

Steven Parrino. Anything can happen
Interview by Reinhard Ermen

Steven, I think you were born in New York?

Yes, I was born in Manhattan and spent my first few years here, then my parents moved out to the suburbs of Long Island. But the first chance I got I came back to Manhattan, and now I'm in Brooklyn. I'm American but my grandparents came from Sicily and Calabria, one grandmother was Puerto Rican.

When did you decide to make art?

My father could draw, and when I was little he used to draw comic book characters for me, Captain America or Spiderman, and I played guitar. I became interested in music and art when I was around two or three years old. Since I was so close to New York, there were field trips to museums, so I was able to see Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Andy Warhol, and all the Minimalists when I was growing up. I was always surrounded by this mentality and by the time I got to high school I started coming into the city on my own to go to openings and stuff. I decided that I wanted to be an artist from being in this climate all the time. Initially, I was drawn towards the music side because I thought it was more expressive, my visual side was still trying to find its voice. And the only thing in the 1970s that was really worth dealing with, as far as the art world was concerned, was this small music scene called No Wave, with musicians like Arto Lindsay and Lydia Lunch. People were doing very interesting things with noise and music in a Minimalist way that was brutal and interesting.

You studied art in high school, how was it taught?

We did our little still lifes, or whatever we had to do, but also I had teachers who would play a Yoko Ono or John Cage record and they challenged us with interesting things, all these wacky ideas about how to make art. In music class we had to deal with Charles Ives and Stravinsky. I was fortunate that the teachers were challenging me both musically and artistically. This is New York, this is where be-bop happened, you have the Philharmonic, punk rock started here, all these scenes. So it was a very rich time growing up during the 1960s and 1970s.

You made performances too, was that before you became a painter?

Yes, I was dabbling in painting but I was still struggling to find my voice. I was already playing in rock bands and I was a music major. The performances I was doing were like confrontational art happenings. So I would walk into a room and throw a television against the wall, or I would set off the fire alarm as an artwork. So they were based on a destructive activity—most teenagers are into destructive activities anyway. When I got to art school, I had to deal with someone saying, "You can't do performance art, you have to pick either painting or sculpture." I chose painting because it was around 1979 and everyone was saying that painting was over, painting was dead. So I figured I'd be like Dr. Frankenstein and work with corpses, that's basically how I chose to be a painter. But my idea of painting came out of this performance mentality, a destructive event of some sort, the idea of the entropic—I was very into Robert Smithson when I was in art school. You could say the climate then was punk or negative. You had Vito Acconci threatening to hit people with baseball bats; you had Warhol's piss paintings. You had Richard Serra making these very threatening looking sculptures, unintentionally one of his sculptures killed

someone: there was a violence in his work whether he wanted it or not. You had this terrorism threat, you had the threat of nuclear annihilation. And then you had this music, which maybe started with the Ramones, it was just a barrage of noise. The Ramones gave birth to a younger generation of musicians, my age, who even eliminated the vocals so it was just pure noise. This zeitgeist gave birth to what I do. So it's funny that a lot of people put me in formal painting shows because my work comes out of a tradition of anti-form that maybe started with Pollock. It's against the formal and trying to reach purity in painting. I was more about the dirty aspect of life because that's what surrounded me—and it continues.

But I think you were in these shows because from the violence comes a very interesting discussion about the formal possibility of painting.

Yes, but also I'm still very conservative in my approach. I still make paintings even if they are three-dimensional. I'm still very aware it has to be paint on canvas. I don't want to start making sculptures because it opens up too many doors, so I limit myself a great deal. Even with the music I play today, it's still a sound that mutates over a period of time, it has the same sort of deconstructivist idea that the paintings have. It's a pure sound, I try not to add vocals, any vocals are very mutated. All my ideas generate out of this one idea: the debasement or deformation of something that is pure.

You don't destroy but rather make something with violence.

When I first started, I saw the work that I was doing as social, in that it may have had political connotations, in terms of my witnessing what goes on around me. As I get older—maybe this is because I'm getting old and cranky—it's getting away from the social and I feel that it might be more of a natural thing. I'm detached from the paintings when I'm doing them, they're not about personal feelings. It's more like, can you blame nature for using destruction, and is that destructive, or is it just the way nature is? If a volcano erupts, is that a bad thing?

It's a normal thing.

Right, and creation comes out of that, a cataclysm can create an island and it can generate life. I'm dealing with aesthetics in the tiny world that is my studio. I see disruptions or damage as a means to an end. I have made pieces that are before-and-after: one panel is as pure as possible and the other panel as damaged as possible—almost like a comic book reading. I still do them from time to time. Everything you do is political whether you like it or not, I choose to deal with it in a very detached way.

