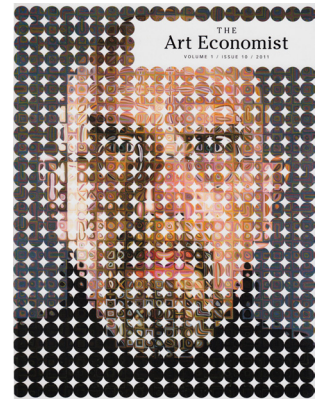


ARTISTS TO WATCH

MAYA HAYUK – CARTER MULL – YAMINI NAYAR – ANDREW SCHULTZ – PAOLO VENTURA – FEODOR VORONOV



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A Very Grimm Tale

BY BRUCE HELANDER



Paolo Ventura, *Automaton Poster*, 2011, 2 color poster hand printed, 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm), Edition of 100, © 2011 Paolo Ventura/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy of the artist and Hasted Kraeutler. +1 212 627 0006

It's been said many times before that every picture tells a story, and Paolo Ventura, following that respected tradition, is one of the most interesting storytellers in the art world today. By way of his thoroughly convincing contemporary photographs, which reinvent remarkable and memorable fable-like portrayals, the artist first creates a small maquette-like platform that allows him to capture his dreamy, magical but quite authentic stage sets on film. Ventura, like all good narrators and directors, was raised on stories. His father was an author of children's books, and the artist recalls that he was "always inventing stories for me and my brothers." Over the past five years, Ventura, a former fashion photographer, has established a remarkable visual voice as a raconteur, building curious environments piece by piece with found objects and hand-crafted minute details. These constructions become highly believable miniature sets that on first glance appear to have been taken by an old fashioned square box camera, complete with black cloth and glass negatives. So realistic are these snapshots of Venice in the 1940s that they become hauntingly narrative, and in the case of his recent show at Hasted Kraeutler, depict the dark days of the Nazi occupation and the rule of the fascist regime in Italy. *The Automaton of Venice* exhibition was based on a short story Ventura was told as a child. The fictional account centers on an elderly, Jewish watchmaker living in the ghetto of Venice in 1943, where the handy, tool-oriented watchmaker has lived his entire life. A former booming tourist center and magnificent city, the atmosphere is desolate and fearful, setting a painful stage where the theatre of unfortunate history unfolds with astonishing detail, right down to the tiny loaf of bread on a table fit for a mouse. The old man, lonely and desperate, decides to build an automaton (an anthropomorphic robot), complete with built-in alarm clock (of course!) to keep him company with made up conversations and domestic distractions against the impending arrival of the fascist police, who will deport the last of the remaining Jews in the ghetto to their final destination. The circumstance is a little reminiscent of the hopeless plight of Tom Hanks in the movie, *Cast Away*, who played the only character who survived a FedEx plane



crash that strands him on a silent island of isolation. Hanks finally succumbs to painting a smiley face on a beached volleyball, which he strategically places in different spots during the day to maintain some sanity in a perpetual one-way conversation. The balding plastic "head" is appropriately named "Wilson," after the brand of the ball. The chronicle of absolute fear and solitude portrayed by Ventura is sharpened as if it were pure fact, not fiction, by fashioning totally plausible wind-up characters documented by remarkably beautiful photographs. After laying out a story board, he then builds elaborate little models in his studio that include diminutive figurines. The final illustrations are the photographs of the scenes created within the models. Ventura follows a challenging tradition first made popular by artist, Laurie Simmons, who combined intimate collages and cut-outs with small-scale background photos of kitchen scenes, theatrical events and other domestic interiors, which were then photographed and presented as charming vignettes. Gregory Crewdson is another master, who creates street scenes of suburban tract homes that become elaborately staged cinematic portrayals of often disturbing and surreal moments. Thomas Demand also is a good example of a leading photographer who substitutes miniature cardboard walls for real buildings and urban landscapes, and uses these materials to reconstruct often shocking, illusionistic environments that further complicate the relationship between reproduction and originality. With Paolo Ventura's work, he's not just

an artist to watch, he's an artist to read, and his handsome book that accompanies the show, *The Automaton*, follows his father's original occupation and makes a courageous history lesson for children. In addition to *The Automaton of Venice*, which was included in the Venice Biennale earlier this year, Ventura has completed a new series of images from his first digital series, *Behind the Walls*. This new work introduces a novel character into the photographer's imaginary narrative: himself. His works have been recently acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Library of Congress in Washington and the Martin Z. Margulies Collection in Miami. The artist is represented exclusively by Hasted Kraeutler in the United States (212.627.0006, www.hastedkraeutler.com). -BH

