

# artHOUSTON

VISUAL ARTS, CULTURE, REVIEWS



Nicola Parente's  
2012 exhibition at  
the Manuel Felguerez  
Abstract Art Museum  
in Zacatecas Mexico

# NICOLA PARENTE

*The* artist and *The* writer, a connection.

BY JODY T. MORSE

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, I'VE INTERVIEWED DOZENS OF AMAZING INDIVIDUALS FOR MAGAZINE ARTICLES AND SOCIAL MEDIA FEATURES; HOWEVER, NONE OF THESE ENCOUNTERS HAVE AFFECTED ME AS MUCH AS MY INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST NICOLA PARENTE. A QUICKENING OF MY PULSE, SPINAL CORD TINGLING, AND SMILES OF RECOGNITION WERE BROUGHT ON APLENTY DURING OUR AFTERNOON OF CONVERSATION. THE ORDER OF THE DAY, AS I TOURED THE HOME OF THIS FASCINATING ARTIST AND LISTENED TO NUGGETS OF HIS ADVENTUROUS LIFE STORY, WAS CONNECTION.

WHILE THERE WERE MORE THAN A GENEROUS HANDFUL OF ARTIST-TO-ARTIST, SOUL-CONNECTING MOMENTS THROUGHOUT THE AFTERNOON, I JUDICIOUSLY MANAGED TO PARE IT DOWN TO FIVE VIGNETTES FOR PRESENTATION IN THIS PIECE. ANAIS NIN ONCE WROTE THAT "WE WRITE TO TASTE LIFE TWICE, IN THE MOMENT AND IN RETROSPECT"; AS I WRITE THIS ARTICLE, I SAVOR THE PLEASURE OF TASTING OUR ARTIST-TO-WRITER CONNECTION IN RETROSPECT.





Home of Nicola Parente. Opposite page: Nicola Parente. Photo by Hall Puckett, Mixed media painting *Safe Harbor* by Nicola Parente.

## Life's Box.

Nicola Parente has chosen a life lived both inside the box and outside of it. Approaching his home, I was astounded by what I saw. There, in the midst of a somewhat standard, family neighborhood on the edge of downtown Houston, stood a gray, metal box of a building. If I'd come upon this structure in the trendy business quarter of Washington Avenue or in one of the warehouse districts, I wouldn't have been surprised. But, here, in a residential zone, this corrugated square of a home stood out like a beacon of innovation and out-of-the-box living.

Nicola says he wanted to create a home for himself that was something akin to a renovated warehouse and he wanted to do it in a district of our city that was on the mend, a neighborhood on the verge of revitalization. Once he found and purchased the plot, the designing began. He

had so many ideas for how to make this house a reflection of his spirit and work. A few of the outside-of-the-box ideas that evolved inside his box-of-a-home include a laundry room hidden behind a movable art wall, a gorgeous studio apartment that he sublets to artistically minded Airbnb guests, and a breathtaking breezeway that conjoins the main house and the studio space.

Just as Nicola has chosen to live in a box but in an outside-of-the-box way, I too have chosen to live in an outside way in a simple rectangular structure. Both of us appreciate the necessity for containers while still living lives that challenge the dimensions, concepts, and boundaries that boxes provide.

"Don't box us in, unless we want to be contained," say the artist and the writer.



## **Eco-Friendly Mindedness.**

In the side yards of Nicola's home, two spectacular sculptures reside. Not only did I find them intriguing and beautiful, but they also revealed the eco-conscious, sustainability mentality that Nicola embraces. This was the second way in which we connected. Me, the writer who bought a ranch in the heart of a national forest in an effort to "protect and preserve, at least, eighteen acres worth of trees." And Nicola, the artist who commissioned and co-created a duo of artwork monoliths out of the boards and bolts left-over from the construction of his home.

On this subject, I must also mention that the gated entrance to Nicola's yard is also a reclaimed scrap material creation, as well as, a number of other reused and recycled features in his home. And I'd be loath not to mention his participation and work in the upcycled fashion industry.