Sometimes you use this plastic, which looks like sperms or something.

It's silicone. It was meant as a glue to hold something together, it's the same material used for breast implants. To me it became a kind of Pop material because of breast implants, and this absurd idea of what we do in our culture. So I decided to try to make the painting as ugly as possible. The painting is like a non-painting because I was fighting with the material to get it to stay in place. I did a show in New York, all black paintings. A friend saw the show and said, "I

didn't realize how elegant your work is, how beautiful and pretty."

Do you fear that your paintings are not ugly?

Well, I did a series of elegant paintings, to see what would happen if I went in the opposite direction. It wasn't a fear, it was more trying to do the contrary. You have all these intentions for yourself as an artist, but people are still going to read into it. I've had people say, it looks like this, or that. And to me it's still painting, that's all I see, just painting. I can't control what people think about it, I just want to proceed and I have certain starting points, like trying to make something ugly, or trying to debase something, or trying to throw the viewer off guard. I did a series of pieces with words, with giant letters, words that were accusatory like "idiot" or "jerk." Some people thought that they should feel offended by looking at this work. Their misreading was that I was insulting the viewer, but if someone wants to be insulted that's fine, I guess.

There's a long tradition of beauty in violence. I'm thinking of the Romantic artists who loved ruins—and Lucio Fontana.

I think Fontana was trying to find God. He was really transcendental in what he was trying to do. I might be closer to Mimmo Rotella, doing this destructive activity to advertising posters. But I'm not a person who's looking for a creator. I don't even know if I believe in that; my intentions were very different, much more pedestrian. I don't think I have any high falutin' aims or hopes.

Is the violence part of living in New York?

There is an ugliness to deal with when you live here and there's the beauty of it also—but I think it's like everywhere else in the world. Our fascination with violence is a primordial thing, I think it's just human nature to be drawn to darker things. That's neither a good thing nor a bad thing. I think it's just nature's way of preparing us to live life. If you think of ancient Rome, it was a very violent culture but for some reason it had an extreme beauty, we keep going back to that beauty. This kind of beauty and power is very attractive and dangerous, so people are drawn to it.

Do you make still music?

Oh yes, I've been playing shows over the last two years under the name of Electrophilia. They're usually solo performances with an electric bass guitar and synthesizer. Sometimes I play with other musicians. It's the same idea as the paintings, I'm taking sound and I'm distorting and twisting it the way that I do physically with the paintings.

Earlier you mentioned Warhol.

We had to deal with Andy. The important thing about Andy wasn't that he was a Pop artist or a fashion person, it was that he took on the responsibility of being a mirror. If he was a society artist, that's what his life was at the time. He wasn't above taking ideas from everywhere. He was a rock 'n' roll promoter, a documentary filmmaker, a fictional filmmaker. He gave himself up, in order to be responsible in that way. And it's strange to talk about Andy in terms of responsibility, but you're being irresponsible if you are closing doors, living in a fabricated world, and ignoring life. That responsibility came down to me, and I hope I could do him justice by being a responsible artist and reflecting life as best I can. Whether that life is ugly or beautiful is out of my control, but it's out of

everyone's control. It makes painting important because you're reflecting what's around you. You're bringing today's approach to painting rather doing purely formal painting. I think the academic is the death of art.

The problem is that the world is a dirty place. You could have all these Apollonian ideas and hopes, but life isn't perfect, you have Dionysius in there. I want to achieve a balance, it's like a ying-yang thing—to sound like an old hippie or something, which I'm not! It can't be all perfection, perfection, perfection, because there's always something coming on to fuck you up, whether it's the taxman or life. Maybe you could view art as an oasis, but I think it's more interesting to think about Manet or Courbet or Andy or Pollock and having to deal with the greediness of life, rather than trying to escape it.

Was Warhol the only mirror in those times?

No, I think that people like Smithson dealt with it, but he was influenced by Andy. Pollock dealt with it and of course he wasn't influenced by Andy. He was dealing with this overwhelming vastness, which he had to suppress through alcohol because it was just too much to take in. To me he's more a realist than an Abstract Expressionist. All artists have to deal with reality. Even Mondrian dealt with the idea of living in New York in a very real way. *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is an incredible masterpiece and it deals with jazz, and a love of New York, and the idea of the grid, because he literally moved into the grid. New York is a giant, active, colorful grid and there is no escape unless you leave. Throughout history there have always been artists—Caravaggio, da Vinci—dealing with the grittiness of life.

Perhaps violence in art is only possible with a border; the painting explodes, but within the frame.

