

GAGOSIAN

ARTFORUM

Blasted Allegories *Fabrice Stroun on the art of Steven Parrino*

Fabrice Stroun



Steven Parrino, Spin-Out Vortex, 2000, enamel on canvas, 72 × 72 × 7 5/8". © The Steven Parrino Estate.

IN THE PAST YEAR, the art of the late Steven Parrino (1958–2005) has been on view in three different retrospectives. It was featured prominently in surveys of two other artists, Cady Noland at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt and Olivier Mosset at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in Geneva. And for the first time in more than a decade, it was the subject of a comprehensive institutional presentation, held at Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz.



View of “Cady Noland,” 2018–19, *Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt*. Foreground: Cady Noland, *Dead Space*, 1989. Background, from left: Kenneth Noland, *Touch*, 1963; Steven Parrino, *Bent Painting*, 1991. Photo: Axel Schneider.

In Frankfurt, a wide selection of Parrino’s “misshaped” and “bent” monochrome paintings functioned as a bridge between Noland’s dark, exurban tableaux of American violence and her father Kenneth Noland’s geometric abstraction *Touch*, 1963. In one room, the saturated green and orange of the elder Noland’s chevron-shaped motif could be seen through his daughter’s forbidding metal tube fence *Dead Space*, 1989. Nearby was Parrino’s *Bent Painting*, 1991, a very terse version of the numerous works on honeycomb aluminum panels the artist made throughout his career. Formally, Parrino’s piece amalgamates attributes of *Touch* and *Dead Space*: It is a spare, bright-orange abstract painting built with DIY industrial materials including cheap enameled-aluminum boards. Via these juxtapositions, curator Susanne Pfeffer made reference to a specific art-historical narrative: that of the disintegration of late modernism’s claim to autonomy amid mass culture’s infiltration of high art. Of course, this is not the whole story of postwar art, but it usefully placed Parrino in his generational milieu. Parrino and Cady Noland were contemporaries, and they never stopped staring intensely at each other’s work. As early as 1992, the latter artist had already incorporated a painting by the former into her contribution to Documenta 9. Parrino’s central presence in her first large survey exhibition was obviously a heartfelt homage to a lost friend. At the same time, this generous inclusion ensured that Noland’s refined assemblages of ready-made hardware-store supplies and blue-collar Americana were seen within a historical continuum of abstract—i.e., radical—gestures.



View of “Olivier Mosset,” 2020, Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva. From left: Olivier Mosset and Steven Parrino, Untitled, 1989; Cady Noland, Untitled, 1999; Olivier Mosset and Steven Parrino, Untitled, 1989. Photo: Annik Wetter.

Mosset’s retrospective was a behemoth of a show, with about 170 works spread out over three thousand square feet of gallery space. The exhibition aspired not only to provide an all-encompassing overview of Mosset’s production, but also to document the many scenes he’s been part of and the individuals with whom he has crossed paths, and who have impacted not so much the nature of his art—which has remained stubbornly consistent for six decades—as its uniquely elastic capacity to foster heterogeneous conditions of reception. Entire rooms were devoted to his initial encounter in the early 1960s with the Nouveaux Réalistes and, famously, with Daniel Buren, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni a few years later (the four of them would found the influential collective BMPT). Curators Paul Bernard and Lionel Bovier also illuminated Mosset’s association in mid-’70s New York with the post-Minimalist proponents of Radical Painting (Marcia Hafif, Joseph Marioni, et al.), his subsequent contribution of a Malevich-like black monochrome to the storied 1981 “Times Square Show,” and his influence on the neo-geo crowd (e.g., Peter Halley), who believed that a painting, however rigorously abstract it might be, can and perhaps inevitably will call attention to its own historicity. Within these numerous group presentations, Parrino’s work held a key position. He had three whole rooms to himself, plus a fourth containing a piece made in collaboration with Mosset. His figurative works—including a comic-book splash page depicting Courtney Love with eight spider legs, murmuring, “Hey lover”—stood out in a show otherwise almost entirely comprising abstract gestures. Most important, his inclusion brought into explicit focus a principle embodied in Mosset’s work and intimated by the exhibition as a whole. Both artists’ paintings share a “dumb,” matter-of-fact formal quality: What you see is what you get. Their inscription in the history of postmodernity has little to do with the successive quixotic attempts (from Conceptualism to the Pictures generation) to dematerialize the art object and float free of its physical substrate. Quite the contrary: Deviating from high modernism’s efforts to establish a pure autonomy for the art object, Mosset and Parrino embraced their work’s inescapable materiality, which anchors it in the world at large, ushering in opportunities for contamination by every other cultural manifestation it comes in contact with. As such, the presentation of Parrino’s paintings—which highlighted the staging of his works within a wide array of activities that dramatized

abstraction's confluences with history, text, moving image, and pop culture's collective unconscious—functioned as a microcosm of the exhibition as a whole.