One of Nicola's passions of the moment is his participation in the Magpies & Peacocks zero-waste, upcycled fashion show. This brilliant eco-minded artist designed hand-painted gowns made from discarded hotel table cloths. His custom textiles will even be featured as a part of London Fashion Week this year.

Making beauty from the marginalized, thrown away, and neglected—a virtue Nicola and I share.

## **Movement.**

Our third connection revolved around movement and frequencies. Standing before a stunning piece of art hung on one wall of his open concept living room/dining room/kitchen, I commented that it reminded me of the vibration

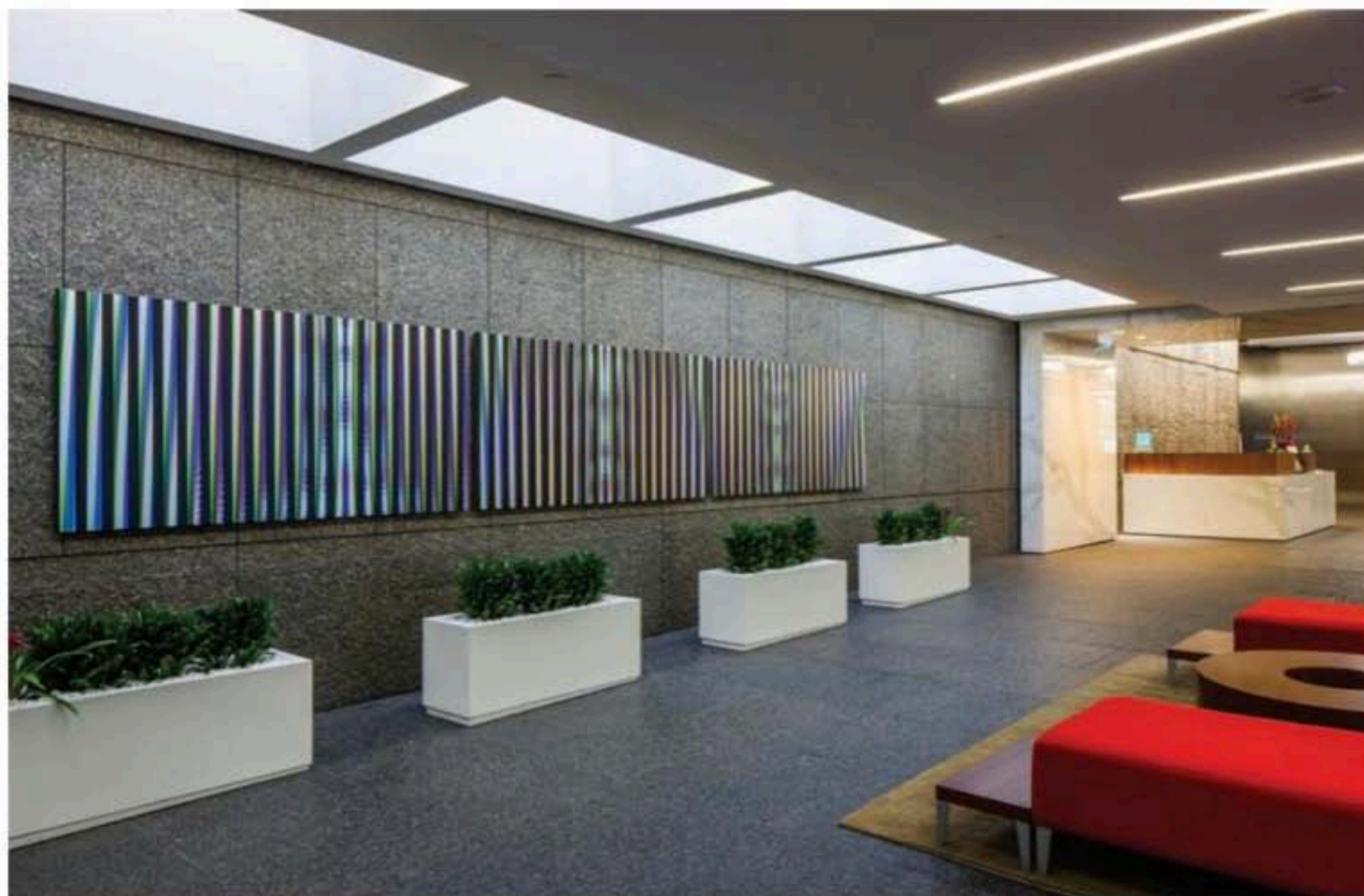




From left: Mixed media painting *Safe Harbor* by Nicola Parente.

