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NOVEMBER 2006

Young Artists to Watch

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Established artists
choose younger
figures whose
work interests,
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provokes them

Way to Glow

Vik Muniz appreciates how **Barney**

Kulok's photographs of unpopulated urban scenes at night inform his videos

BY REBECCA ROBERTSON

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"I'VE BEEN FOLLOWING BARNEY'S work from the beginning," says Vik Muniz of his former student Barney Kulok, who took his large-format photography class at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. "Vik made me question everything I thought I knew about photography," recalls Kulok, now 24. "He taught me that photography is not independent of the other visual arts; its history is the history of representation."



Vik Muniz and *Mars*, from his "Pictures of Junk" series, 2005.

Although photography is an integral part of Muniz's work, his final product is much more than a simple photograph. The 44-year-old artist uses confounding, sometimes humorous materials—from thread to caviar to replicate images from art history, literature, and pop culture, among other sources. He then photographs the results with a large-format camera. For his series "Pictures of Chocolate" (1997), Muniz used Bosco chocolate syrup to copy such recognizable images as a portrait of Sigmund Freud. Looking at these works, viewers oscillate between seeing the picture and noticing the glossy substance from which it's made. In this way, Muniz forces them to confront the way the brain and the eye function together to understand an image.

Kulok ventures outside the studio, exploring how artificial and reflected light define the environments they illuminate. His series "Lightbox"

(2005) shows nighttime city scenes like an elevated train overpass, a taxi stand, and a baseball field, depopulated and eerily lit. In one photograph, a peeling billboard shows an image of a house at night, its windows radiating warm yellow light. After Kulok shot the photographs, he made enlarged transparencies of them and mounted them in 20-by-24-inch

lightboxs to enhance their glowing quality. Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in New York, which represents the young artist, sells prints from the series for \$2,000 to \$3,000. As with Muniz's work, the photographs force the viewer to consider the different levels of lighting at work, from the lightbox to street lamps, and underscore the viewer's distance from each.

Kulok says he became interested in photography when he was a teenager at Birch Wathen Lenox, a private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where his classmates included Isca and Liliana Greenfield-Sanders, the daughters of Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. Through them, Kulok began hanging around the portrait photographer's studio and learning from him. "He gave me my first strobe light and taught me how to use it," says Kulok.

At Bard, Kulok, who also cites Joel Sternfeld and Stephen Shore as mentors, began to think more seriously about photography and its relationship to movement. He made a feature-length black-and-white film, *Still Life*, that tells the story of a young couple after college. "It was the first time I'd ever picked up a moving-film camera," says Kulok. "It was horrible, the most boring thing. Every shot was just head-on. When I went back to photography, I wanted to make pictures that had rhythm, pulse, that were more than just static frame. The 'Lightbox' pictures came out of that."

Shooting the film also inspired Kulok to research the lives and work of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, early photographers who experimented with recording motion. The title of Kulok's 2005 video installation *River of Shadows* comes from a biography of Muybridge. The piece is a collaboration with Sebastian Bear-McClard and consists of multiple monitors showing snippets of Queens, like a windshield and a cloud of steam, lit up by a blinking outdoor sign. At first glance, the images on the monitors look like photographs—nothing in them moves. But over the course of several minutes, as the sign, which is off-camera, cycles through its ads, the light in the shot changes from shades of red and blue to bright white and drops momentarily into blackness. "What I like about the piece," says Muniz, "is that Barney chose to use video in a purely photographic way. He chose one medium to shed some light on another, which is the only way to understand either, and something I try to do in my work."

All of Kulok's current photo and video projects are influenced by other mediums. He and Bear-McClard are currently

shooting a video of the Empire State Building that "starts where we left off with our last collaboration," says Kulok, "exploring the space between film and photography." He's also collaborating with artist James Hyde and art historian Svetlana Alpers on a series of photographs of three Tiepolo paintings hanging in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. "We played around with croppings and orientations," says Kulok, "approaching them from different angles."

For his first solo show at Nicole Klagsbrun next spring, Kulok has "been trying to move away from working in the traditional 'photo project' mode," he says. "If anything, the subject of the series is photography itself." So far the images



Kulok's *Landscapes in Landscape*, 2005, and *Green Barn*, 2005.

include a car's leather headrest, a red-painted door that has been jimmied open, and, he says, "pictures of paintings of paintings of photographs."

Rebecca Robertson is a writer and photographer who lives in New York.

LEFT: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND OLIVER KAMM/B&B GALLERY, NEW YORK; RIGHT: COURTESY SIKKEMA, JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK (2); TOP RIGHT: JANAINA TSCHÄPE

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ©TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS; COURTESY NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY, NEW YORK (2)