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Bishangari, Ethiopia, Ltd. Edition, 2011

Nicola Parente

The Bayou Review



Nature's Echo, *Journey Series*, 1998

Nicola Parente

A Journey from Inception to Creation: An Interview with Nicola Parente

Ana Laurel, General Editor

Nicola Parente's art is encased within an overlying structure which permeates and informs each facet of his artistic journey, from inception to creation. The very way in which he physically layers his paint represents the way different experiences in his life have been layered to create his own philosophy of art: he allows each experience to coalesce in his consciousness and then reduces these experiences to their bare minimum, gleaning that which is most conducive to the production of his compelling and challenging artwork. Yet, in the midst of this intimate process, there exists a universal quality to Parente's work which allows it to transcend languages, geographical boundaries, and artistic genres. It is this distinctive balance, this mediation between the incredibly personal and the immediately universal, which characterizes Parente's style and allows his work to be transmutable through so many different mediums. This is evidenced by the different projects Parente is currently working on: Tibetan hand-woven rugs, textile artistry, and print-making, as well as his ongoing collaboration with Dominic Walsh of Dominic Walsh Dance Theatre.

As Nicola and I sit down for our interview, I have to remind myself that this is the same man, the same esteemed artist, I saw at his Bishangari photography exhibit at Gremilion & Co. during FotoFest in March. At the exhibition opening, he looked just as comfortable surrounded by fans and friends in a handsome suit as he does now, in shorts, a t-shirt, and sandals, the uniform of Texans in the summer. Keeping this duality in mind, knowing it could prove to be significant later, I begin the interview.

Ana Laurel: I wanted to start with talking about your most recent project in your portfolio, *Edge of Awakening* [pictured on page 36]. On your website, you feature a quote by Henry David Thoreau, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake." What about that quote drew you to it in relation to this series?

Nicola Parente: Well it's interesting. Sometimes I work from looking at a quote, and then creating a body of work to present what it is about that body of work that relates to the quote. But other times, like in this instance, I found the quote as I was developing the body of work, so the body of work is about that moment of time when we all awaken. I was trying to find a correlation between , no matter what part of the world you live in, no matter what your economic status is or what nationality you are, what is it that ties us together as far as the human aspect? And one of the things that ties us together is the moment of awakening. That moment of time that you all awaken in the morning and it's a brand new day and light is starting to filter through from darkness...and we have that sense of a new beginning; and everybody goes through this....So the quote really spoke to me because it is about beginnings and awakening. I thought it was a really fitting way to introduce my work by putting a literary element within the whole structure.

AL: A lot of people described your work as abstract. You've been quoted as saying, "Art is a venture into worlds that are often only discovered in the attempt to represent them to yourself and others." Please explain what you mean by that....

NP: ...I try to focus on what I see in the present time, what I'm surrounded with. Whether it's beauty or not. And I try to use that as inspiration for creating the work. I consider my work more of a reductive abstraction, so I consider myself a reductive abstract artist. Because what I do, when I'm painting, part of the process is to lay out various layers of paint, and at the same time, what I'm doing is taking away layers while they're drying. Part of the process is that richness that happens when you're layering paint. Rather than creating a piece of artwork that has layer upon layer upon layer, which becomes an abstraction, what I'm doing is I'm putting layer upon layer, and then reducing it down to almost the initial elements, revealing some of the underlining, to create the work.

AL: That's so interesting. I had no idea that there were so many layers to your paintings... How did you start doing this process? Is it something you developed over time and just evolved out of what you started out doing?

NP: I think every artist can say their career evolves as their progress evolves.

For me, what made a difference is when I made the decision to only focus on my art and let it guide me, in a sense. A little bit over 10 years ago, I made the decision that I was just going to focus on my art full-time, and I've been able to do that. From that moment forward, I really feel like I've blossomed because it allowed me...to really focus on experimenting and working with materials that I had never had time to utilize before...I really wanted to work with 21st century materials rather than the typical works on canvas, wood, or paper. So, I sought out to contact manufacturers in plastics because I think in modern society, so much is made out of plastic. [I contacted] these manufacturers and told them I was an artist and I was experimenting with trying to find a new medium and asked if they would send me some samples, and most of them did. It took me about three years to really find what I continue to work on with traditional [painting] methods...and with what I was trying to create. I found that this industrial element allowed me to really create a movement on the panel that I struggled with so long to try to do on other mediums. Part of that evolution I think was just me growing as an artist, just me trying to find my way and my voice through my work. And the panels that I use are recycled materials and... [have] basically become what I do all my paintings on.

AL: So you had an exhibit in Ethiopia and one in Mexico.... How do you feel...going to foreign lands has informed your work? ... Because I've studied a lot of writers who do a lot of travel writing and they say it really enhances your writing because it takes you out of the familiar and it forces you to go back to primal creative impulses. How do you feel about that?