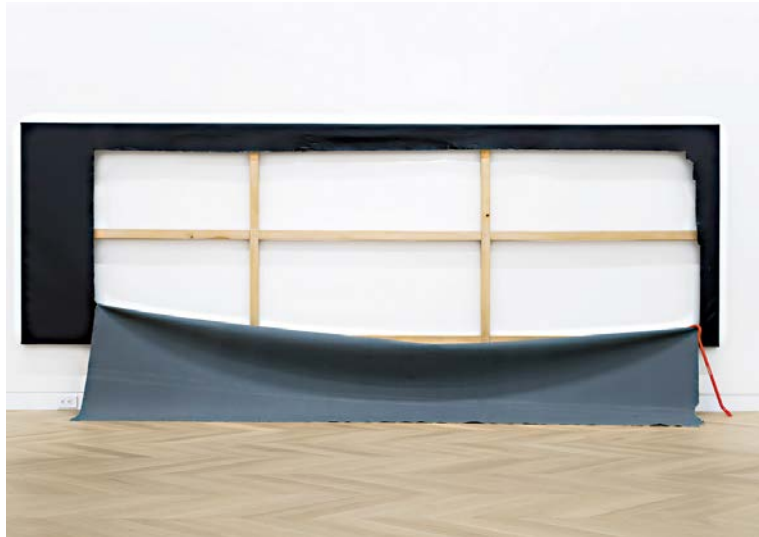
Steven Parrino, *Exit/Dark Matter* (detail), 1998–99, forty-one framed drawings in pencil, felt-tip pen, ink, and lacquer on vellum mounted on board, this drawing 16 × 30". © The Steven Parrino Estate.

In his collection of writings *The No Texts* (1979–2003) (2003), Parrino wrote, “Radicality comes from context and not necessarily form. Forms are radical in memory, by way of continuing the once radical, through extensions of its history. The avant-garde leaves a wake and, through mannerist force, continues forward. Even on the run, we sometimes look over our shoulders, approaching art with intuition rather than strategy. Art of this kind is more cult than culture.” While his work could not have emerged in any context other than that of the downtown New York scene of the early '80s, it continues to resist assimilation, remaining stubbornly singular despite the many points of overlap with the practices and obsessions of his contemporaries. His exhibition at Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, titled “Nihilism Is Love,” was built around the legendary Cologne dealer Rolf Ricke’s collection, which was jointly purchased in 2006 by the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, the Swiss Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, and the MMK. Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein’s presentations of Ricke’s collection have focused on maverick artists such as Parrino, Bill Bollinger, and Gary Kuehn, who stand as relative outliers in relation to mainstream art-historical narratives. “Nihilism Is Love” contained more than ninety works, including paintings, works on paper, films, installations, sculptures, and sound pieces, from every major series and phase of Parrino’s career.



Steven Parrino, *Disruption*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, framed Xerox, three parts, 18 × 18“, 18 × 18“, 12 1/2 × 9 1/2“. © The Steven Parrino Estate.

This abundance stood in sharp contrast to the eloquent, streamlined approach of Parrino's 2017 survey at the Power Station in Dallas, which strove to synthesize, in a mere nine works, his elemental formal and conceptual vocabulary. The sprawling Liechtenstein exhibition, organized in five distinct, nonchronological sections, aimed to generate an organic and open-ended context in and through which to assess the range and complexity of a quarter century's output. Each of the loosely defined sections was titled for an iconic work and emphasized a different facet of the artist's practice. The first, "Disruption," was named after a 1981 triptych that sequences a descent into violence, encompassing a square black monochrome canvas, its misshaped doppelgänger, and a gruesome 1928 image of Ruth Snyder, the first woman to be photographed in the electric chair. This section also included *Pollux & Castor*, 2004, a drawing of a sarsen-like architectonic structure that resonated with Parrino's late turn toward monumental form, as well as paradigmatic pieces like *Crowbar*, 1987, a large monochrome ripped around three of its edges, with the titular implement resting on a corner of the stretcher. This work stems from a filmed performance at Le Consortium in Dijon, France, originally screened alongside the painting, in which the artist stood on a ladder ripping the canvas with the tool, then walked away, returning to nonchalantly kick down the ladder so as to provide a better view of his work.



