

A Living Fiction, Inspired by Memories

A Chat With the Artist

By **AILEEN TORRES** | May 15, 2006

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PAOLO VENTURA, WHO WAS BORN IN ITALY IN 1968, DID NOT WITNESS WORLD WAR II. BUT the photographs in his show, "War Souvenir," at Hasted Hunt through May 20, suggest otherwise. As a boy, Mr. Ventura was fascinated by his grandmother's memories, which she shared with him again and again. Her memories fed Mr. Ventura's imagination. He conjured up his own stories and transposed them into set designs of imagined scenes from occupied Italy.

His series of photographs creates a living fiction that evokes the tragedy of the time through scenes of daily life; an empty home with all the furniture stacked together, two soldiers sitting down to a meal in a trattoria, and a painter sketching in his studio are among the images.

"I want to play with ambiguity," Mr. Ventura said. "You can think that it's real [the scenes in the photos], and then after a while you start to see they are not real. Or there's something that bothers you because it looks real, but it's not."

Figures - some made of fired clay, some from toy action figures, all about size of Barbie dolls - populate the sets in front of the photos. The photos are of staged constructions that Mr. Ventura created with attention to minute detail. Each scene took about one week to create (a little longer for the more complicated ones), and after shooting each set, he destroyed it and created a new one. The reason for the destruction was practical: His small studio didn't allow space for storage. The photos that he took of the sets became then a "witness," as he puts it, to the scenes.

"I want to give names to these people, give a story," he said.

He did that by writing fictional captions for each scene, such as: "Modena, April 1945. GG, an alleged collaborator, humiliated by having her head shaved;" "Christmas 1944. Shortly before curfew;" and "The home of the poet GV."

Together, the images look like stills from a film, and they have a somber, romantic ambiance in tones of black, white, blue-gray, and green. There is an elegance, too, in these images that springs from the meticulous craftsmanship behind each one; every object, from blocks of cheese to Italian newspapers and German posters, was made or found by Mr. Ventura, and every placement is deliberate.

Mr. Ventura believes that the details carry the stories. One of his inspirations is a photo taken by

Margaret Bourke-White that depicts a German woman whose family committed suicide when the Russians arrived toward the end of World War II. "I think she took poison. [She was] asleep, mouth open. This picture is really tragic [because] she's lying on the couch and there's a button on the couch that's falling off. That [the button] really struck me - more than her. It made more tragic the entire scene."

His interest in such small, yet very significant background details goes back to his childhood spent on his family's farm in Anghiari, a village that saw combat during World War II. "If you shovel a bit on the ground, you find a lot of this war stuff that remains. It always fascinated me - the rust of a tragedy covered by this beautiful landscape," he said. "With my twin brother, we used to shovel the ground and take all this stuff. We found a lot of bones, rusty things, buttons, and all kinds of ruins."

Several of the images in "War Souvenir" are of the remains of soldiers half-buried in the dirt. The finds that Mr. Ventura and his brother would dig up reinforced the drama of the stories they heard constantly from their grandmother about the war. She died a few years ago, and Mr. Ventura's show is an homage of sorts to her.

Mr. Ventura plans to start making his first film this summer, and he is now working on a series of photos, again, of scenes he will design and build. This time, the theme will be winter - and more specifically, memories of winter in Italy. "I love Italy, but I want to rebuild my own Italy. It's an Italy that doesn't exist. It will never exist." All the more reason to bring it to life.

Until May 20 (529 W. 20th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-627-0006).