Maybe it's not fair to use the word violence, maybe it's better to say disruption or debasement, as opposed to purity. I use both all the time.

But within a formal situation?

I'm very aware that it has to exist within a formal setup. But so did Andy, he was making paintings and films within a formal framework in order to deal with content. And I still believe in content on a certain level; I'm an abstract painter but I think you can have content in abstract paintings. I think we emptied painting of so much content that you were left with a blank. By bringing back content I'm making filthy that purity that so-called radical painters wanted. Fewer people are saying, "That cannot be a painting," and more people are saying, "Yes, that is a painting." So is it still radical?

In this painting, there's an eyeball.

Yes, it's a rubber, goofy, monster, eyeball in the middle of the painting.

Is it a step to a kind of realism?

No, it's an anomaly. I'm a big fan of B-movies and science fiction and horror movies. Earlier we spoke about the death of painting and my being a sort of Dr. Frankenstein character. This painting existed without the eyeball for a long time and then someone gave it to me and it just happened to fit in that area. I like Ad Reinhardt's cartoon where a man comes up to this abstract painting and he mockingly says, "Ha ha, what does this represent?" And then the painting punches him and says, "What do you represent?" I like this idea of the con-

frontation where the painting is looking back at you. And it became this joke on Modernism because I think—or thought—of abstract painting as a big mess like a Pollock, or a Picasso. So it just became this device, or joke or to me.

You said your aim is not making elegant paintings, but in the Ricke show in March of this year I had the feeling perhaps you're heading that way.

Well, I'm not upset that the paintings wind up being elegant. The paintings that Rolf had were a way of combining ways of working. So I had the pulling and I had a hole in the painting, it created a vortex. The idea in Rolf's show was to do a series of pieces that related to each other but also had this concentric spinning. That's why a lot of the pieces were termed Spinouts or Burnouts, like a car wheel spinning.

How do you handle the problem of composition?

There is no right or wrong. It's a very American idea to eliminate composition by putting something right in the middle, being as blunt as possible. I think Donald Judd wrote about this idea of American composition in terms of Kenneth Noland's paintings, or Jasper Johns's target paintings. The only compositional device that I use is selecting a size. As far as the pulling is concerned, it's totally anti-formal, because I work with them face down. I take the staples out, I pull, and I re-attach. I don't even look at the painting until it's finished. Through the anti-formal it addresses formal concerns, so you get both in a strange way. You keep generating interesting things by having this looseness in it.

It's almost like I've been making the same painting for the last twenty years. It just changes slightly. And I think that's the Minimalism of my work: it's not formal Minimalism, but more the Minimalism of the action.

What have you been working on recently?

I've been doing these things I call frescos. I've been taking sheetrock, painting it black, and then destroying it. In Italy, I just did eleven panels that filled up a whole room, so you had this debris around. It still relates to traditional painting because it's paint on plaster, a contemporary way of making a fresco even though it's not a pure fresco. It still had this disruptive mentality, but it's addresses a whole room.

When did you make the pieces with honeycomb panels?

When I was in art school, I didn't have a lot of money to buy materials, but what you could find in the trash was cardboard, which is a paper honeycomb. So I did monochromes that were broken and bent. Later I got a little money together and I discovered aluminum honeycomb, Frank Stella was using it. It's a very light aircraft material. So I set about doing larger versions of the little pieces I made in art school but using this new material. I score the back and break it by bending the material. It's a slower, different way of dealing with the same issues. The rooms that I was just speaking about relate to those pieces in a very direct way, except the panels are sheetrock, not aluminum.

But your main materials are the paintings made with linen.

Well, I still think in terms of very traditional painting materials, the aluminum honeycomb became traditional to me when I discovered Stella used it. Paint on panel is a traditional idea. I haven't really taken anything made of wood and

destroyed it—yet—but I know Imi Knoebel did these pieces called “War Paintings.” They were large wood panels painted black; he took a saw to them and destroyed them. And I felt close to those, so maybe Imi did my paintings for me!

But is it possible that the paintings with frames and linen will be over?

The freestanding pieces were like that. The problem with me is, instead of going on to the next thing, I want to do everything. I don't know what the future is about, I'll just have to figure that out when it comes. You know, anything can happen.

The conversation was recorded on 26 June 2000 in Queens, New York, in Stephen Parrino's studio, a garage-like space that is also home to two motorcycles. The interview was originally intended for a radio feature about “Artists in New York” (Between Art and Artists). The concept for this feature was time-consuming, and it was never realized due to the fact that after September 11, 2001 there was a shift in emphasis in reporting.

R.E.