



Photograph by Davi Russo

ART

JOSÉ PARLÁ

New York based artist José Parlá has established an identity by drawing inspiration from memories and experiences to produce the most compelling and unique creations, referred to by him as 'contemporary palimpsests'. No matter what materials José uses, he is able to adapt, extract, and synthesize fragments of society to create his amazing works. You can't help but admire the uniqueness of each of his pieces; the remarkable and inimitable personal approach he employs to each of his works is evident. Talking with José Parlá, The New Order gains an insight into an artist who will certainly keep evolving; he is having an impact on history as you read this very interview.



How did your upbringing influence your becoming an artist?

This depends on what you mean by upbringing. There are so many stages, for example my parents taught me to be polite, my mom taught me to draw and my dad, geography and history. Then there's the raising of self, which I took the liberty of doing. By this I mean that I made choices both good and bad without anyone's consent from a very early age. I have always been very independent. Art is about expressing one's freedom.

You were raised in Miami, you're Cuban, and you've lived in Puerto Rico. Your roots must have affected your work in a very positive way, how do you think this comes through in your work?

My roots have affected me positively in ways that, I believe, show through my personality. Then like the layers of upbringing, there are new roots I took on myself, as hyphenated nationalities. These new, self-made, mental nations come from influences I picked up in the streets, through experiencing and sharing the culture of friends from different backgrounds. A lot of young people in my early days as a painter were searching and fighting for meaning within the bubble of confused identities. Worldwide, youths invented subcultures to fight oppression of the so-called norms that existed within each society. This has always been a driving force behind my work. I keep doing things with the same energy I had in my early youth. I'm still young anyway, and hope that in due time Cuba becomes free from the fifty-year reign of oppression by both Fidel Castro's government and the U.S. embargo. I have been to Cuba before to visit family, and that gave my life and work the strongest recharging of energy and inspiration ever.

What artists did you look up to when you were younger? How do they influence your style now?

When I was younger, and still today, I looked up to artists like Phase 2, Lee Quiñones, Futura, Cy Twombly, Kase 2, Anselm Kiefer, Robert Rauschenberg, Antoni Tàpies, Mimmo Rotella, Jacques Villaglé, Terry Winters and many others. Seeing the art of others, and studying their philosophies, helps me to understand myself and some bits and pieces of humanity. Then, when looking at one of my own paintings, however abstract, I can read through feeling, answer through colors or textures or the movement of my lines. I see things from life, like nature, the city, people, and the artwork of my peers. Inspiration comes from everything; then I adapt and translate what I absorb and it turns into paintings.

How do you define your work? You've worked with the likes of Tom Ford, Supreme, and Tanushi Tomoki, amongst others, which is a really wide spectrum of people. How do you direct your work to a certain market?

I do not direct to any market because I don't look at my art as a product. It is art and it is for everyone. I would like to make a correction; I never worked with Tom Ford. He was generous enough to collect one of my paintings back in 2002. Working with James Jebbia of Supreme was fun and it was work between friends doing something new together. As for working with Tanushi Tomoki, he's one of my best friends, and when working with him I worked with his team, Eda Ryuske and Kentaro Kaba from Japan, known as Balance. They were very generous in hosting my first Japanese solo show, Personal Alphabet in 2002.

One exhibition of yours that stands out is Pirate Utopias. What was it like working with Futura? How did you come together, was it a natural project?

Pirate Utopias was a very natural occurrence. I had been working with the London gallery Elms Lesters Painting Rooms for one year at that point. Paul Jones asked me if I would like to show with anyone in a two-man show and I said that I'd be honored to show with Futura. The next day I ran into Futura at a 'No Ordinary Monkey' party in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and we talked about doing the show. It was great working with Futura. The title Pirate Utopias comes from the roots that both Futura and I came up on making art, which originated from the guerilla point of view. And this is to be a pirate. Stash was there in London with Futura and my brother Rey was there and we all had the best time setting up the show. It was very successful and a time I will never forget.

You've been known to use numerous materials within your work. Is there anything that you prefer or find more constructive when you are creating work?

