

JEREMY DICKINSON
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Piecing together an image

Two artists build pictures from their recollections and consider the function of memory in making art

BY ALEXANDRA KOROENIDIS
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In a world inundated by images, it probably makes sense that much of contemporary art is concerned with the nature of representation itself, with how images are constructed and how our visual perception is shaped. A joint exhibit on the work of Brazilian artist Vik Muniz and the British painter Jeremy Dickinson, currently on view at the Xippas Gallery, expresses art's "self-analytical" tendencies, while also showing interesting and unsuspected similarities between the work of two artists who, at least on the surface, seem opposed.

Both artists seem interested in how images are pieced together from what we remember and how our recollections — either collective or personal memories of things that we have actually experienced or visualized through second-hand information — affect our vision, and ascribe meaning to the images we view.

Collective memories is the theme of Vik Muniz's impressive, Warhol-like photographic portraits, titled "Diamond Divas & Caviar Monsters" which include six photographs of the portraits of film stars and divas (Romy Schneider, Brigitte Bardot, Sophia Loren, Maria Callas, Monica Vitti and Catherine Deneuve) and an equal number of large photographs of Hollywood monsters (Dracula and Frankenstein among them).

Interestingly, Muniz has not photographed real people (in the case of the monsters, their image on film) but his "paintings" of them which he has made on standard-size paper using not paint but the most bizarre, un-painterly materials: diamonds in the case of the divas and caviar for the monsters and anything from ketchup, chocolate, sugar, pins and confetti — or whatever the artist found interesting or fitting to his subject matter — for other works.

In what is an exercise in skill and masterful technique, Muniz draws his images in excellent detail, then photographs the original image and prints them in sizes that, despite their far larger format, have lost nothing of their original precision.

Although what the viewer is presented with in the end is a photograph, Muniz's art seems as close to painting as it does to photography. This middle ground, this suspended tension and lack of fixed definition runs through his art in more than one way.

Muniz likes to overturn standard notions



Monica Vitti is depicted in one of the "Diamond Divas" portraits by Vik Muniz. The image is the enlarged photograph of an image that the artist has made out of diamonds. On the right, a painting from the car series by British artist Jeremy Dickinson.



and to constantly surprise us. By making the subject of photography not something real but a representation of reality, he challenges photography's supposed verisimilitude. If photography is the representation of a representation then the distinction between a copy and an original becomes confused and the notion of authenticity loses its significance.

In a world where our experience of reality is constantly mediated by images, that which we experience first, an image or what is represented, is also open to debate. This, of course, is far from a novel idea. What can make a difference is the way that each artist turns this idea into an image; in the case of Muniz, it is his distinctive technique and the allusion he makes to how memory functions that carry his signature style. "If nobody ever saw what everyone remembers, what exactly are those memories made of?" Muniz said in an interview with Charles Stainback some years ago.

They are perhaps made of illusions, fictional information and reproductions. His photographs too are something like illusions, as they fluctuate between being real-life portraits and illusions of paintings with a tactile painterly surface. One thing transforms into the next and Muniz invites the viewer to enter into the game and piece together the puzzle of how images are con-

structed from that which we remember and how our understanding of them is shaped.

Although Dickinson does not depict broadly recognizable icons but explores his personal world, he too is concerned with reconstituting a world he retains from memory. His paintings show old, toy vehicles stacked together in horizontal or vertical piles and painted in an orderly fashion against a monochromatic background, usually of a pleasant, light color.

As a child Dickinson watched the blue and red-colored buses of the neighboring towns travel back and forth to Halifax, where he grew up. He also began a toy car collection, which he rediscovered once he started painting his car series.

His paintings have something of nostalgic reminiscence of the past, a tender evocation of childhood and boyish obsessions. The chipped paint on the cars enhances this notion of the past, of things that were once part of life but now are only part of our memories. Dickinson paints the cars with an almost photographic precision and in an objective, very controlled way in what seems like an attempt to reconstitute these childhood images as faithfully as possible. It is a personal world that not everyone will necessarily relate to. But the obsession with which Dickinson seeks to evoke this past strikes a common chord and viewers to the exhibition are,

in the end, left with an odd nostalgia of their own childhoods.

Set against the large black-and-white photographs of Muniz, which for some may have a populist aspect, Dickinson's images seem entirely different, less sensational perhaps and more esoteric, and for that reason more soothing and relaxing to look at. Like Muniz, Dickinson seems to pay attention to scale (there are many small paintings) and to the choice of color. Moreover, he uses cars as units that gradually build his images as well as reconstituting images retained in his memory just as Muniz uses diamond after diamond to piece together his photographic portraits and to evoke images ensconced in our collective unconscious. The process through which an image is created is important for both artists. So is how memory functions in helping us to reconstitute and envision our world. How does time change our recollections and how close is the world we remember to the one that we actually experienced, either vicariously or directly? And how does representation help us revisit this initial experience? Muniz and Dickinson both probe these questions.

Vik Muniz "Diamonds Divas & Caviar Monsters" and paintings by Jeremy Dickinson at the Xippas Gallery (53D Sophocleous, 210.331.9333) through December 18.