

Ars Brevis

Vik Muniz explains how — and why — he makes art from the most fragile media in the world.



There are two things that are constant in my work. I'm always portraying things that represent other things. And I'm always representing things that exist just for a limited amount of time. I'm a photographer. If something is not ephemeral, why photograph it? If you want to see it, you just go there and see it.

I have worked with sugar, chocolate syrup, ketchup, sewing thread, garbage, skywriting and now dust. I got the dust from the janitors at the Whitney Museum. There was a taxonomy to it. There was dust from the first floor, which was very fuliginous, dark and greasy. On the top floor, there was some lighter dust. It was the hardest substance I've ever worked

with, because it's disgusting. Dust is pieces of hair and skin. I think people scratch their heads a lot in museums; that gets mixed with the residue from the artworks themselves. That's the ultimate bind between the museum visitors and the artwork. If you do a DNA profiling of the material that I used, you end up with a great mailing list.

Clouds — when you look at clouds, they always represent something else. So I thought, If I make a cloud that looks like a cloud, what will happen? On Feb. 20, an airplane is going to draw the most generic cloud several times over Manhattan. (The photograph is from a test run.) I will be on the ground trying to photograph it. Skywriting is something that is so beautiful because it doesn't last too long. It's drawing, which is very primitive, elevated to a form of broadcasting that everyone can see at the same time.

Art for me is not about saying things. It's about discovering ways to say them. There's no way to discover without being involved in the making of it, and through the process, you start to realize the mechanics of representation and you start to use them better. I think the end result is just the beginning of a narrative that moves backward in time. For me, an interesting work of art has to have this quality that when you look at it for the first time, you wonder how it was done. — As told to Deborah Solomon

"The Things Themselves: Pictures of Dust From Vik Muniz" is on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art through May 20. The skywriting project, "Clouds," will be visible above Manhattan for a four-day period starting Feb. 20.