

Portfolio: Flights of fantasy in Paolo Ventura's dark, poetic 'Stories' series

By Robert Epstein
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Paolo Ventura's father was a celebrated Italian children's book illustrator in the 1960s and 1970s, who would delight his twin sons with sketches and stories. His grandmother, who lived with the family, was "a free spirit", who would take Paolo and his brother to the circus and street performances.

And each year in his childhood home of Milan, young Paolo would attend a celebration on 7 December, when the feast of St Ambrose heralded a grand street fair and what turned out to be the last of the cantastorie – troubadours who had sung stories of good and evil since the 17th century.

"Growing up like this was a great example to me," says the 45-year-old. "It was unusual for a kid to have a father not going to an office, but staying at home, drawing... It authorised me just to think, to be fantastical, creative, not just for fun, but for work. It was really a magical youth."

Both flights of fantasy and family continue to play a major role in Ventura's work. As part of his ongoing series "Stories", he employs the services of his wife, the designer Kim Mingo, his graphic novelist brother Andrea, and his six-year-old son Primo, to star in dioramas that never fail to bring a smile to the face – even if they do tend towards the morbid. "I like dark, poetic stories," he explains. "It's funny, because in two of the stories, my son disappears; in another, I kill my brother; in 'The Knife Thrower', I kill my wife."

The story, then, of "The Knife Thrower", above. A man and his wife visit a fair. The woman falls in love with the fair's knife-thrower, packs her bags and leaves to become his assistant. and the woman returns to her brute of a husband. He uses a knife in a more fatal manner.

Ventura plays the husband; his wife, the wife; his brother, the knife-thrower (not shown here). The costumes Ventura picked up over the years for various projects. The backgrounds, he paints himself, on a blanket; the



stage, measuring 3m by 5m, is one he built, to take advantage of a dramatic space that emerged by chance one day in his studio. "The idea for the set came about because of a banal accident to the roof in my studio. A piece of the roof fell, a light streamed through. I put glass over the hole and decided to build a little theatre where the light shone."

The dramatis personae all being family, Ventura comes up with ideas for stories on a Friday, then the "company" acts them out over the weekend. With his studio sitting in a barn attached to the family's Tuscan country-house home, it sounds idyllic.

"It's a nightmare. Everything starts really well, then I get frustrated with something, my wife gets angry because I start to scream at her, then Primo, he gets bored. It's strange: we enjoy doing it, but we fight a lot."

All said with a knowing wink, thankfully – that killing urge never leaves the stage.

New works from Ventura's 'Stories' will be exhibited for the first time at the Atlas Gallery, London W1 (atlasgallery.com), from 10 October