

## On José Parlá and the art of psycho-geography

by Greg Tate

Of all the things that James Joyce ever [wrote](#), none was more profound or irreverent than his utterance that 'God is a shout in the street'. The streets have lately rendered Joyce a mightier prophet than even he predicted. The 20th century's longest-lasting pantheon of gods and goddesses has, by and large, been a product of the streets or at least, a privileged street ethos. The trajectory of Western painting since the Italian Renaissance has been down, down, down to the ground--from the high of Michelangelo's heavenward chapel ceiling to Jackson Pollock's freedom jazz dance on stretched canvases laid out beneath the artist's lindyhopping, bebopping feet, dripping in time to Charlie Parker, his muse and constant studio companion. A new school of American painting emerged in the 1970s which came to be known as 'subway graffiti'. Its avatars decided painting needed to get down even more, go further under the floor, get down to the world beneath the metropolis' marching feet and mean streets. They decided to take painting back to its origins in caves, mines, shelters and tunnels. Because these cave-painters were also children of the age of locomotion, jet engines, interballistic missiles, moon shots, supersonic transports and Star Trek, they primarily painted not on the cave walls but on the mobile metal behemoths housed within them. Monster cars that sometimes slept by night and crept by day were awakened and relaunched into the autumnal city to find their somnolent,

slumbering bodies tattooed with the effusive krylon-colored caricatures and calligraphic visions of these neo-expressionist futuristic graphic design and animation savvy cave painters.

If you lived in New York between the years 1972 and 1984 and rode the trains you encountered the work of these artists on a daily basis. The best and most rigorous of them concentrated their talents and gifts on embellishing the train's exteriors; less evolved practitioners left few surfaces unmarked with their bold, cryptic signatures and scripts. That it was understood by all practitioners and devotees as both 'writing' and 'bombing', as both a declaration of love and as declaration of war, speaks to the inherent schizophrenia of the enterprise--a bona fide aesthetic discipline polemically driven by aligned impulses to beautify and destroy the romantic city that spawned them and their seductively entombed metal canvases.

New York City, that most exalted of twenty-four hour twentieth-century cities was one whose caves, tunnels and wheeled beasts kept life, art and commerce flowing like desire. It made sense that its literal underground would one day house hidden studio complexes and that true to its anarchic over-policed nature would respond to its young, subterranean guild of artists with art-historical ardor, money and attack-dogs.

What these cave-painting writers understood about cities is that they thrive, flow and function on a pressurized network of paradoxes--binaries of law and

disorder, construction and chaos, signification and erasure, knowledge and amnesia, primitivism and modernity, ritual and engineering, angst and spectacle, culture and critique. Fundamentally they understood the city and urban painting were aligned forms of consciousness that ran on parallel, metaphorical and metaphysical lines. The eruptive and disruptive spontaneity of the train writers' movement, its indebtedness to the can-do hustle and flow of the streets meant that it would not be built to last in any notion of a purest form. Street traditions, by and large, don't leave monuments; they level them, or at least their cultural relevance. Street traditions leave behind profound improvisational practices and these make huge breaches in the high walls of the status quo, although only faint physical traces may remain of the practitioners ever having ever been on the ground.

The science fiction writer William Gibson likes to say 'the Street finds its own uses for things - uses the manufacturers never imagined'. The painter Jose Parlá, began breakdancing at the age of nine and counts among his educational background street bombing under the name Ease, and co-founding the crew Inkheads. His formal academic studies were done at The Savannah College of Art and Design, but he has also benefited from the many instructive correspondences and skull sessions he's had with subway painting legends Phase 2, Lee (Quiñones), Kase 2 and A-1. He recently exhibited in London with Futura in a show titled: Pirate Utopias, and also had a two month residency in

Osaka. True to Gibson's dictum the worldly and street-savvy Parlá produces exquisite paintings that make redolent and imaginative uses for things lost and found in the street.