Steven Parrino, Crowbar, 1987, canvas frame, paint on canvas, paint on crowbar, 4' 5 1/8" × 14' 1 1/4" × 2' 2 3/4". © The Steven Parrino Estate.

The second section of the exhibition, "Bent Paintings and Slot Paintings," took a more formalist approach, focusing on two families of works, each of which represents a particular production protocol used by the artist, and which jointly demonstrate what an incredibly versatile and deft painter Parrino was. Here the curators showcased two untitled bent works, a large 1991 aluminum sheet mostly covered in black high-gloss acrylic, with only a hard-edged strip of bare metal visible at the top, and a blue enameled honeycomb painting, part of the series "BENTOVERSLIME," 1995, whose lower, sunken section is visibly welded to the main body of the work with a sticky, foul-looking excess of silicone glue. While the first painting would hold its own alongside an Ellsworth Kelly or a Donald Judd, the second could play the part of the medium-specific throwback within a critically abject installation by Mike Kelley. The works' positioning was a skillful move on the part of Friedemann Malsch and Fabian Flückiger, the show's curators, to keep Parrino's well-known misshaped canvases away from this gallery, instead scattering them throughout the rest of the show. The precision with which the bent paintings are fabricated, and the intricately constructed, shaped stretchers of the "slot" paintings,

made it abundantly clear that no matter how expressive these works may appear, they are not the result of an embodied, expressionistic practice. To paraphrase Bob Nickas, whose writing has accompanied the critical reception of Parrino's work from the late '80s to this day, this is a violence served cold.

The third and fourth sections of the show were best described as thematic. "Dancing on Graves" — titled after a 1999 work whose first component is an aluminum bent painting and whose second is a video of a woman dancing lasciviously to a live noise performance by the artist — highlighted Parrino's gothic sensibilities. Full of Anton LaVey-style theatrics, it included works such as Bradley "The Beast" Field R.I.P., 1997, an amorphous heap of crumpled matte-black-painted canvas and dirtied-up metallic tape sprinkled with sparkling black glitter. The adjacent space, "Death in America," named after a group of luminous silver misshaped canvases from 2003, tried to shed light on the artist's fixation on the often-terminal violence suffusing his country's culture. It was here that the curators decided to present *The Self-Mutilation Bootleg 2 (The Open Grave)*, 1988/2003, an installation made of brightly colored misshaped paintings the artist first exhibited in 1988, and that, fifteen years later, he repainted in black and shredded, partly to spite a European art dealer who owed him money and refused to pay for the works' return shipment. The final room, "Exit/Dark Matter," took its name from a 2002 comic book published by JRP Editions (and which, full disclosure, I edited). Invoking Robert Smithson's dialectic of site and nonsite, the visitor's guide explained that this gallery's array of works bore witness to the "extra-artistic" spheres that informed Parrino's works: comics and countercultural print media more generally; the punk, No Wave, and noise scenes; outlaw biker culture; etc. The exhibition's largest ensemble of works, it was also its most heterogeneous, with paintings such as *Slow Rot*, 1988–91, a stretched piece of raw cotton-duck canvas soaked in motor oil that will take decades to dry and in the meantime has developed a thriving fungal colony, as well as recordings by Electrophilia, the Noise ensemble Parrino and Jutta Koether ran with a changing cast of artists and musicians.



Steven Parrino, Bradley "The Beast" Field R.I.P., 1997, acrylic, glitter, and electrical tape on canvas, 33 3/8 × 58 1/4 × 54 3/8". © The Steven Parrino Estate.

