

Paolo Ventura

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Before he is a photographer, Paolo Ventura is an image-maker. From hand-drawn sketches he meticulously builds miniature sets, that, when lit by uncomplicated means—with tungsten table lamps and open windows—are photographed with his 15-year-old Pentax 6 x 7. The trappings of photography are secondary to the obsessive attention he gives to shaping the image itself, which present a staged “ir-reality,” an “illustration” of his fantasies and dreams. His “California,” “Winter Stories,” and “War Souvenir” series—images from which we feature here—can be compared to the output of contemporary photographers like Jeff Wall and Thomas Demand, who have used the photography medium to stage or recreate reality—not document it. Having established himself as a fashion photographer first, Ventura is no stranger to posing figures and constructing sets, and has an eye for imbuing his tableaux with a unique, and arresting kind of drama.

The images in Ventura’s War Souvenir series are characterized by their long, deep, shadows and brooding atmosphere of film noir paranoia—a moodiness appropriate to the fascist-era Italy they are intended to represent. Specifically, the photographs from in this series were influenced by stories of living in Tuscany on the German Siegfried line, told to him by his family. Several photographs in this series, one of which is featured here, display the romance and erotic commingling of two young lovers. Another shows a soldier staring at a book in a ransacked apartment.



These strange, open-ended images do not aim to illustrate his family stories literally; rather, Ventura’s goal is to convey the impression their tales have had on him: it is “more a feeling...the color of the air, the color of the wall, the feeling that they had at the time that I tried to recreate,” he says. One of the photographs we have featured shows a dead soldier, half-buried in the mud. Ventura conceived of this image partly because he and his family had found helmets, mortar shell casings and other ephemera from World War II in the fields surrounding his home, a reminder of the violence that had occurred there. With this image Ventura is trying to acknowledge the history that has been—literally—buried beneath this idyllic Tuscan landscape.



Detail is essential to Ventura’s work—“It’s my obsession,” he says. Indeed, his sets, made from clay, cardboard, foam board and plastic, reveal his finely honed eye for the minute. In one of our three featured photographs, we can see that he has carefully etched away paint to convey the worn floorboards of a cafe. In another, swaths of wallpaper hang from beaten up plaster and a cup of water sits on a radiator. And the gear attached to the dead soldier is all historically accurate.

The process of capturing the photographs is done with little sophistication. His lighting is simple, and his f-stop, shutter speed and lens are almost always the same: he puts a 105 lens on his camera and keeps the aperture at f/64. He almost always uses Fuji film, which is usually exposed for 10 seconds. What is not so simple, says Ventura, is picking the camera angle. He makes the decision based on Polaroids, and it usually takes him several days of tweaking to get things just right. The photograph of the dead soldier is unique with respect to the rest of Ventura's work. It was not staged in his studio—but rather on site, in the fields near his family's Tuscan home. He happened to have a ring flash, and found that mixing it with daylight created light appropriate to the image "I wanted all the details to come out...it was almost a medical picture."



All while continuing to work as a fashion photographer, in the last year or so, Ventura has witnessed substantial success as an artist. His work has been published by The New Yorker, Harper's and Aperture and a book of his War Souvenir photographs was released in 2006 by Contrasto. He has had solo exhibitions at the Hasted Hunt Gallery in New York, the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome and the A-3 Gallery in Moscow. He hopes to begin work on a children's book soon.

Ventura was interviewed by our Editor Zack Seckler about his art and his career:

TFS: How did you get your start as a photographer?

Ventura: I think I started like everybody, working as an assistant while I was in college. I had a friend who was working for a photographer and needed some help. I started without any particular interest for photography. Because I was in Milan, it was a good moment for fashion photography. It was a lot of work, a lot of magazines. The photographer that I started to work with, he was kind of working for some magazines. So it was a natural place to start. I did that for ten years. It was a good ten years; I did well, I paid for my life, it was nice, it was exciting, I traveled a lot. For ten years I was competitive and maybe because it wasn't my kind of work, the career that I wanted, I lost focus. I was just bored with the work, and I decided to move here and change. Change completely, drastically.

