

OutSmart

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*You name it and I studied it,
practiced it, walked on it, held it—
from "God is everything" to "God is
nothing" to everything in between.*

Chad Allen

spiritual medicine man

Arts & Entertainment Preview

Journey: The Art of Nicola Parente

It's our connectedness that makes the journey worthwhile

by **Brandon Wolf**

Forty-one-year-old Nicola Parente lives in a downtown Houston loft converted from an abandoned railway headquarters, where he can enjoy the exciting city skyline and the movement of the city. He is an artist with a unusual palette of skills—business acumen, marketing experience, painting, photography, and even theater, where he recently met the multiple challenges of costume, stage, and lighting design. His work is on display in Houston, Louisiana, Mexico, Bolivia, Ethiopia and Italy.

Born in the picturesque town of Mola di Bari on the Adriatic coast in southern Italy, where his father was a farmer and his mother was a tailor, Parente remembers sun-washed white stucco houses attached to each other and the rock walls of the landscape. As a child, he migrated to the U.S. with his parents, who settled in New York, where they opened an Italian restaurant. It was there that Parente's artistic talents were recognized by his sixth-grade teacher who had discovered his sketch book filled with drawings of his hand. Although his parents appreciated his talents, they counseled him to pursue a career that they considered more financially sound.

After 15 years in the U.S., the Parentes returned to Italy. Their talented son, however, stayed behind and earned a bachelor's degree at Kings College in Pennsylvania. At graduation, following his parent's advice, he began his business career, moving to Houston to work as an analyst with the Italian Trade Commission. Some years

later, after completing his M.B.A. at St. Thomas University, Parente was drawn back to art and began producing paintings. Exploiting the expertise he had developed

he paints in the morning and evening hours when the Houston heat is the least oppressive.

Parente works with acrylics, inks, crushed graphite, and powdered charcoal. He never works on an easel. Because his chosen media easily drip and run, he must work horizontally instead of vertically. And because of the size of his works—some as big as eight feet by eight feet—he is always exploring innovative ways to suspend himself over his canvases as he paints. Just as his media are varied, so are his implements. He utilizes brushes, his hands, and an amazing variety of self-crafted tools. Because his paintings require a lengthy drying time, he usually works on several at one time.



Nicola Parente's recent one-man show *Journey* was mounted at the Gremillion Gallery of Fine Art.

in business, he successfully marketed his work, easing the transition from businessman to artist.

Influenced by the Abstract

Parente has long been fascinated with the abstract work of Picasso and Pollack. Since his teens, he has been photographing the world around him. Cameras allow him to stop time in its tracks and forever record moments as life relentlessly rushes forward. He draws from these freeze-frames to create his paintings and fills his canvases with the emotions that cameras cannot record.

His studio in downtown Houston has one small window air-conditioning unit, and in the summer time the temperature sometimes rises to 90 degrees and more. The weather dictates his work habits:

A Theatrical Turn

After seeing Parente's paintings last year, Dominic Walsh approached Parente about collaborating with the Dominic Walsh Dance Company in one of its theatrical productions. The result was *E-Merging II*, which was performed at the Hobby Center this past April.

Parente was responsible for the costume design, the staging, and the lighting. He watched the dancers rehearse for seven to eight hours a day. As each rehearsal unfolded, he sketched his ideas for the visual aspects of the production. During the public performances, he looked on from the sound booth, cueing the lighting. From the first rehearsal through the public performances, Parente was there. The experience, he says, was "exhilarating."

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Parente's Journeys

In July and August of this year, Parente's one-man show, *Journey*, resided in an intimate upstairs venue at the Gremillion Gallery in the West University area. The show was dedicated to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran minister who openly solicited Christian opposition to Hitler's anti-semitic policies during World War II. When Bonhoeffer's link to an unsuccessful 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler was discovered, he was arrested and later executed. Bonhoeffer's words, "There is meaning in every journey that is unknown to the traveler," greeted visitors as they entered the exhibition.

