

Dialogue



"War Souvenir"

Life-size Reality

Photographer Paolo Ventura discusses dioramas, World War II and writing a film script.

by Steven Heller

The Italian conceptualist Paolo Ventura considers himself a photographer first and a diorama-maker second. For me, he is a master miniature tableaux-maker and dramatic storyteller. He creates scenes both real and surreal that harken back to the dark times of Fascist Italy, and he captures the melancholy aura of the '30s and '40s in Venice and Rome on film. His exhibitions

include "War Souvenir," "The Automaton of Venice" and the most recent, "Lo Zuavo Scomparso." The dioramas in the early part of his career are beautifully dreary, eerily quiet. They are also the basis for his exquisite large-scale photographic prints. Now, he is working with real models in period garb, and the effects are stunning. I reached out to Ventura to discuss the role of photography and the rationale behind his art.

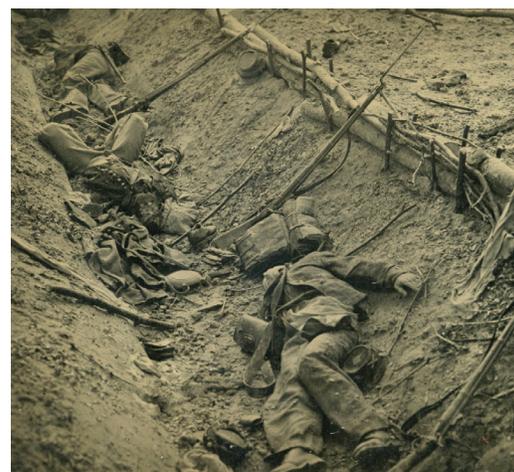
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What came first for you as an artist, photography or your dioramas? Photography. I started making dioramas because I wanted to photograph something that didn't really exist—except in my head. The dioramas, in themselves, have little sense. They are the instruments to create a representation of a story. The story is my vision, obsessions and dreams that I render real only the moment that I take the photograph, exactly as if I was there—as if I walked on that street or saw that corner and then took the photo.

How much does photography contribute to the overall success of your work? Photography is the key to the success of my work. Photography allows me to play a trick. Because people tend to believe what they see in photography as real—even if they know that behind the houses there is cardboard scaffolding—they want me to take them by the hand and bring them into my world.

What triggered your interest in creating tableau, in "War Souvenir," about World War II? As an Italian of my generation, I grew up in a family where every person—my mother, father, grandmother, grandfather (my grandparents lived with us)—in different moments of their lives, were each directly impacted by the war. In Italy, the war knocked at everybody's door. So the constant conversations around the table or before going to bed or before turning on the TV or while watching TV was *the war*. How could it not become an obsession for me? This is my rational answer. Then I think the provenance of obsessions is also a bit of a mystery.

Your photographic prints are immense. Is this a function of working with so much detail? Since I work in small scale,



Clockwise: "Behind the Walls," "The Automaton," "Lo Zuavo Scomparso" and "Civil War"

I like to render the final images very large—closer to life-size. It's another layer in creating a perception of reality.

Why did you make the leap from miniatures to life-size figures? For me, it was a natural evolution. I created a nonexistent world, so I sent somebody else to explore it first. When they reported back to me that it was a safe and comfortable place, I decided I'd visit it myself (I'm not a brave person). On a technical note, my dioramas are built in small scale. The figures that appeared in my stories for many years were models of the same scale. More recently, I realized that this world was built for me. So I keep the same scale for the environments, photograph myself (life-size) and then insert myself into the scenes.

These photographs recall the long exposure portraits of the early teens. Do you shoot with such a camera? No.

I use a modern camera. However, it is true that I use long exposures because I work with natural light in my studio.

You have a talent for establishing dramatic auras. How do you achieve the desired result? I'm not really sure. Maybe this ability came from my youth, from going to the Scala in Milan when I was a kid to see my uncle who was an extra in the operas. My grandmother used to take me to see the dress rehearsals for grand performances like "Aida" and "Rigoletto." I remember going in through the back door. As a child, it was incredible to see this complex scenery with hundreds of extras and real elephants. For me, it was a fantastic vision—a mirage.

Have you ever considered making a film of your characters? Yes. I'm writing a script for a film that I've had in my head now for a couple of years. ■