



APERTURE

PAOLO VENTURA'S WAR SOUVENIRS

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by Francine Prose

If, as Diane Arbus said, a photograph is a mystery about a mystery, Paolo Ventura's haunting and beautiful work makes the mysteries seem to multiply exponentially, like reflections captured in the infinite progression of a hall of mirrors. Looking at these photos creates a moment of suspension, a melancholy hush in which we almost imagine we can hear whispers about the riddles of life and death, time and age, childhood innocence and adult knowledge, art, war, history, and such questions as: What are we seeing? What do we think we are seeing? And what we are concluding about what we think we are seeing? In order to talk about these pictures at all, it is, I suppose, necessary to address the last and least of these mysteries first: What are these photographs of?

The first time I saw them, and for quite a while afterwards, I assumed that these dead soldiers were life-sized mannequins arranged to simulate the aftermath of battle, that these scarred and burned rooms were "real" rooms damaged and scorched to recreate the shocked emptiness of a dwelling unlucky enough to have been caught in the sights of the sharpshooter or bomber. And for a while after I learned the truth--as if to prove to myself that I wasn't the least observant person I knew--I kept showing the photos to friends, all of whom agreed with my initial impression about the life-sized scale of the models and scenes.

That impression was wrong. These soldiers are not mannequins but dolls, the "action figures"--GI Joes and so forth--that my own children collected and played with during the 1980s and early 90s. And the period pieces, the vintage furniture of these war-torn rooms are the provenance of Barbie and Ken, furnishings plucked from the dolls' glamorous fantasy-life in Malibu or Miami and repainted and refashioned to suggest the decor of an earlier and considerably less pacific era.

And so the solution to one puzzle leads directly to another. The fact that we are looking at dolls and doll furniture forces us to consider the mystery of childhood imagination, and of the simultaneously razor-sharp and murky ways in which the child interprets the painful realities--among them, war--of the world of the adults.

Born in Milan, Paolo Ventura--who, like Arbus, began his career as a fashion photographer--spent part of his childhood with his grandmother, listening to her stories of the two world wars and poring over family photographs of relatives who fought in the battles and of places where they'd lived.

"The inspiration for the portraits," he writes, "come from the pictures that soldiers used to send home during the Second World War. At that time 90% of the pictures that European soldiers sent home were taken in a photographic studio. This is because the people were very poor, and very few had their own cameras, unlike the Americans,

who at the time could afford their own cameras and therefore, through snapshots on location, have left behind photographic imagery of a very different kind. What interests me, is that the European soldiers, completely covered in dust, are removed from the battle fields, and photographed in a peaceful environment completely out of context and therefore somewhat surreal.

"I have a large collection of this type of portrait. And looking at these pictures, I have the desire to enter into the picture and exit through the door of the photographic studio. I started to experiment with the images by making them appear physically old, as if they were found in an archive in some forgotten basement. The idea is to create another layer of reality on top of the already realistic (but false) photographs."

As we consider these photos, we find ourselves wondering: In which war, exactly, have these soldiers been killed? In what year were these rooms inhabited and then deserted? The answers matter much less than the evocative mix of vagueness and precision that constitutes the simultaneously skewed and accurate truth of a child's understanding of war and loss and death, an imagined vision (assembled from relics and fragments of family narrative) of a distant and vanished past.

The sons of a successful children's book illustrator, Ventura and his identical twin brother spent their summers at their country home near the border of Tuscany and Umbria, a place he remembers as a sort of "boot camp" run according to his father's strict rules and where, to pass the long months of isolation and boredom, the boys invented a fantasy world that has reappeared in (or in any case influenced) their art. (Ventura's brother is a painter.) Something of that spirit still pervades these photos, especially once we know how they were made: a note of playfulness and innocence thrums beneath the more somber music of these images that so effectively telegraph grief and destruction. And our knowledge of how they are created--dolls dressed with a fully realized sense of the "lives" they lived, countless all-important and obsessive details of costume and decor lovingly fashioned and then, in some cases, burned with matches--makes them at once moving and delightful; the pleasure is a consequence of that same inventive obsessiveness. It's a world that a child with the esthetic sense and the technical skills of an adult might have constructed in a shoe box.

There is something very Italian, or perhaps more accurately, Latin about the way that tragedy and dark comedy mingle in these images. The fashions of the wounded and the dead--the dressing up of the corpse in an outfit that its owner so proudly wore during his lifetime--evokes the catacombs the Capuchin Fathers in Palermo, where row after row of the dead display the raiments of their worldly existence so that the doctors and lawyers, priests and professors, soldiers and society women still retain their professional and social identities, even if they no longer are in possession of their flesh. It's a terrifying and somehow comical place where the rictus grin of death often seems like a smile, and where in one famous pairing a skeleton man and wife appear to have continued their lifelong conversation, centuries after death.

Which brings us to consider the final and most essential mystery that these photos evoke--which is, of course, that of life and death. Much has been written lately--most notably, Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*--about the moral and esthetic implications of contemplating images of suffering and of the horrors of war. We have all experienced the pornographic fascination and the accompanying unease we feel in the presence of images of victims of some natural or manmade catastrophe. But what are we to make of these photographs of the dead who were never alive in the first place?

And so we come to the mystery of art, which enables us to contemplate these soldiers, these rooms, the souvenirs and relics of destruction. The ingeniousness with which Ventura has assembled these tableaux and the beauty with which he has lit and arranged them somehow manage to remove all this-- battles and bombing, soldiers and survivors--from the realm of politics and partisanship, of history and nationality, and to distill everything to its essence: the losses, the sorrows, the dislocations of war. Looking at these pictures, we feel tenderness and grief without the guilt and shame we would feel if they were photos of actual people. We feel as if the soldiers are our relatives, our grandfathers and fathers and sons, as if these burned-out rooms were the homes in which our families lived, at a time that someone remembers, even if we do not, at yet another dark moment in the history of the war that is always happening to someone, somewhere, if not at this moment to us.