

Q&A with Paolo Ventura

In War Souvenir, Paolo Ventura recreates fictional wartime scenes using highly detailed miniature sets and subjects. Graphis is pleased to speak with the Italian-born, New York based artist about the rationale behind this unusual collection, his process as a photographer and his thoughts on the current state of the industry.

G: Congratulations on the success of your latest collection, War Souvenir. Describe these photographs.

PV: These photographs are illusions. It is like looking at ourselves through a series of mirrors which create an infinity that does not exist.

G: Does this work fall into a specific genre? How would you describe your style as a photographer?

PV: I think that my photos don't really belong to any particular photographic genre—perhaps this is part of the reason for their success. However, if I have to define a genre to which they belong, I would say that they are still life.

G: The classic role of the photojournalist is to bear truthful witness to a moment. How does your work relate?

PV: Photojournalism is to be present in the moment and to capture that moment, as well as to search for the story that you are looking to tell. My work is exactly the opposite—I create the moment and invent the story.

G: What was the catalyst for this series?

PV: The reason was a very strong need to represent and to give form to my dreams and my obsessions that I have carried inside of me since I was a child: a confused imaginary world that protected me from the reality that I lived sometimes with difficulty.

G: How large are these settings in reality?

PV: The sets range from 50 cm to 3 meters, depending on how complex the scene is.

G: Where do you procure the miniatures for each scene?

PV: Many of the props I make myself, and others I find in various places.

G: How are these scenes developed—both physically and creatively?

PV: When I begin to create a scene I already know exactly what I want. I have imagined it many times, and this helps me with the physical aspect of building it—because I somehow automatically understand how to make exactly what I need. The construction is the last phase of a creative process that I have already imagined long before.

G: Approximately how long do the above physical and creative processes take?

PV: It's difficult to say exactly. Some scenes have kept me company in my head for many months before I am able to reproduce them. Others only a few days.

G: Where does your great appreciation for detail come from?

PV: Maybe in observing the people, houses and things around me. From the fascination of the past, and the traces of the people that have lived before us.

G: The craftsmanship necessary to prepare these images is amazing; where did you develop this skill? Any other avenues you wish to explore that might utilize this talent?

PV: I don't think that I have a particularly strong manual talent. But I have a very clear idea of what I want. Therefore to construct it physically comes to me very easily. I would like to create short films.

G: How would you describe the current relationship between painting and other arts and photography? How does this influence photographic practice?

PV: I think that after many years of inferiority or living with the sense of inferiority to the other visual arts, photography is experiencing a very

important moment, a moment where the understanding of photography's own specific potential has allowed it to be more creatively autonomous, and sometimes, turning the tables; for example, when a painting is inspired by a photograph, rather than the opposite. In my specific case, I have been influenced strongly by Italian neorealism films like those by Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti.

G: What research goes into each setting? How much influence do your grandmother's family stories of the two World Wars have on any given photograph?

PV: I grew up with my grandmother because she lived in our house with us—something rather common in Italy. She told me stories of the war during my childhood, which later influenced my art. But not in the specific facts of the war that I was inspired, but more in her stories of common life—of hunger, of fear, and of poverty.

G: Are the scenes you set more conceptually driven or aesthetically driven?

PV: The scenes are driven both conceptually and aesthetically—conceptually because all of the photos are connected to one another. Looking closely at the details of the images, you begin to find a common thread that unites all of the photos. This common thread is not just the war, but also the direct and indirect stories of the people in the scenes and how their lives intersect. For example, the painter that commits suicide— one can see him walking in the street of another photo. Or you may notice that some of the objects found in his studio appear in other photographs. Then—in being photographs—they also need to be aesthetically compelling to command the attention of viewers so that I am able to tell the story that I want to tell.

G: Describe the overall impression or emotion you hope to evoke with this campaign. What ideas do you wish to convey?

PV: I reconstruct an invented reality in reduced scale, but extremely realistically so that you ask yourself what you are looking at. It's as if we are looking at ourselves through the lens of a telescope from afar. And maybe the distance helps us to better understand the present.

G: Why do you believe these images resonate so strongly with viewers?

PV: Maybe, in some way, because they are photos that represent violence. I have mixed very peaceful scenes, like that of the woman in the bath, with very strong photos—like that of suicide. And in doing this, sometimes the more peaceful photos become the more violent ones. Perhaps because you are expecting something to happen next, the anticipation before the drama—a sensation that is created by the preceding photos. In this way, I tried to recreate one of the worst things about war: the fear to live every day because your life can tragically change suddenly in any moment.

G: In War Souvenir's introductory essay, Francine Prose writes, "In some ways, the pictures are as much about the representations of war as they are about war itself." Your thoughts?

PV: The war that I try to recreate is the iconographic representation of the war that when I was a child deeply struck me. Much of the photography that I saw of my relatives as soldiers were portraits taken in photographic studios with realistic painted backgrounds and stones of papier-mâché, where the representation of the war was substituted and sublimated by these choreographed scenes, turning the figures into melancholy actors of an opera.

G: Please describe your state of mind while shooting.

PV: It's like trying to write down your dreams the moment that you awake—the dream that disappears after the first coffee.

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