I don't have a preference for any particular materials really. I mostly enjoy finding new materials to experiment with.

How do you find inspiration now that you have a renowned aesthetic? Do you find it harder to come up with something original now?

I was walking in the rain today in Tokyo searching for something to eat, asking myself 'what do I feel like eating'? This is the same thing I ask myself when starting a new painting. Each time I'm in the mood for something else. Something new. So being that I am super optimistic, I believe that I will find something good to eat and something



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great to paint.

Are you a traveller? Much is made of people who travel more than others. Do you feel this benefits your approach to you work?

Travelling has done many great things for me. I have made the best friendships that have lasted and grown over the years, and travelled to distances that I never imagined before. It benefits my work as I learn through the experience of being elsewhere. Travel is nourishment for my soul and ideas.

2008 was another hugely successful year for you with Adaption/Translation and Layered Days really standing out. How did you compare these two exhibitions between each other and past exhibitions, in terms of approach, execution and evolution?

For both Adaptation/Translation and Layered Days, I invested in a year of preparations. It was interesting to create two separate bodies of work and concepts. Adaptation/ Translation at Elms Lesters in London was a much bigger exhibition in size in comparison to Layered Days. Adaptation/Translation featured large paintings with the focus of the concept being that of adapting to new cultures through travel modes, while sharing my views of those cultures through my paintings and sometimes, depicting the walls of cities. This is my ongoing process and experiment. This exhibition showed four major sized works, which are some of my most powerful paintings to date. Hackney Canal-Rio Don Diego (10 x 10 feet) for example, is one painting I really enjoyed making recently. Layered Days focused more on comparing cities I had travelled to recently, with the city of New York where I live. I went all over New York with my brother Rey and Davi Russo to

photograph and search out some remaining points of deterioration in the five boroughs, and I compared that to places elsewhere through my paintings.

When painting I use photographs I've taken to help me observe closely the details, color or mood of a place in the city I visited. I don't plan on recreating anything from the photograph exactly. But, the photo works as a point of reference to keep something alive, which may otherwise disappear forever. At the same time, the smaller boutique exhibition of Layered Days featured a memory wall which was composed of framed photographs of my family history, hand-painted film strips by my brother Rey Parlá from his abstract motion paintings, as well as found signs and objects from around the world of my own collection. The wall also featured artwork by Chris Mendoza and Rostarr.

We've seen you become part of the project The New Grand Tour, which has culminated in exhibitions in Hong Kong and Beijing, a book and two short films. Can you tell us a bit about the project?

Together with my friend Young Kim, and my brother Rey Parlá, the film's director, I am one of the founders of The New Grand Tour project. The New Grand Tour is an episodic art project featuring revolving guest artists with hyphenated cultural and geographical backgrounds. The artists and documentary crew travel together to different parts of the globe and express, through art exhibitions, the subject matter of towns and cultures they visit. The goal of The New Grand Tour in the early twenty first century is to bring together the diversified voices of artists and communities from around the world by bridging cultural divides through art and the moving image as the common grounds

for communication, education, discovery, exchange, philanthropy and collaboration. The book and film chronicled the travels of Suitman (a.k.a. Young Kim), José Parlá, Romon Kimin Yang, Rey Parlá, Deanne Cheuk and Davi Russo as they embarked on a journey through China and engaged in a cultural exchange that impacted their life and work forever.

Do you think of art as a career? Do you have visions and movements for the future planned?

For me, painting is a career and not a hobby. I have always had ideas of the future in which I envision how I can better create works that are relevant to the times in which I live. As for planning ahead, sometimes I like to plan, and sometimes I take life as it comes. Some of the best things I have created have happened spontaneously. •

www.joseparla.com

01 Portrait photograph by Andrew Paynter

02 Broadway Junction, East New York

3 x 5 feet
mixed media on canvas
2008

03 Cambridge Avenue

7 x 11 feet
mixed media on canvas
2008

04 Li Jiang

30 x 44 inches
mixed media on paper
2008

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