NP: Well, I was born in Italy and raised between Italy and the US. I have a dual-citizenship, so I feel that's really a blessing and I'm really lucky to have that because it allowed me to travel without many restrictions, without having to get visas and things as far as travelling outside of the US....Yes, having the travel opportunities really opens my eyes to getting out of my comfort zone, out of my every day way of thinking and working because I think anytime you can open up yourself to various cultures as an artist--- you know, I never look at things as black and white. I want to soak it in as a sponge. I want my peripheral vision to not even exist. Even if I travel somewhere else in the US, or somewhere else in Texas, I try to open up my mind for the experience to speak to me and to just kind of soak it in.

But when you travel to countries that have different cultures than what you're used to, it allows me as an artist, to look at things differently, to look at light differently, to look at people and the way that they're living and what's important to them....

AL: And I feel like that's like what you described, you know, no peripheral, no preconceived notions, it seems to be the same thing you were describing in your approach to doing your art as well. Calling different companies and asking for materials, no preconceived notions of how it's going to work, just trying it out and seeing what works and what doesn't. It seems like that's a part of your philosophy. It's interesting that there are parallels between the different facets of your life and work. So I've seen that a lot of artists use the internet and stuff, like blogging, to get their works out there in order to get people to see them. I'm wondering how that's affected how you're able to put yourself out there and if it has benefitted you or you feel like it's a detriment to you.

NP: I think that we're in a very exciting time for artists because social media allows a cross-platform of communication between people, not only in your own circles, but also at the outside of your peripheral [environments].... I've noticed, for me, it's been very helpful to have part of that social media marketing because it's allowed my work to travel virtually across, not only the US, but across the world.... It gives me encouragement as an artist to really develop my work because I feel like it has a voice, but it's not specific to one culture. And I think if art can kind of give the sense and communicate the same thing across platforms, across worlds then the artist is really doing a good job at creating that body of work because it speaks to everyone no matter where you're from. And I hope my work does that. And having my show in Ethiopia, people that saw my paintings and my photography, they got it [and] they understood it without speaking the same language. Without being able to communicate, in a verbal sense, I was just letting the art speak for itself.

AL: Well I think it's true because with the internet, an artist has to learn to market himself in a way that he didn't have to before. In addition to the social media, you need to know how to build a website. I mean, you can have someone else do it, but it's very expensive. There are basic things that you need to learn to get your work out there--

NP: I'm very lucky because I came from a business background and that business background has really helped me, as an artist, grow. Though when I began doing my art full-time, I didn't want anything to do with the business aspect... A few years ago, Creative Capital in New York did a week-long seminar for artists and you had to apply to get in...It was a seminar that changed my whole thinking about art because it made me realize that as an artist..., you don't have to live under a bridge, you don't have to struggle, and you are the controller of your destiny. And I think that applies to anyone who wants something specific for their lives. That you can create your own reality by living it. So that whole business aspect for me, you know, taking that Creative Capital workshop really opened my eyes to, Wow, this is stuff I'm familiar with through my business background, and I should be applying this to my art career. And that has helped me tremendously...

AL: Related to technology, in reference to your work on Dominic Walsh's



productions, *Terminus* (2008) [pictured above] and *Time Out of Line* (2011), y'all incorporated some very new features into the show. One of them was the video and the projection, and so I was wondering, what role has technology played in your art as far as the production of it, and has it simply become another medium

through which you can filter your imaginative impulse?

NP: Yeah, working with Dominic Walsh Dance Theatre was an incredibly rewarding experience for me because it allowed me to step out of my comfort zone...and step out of creating basically one-dimensional paintings. Dominic had seen my work and was drawn to it and approached me about writing a ballet around the actual body of work. It was the *Edge of Urban Time* series from like 6 years ago, I guess. The process in going to their rehearsal as he was developing the choreography for the ballet...was based on the same premise that my work was about, and he created a multidimensional way to express that through dance. [Walsh] asked me to create the set design for it, so through that process I really wanted to not just create some paintings as a background; I wanted to do more than that. So I decided to, because a lot of my work is about movement, as if you're on a fast-moving train and your peripheral vision starts playing tricks on you, I wanted to incorporate some of that movement and I thought what better way than video. So not having any expensive cameras to work with, but having a video option on my old flip phone [laughs] I used that to create video. I took drives---I had gotten into a state international juried show in Nacogdoches and it was around the same time that I was working on the set design and driving to Nacogdoches and back. It was the hilly, hill-country kind of thing, beautiful panoramic views and there were parts of it that followed a train line, so you had these beautiful old steel bridges and stuff that went through it so the video aspect of it was shot with that phone, with my window down holding my phone out the window as I was driving and they were all basically these snippets--- I think my phone would only record maybe 2 or 3 minutes at a time--- so it was basically all these snippets that I put together and created a video feed to project onto the stage as part of the background. In addition to that, Dominic wanted me to showcase my work, my body of work from those paintings, so part of it was doing these projections on these panels and the panels were the same kind of panels that I paint on but I had them juxtapositioned where they were falling in and out of each other, in front of each other, behind each other, it was kind of like layered, almost like I have my paintings, but they were just layered in different levels so as they appeared blank on top of the stage, they were at different levels and then when you added video elements to them, or I would project my paintings onto them, it just created a beautiful perspective of the work.

