

Ashes to ashes

FROM A DESIRE TO EXPRESS HIS OWN VIEW OF INCARNATION, OLIVIER VALSECCHI'S *TIME OF WAR* SERIES WAS BORN. WE SPEAK TO HIM ABOUT HIS BEAUTIFULLY EPIC PORTRAYAL OF LIFE AND CONFLICT, AND SALUTE HIS SPELLBINDING WORK...

IT'S A NATURAL human trait to wonder about the afterlife. Where do we go? Is it really the end? It's a thought that led French photographer Olivier Valsecchi to record a series of mind-blowing portraits; his own vision of how being reborn might appear. His first series, *Dust*, was a storming success, featuring heavily in the press and on the Internet. "That was the start of my professional career," says Olivier. "My work did the rounds in publications and exhibitions, and I began to sell a lot of prints." From this early success came the chance to work for other people: "It's fun to try to turn someone's expectations into something that blows their mind and is even better than what they had pictured in their heads," says Olivier. "It's interesting and challenging. I especially like to work on projects that drive me back to where I started."

Olivier's starting point was in book covers, record sleeves and poster advertising – which was actually a byproduct of his first love: music. "I wanted to be a singer," says Olivier. "As a teenager, I composed and recorded a lot of songs, and I shot photos for the sleeves. It was then that I realised the photos were better than the songs." So it was at the age of 27, after ten years of slog and unfulfilled ambitions in music, that Olivier decided to enter a photographic school to improve his technique and see where it might take him.

And so to today: "*Time of War* is the second episode of the *I Am Dust* body of work, which will be compiled in a book. It was originally inspired by Ovid's definition of *Chaos* – a confused mass of liquid and fog, order and disorder, light and darkness, moves and stillness – that exploded and gave birth to planet Earth," reveals Olivier. "I enjoy mythological stories.

When I started this project I remember I wanted to tell a story of wearing death and undressing from it, and the more I worked on it, the clearer it appeared that it expressed my own renaissance, my chance for a second life; reincarnation."

It seems especially fitting today, in a world where we're faced with myriad news stories of conflict and angst – the concept was his own interpretation of these issues, as Olivier explains: "This *Time of War* chapter is more telling about the strength it takes to stay alive once born. It's also a kind of social diary of our times. We are experiencing hard days because of crisis and social conflicts, and I felt a lot of tension, especially in France, that I had to get out of my system."

Inspired by the work of painters such as Goya or Caravage, Olivier named this series after an exhibition in Madrid that commemorated the bicentenary of the Spanish War of Independence. These are artists that depict violence brought about by conflict in a beautifully dark but passionate way. That was the feel Olivier wanted: beautiful but violent – and that meant finding the right people for the job, which Olivier wasn't shy about. He says, "I'll usually find people on the street or on Facebook," he says. "I did focus on a certain type of model this time, who had a certain violence in their features. I imagined the series like a video game, like a presentation of the characters you can select and play (and fight) with. So I looked for people who could evoke a manga character or a samurai, a witch, a skeleton, an Amazone, a human bomb or even a robot. People are kind of easy to find and persuade. Once they see the work they want to be part of it."

Olivier relies heavily on the models for a great shot, but a pinch of luck helps get good results. Some advance planning is involved, though. "I always have some sketches that show



what I expect from the shoot," says Olivier. "But as much as I can control the model, I can't anticipate what the dust is going to do, that's why each shot is a surprise. We can try to force luck – and the more I work on this project, the better I am to almost tame the dust – but in the end there is no recipe for a great shot. Magic happens, or not. That's why shoots take four or five hours – the longest was seven hours, and I can shoot up to a hundred frames to get just one picture. The longer they last, the better the models understand how it works, how you can trick the dust to force it to make something unexpected. It really does involve the models' will to make a great shot. They really fight for it. I may have found them in the street; in the end I turn them into performers."

When the conversation turns to lighting, Olivier is pretty guarded: "You know, not that I don't want to unveil my secrets, but this really isn't important. You can make pictures with a box or can, with a candle or a flashlight, even an iPhone screen if you're into light painting. What I can tell you is that I use a digital camera and a bunch of softboxes." And the dust? "That's actually ash from an ashtray, in reference to Ash Wednesday and all the spiritual beliefs that ashes

convey in terms of reincarnation, purification and disembodiment."

As for post-production, everything is in-camera: "I am one of the few who doesn't spend much time on post-producing," explains Olivier. "What you see is what you get on my camera. The concept of my work is to create a parallel reality, with the ingredients of our everyday reality."

So where to now for Olivier? "Time of War is finished. *I Am Dust* is ongoing. But I guess this project will be a lifetime of storytelling. There will definitely be a third episode and there will be a book at the end. I don't know when, I don't know how. All I know now is that I have to take a break from it and come back with a new energy. If you take a look at *Dust*, and then at *Time of War*, you'll see I added portraits in the second series and the cast is very different. The energy is different. It's subtle but you can feel it."

Olivier's images are full of feeling and have a way of transfixing their viewers – we can't wait to be mesmerised by the next installment and to see how his project evolves. Watch this space... www.olivervalsecchi.com

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