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Image courtesy of Rainart.

ART + AUCTIONS

Vik Muniz Finds Inspiration in the French Countryside

For his new series of work debuting at Frieze, "Shared Roots," the Brazilian artist explores nature's complexity

By Katherine McGrath

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"I'm fascinated by vines—every day I wake up and look at that wisteria plant," says Brazilian conceptual artist Vik Muniz, pointing to a plant that's crawled its way up the fence in the backyard of his home and studio in Brooklyn's Clinton Hill neighborhood. "I try to figure out where it's going, and why it's going that way. Vines have an intelligence that is too slow for us to perceive." It's appropriate that Muniz is particularly drawn to nature and plant life right now, having just completed a series of works titled "Shared Roots" that draw inspiration from trees and nature and are making their debut at Frieze New York.



Flow Diptych 2 by Vik Muniz. Image courtesy of Ruinart.

As a conceptual artist whose work is heavily focused on process—he arranges materials like chocolate, diamonds, ketchup, linen thread, garbage, flowers, dust, caviar, and much more into recognizable shapes and sometimes iconic works of art before photographing them—Muniz relies on the materials to guide the piece's theme. This particular body of work, for which he was given carte blanche to create in partnership with Ruinart, France's oldest and most distinguished Champagne house, explores the complexity and life cycle of the trees in the vineyard. "Fertile earth does not produce good wine; you need adversity to produce

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character. It's quite beautiful," reflects Muniz. We're discussing wine, sure, but in essence we're touching upon deep philosophical truths about life. "You cannot learn the beautiful, complex truths about life from someone or something that never struggled, that had an easy time," he says. "These works are like a self-portrait for me."

Alongside raw materials gathered at the vineyard—twigs, roots, fragments of leaves—the foundation of the works are crafted from blackened wood and charcoal. "It's all full circle—I'm drawing living trees using a material that used to be a tree. It's meant to represent that something has to die in order to be reborn." One work in the series, *Flow Hands*, features the hands of Frédéric Panaïotis, Ruinart's cellar master, gripping vine stocks. "Frédéric is very connected to the land, but he's also an intellectual. I was immediately struck by the rough texture of his hands when I met him, and of his scientific knowledge," says Muniz. Panaïotis can look at a branch and know how old it is, and what quality of wine its fruit can be expected to produce. It's his complexity that is represented in *Flow Hands*; the tension in his veins is mirrored in the roots, and the separation between humanity and nature becomes hard to define.



Chardonnay Leaf by Vik Muniz. Image courtesy of Ruinart.

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Another work on view, *Chardonnay Leaf*, was made not only by Muniz, but also by employees of the champagne house's caves. It's a signature theme in the artist's work, bringing people into his practice who might not otherwise engage with art (best exemplified in his 2011 documentary, *Waste Land*, in which he brings humanity and hope to trash pickers who work in Rio de Janeiro's largest landfill by creating portraits of them using the trash they've collected). For this particular piece, Muniz and Ruinart's employees created a large-scale leaf from a chardonnay vine using a variety of leaves in different stages of life. Says Muniz: "Art makes the world meaningful. When you share the process of making art, it becomes personal; you're a part of something bigger. Art humanizes people."