So, the technology allowed me to come out of my shell in a sense and explore, you know, other art mediums that I'd been wanting to do....It was quite challenging and it was a lot of work, but the rewards were so worth it because it was such a great experience and it opened my eyes to different media that I can and want to explore in the future.

AL: So from installations to your sculptures to your paintings, you're constantly working with your hands. And for a poet, the difficulty lies in translating the abstract of the imagination to the written word/language, so how difficult is it for you to bridge that divide from the intellectual to the representational on the panel, not the canvas, or the---

NP: Video, whatever the medium? Well, I think it's difficult, I mean there's no doubt that it is difficult to put yourself out there and to open up yourself to vulnerabilities and not everything that I do or create is a success, you know, I have my failures, too. But I think that having those failures really makes you a stronger artist...whatever your medium is. And for me it's just about learning to create. The how-to and the end process is only a part of it, but the actual creating process is what art and writing are about. To be able to make A go all the way to Z, I mean that's really the art form. And then the result of it is what others see, but it's really such a small aspect of what has gone into it.

AL: So you're very involved in community projects. What do you currently have going on?

NP: One of my favorite organizations is WITS, Writers in the Schools, and working with them because what they do is have professional writers that they put in the school systems to help kids improve their test scores and to improve their writing by making [it] fun for them. What I do is I'm one of the artists in residence that is actually sent to the schools. I take the writing that the kids have created and create an art component to it, create a visual. A lot of these kids have never even been to museums so part of the program allows them to go to a museum for the first time and write about that experience. Or write about, you know for example, a couple of years ago we did one for the [Joaquin] Torres-Garcia exhibit at the

Menil and what Torres-Garcia does. All of his art is based on symbols so the kids had to write about symbols and my art project was to actually create a symbol that represents their life. So, I had them doing carvings with a heat carver and wood.... They had to write poetry about it and incorporate their poetry that related to their life and their symbol. So it really opens up their lives and makes writing fun for



them, but it also opens up their eyes to appreciate art and to see that it's such an important aspect of life. And I love getting that smile or sense of excitement from a kid because for them, it's a break. Especially since a lot of schools have taken funds away from the arts. So for some of them, it's the only opportunity they have to be creative---visually creative.

AL: It's also that acknowledgement that art is important to education. That it does facilitate---

NP: Conversation and----

AL: Helping you express yourself. Which is important. Even in academic writing, though it initially seems stale, everyone has a certain, unique style or way to express themselves and their thoughts. And this opens up that realm for the children and helps them develop their own styles. So, I want you to describe more the artist's role at WITS. I know some people that matriculate at our university know perhaps a little bit about it, and the people that do know about it might only

be aware of the role for writers in that program. So I wanted to---

NP: Incorporate that artist's role, too?

AL: Because we do have a lot of interesting artists at our school....I just want to make sure that they know there are other things for them to do as far as giving back to the community. It's not just for writers. So how did you get involved with WITS?

NP: That Creative Capital workshop that I was telling you about? A couple of years ago? Long [Chu], one of the directors at WITS, was a part of the workshop, and we started a dialogue and I was telling him I wanted to get more involved with children and he said, "I happen to work with WITS," and I said, "Well, what's WITS?" So we just did a studio visit and he loved my work, and he asked if I'd be interested in working with them on a project-to-project basis and I said, "Of course." And that was about three or four years ago...It's not a full-time gig, but I just really get a lot out of it. I've been working with anywhere from elementary school to junior high kids so it's that whole gamut of children and it's just amazing to see how they view art from various stages of their lives and their age groups and intellects....I think it makes a more well-rounded individual, ultimately....And I try to incorporate, at one point or another, either at the beginning or at the end of the class, I usually end up talking to the kids. We do like a kind of critique of everyone's work and I try to incorporate the fact that it's really important to do something they really love with their lives... If their hearts are into it, that's what they should go for....

AL: You're also facilitating the next generation, a future artist perhaps. You've done what you could to help them out and get them along. From what I understand, I think it takes a lot more work than people may realize to become a notable artist, so it's good for someone in your position to be able to be like, "It's possible. Don't give up. But you will have to work hard" ...It's probably incredibly instructional for you to see the art of the younger kids as well because there would be less of a filter in their approach. It's simply pure imagination, unbridled and unedited.

