

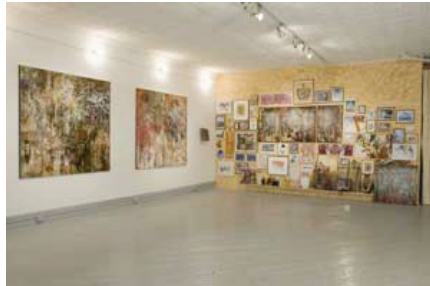
## José Parlá: Layered Days

By Joan Waltemath  
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### **Cristina Grajales, Inc. November 8 – December 20th, 2008**

The antipode of Babel.

José Parlá's first New York solo exhibition is on the fourth floor of an old Soho loft building; a manually operated freight elevator takes you up to a space that has been cleared of its usual offering of furniture to make room for his paintings, works on paper and ceramics.



Installation view "Layered Days" José Parlá at Cristina Grajales, Inc. Left "Taganga, Colombia" 2008, 6'x6', oil, acrylic, ink, enamel, collage, polyurethane and plaster on canvas. Right: "All City Din", 2008 6' x 6', oil, acrylic, ink, enamel, and plaster on canvas

Parlá began his career writing on the streets of Miami, with the occasional jaunt up to New York City to join in what was going on in the boroughs at the height of the graffiti movement. "Soho, Manhattan, Circa 1981," a four-by-six-foot canvas painted in 2008, acknowledges the "old school" writers Parlá was too young to truly be part of, yet from whom he nevertheless learned volumes as he watched their forays into the commercial art world of the 80s. To his credit, Parlá concentrated on the problems inherent in the change of context from the street to the galleries that few of the old school writers had successfully negotiated. A notable exception is, of course, Samo, who later painted under his given name, Jean Michel Basquiat. Parlá's work takes off from and expands on these roots.

In "Reverberations of Yajé," like many of Parlá's works, we tend to read a group of calligraphic lines, hovering at the top of the painting, from right to left like Arabic or Hebrew, yet it is unclear whether they could actually be read by a native speaker or are a recreation of the style. Below these marks, a vast space opens up, and with the awareness that these pieces were painted as reflections of Parlá's recent journey to the Colombian jungle, the color and forms fall into place as part of an extended undergrowth with the calligraphic marks serving as a canopy. Time serves to open up the volumes in Parlá's work, and after a while you can believe you're hearing the sounds of birds as the world outside this 6' x 12' canvas falls away.

Another piece in this exhibition, "Taganga, Colombia," relates to the Colombia journey, though this one, like most of the others, is in response to an urban condition. Parlá not only photographs the layered graffitcovered walls in his neighborhoods, but has photographed walls in China, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Cuba as well. These images serve both as notebook and inspiration for his larger works, which tend to recreate the palimpsest of the billboard or other urban surfaces as a tabula rasa for his mark making.

“Layered Days,” the title piece of the show, does well to capture the density of contemporary life, the manifold connections and multiple agendas that make up any given day. Like many of Parlá’s paintings, the space that opens up in them is underneath—a hesitant reality that hovers below the surface, partly visible and partly not. The surfaces are by turns matte and reminiscent of Tapies, and then gritty with a sheen that speaks of the layers of grime we live in and around. Parlá celebrates the least intervention of the human touch.

On the far wall of the Soho space Parlá has constructed an altar in honor of his ancestors. Using photographs and paintings, memorabilia and drawings, Parlá makes it clear that he sees his project as part of something larger than an individual artist’s drive to become marketable. He takes image after image of his ancestors, some serious, some hilarious, and enshrines them on the wall together with some African sculptures and vases he made recently in Italy. They weave a context for Parlá’s movements, tracing his family history from Lebanon to Cuba to the US and now, with José and his brother Rey’s Grand Tour of China and Tibet, the Far East.

One might be inclined to think of Mark Tobey or Cy Twombly when looking at Parlá’s work, but the relationship is more one of a common source of inspiration than any actual link between the artists’ works. Starting from his broad, sweeping, tagging gestures, Parlá has dug into history and familiarized himself with the traditions of calligraphy from Asia to the Middle East. While Parlá’s gesture hovers on the edge of communicability as an understandable language, it raises the question of whether the visual or written language will take precedence. One feels his need to get to the bottom of things, to touch the origins of our impulse towards mark making—an impulse that lies at the root of both the line and the calligraphic gesture.

Tracing things back to their point of origin also enables Parlá to project forward, with a look at the similarities underlying various calligraphic scripts and their common ground among young graffiti writers around the world—who all speak the same language with their tags. After the pieces had a chance to unfold, I began to sense that they are cast in a future tense. It is as if Parlá is already speaking of a time when all the languages of Babel will return to one. His utter confidence and bravado in writing this universal script are almost enough to convince one of the possibility of its occurrence.