TFS: Did you see anybody creating images from models shot on sets before you started doing it?

Ventura: Not before, I discovered it myself. After I started friends told me they had seen somebody else that did similar things. So I went to see somebody else's work. Before that I was not really interested in recreating, reconstruction, models, and all that stuff. I discovered Thomas Demand, for example. I discovered there's a group of people that work not with reality but with ir-reality. So I think many photographers right now are working not with reality but with invented realities. They get the picture from real life and then they make it into something else.

TFS: Do you ever build a set and not like how it turns out?

Ventura: Yeah, many times. In the beginning it happened a lot but not now. As I did it more I began to know more of what I wanted.

TFS: Tell me about your artistic process.

Ventura: The whole process of creating an image takes about a week. I sketch an idea and then I go looking for materials. I build the set and when it's together I put the lights in and take Polaroids. I may spend days taking Polaroids before I shoot film. Taking the picture takes more time than building the set. It's difficult to find the right point of view. Maybe when you imagine something you build it and then the space is not exactly what you thought, so you need to readjust something.

TFS: Some of the detail is really incredible. The look of the rifles, the grenades, the torn up posters...how do you create this detail on such a small scale?

Ventura: I think detail is very important. I use clay, cardboard, foam board and plastic. I find objects in flea markets, on the street. I use action figures and sometimes I change the face, soften their face, or make it a little more interesting. I'm a little bit obsessive about detail. I remember when I was a kid, this picture of my grandfather in a war. I remember very well that the thing that impressed me was he was sitting there with cross legs, and there was a hole under his shoes. I remember that hole more than the picture.

TFS: Did you have any training?

Ventura: No, I think it's very easy to create these kinds of models. You just build what you need, no more. If I need a house, I don't make the entire house I just make the façade. So it's like a drawing. You see something and you draw it on the paper. You just do it. I don't think there is this specific ability to do this. I had never built a model before when I started. I learned by myself, just by doing.

TFS: Tell me about how you light your sets.

Ventura: The lighting is very simple. I usually use a table lamp or a ceiling light. I'm not really interested in being precise, in using flash. The important thing for me is that my light comes from above so it gives a certain heaviness to the set. The shadows give it some stability. But then I also use everything — I even use Christmas lights sometimes. I don't need a lot of lights because the set is small. So two or three table lamps together is more than enough. I use different kinds of lights to give the image a different color, sometimes more green or more yellow. I use tungsten mostly but sometimes the light comes from windows too. I also like to mix light sources to give different color combinations like yellow-bluish combinations.

TFS: In your image of a soldier with his face on the ground, did you specifically choose to do this shot where the war actually did take place, on the actual earth where soldiers were? Was that significant to you?

Ventura: Yeah. I think I wanted to recreate that kind of emotion that happened sixty years ago in a countryside where you never would expect something like this to have happened today. When you see Tuscany right now, it's beautiful sweet hills and English tourists. Everything is the opposite of what it was sixty years ago. There was a war, it was terrible. It was a big contrast from today. But under the ground, under the surface of beauty there are still bad memories. So the trace of what it was sixty years ago was kind of a contrast I didn't expect. It's kind of like a metaphor to life.

TFS: What was your goal in creating the War Souvenir imagery.

Ventura: I think that my first goal is to tell a story. The story is about a war. It's about love, it's about life. As a writer, or as a poet, your first need is to tell a story that is inside you that you want to get out. I remember this Italian journalist. His parents were involved in the war and he saw a lot of his own stories in my pictures. He saw his own mother as being alone...so everybody can see what they want. Somebody's touched because they have a personal story about the war, in Italy, because the war was really there. And other people see other things. But my first goal is to tell a story.

TFS: Why did you pick World War II as your first major body of work?

