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Matthew Rolston's Mummy Portraits, by Christina Binkley (October 29, 2014)



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Matthew Rolston, the celebrated commercial photographer and director, is known for his glam shots of timeless icons such as Madonna, Angelina Jolie and Michael Jackson.

In his latest project, he's asking viewers to look at the flip side of beauty, or, as he puts it, "the tragedy of human frailty."

For nine nights last fall, he photographed inside the catacombs of a Cappucine monastery at the Santa Maria della Pace church in Palermo. There, he photographed the mummified bodies of some of Sicily's notable citizens of the past four centuries—many of them wearing what remains of their best finery.

With hair swept up by once-crisp bows, their gowns faded and suits frayed, the mummies are meticulously recorded by Mr. Rolston's Hasselblad H4X lens. The photographer hopes the collection will take his work in a new direction away from what he calls "the glamour ghetto."

"We don't even let our icons age," the 59-year-old photographer said one day, reflecting on years spent camouflaging the lines on iconic faces with lights, makeup

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and filters. "I'm in search of the meaninglessness of life. I'm getting to the age where you contemplate these things."

He calls his mummies project "Vanitas: The Palermo Portraits." Vanitas "means vanity, a sin," he says, "and also nothingness."

Some 8,000 mummies line the walls and shelves of the catacombs, most of them monks or wealthy citizens whose families paid to preserve and inter them over the past five centuries. Open to the public by day, they are closely guarded by the church and anthropologists, who oversaw Mr. Rolston's work. He did not touch or move them during the photo sessions.

"The first time I went to the catacombs, I cried," Mr. Rolston says of his first trip to Palermo two years ago, after reading about the mummies. He seems shaken when asked if people might consider the work offensive. "I'm drawn to them because they fascinate me, in the same way, in the past, I was drawn to the most beautiful women in the world," he says. "I see them as jaw-dropping fabulous, right up there with Angelina Jolie."

After decades of shooting for Interview, Rolling Stone and Harper's Bazaar, and commercial clients who pay him upward of \$75,000 a day, Mr. Rolston could be lolling about the pool at the modernist Beverly Hills home he shares with his partner of a quarter-century, the interior designer Ted Russell. Instead, he's been knocking on doors with his new portfolio



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It is Mr. Rolston's second project in fine art. His first was only slightly less surreal. At a reception given by Diane Keaton in Los Angeles last year, he displayed photos from "Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits," a project he shot of ventriloquist dummies at the Vent Haven Museum in Fort Mitchell, Ky. Every crack, splinter and patch on his crumbling subjects was visible on his high-resolution prints, for which he employed the same portraiture techniques he has used with Jodie Foster and Jennifer Lopez. With their startlingly human eyes, the dummies are riveting, and extremely weird.

He treats these photo sessions as he would a commercial job. "There's 800 dummies, I went in there like a casting," he says of the ventriloquist dummies. calling the sessions

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"instinctive." "It's totally between the sitter and the photographer," he says, "And they are the sitter."



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He chose last Oct. 31 to complete nine nights of shooting in Palermo. They were all-night-shoots, because the catacombs are open by day, and involved a team of seven assistants and a videographer, using rented equipment they hauled from Milan and Genoa by truck and boat. They shot with strobes, and added blue lights to bring definition to the photographs. Lighting took about an hour to set up for each corpse.

Diane Rosenstein, whose gallery Diane Rosenstein Fine Art in Los Angeles showed "Talking Heads" last June, says Mr. Rolston's approach to light, composition and color creates an emotional connection to his subjects—alive, dead or inanimate. "For me, this is the mature work of a mature artist," she says, noting its connection to death masks and other elements of art history.

It also grips distracted clients. "When they see this work," she says, "people immediately put down their phones."

Mr. Rolston is treading in territory that animators try to avoid, called the "uncanny valley." It takes place when objects seem nearly—but not quite—human, causing revulsion in viewers. It's why a zombie may be creepier than a corpse, for instance, and why lifelike wax figures at Madame Tussaud can be unpleasant.

It means that people's response to the work can be mixed. Some people have been repulsed by the eerily human ventriloquist dummies. And the mummies, not yet published, were once alive.

"So here's the deal," Mr. Russell recently announced to friends. "If you've been dead for 250 years and you want a good photograph, call Matthew."