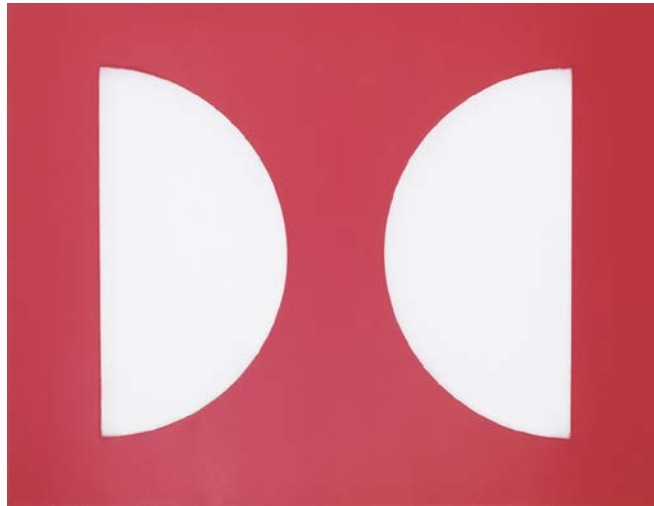
If this essay about an artist's retrospective seems low on descriptions of the actual experience of encountering these works in situ, it's because it has been written from a floor plan. Covid-19-related restrictions made it impossible for me to physically travel to see the show. Though I was able to assess from a distance how comprehensive a historical overview was provided by the grouping and framing, it is harder to gauge, without having viewed the exhibition in person, how

such an account might reverberate in 2020. To construct an entire oeuvre on the proposition that “painting is dead” seems barely comprehensible today, but Parrino did just that, finding more and more room to expand the scope of his entropic vision. If it is impossible to completely extract Parrino’s work from its historical context—particularly that of its emergence in the late ’70s, when grand art-historical narratives were thrown into question and America’s postwar triumphalism had given way to malaise—neither can the breadth and heterogeneity of his practice be reduced to *only* its context.



Steven Parrino, *The Self-Mutilation Bootleg 2 (The Open Grave)*, 1988/2003, enamel on canvas, 88 × 108 × 72". © The Steven Parrino Estate.

And yet the legibility of Parrino’s work within our current political context is vexed at best. Parrino saw himself as a quintessentially American truth-teller. As did that of a number of his peers who came out of the downtown New York scene of the late ’70s and early ’80s, his truth-telling incorporated confrontations with some of the nastiest corners of American culture. A post-Pictures artist, he was a practitioner of what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh famously called “allegorical procedures”—his work infused by, and constantly referring outward to, the culture in which it was created. (Parrino’s first solo shows were held at Nature Morte, a gallery run by artists Peter Nagy and Alan Belcher, who strategically positioned themselves at the cutting edge of post-Pictures contemporary art.) For all his transgressive, deadpan appropriations, his culling of motifs from motorcycle gangs, Confederate or Aryan white-supremacist subcultures (as, for instance, in *White on White*, a 1991 collage for which he glued a found white-supremacist flyer sporting a half-naked, assault-rifle-toting blonde to a larger piece of white paper), and misogynistic ’70s exploitation cinema, his works were never mere punk provocations but efforts to hold a Warholian mirror up to the immanent brutality of America.



Steven Parrino, *Red Varla*, 1989–93, acrylic on canvas, 66 × 84 1/8". © The Steven Parrino Estate.

Radicality comes from context and not necessarily form. The forms are radical in memory, by way of continuing the once radical, through extensions of its history. Was Parrino anticipating the moment when his own art would be radical only in memory, or even suggesting that that was already the case? This year, it seems safe to say, will go down in history as a genuine watershed, and, oddly, the spatial inaccessibility of Parrino's retrospective itself seemed to be a kind of theatrics of rupture. The spatial gap dramatized the temporal gap, underscoring the extent to which his work now seems inaccessible because it exists on the other side of a decisive break. At the beginning of the millennium, his misshaped, bent, shaped, and torn canvases began to veer away from the narrative of the dissolution of modernism's specialized ambitions toward a quasi-geological conception of time and space. Works from this era include his two *Spin-Out Vortex* pieces of 2000, and *The Chaotic Painting*, 2004, which was prominently featured in both the 2006 Whitney Biennial and the Liechtenstein retrospective, as well as dozens of small paintings on crumpled vellum that burst at the seams with the cosmic crackle of "dark matter" (the generic title of this series). In my opinion, these are some of the artist's most complex and accomplished works, which makes his untimely death in a traffic accident at the age of forty-six all the crueler. True to form, Parrino did not entirely leave earthly things behind. His shift from an art-historical to an apocalyptic cosmological chronicle was still steeped in a host of vernacular cultural manifestations. One of Parrino's late, most ambitious, and sadly unrealized projects was *Model of the End of the Universe (To Be Placed in the Forbidden Zone)*, a monumental sculpture for which he produced numerous sketches, diagrams, and maquettes in 2001. Indebted to Smithsonian's desert Earthworks and (like Smithsonian's own art) to lowbrow eschatological sci-fi, this late dystopian monument continues to emit—from a place and time that already seem impossibly remote—a dark, negative poetics.