

# ARTnews

## CRITIC'S PICK PAOLO VENTURA



*Behind the Walls #5*, 2011, a digital chromogenic print, veers between reality and illusion.

In the 1840s, the newborn medium of photography experienced a period of explosive creativity. Enthusiasts discovered they could make negatives on metal, glass, and paper, using materials ranging from fermented egg whites to tar. One could create a collage by sandwiching together two negatives, or use a stereoscope to achieve the illusion of three dimensions. The potential seemed limitless.

For Italian-born photographer Paolo Ventura, the current digital revolution recalls that early era of photography. "Digital technology has opened the door of fantasy and imagination," he says. "it's like being a painter and someone gives you a bag, and inside there's a completely new color."

The 45-year old artist is something of a master illusionist, a photographer who creates elaborate stories out of the simplest materials. Each of his images starts with a diorama of a little city or interior that he crafts himself, painstakingly detailing it to look weathered. He then adds dolls, props, and other elements and goes on to photograph the scene. The result is mysterious and occasionally surreal -- a hybrid that veers between the sharpness of reality and the strange logic of dreams.

Ventura has always been steeped in storytelling. His father, a children's book author, would regale the family with tales as they sat around the dinner table. His eccentric grandmother, who used to take the artist with her to dress corpses for burial, told him anecdotes about World War II.

Ventura, who graduated from Milan's Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in 1991, spent ten years as a fashion photographer before realizing "there was no life, no story in anything I was making." So in 2001, he decided to move to Brooklyn, where he began constructing dioramas inside a closet. "What I was seeing in the diorama," he says, "was exactly what I had in my mind, and that made me very happy."

Unlike the artists Thomas Demand and James Casebere, who also construct and photograph dioramas, Ventura works with narratives that unfold over a series of images. His first series, "War Souvenir" (2005), is based on his grandmother's wartime memories; "The Automaton" (2010) sets a whimsical, Pinocchio-like story against the gritty reality of Venice's Jewish ghetto in 1943. Within this work, each image is its own little mystery, filled with character and atmosphere and detail that beg for closer examination. Ventura is represented by Hasted Kraeutler Gallery in New York, where his individual images sell for between \$5,000 and \$10,000, depending on the print size.

In the series "Behind the Walls" (2011), Ventura enters his own fantasy worlds as an actor. Photoshop allows him to play every part in his imagined scenes. It's like a "new color" in his palette. But if digital technology has made Ventura the star of his stories, old-fashioned craftsmanship and narrative bring them to life.

**- Sarah Coleman**

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