NP: ...Elementary school kids are great because they have no preconceived notions of what is right or wrong [in art] so they're very creative and are willing to try things that aren't expected. And I do learn a lot from them. I always think, "I would've never thought of that. It's really cool."



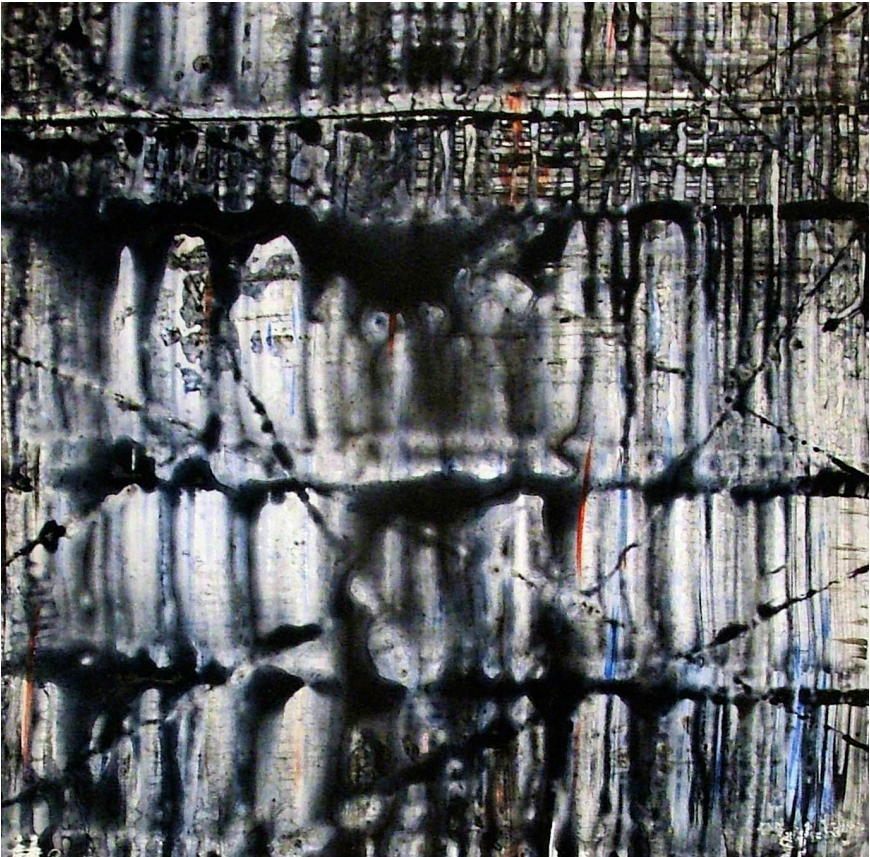
AL: Finally, where do you gain influence, or what strikes you as most influential in your everyday life?

NP: ...I love going to museums and seeing, especially contemporary works, and one of my favorite museums in Houston is the Menil. I'm usually there once a month. I love to go through all the various halls they have from Surrealism to whatever they may be featuring in their contemporary gallery spaces to their permanent collection of African art. I can look at a painting a thousand times and always pull something different away that I hadn't noticed and it's that element

of surprise in abstract art that I'm really drawn to. So when I'm looking at art in a museum for inspiration, a lot of times I'm not setting out saying I need to look at this because I need to be inspired to create something similar to it or create an aspect to it, but I'll look at something and if it creates some kind of emotion---Like I remember going to the museum to see Roberto [Gil de] Montes' work years ago, it was one of the largest exhibitions of his work and it was owned by the Menil. And this was like over 10 or 12 years ago. I was so moved that I was in tears by this exhibition. And to this day he's still one of my favorite artists. There's something about the emotional connection that art can create in the same way that a good book or good writing can. It's that element of getting your heart to beat faster and maybe creating that emotion that you get teary eyed. It's that connection that really makes it all worthwhile....The inspiration is drawn from all around me. A lot of times I'm inspired by talking to other artists and having a dialogue. A lot of times I'm inspired by having that dialogue with my collectors...Or taking a walk and looking at construction sites. I'm fascinated with construction sites and trains. So going to a construction site and looking at a scaffolding and looking at the artistry that goes into the scaffolding and how it all---there's a correlation to how it all connects---and that connection creates a safety board for the people that are using it. Or creates a temporary structure to hold up what's behind or on top of it, so it's like that whole dialogue that I have in my brain while I'm looking at something.... It's that dialogue and that complexity that makes each work of art what it is that intrigues me and inspires me.

Emergence, *Edge of Urban Time* Series, 2006

Nicola Parente





Portrait Dreamer, *Edge of Awakening*
Series, 2011

Nicola Parente