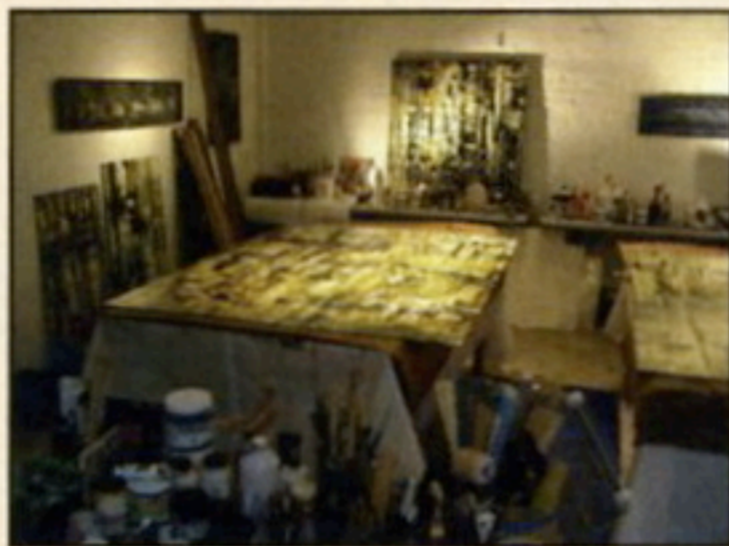
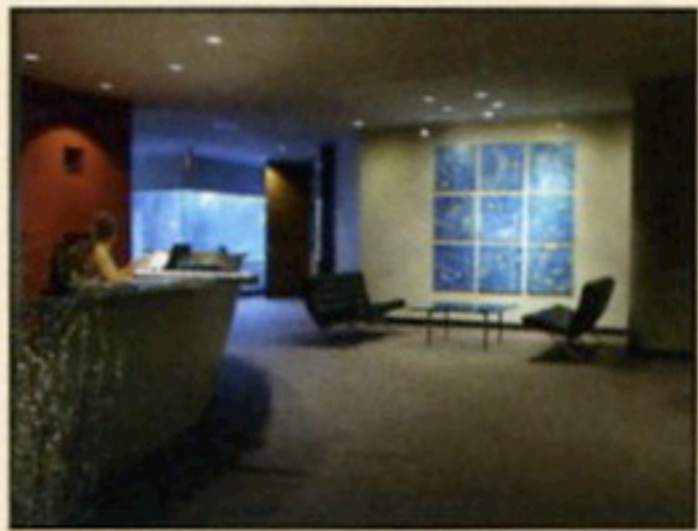
The paintings, representing Parente's journey, came from a variety of sources—a Google satellite map, peripheral vision through a train window, frames of a film, chain-link construction fences, railroad tracks. Trees, water, sunlight, and rusting

surfaces mix together. Characteristic of all his work, Parente's *Journey* paintings encouraged the viewer to unlock their focus

is a very private person. Reflecting on his own coming out as a gay man, he is willing to share: "I started being true to myself in my mid 30s. It was a time in my life where I became confident in the man I had become, and during this process, I could see and feel a shift in my artwork—the spontaneity, the confidence, the risk, the openness of my personal journey was coming through in many ways. My outlook became clear and I embraced who I really am. A beautiful new world opened up around me. Those around me, including my family, could see the new me and embraced this new direction in my life."

During his years in Houston, Parente has worked with

The multiple talents of Nicola Parente—clockwise from top left—paintings grace the walls of a local office; visual design for Dominic Walsh's 'E-Merging II'; downtown Houston studio; photograph of the city in motion.



and let their eyes relax, losing themselves in the elements of each painting.

Despite the boldness of his art, Parente

many community organizations, including The AIDS Walk (Bering Omega Team), American Cancer Society, American Heart

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Association, Scleroderma Foundation, Avenue CDC, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and Charity Water. He volunteers his time and donates artwork to raise money and awareness.

Parente also gives back by mentoring new artists. He advises them to become sure of what they want to accomplish in an art career, then to be persistent and never give up. He encourages them to establish and maintain connectedness—to reach out to others for help—and to realize that materialism and fulfillment are not the same thing.

The journey of Nicola Parente is an ongoing and ever-changing adventure—one that he embraces with optimism, passion, and creativity. He is a believer in the small-world theory, made popular by a '90s parlor game, Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon. According to this "Kevin Bacon theory," everyone on earth is only six people away from knowing everyone else—we all know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows someone else. "It's our connectedness that makes the journey worthwhile," says Parente.

Brandon Wolf interviewed Mike Ator in the August issue of OutSmart.

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