were shot in a proper New York photo studio with natural light.) Ventura's latest series, "The Automaton of Venice," on view at Hasted Kraeutler later this week, focuses on an elderly Jewish watchmaker in the Venice ghettos during World War II.

Based on a story Ventura's father told him as a child, "Automaton" is set in 1943, an especially dark period in Italian history. Most of the Venice ghetto has been emptied, and many Jews have already escaped. The retired watchmaker has lived in the city his entire life but now finds it dark, stifling and strange. Frightened and alone, he decides to build an automaton to keep him company.

"He becomes very attached to it," Ventura says. "It seems to

him the most alive thing in a dead city." Each night, he and the automaton boy share a drink and toast to one another's health, awaiting the arrival of the fascist police who will deport the remaining Jews from the ghetto.

No detail of the story has been left to chance, though kismet does seem to play a significant role. Describing the rationale behind his watchmaker's appearance, Ventura recalls, "One day on the subway in New York I saw an old Orthodox Jewish man. He was dressed in the traditional Orthodox dress and looked to me as if he had stepped straight out of the 1930s. His face was exactly the face I had imagined for the watchmaker years before when my father had told me the story of the Automaton. It was this face that gave me the idea of bringing to life the character and story of the watchmaker in photographs. Oddly enough, someone has told me that the watchmaker resembles my real-life father. I don't know if this is a coincidence."

In addition to the Automaton story, which was included in the Venice Biennale earlier this year, the show will feature a small selection of images from Ventura's first digital series, "Behind the Walls." This new work introduces an entirely new character into the artist's narrative: himself. "After years of creating these environments," he says, "I had a big desire to truly enter into my sets — into my imaginary world."

"The Automaton of Venice" is at Hasted Kraeutler from Sept. 8 to Oct. 15.