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28 Questions for Narrative Painter Jose Parla

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Courtesy of the Artist

"Jose Del Valle de Aguila" (2013), from JR & José Parlá's "Wrinkles of the City" series, Havana, Cuba
by Sara Roffino

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José Parlá in Havana Cuba / Photo by Rey Parlá, 2012

Name: José Parlá

Age: 39

Occupation: Painter

City/Neighborhood: Brooklyn, New York

You went to Cuba last year to work on collaborative project with JR on the murals that were part of the Havana Biennial, and are now in the show at Bryce Wolkowitz. You also recently completed a piece for the Barclays Center, in Brooklyn, where you live. Can you talk a little about the differences — in perspective, sentiment, process, or otherwise — between working in Havana and Brooklyn?

There are a few differences in the two projects. The Barclays Center mural commission, *Diary of Brooklyn*, was painted indoors in my studio near the stadium. I made the painting in a period of several months that allowed me to layer the surface of the work with the stories, names, lyrics, poems, location names, homages that deal with the history and contemporary life of the people of Brooklyn and my own. The object of this kind of story telling in painting that uses abstraction as one of its components is to analyze my own experience of living in the borough through many subjects I have come across over the years. Working from memory and from literal material to translate that into visual form that can be read by onlookers as their own diary, a mirror in a language that can be interpreted as a mixture of all languages. After the work is installed in the entrance of the Barclays Center, the painting interacts with the public and engages everyone differently.

The Wrinkles of the City, Havana Cuba project with JR is a unique collaboration project that involves many components such as location scouting, photography, and painting. Together we created 20 murals through out the city of Havana. Each mural is dedicated to an elderly woman or man. The project as a whole pays homage to the years or experience and physical appearance of the wrinkles of people's faces in comparison with the deteriorated walls of Havana that show their own wrinkles representative of the struggle in life, the joy and smiling, all of the layers of the memories in their lives. JR and I both randomly met people in Havana by walking the neighborhoods and asking them to participate in our art project by introducing each other's work. JR would introduce my "Character Gestures" painting book and I would introduce his "Shanghai Wrinkles of

the City” book. We collaborated on the composition of the pictures on the murals and later pasted them the size of buildings through Havana while I later painted them by layering transparencies of color on the pictures as well as incorporated my calligraphic style, the stories of each person into the composition of each painting. This project began interacting with the public as soon as we started to work in front of everyone. Many people wanted to talk and ask questions and to be involved in the project. In Cuba there is no advertisement and in the 54 years since the revolution, most of the images you see in the city are of political icons like José Martí, Ché or Fidel Castro. For us to make 20 murals of random people was a big deal for people there. They asked questions like, “Who is it? Is this person dead? Is that Fidel?” Both projects in Havana or in Brooklyn incorporate the public in a unique way. Public art is necessary because it confronts people with art, maybe sometimes a lot of people who may not usually go galleries or museums.

What was it like to collaborate with JR? How did you guys plan and execute the murals? Are there any particularly memorable moments from the time in Cuba?

Collaborations are usually not easy, yet JR and I were fortunate to be able to share the same vision of the project. His work is humanitarian and has been incorporated into walls and cities and my paintings have been largely about walls and the psychological aspect of their surfaces, what they reflect about humanity. It is a natural collaboration. For our project we made several trips to Cuba and I can honestly say that every moment and all the people involved made it always memorable.

You’ve said before that you don’t feel a tension around moving from the street to the canvas because you don’t see a difference between the two and that both graffiti and fine art are narrative practices. Yet, one of the differences between making work for a gallery and making work in the street is the audience who will see it. How does, or doesn’t, your work change depending on the audience that will likely be exposed to it?

I don’t recall saying there was no tension and I imagine I didn’t use the word graffiti; I probably used the word writing. To be more precise, I said that in the creation of art there is no difference between indoors and outdoors, the impulse to create is the same. The audience does not change that for me.

Having been a part of graffiti since the beginning, you’ve seen it move from the fringe to the biggest museums in the world. How has this changed the art form and the people making it?

Since I was a child making art, I never liked the term graffiti or graffiti art, [we] always called ourselves "writers." The beginning of the style of writers comes from a time before me. However, I clearly remember starting to write, when I was a kid the age of nine years old, artists like Lee Quiñones, Futura, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Phase 2, Keith Haring, and others were already exhibiting in major museums back in the 1970s while they were still painting trains or walls around the city. Both forms were validated to me; the city was a museum from my point of view. The art form changes because of the circumstances and the individuals’ personal experiences in life. This art form in my experience and understanding has never had a manifesto, there are no rules, and it has never been a movement, for me the art remains a phenomenon, very personal, full of characters, changes and unique important developments.

What project are you working on now?

The most recent projects I’ve completed were the solo shows "Broken Language" in London’s Haunch of Venison gallery, and "Prose" at Yuka Tsuruno gallery in Tokyo.

Now I am back in New York to prepare with JR our *Wrinkles of the City Havana, Cuba* project opening at Bryce Wolkowitz gallery. I am also working on a mural-sized commissioned painting for the new Hunt Library at the North Carolina State University by renowned architects Snøhetta.

What's the last show that you saw?

“The Bride and the Bachelors: Duchamp with Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns,” featuring an array of painting, sculpture, stage sets and musical notations, orchestrated by leading contemporary artist Philippe Parreno at the Barbican in London.

What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

Dieter Roth. Bjorn Roth at Hauser & Wirth in Chelsea. First of all it was an impressive show in size and the work was revealing of the artist's process and life in a very unique way. Certain works made me think of the Duchampian examples from the “Bride and the Bachelors” show at Barbican, but Roth was all in his own world. It was also amazing to see the gallery that is impressively built in the old Roxy nightclub. Dieter's studio recreated inside the space gave me the impression as if he was there dancing around his space working.

Do you make a living off your art?

Yes.

Do you collect anything?

I collect paintings, drawings, photographs, music, and plants.

What are your hobbies?

Painting.

Describe a typical day in your life as an artist.

In the morning I make my famous Cuban espresso, stretch, shower, start working with my phone off for a few hours, walk, eat lunch, paint some more, travel, move, come back, play loud music, spill paint, clean up the mess, dance, dance dance, nap, wake up, eat, work again, email, text, travel, sex, more sex, sleep a little, more Cuban coffee, donate art work to a good cause, paint, meet someone about work, drink a Dark and Stormy, do some interviews like this one.

What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

The studio door.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

Traveling all over the world, randomly walking in cities or in nature.

Do you collect anything?

I collect paintings, drawings, photographs, music, and plants.

What is your karaoke song?

I don't have a favorite, I choose randomly because I'm terrible and just end up drinking and watching everyone get crazy, specially in Tokyo.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

A beautiful work by Cuban American artist Teresita Fernandez.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

A denim jacket I painted for a girl named Christy in 1986.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

The weirdest think I ever saw was someone run out with a painting and get chased by security, then the robber fell in the street and got beat up in Chelsea.

What's your art-world pet peeve?

I don't have one.

What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

The Standard.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

Nothing routine, always random or with a defined destination.

What's the last great book you read?

"Clyfford Still: Paintings 1944-1966" [James T. Demetrion].

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

I'd like to go to Istanbul again.

Who's your favorite living artist?

Rey Parlá.

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