Ventura: All my family was involved in the war as was ninety percent of Italian families at the time. So I grew up with the story about war and it was kind of like the soundtrack of my youth. When I started to think about the work, I was thinking about it like I was almost there, because I was so familiar with the story. I kind of absorbed emotion and the feelings of the time, even though I wasn't there. So when I start to think about the World War II in northern Italy, I felt like I almost knew everything. Maybe because of my fantasy, my grandmother telling me stories, maybe I was creating the scene around the story, so it was something familiar for me. It's easier working with something that you are familiar with.

TFS: Tell me about your new body of work titled “Winter Stories” that will be published sometime in the near future.

Ventura: It’s a simple story of a man that’s going to die. When he is in his bed dying, 15 minutes before he dies, he thinks about his life. It’s a series of images that he thinks of before dying. His life was always in Italy, he never left where he grew up. So there are all these little stories...it’s kind of like a story of a neighborhood in Italy, and nothing specific happened. It’s not a sequence, each image is its own story, just like a slice of life. It’s taken me almost two years to do it, more or less. So now it’s almost finished. There’s a publisher that’s interested in publishing the book. We are just trying to finalize the arrangement.

TFS: Is there one thing, one over-arching theme that you want people to understand or you want people to see or feel?

Ventura: No, I think it’s important that you try to tell story, and you do it. Then everybody can see what they want. I don’t have any political message from my picture. I try to set my story in the past for sure, so you are away from the present. In the case of War Souvenir, it’s a specific period but in my new work, it’s not. It could be the 60’s, or the 40’s or the 30’s. I choose the past maybe because I’m more personally attracted to the past. I think it’s coming from the same origin; re-interpretation of reality.

TFS: How did having a book published influence your career?

Ventura: I think it’s important. It’s a good way to show your work. But I think a long time ago it was even more important to have a book. When there was a new book, there was a lot of attention. It’s like movies. Movies now stay out like two weeks, three weeks, months, then it’s gone; before it would stay out for a year. So you had more chance to show your work. Before if you had a book it was a big deal, and it stayed in the bookstores for like two, three years. It was an event, since there were less books. Now it’s more of a supermarket selection. After two months, it’s not in the bookstore anymore. I think it’s less important than before. You have a book, and maybe nobody notices. So you need to be everywhere. There’s more competition now and there’s much more work around.

TFS: Would you ever go back to doing editorial advertising?

Ventura: Yeah, actually I have a contract with Italian Elle. I have a contract to make 70 pages for them every year as I want. It is good because it’s a good distraction a couple times a year.

TFS: So tell me how is it to be in the fine art world as a career, how is that different?

Ventura: In fine art it’s more about yourself. In advertising, you work with other people and you work with a layout. When you work with other people, they’re more involved with your own work. They contribute to your work, and affect whether it’s good or bad. With the art world, I think you are more free. They encourage you to just sell your work, they advise you, they support you, but they mostly just sell your work. They don’t really contribute to the creation of the object. You are more yourself. I like that. I like the idea that I can decide everything about my work. Not depending on other people’s ideas. When you’re working in advertising your picture is not good or bad because you’re a good or bad photographer. It depends on many other things, like the model, the makeup, the styling. They make the picture incredible, or not. It’s not just you and I don’t really like that.

TFS: How does it feel to be a very successful fine art photographer?

Ventura: It feels good because you have more freedom. Your life is the same, it’s the practical things that change. Maybe you have more money to pay your rent and you’re more stable. The only thing that changes is your satisfaction with yourself. You say, ‘I did something good that people like.’ It was really hard before, I’m going to be honest. I practically started from zero when I came here and I left the fashion world. There’s a lot of competition and it’s extremely hard to find a way, your own vision. When you see so many things around you, it’s difficult to isolate yourself and do something that comes from you. So you have to really look deep inside yourself and find your dream, your obsession, your nightmare, and try to give it some shape.