The train writer turned canvas painter Doze has said that in hip hop 'style always beats technique'. The street consumes styles even faster than it consumes lives, but even without archives and museums street style deposits deep imprints in contemporary cultural memory and evolves classic forms and classic techniques. Because some things are too good to lose, some ideas and practices from the street live on as cult classics - any of hip hop's five elements come to mind - whether they have current market value or not. What José Parlá's paintings force us to realize, as good historical paintings always do, is that given enough time and entropy even the hurtling locomotive motion of the streets can be arrested, contemplated, symbolically apprehended, studied, replicated. The temptation to call Parlá a 'post-graffiti' painter is great but I'd prefer we recognize him as a historical landscape painter even though his historical landscape is made of concrete, wood and wallboard and his 'histories' derive from personal memories and from events buried and embedded in the gorgeous erosions and ruination time and weather will deposit on your average urban walls. There's a saying that goes 'if walls could talk'. Parlá's art arranges means for the walls to speak in several tongues simultaneously via his 'diaristic' mode of 'handstyle' glyphs that embrace the calligraphic futurism of graf, and through

well-worked loquacious patinas that elegiacally address the glorious entropy of urban collapse, anarchy and civil regeneration. The artist's own conceptual take on his art is embedded in descriptions of it as 'psycho-geography', 'a segmented reality' and as revelations of the 'memory in the walls'. The notion that modern cities possess self-consciousness, desires, agency, even dreams, has been explored by writers as varied and street-besmitten as Baudelaire, Benjamin, Joyce, Musil, Cortázar, Baraka and Samuel R. Delany. There is a pronounced literary sensibility on display in Parlá's work, a man for whom titles often lead his hand's way into a labyrinth of cosmopolitan visual concerns. This writerly aspect of Parlá returns us to the frenzy for language and re-naming the world that has been at the heart of hip hop culture from 'the jump', the very beginning. The artist's terse titles are secretly full of arcane and esoteric mysteries that only his sense-memory and vernacular imagination could ever fully unpack, (no matter how generous the gregarious and anything but obscure Parlá is with conversational explication): 'Temporary Autonomous Zone', 'House of Sun', 'The Run Kid', 'Accident & History'. Likewise in his visual recordings and what I call his 're-constructivism', Parlá sees and seizes upon the rough visual poetry embedded in the layers of house paint, graffiti and promotional materials that have been grafted and implanted into the global cosmopolis' walls. Parlá's work is an intriguing and cunning blend of calculation and spontaneity, of the architectonic and the wild. His paintings speak of a dual

fascination with the script styles and techniques the first generation of New York subway writers left behind, (the 1972-1985 crews) and with the accidental style that organically erupts from the decay, density and chaos of exposed, weather-beaten city surfaces. Parlá is all about a creative, palette-brush-and-knife-adept, constructivist reconstruction of the city's own painterly mutations, maulings and palimpsests, open to distressing a canvas 'by any means necessary' - tarring, enameling, rainstorming, whatever will bring the right lyrical [degrees](#) of mimetic ruin to the piece. His paintings in fact operate in a lyrical free zone where the mimetic and the mythological aren't hidebound to figurative notions of either term. Like Gerhard Richter, Parlá sees our art-historical notions of abstraction and abstract expressionism as having inextricably and poetically woven themselves in our contemporary understanding of the real, the authentic, the dramatic, the historic, the classic, the modern, the global, the magical, the African, the human. His travels to Turkey and Japan led him to museums there where he saw indigenous calligraphy shown as much reverence as sculpture and painting. This in turn led Parla to create a series of carnal cursive works that put the focus on the flamboyant and rigorous script-forms which evolved out of subway writing. These pieces also have a unique tactility due to Parla's use of powdered pigments and sponges rather than brushes, pens etc, giving them a feel that conjures up the eloquent convergence of grace and grit that occurred when writing was bombing and best done by

skilled artisan hands underground.

Like the nomadic artist himself, whose family history of migration encompasses Lebanon, Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico and Miami (and well-prepared him no doubt for his own sojourns from Georgia to Philadelphia to The Bronx,) Parlá's work travels well - thus explaining its embrace upon arrival by ports as far and wide as Manhattan, Japan and [now](#) Italy.

Greg Tate is a writer and musician who lives in Harlem, USA. His books include *Flyboy In The Buttermilk* (Simon & Schuster, 1992), *Midnight Lightning: Jimi Hendrix and the Black Experience* (Chicago Review Press, 2003), *Everything But The Burden--What White People are taking from Black Culture* (Harlem Moon, 2003), and *Brooklyn Kings* (Powerhouse Cultural Entertainment Books, 2000), a collaboration with photographer Martin Dixon about New York's Black biker gangs. Tate also leads the 22-member *Burnt Sugar The Arkestra Chamber*, a conducted improv ensemble who frequently tour Europe and have released 15 albums on their own truGROID imprint since 1999. He is currently completing a book about the Godfather of Soul, James Brown.

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Shakespeare and Company, 1922)  
William Gibson, from 'Rocket Radio' (Rolling Stone, 1989)