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Behind the Unicorn with Bela Borsodi

— Art



May 01, 2018

Flipping through Bela Borsodi's new book *Unicorn* might remind you of word-to-picture puzzles you played with as a child— though this time they're certainly not as censored. True to form, Borsodi brings something stimulating, cerebral, and creatively stirring to the nostalgic, notable games— giving us a series of work which wanders from weird, to heartfelt, to humorous, without sacrificing the superb articulation of aesthetics we have come to associate

with the artist.

To celebrate the arrival of Borsodi's first book and its accompanying signing at Dashwood Books NYC, on Wednesday May 2nd, *office* spoke with the artist for some exclusive behind the scenes insight of his creative process, lifelong interest in Rebus puzzles, and his transition from documentary photography to editorial work.

Interview by Izzi Sneider

Images courtesy of Bela Borsodi

This is your first book, tell us about the creative process that went into making “Unicorn”. What spurred the concept?

When I was offered to publish a book I thought of many different ideas. I finally decided on an idea which I carried with me already for a long time. Already as a kid I was very drawn to puzzles and one day thinking about ideas for various new projects I remembered the “Rebus puzzle”. I knew rebus puzzles always to be done in the form of illustrations, graphics and collages in various forms, but never by the means of mere photography. When I thought of trying to make these puzzles photographic I was very intrigued by this idea, but very soon I gave up because it seemed to be very complicated. But to explore something that complex and quite unpredictable was an ideal start for a long term project.

So for my first book “Unicorn” it became my initiative to work with rebus puzzles. Most exciting for me was the aspect that very different and unexpected objects would find themselves being next to each other. Together looking very randomly chosen and arbitrary, seemingly chosen by chance or by aesthetic preferences of the artist for the sake of composition. But this first impression of a random chaos of things soon reveals itself to be anything but being random, very much to the contrary: these random arrangements are governed by absolute control restriction precision and limitation. Guided by the necessary logic of the rebus any part of these photographs is ordered to the maximum, nothing at all is arbitrary although at first glance the image looks that way (unless the image is experienced without guidance, or with no interest of solving a puzzle).

Although the entire project is obviously so heavily controlled by the rebus puzzle my aim though was not at all to becoming a puzzle maker. I merely used the rebus puzzle as a guiding structure and discipline to explore the aesthetics of photography through the representation of objects, and in search for their alternative qualities. My true initiative was to endure an aesthetic adventure and to being surprised by its outcome. The entire project for “Unicorn” took about one year, half of it just to research and conceptualize, and the rest for producing and shooting.



You have a background in fine arts and started experimenting with photography by doing portraits and documentary shots for magazines. Your work today is possibly the opposite of documentary photography, how has that training influenced the work you produce now?

I think my answer to your question here works the other way round, understanding “documentary photography” better by what I am doing now. At first it seems obvious that “documentary photography” might possibly be the opposite to what I am now doing. This is of course true, but thinking about what documentary photography really is in its actual practice, I find quite similar strategies at work. To tell a story that comes closest to the “truth” or which wants to document a “reality” uses the initiative and the personal vision and experience of

the individual (in this case the photographer). In my opinion documentary photography is not an absolute proof of a reality, it is governed by the experience and the merit of an individual, telling that story based on personal intention and intuition, direction and interpretation.

The quality of a successful documentary photograph depends on the right choice of moment and angle of the camera, able to showing only one perspective of that very moment and situation, being composed by aesthetic means for its drama and narrative within a context, driven and governed by an individual with an agenda and an ethic engagement. I think that the closest one can ever get to depicting “reality” and “authenticity” and documenting a real situation in photography is to somehow “inventing” and “directing” this reality to sell a “soft drink” or to explain the story about a conflict in the world uses quite similar tools, only with very different intentions and ethos.

Only the agenda is what makes it really seem different, the process techniques and tools for working visually are often quite the same. In short: there is no real “truth” in photography, all is necessarily to some extent fictional. In this way I do not think my work now is that much different from what I was doing before (or from documentary photography). I am just exploring other interests, or I could just say that I am documenting a different reality than what is usually associated with “documentary photography”.



How does this body of work differ from previous projects?

What is different about “Unicorn” to much of my other work is only that it is not in any relation to having to show products, or fulfilling a client's request or need (which is usually a starting point for much of what I do). Also I never have engaged yet in one single project that is so enduring, long lasting and consuming. It is completely self initiated and self financed, and only to satisfy my own curiosity: how a complex but promising idea which I have never seen executed before can take on shape, finds its own language and personality. An idea which in the course of the experience would continuously surprise me with its outcome in the final results.

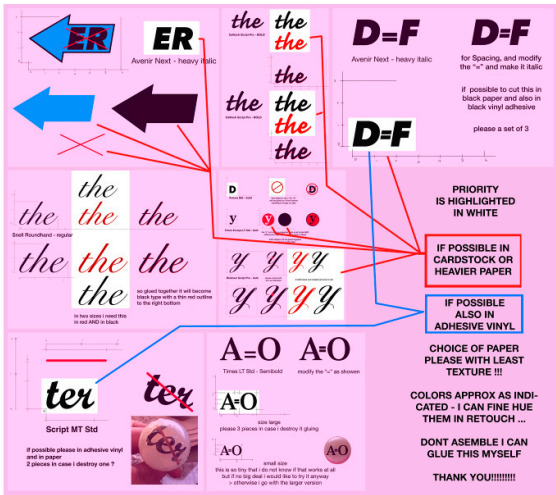
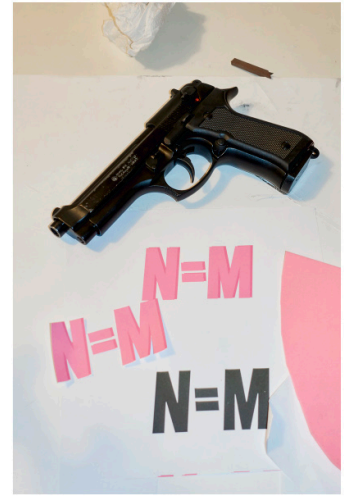
This experience and my curiosity is what I want to share with my book. This project still being so very fresh within my system of course

also makes me emotionally quite entangled with it. So right now I want to believe that it is one of my best works so far. And if I should realize in time that it is not, then I can reassure myself later that at least I had so very much fun doing it.

Is there an aesthetic or philosophical point of view that you are trying to get across with “Unicorn”?

Obviously I think a great deal about psychology philosophy and aesthetics, among many other things. What they mean and how they function. All of my many quests can be reduced to one single point of interest, which I believe is also very well represented in “Unicorn”. I am more interested in “good questions” than in (their) “good answers”. Often many answers are possible to one question, and they all can be interesting and revealing, but it is more often the questioning that sets uncharted territories in motion.

By a question I mean in this way more of an “exploratory” question, a project, a quest, an idea, a vague guess about something that pops up unexpectedly and needs to be looked into etc ... in short: a hunger to satisfying one's curiosity for something that is new and uncertain. Possible answers can be plentiful and often contradicting, or they entice for more questions. It is a process with no absolutes in return. I think a contradiction or an ambiguity is often more revealing and “true” about something than forcing things down to having only one answer. With “Unicorn” I wanted to encourage and reassure my audience of how much fun it is to explore ideas.



*Bela Borsodi will be signing his book at Dashwood Books NYC
Wednesday May 2nd from 6-8pm. Order Unicorn online at
Dashwood Books*