



Issue 05  
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PICTURE PERFECT WARDELL MILAN

# FROM KING TO CAMUS...

ISOLDE BRIELMAIER MEETS WARDELL MILAN

Wardell Milan (born 1978) earned a BFA in photography and painting in 2001 at the University of Tennessee, in his home town of Knoxville. He then went on to earn an MFA at Yale University in 2004. Right out of school in 2005, Milan emerged and was included in institutional exhibitions such as *Greater New York* at PS1 Contemporary Art Center and *Frequency* at The Studio Museum in Harlem, and had his first solo gallery show at Taxter and Spengermann Gallery. Milan has continued to challenge conventions of medium and message in his deeply personal and prolific work. For this issue of *OSMOS Magazine*, Wardell Milan converses with curator and friend Isolde Brielmaier.

**ISOLDE BRIELMAIER** You move back and forth between—and within—different mediums. Can you talk about where you started and where you are now in terms of combining your photography, painting, and drawings?

est of mine. During this time I slowly began to understand how to work with all three mediums in a more integrated way.

**IB** What about the relationship between your many bodies of work? For example, there is a focus on the body and on physicality and movement in many of your images. Do you see this and other elements as threads linking your work over the years?

**WM** Absolutely, the themes of physicality and movement; of sexuality and morality, my personal history and obsessions, as well as larger histories—many of these themes and conversations are threaded through the different bodies of work. The themes aren't always interpreted or visualized with the same artistic expression from one body of work to the next, but the conceptual and narrative conversations I'm interested in having with the work move from one series of works to the next.

**IB** I know that you create elaborate and intricate dioramas that you then photograph. Your process is quite labor intensive and multi-



LEFT TO RIGHT: *Lovely tulip #7 (2012)*, *Lovely tulip #2 (2012)*

these worlds with the aid of the camera, having it positioned in front on the developing diorama, and consistently looking through camera lens as I build a landscape or an interior to insure that an interesting composition is developing. That information that shouldn't be seen, isn't in view in of the lens. And most importantly, my oscillation between the camera and the diorama helps with the creation of an optical illusion. I'm also thinking about the final presentation of the diorama, which is a photograph. The photograph is how the audience will experience these constructions. When building a diorama, I'm always considering the viewer's potential visual experience. Years ago I would start a diorama with little preparation. Perhaps I'd make a quick sketch of what I wanted to build with a partially resolved conceptual idea. I now find that mode of working to be counterproductive. With the dioramas I now build, I spend a lot of time sketching out the form or layout of the diorama. Conceptually and thematically, I have a clear understanding as to what the narrative(s) of the scene will be. And all the while I invest a ton of time searching for pictures and images to appropriate and use in the dioramas.

**IB** Your art is often grounded in extended research. How do you go about this process? Do you begin with an idea or does your reading enable you to develop your concepts?

**WM** The development of the work comes from my own personal curiosities and interest as well as from the many different essays, articles, and books I read. Most often what I'm reading is a text I've

searched for with the hope that it will further educate or better inform an idea or topic I've been considering. Literature has been a huge influence on my work and creative practice. Presently, it is the work of Albert Camus and Eugene Ionesco that has my interest. Although, I do plan on starting to read Steven King's book *IT* about a scary murderous clown that lives underneath a city's streets ... Sometimes one needs a bit of light text after reading *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

**IB** Your latest series engages ideas, history, and narratives. What source material inspired this new work? What can you tell us about these forthcoming photographs?

**WM** Three significant readings contributed to the development of my latest series entitled *The Kingdom or Exile* (2013–ongoing): Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, the short stories of Albert Camus, and Charles Baudelaire's most famous work, *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The forthcoming photographs are at times challenging—both visually and in content. The series is actually made up of four different, but related, thematic chapters, the first being *Parisian Landscapes* (2013–2014). The significant themes in this chapter include, the unconscious, voyeurism/exhibitionism, femininity, the supremacy of nature, sexual aberration, and love. Subsequently, the narratives of the photos in this series will relate to these topics.