Transwestern Building Lobby. Photo By Joe Aker.

Dynamic set and costume design by Parente for Dominic Walsh Dance Theater's production of *Terminus, E\_Merging II* at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts. Photo By Gabriella Nissen.



of violin strings—I've played since elementary school. Nicola replied that the piece was about vibrations and frequencies. He went on to say that most of his works contain elements of movement and motion. In fact, one of the biggest influences and inspirations to his work has been the experience of riding trains across Europe, where he grew up and still visits frequently.

I too have lived and traveled in Europe and fell in love with trains in transit. There's something magical about the motion of a train and watching the world pass by outside the window. In this same vein, Nicola commented that his earliest recollection of being on a train was when he was three or four years old. "What really excited me was looking out the windows and seeing the cadence and movement of the landscape." Thus, was the inspiration for Nicola's *Edge of Awakening* series, pieces of which are featured at the Manuel Felguerez Abstract Art Museum in Zacatecas, Mexico. We discovered that we are both moved by movement.

## Poet-Trees.

As we sat at his dining table with its clean lines and minimalist design, we chatted about our passion projects—past and present. During the conversation, he mentioned a few of the local charitable and entrepreneurial ventures that he has spearheaded or been involved with over the past decade or so, including Art Unity, Artist Inc with Fresh Arts, a Houston Arts Alliance project with Tammy Merrick, and the Poet-Trees project, a collaboration with WITS (Writers in the Schools). My jaw dropped at the mention of the Poet-Trees. Not only have these live trees, decorated with tiles penned with poems, been a huge inspiration for my career in the writing and publishing of poetry, but I also have a mini-Poet-Tree on my table at every comic-con and literary festival I attend. I enjoy giving people the chance to play with words in a haiku-sort-of way. Who knew that I was sitting in the presence of the mastermind behind this amazing, arboreal endeavor of hope and inspiration?



Hand painted textiles by Nicola Parente. Featured at London Fashion Week, Designers Jerri Moore + Clarence Lee for Magpies & Peacocks. Photo by MP&P

"After only being up for less than a month, we had over three-thousand people leave messages, sentiments, thoughts, and prayers on the branches of the trees. It was incredibly special," Nicola said.

We're all poets and writers and artists at heart.

## Multifaceted Artistry.

While Nicola may technically be labeled a visual artist and I may bear the title of writer, we've both blurred the artistic lines and played in other creative sandboxes. Nicola has explored photography and sculpture, as well as, painting. I've written poetry, fictional stories of various lengths, and, of course, nonfiction pieces. Nicola designed a rug for the lobby of the Post Oak Hotel, and I've been a supernumerary with Houston Grand Opera. We've each been a part of the on-stage dance scene at various times and have accepted invitations to create and collaborate with

fellow artists in more ways than either of us could count. The list of our adventures and epic forays into imaginative entrepreneurialism goes on and on. We, the artist and the writer, agree that life is most delectable when you sample from a variety of plates and glasses.

Sad to go but thoroughly energized and inspired by my connection with this incredible artist, I leave you with two final quotes from Nicola Parente.

"I once created a series about interconnectedness, featuring circles and circular forms. It was an expression about the intersection where the circles meet. The place where relationships form, and all the connections are made."

"I see my line as a red thread that runs through everything. The red signifies the human aspect of life and what we're all about. As one thread runs through one discipline, it easily runs through another, but they're all related because of that one connection that we make."