

Renowned artist bursts into B.C. on a grand scale

Vik Muniz is working with First Nations in Squamish for a large work of art

BY YVONNE ZACHARIAS, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 22, 2014



Brazilian artist Vik Muniz is seen with his work made of trash, portraying the sugar loaf in Rio de Janeiro, on June 16, 2012.

Photograph by: CHRISTOPHE SIMON, AFP/Getty Images

Brazilian-born, New York City-based artist Vik Muniz isn't afraid of bold new adventures.

Muniz, 52, began his artistic career as a sculptor but moved on to photographic representations of his work, building finely detailed mosaics from quotidian materials like chocolate, sugar and junkyard rubbish and then photographing them.

Driven to explore different mediums, he has been at the heart of two documentary films, including the Academy Award-nominated *Waste Land*, which chronicles Muniz's work at a Brazilian junkyard located in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.

More recently, Muniz made his debut as a director in the film *This Is Not a Ball*, which chronicles the creation of a massive new artwork using 20,000 soccer balls in the lead-up to the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Brazil.

Both films will be shown tonight at the Rio Theatre with a moderated discussion with the artist to

follow.

From his humble working-class roots in San Paulo, Muniz has travelled to the upper echelons of the international art world. His work can be found in permanent collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Tate Modern in London and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Now he is about to explode onto the Canadian art scene in Squamish courtesy of the Vancouver Biennale, a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public space.

Over the next couple of weeks, Muniz and his team will be in Squamish working with First Nations groups and the local community to create a grand-scale land mosaic that incorporates local, natural materials and imagery into a portrait of a Squamish resident so large that it must be viewed from an elevated platform.

Here is an edited, abbreviated account of The Vancouver Sun's interview with Muniz.

Q. What inspired you to do this type of community-based project in Squamish?

A. I've been involved in doing a number of projects which demand public participation. More than the end result is the fact that people participate in the making of it. It's not something where you go to a place and just watch it. You help make it.

Q. Have you done this type of project before?

A. Yes. We did a work like this for the United Nations Rio + 20 conference on sustainable development (June, 2012). We had 10,000 people bringing bottles and things and making a drawing of the landscape of Rio. It was amazing. When you have 10,000 assistants, you can lose a bit of control. (Turning Rio's detritus into a unique portrait of the city, a meditation on the ever-quickenning pace of consumer culture, the idea was to build a giant collage out of trash and then take a photo of it from a bird's-eye view.)

Every time we have done this, the results have been very satisfactory. We did something with flowers in a church in the south of France. We got high school students to help. It's actually very cool for people who participate. Art isn't something that somebody did better than others. It's something that was shared. It's a sort of experience.

Q. What materials will you use in Squamish?

A. We always go for the most important abundant material. We are thinking of rocks and wood for this particular project.

Q. How did you become an artist?

A. I do not come from a family of artists. The first time my parents walked inside a museum or gallery was to see one of my shows, so I didn't grow up with the stuff around me. I never intended to be an artist. I was born in a slum inside San Paulo. Then my parents moved to the outskirts. My father was

a waiter and my mother was a switchboard operator for a phone company.

I had a bit of a reading disability when I was small because my grandmother taught me how to read. She taught me to read the way she taught herself how to read. Nobody knows how she did it. I learned how to read the entire shapes of words. So when I went to school, I could not read or write from a syllabic method. It took me three years to write a word of my own. In the meantime, when I took dictation, I was making little drawings in the shorthand version that I devised.

Normally when people start having more contact with language, they stop drawing and playing with clay and things like that. With me, it was the other way around. As I got more contact with reading and writing, it actually prompted me to start drawing more. I became the character in the class that draws caricatures. I assumed the identity of the drafts person but never the artist.

One of my first jobs was in advertising working with billboards. This gave me ideas about art. For example, as you approach the image, it changes. In 1983, I went to the U.S. For years, I tried theatre. I tried other things but it was only around 1987 that I started envisioning a career as an artist. I noticed that people from my own generation were not just consuming culture; they were producing culture that was relevant to them. So I started thinking about making art at that moment and it happened very quickly. I got an exhibition in about a year from the time I started.

Q. What did you learn from making the film about soccer?

A. Soccer involves a ritual that is so significant, it's only rivaled by the great religions. I had an opportunity to go to a couple of the World Cup matches and I will never forget it. It's such a great, amazing feeling that sort of takes over you. Even if you lose, you are filled with so much emotion. It's the stuff that you don't see in the theatre or in the museum or even in front of a horror film. It's real. One of the few conclusions I managed to reach was that artists are interested in everything and athletes are interested in a single thing all the time. They are interested in a ball, a mark or a line.

Q. What do you hope people will think or say when they look at the final product in Squamish?

A. In my studio, when I am making something myself, I have to assume full responsibility for it. Then I control very carefully the result of what I make. In this case, it's never what I wanted to do. It's never as I had envisioned it. But it's a lot more because it means more to people and it's the result of a much larger encompassing project.

Q. What is your definition of art?

A. Art is the way in which we continually devise to improve and to update the interface between the mental world and the material one. I think what the artist does is polish this membrane that separates the world of the mind from the world of the matter, the senseless incomprehensible stuff that's around us so that we can guess or wonder what the world is like beyond our immediate experience.

It's an important job to do. I take it very seriously.

To volunteer to participate on the project in Squamish, people are asked to visit vancouverbiennale.com.

The Rio Theatre at 1660 E. Broadway in Vancouver will screen *This is Not a Ball* tonight at 6:30 p.m. followed by *Waste Land* at 8 p.m. At 9:30 p.m., there will be a moderated discussion with Vik Muniz.

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