

## Jose Parla: The Writing Off The Wall by Carlo McCormick

Caught in a syntactical shift between the minimal and the baroque, Jose Parla's paintings subject a visual reduction of terms to the accumulative tense of time. Marks bordering on language, the terms are a simple means to complex ends. Parla is an esoteric master of signs to be sure, but he lets them fly cross-purpose, savoring them for their textural liaison more than as literal text. There are in fact real words in these paintings, hermeneutic and hermetic notations of private meanings; calligraphy skewered by graffiti, manic madman scrawls and obsessive notations where content is obviated by context. When some people are talking to themselves- ranting to a deaf world, say on a crowded subway car- you don't actually stop them to ask what it was they're trying to tell you, but like all city din, you can take it in as a rhythm, a cantor describing the dimensions of another kind of chaos within the cacophony of that larger social symphony all around us. Jose Parla deals in these linguistic slips and convergences. He takes the noise and gives it meditative silence.

It's so easy to get subsumed into the visual miasma here, to follow the lyrical lines to some lost point of ethereal poetics, that we might just need to remind ourselves that this artist has in his focused commitment to his studio practice an absolute specificity with regard to narrative. The grace is not so casual as it seems, but rather highly choreographed, delicately coded, but ultimately iconographic despite its anodyne abstraction. From carefully mapped schema of family, place, itinerant wanderings, geopolitical opportunism, and, most systemic of all, memory, Jose Parla interweaves gesture as the physical vernacular of self-expression. It's not enough to know the words he implicitly tells us, like the letters themselves we too must dance as if to a melody we can never forget nor hope to recall the words. The motion is inevitable and irrepressible, not the linear propulsion of a proper storyline so much as a spatial rift that plays as a musical riff, librations that oscillate as we step back to look and only fall in deeper. This is simply not the kind of art that allows such critical distance or knowing.

Layered Days is a pictorial poem to the kinetic energy of Jose Parla's adopted city of New York. In as much as it is a love letter, it is just as much a testament to the pathology of what it means to actually feel compelled to live here. Caught very much in the moment, Parla's time is always transitory, a measure of echoes rather than certainties, a resonance of history where absence constitutes a more formidable presence than anything so shiny and new as the present. These are pictures in the wake, backwards glances and tainted traces, recollections that crowd the shelves of a packrat city like heaping piles of old New York Times stacked along the wall forever yellowing in neglected promise but immovable as an old habit that forever resists being discarded. That's the mess here, a purely

psychological one of haunted nostalgias, faded glories, weathered worthies and gratuitous landmarks rendered obsolete by new paradigms yet irascibly resistant in their redundant clutter to that terrifying program of urban renewal by which all these neighborhoods of identity get “cleaned up.”

An embellishment in search of the truth, we must always read Parla’s paintings as a negotiation between the visceral and the vernacular. I can’t say where exactly this comes from, it certainly seems like the way many of my Cuban friends tell a story, anecdotes of authority, and so too it would be something we might expect from a kid who learned to make art and (most importantly) care about it from the streets, further conflated and conflicted at that by a subsequent education at a reputable academy. It also bears, we can recognize, the definite charms of urban lore. This is pure stoop-side chatter, the old heads going on about the daze of yore, what used to be there, who lived here and whatever happened to them. You could get the best whatever-it-was before old pops what’s-his-name closed down whenever that was a long time ago. He’s dead now and his kid is in the joint, but if the sun hits it just right, or if they’d tear down that god-awful new condo building, you might just see the sign and hear the story floating from a five stories up whose mistress there is just a little too creaky to make it down those steps that often but still loves to sing her life past just like good neighbors passing gossip across the street. Nothing’s all that sure, but in a culture of disposable pasts this is as close as we get to history anymore, and in a city that never sleeps these are the dreams we’re bound to have.

I remember an urban myth from long ago, one dosed out to us like another spoonful of anti-drug vitriol by yet another generation that refused to let their kids have fun, about a brilliant kid who waited all year to do his school work and then at the end, pressured by time, stayed up on speed for a whole week to get it all done. He wrote and wrote and wrote, it was exceptional of course, but the problem was he never changed the page and just kept on scribbling over the previous sentence until it was all one illegible blur. And of course he went crazy. Well that might just be Jose for all we know, except he’s found a perfectly New York way to let the density breathe, like a mad-peddling bike messenger who somehow never runs into anyone as he races through all manner of automotive and pedestrian traffic, or really like anyone trying to compose their own work in this place to the sound of neighbors fighting, kids playing, stereos blaring, sirens, horns, hawkers and everyone else just plain on the hustle. You hardly need to love people to live here, but with this many of them you better figure out a way to get along and at times to just get out of the way, and compositionally speaking that’s the lovely little jig Parla dances where a quiescent order undergirds the entropic maelstrom.

All said, there's an even more profound reason why, while in less capable hands they might so easily fall apart, Jose Parla's paintings work. Excessive and maximal as he may be, he doesn't just pile it on. Parla diarist's dialectic of collective memories is an overwriting built upon erasure. He allows the buff because he understands that obliteration invokes its own ghosts and anything can be eradicated but the trace or aftertaste that wraps itself like some Proustian remembrance around our DNA. His marks may be visceral but they outline the vestigial, euphoric in their elemental fading, organic in their loss, deteriorations that speak deeply to the politics of neglect. Writing in plaster, powdered pigments, watercolor, gauche, oil, acrylic, ink, wheat paste and collage, Parla gets at the depth of this town by treasuring its surface, the skin of a very old animal wizened by age and the wisdom of ancient scars, one that may shed its skin every so often but does so with a mottled beauty where we are all the sum of infinite addition and persistent subtraction, a reality only evident as an abstraction.