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AARON PARAZETTE: AN EDGY ARTIST AT THE CENTER OF IT ALL

By: Molly Glentzer



Aaron Parazette in front of his acrylic wall painting "Flyaway" at Art League Houston.: Michael Paulson : 29-95

Aaron Parazette was running uncharacteristically late for our meeting at Art League Houston, where he's being celebrated as Texas Artist of the Year.

Parazette, a trim guy of 52, apologized for his tardiness as he let a photographer pose him in front of the 7-by-56-foot site specific wall painting that dominates his exhibit. One could see that he was calculating where in that bold geometry his body was being placed, but he didn't try to dictate the composition.

He said he'd been feverishly building shelves to display sculptures by a former student, Hillary Harnischfeger, for a public exhibit at FRONT gallery the next day.

FRONT is in Parazette's living room. His partner, artist Sharon Engelstein, has curated shows by other artists in their home gallery for five or six years.

"It's not anomalous," Parazette said, noting a 20-year tradition of artist-run spaces nationally. "But we have this Houston bungalow with a front room we just walk through. It always troubled me that you'd have what I think of as a nicely appointed New York apartment, fully climate-controlled, that our dog sleeps in. It's like 13-by-25 feet. We felt we should be doing something with it."

Elsewhere, Parazette organized “In Plain Sight,” the current exhibit at McClain Gallery featuring paintings by 40 Houston artists. But it’s not about him, he demurred.

“That show is meant to represent a full range of painting of Houston,” he said. There hasn’t been a critical look at the landscape of Houston art since 1985’s still talked-about “Fresh Paint” exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and he wanted to nudge the idea forward.

Parazette’s generosity and influence — he’s taught painting at the University of Houston since 1997 — aren’t the only reasons he’s being honored, of course.

The artist is one of the foremost practitioners of “post-formal formalism,” writes Bill Davenport in the essay to the Art Leagues’s exhibit catalog. Referencing pop culture and the surfer culture Parazette loves, his paintings are deceptively simple looking.

He refers to himself as a “tape painter,” since he uses tape to define the lines of his patterns. But machine-made tape edges aren’t clean enough for him. He wears jeweler’s goggles to cut them on a piece of glass so they’re sharper and as thin as an eighth of an inch before applying them to his prepped canvases, where they demarcate the strict boundaries between his smoothly painted, harmonious colors.



Parazette’s *Color Key 37*: Courtesy photo

Underneath, Parazette’s canvas supports are so beautiful it’s a shame they’re hidden. They take longer to make than “the art part,” -as he calls the painted surface.

He lifted “Color Key 36” off a wall to show us the pristine wood frame he’d made, the neatly trimmed linen canvas stretched over it and hundreds of parallel staples holding the linen in place.

He’s been exacting all his life, he said. “I’m a puritan worker.”

Parazette makes as many as 15 supports at a time over several weeks, then paints on a base of basic titanium white acrylic before what he hates to admit is the hardest part of his process: “figuring out what the hell to put on them.”

He grew up in Hermosa Beach, Calif., one of the cities that birthed modern surf culture. His understanding and feel for tape painting — and what he calls a “finish fetish” — came from watching a boyhood friend tape off graphic patterns on surfboards. The flashy colors stayed with him, too. With an MFA in painting from California’s Claremont Graduate University, Parazette came to Houston (as did Davenport) as a Core Fellow at the Glassell School of Art in 1990, the early days of the program. They belonged to a new crop of abstractionists, Davenport suggests, who used irony as “an alternative to the voodoo figuration that had typified the Texas regional aesthetic.”

The irony has faded over time, although Parazette’s colors have intensified.

The Art League wall painting, “Flyaway,” is the first he’s done in Houston since a solo exhibit at the



Parazette’s *Color Key 36*., Courtesy Photo

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 2004, although he'll soon create another one at the University of Houston. The exhibit also features a few of the Color Key works he's created for the last three years, which get some of their oomp from odd-shaped canvases. He was bored with rectangles, he said. "But instantly, if you use an ellipse, or a square turned on point with a corner cut off or ellipses with sides cut off, that conditions how you're seeing the work, and it changes the way that the imagery within it operates."

The catalog documents other distinctive periods as well. In the early 1990s Parazette made Saw Drawings, grids with strips, rectangles and squares composed of birch; as well as Paintings with Subtitles, square canvases with neutral-hued patterns and slightly self-absorbed captions, such as, "I made this painting to end an argument with myself."

His Wallpaper Paintings of the mid-'90s nod to domestic life in the '60s; then he broke out with more psychedelic-inspired Splash Paintings, as if following the "Mad Men" timeline before the TV show existed.

Up to that point he drew his imagery by hand. Then came a period of Word Paintings, and Adobe Illustrator became an important tool. Now he creates his patterns digitally before transferring them to a canvas.

"Once it's in the computer, you can do all sorts of things with it," Parazette said. He often manipulates imagery from previous work in new ways. After he's transferred the design to the canvas, he tapes all the lines and applies a layer of clear matte medium as insurance against color bleeding.

When it's time to paint, he's almost on auto-pilot, like an car painter who has been told, "We want some flames on that fender."

"I like the idea that in finish the work has an anonymity to it," he added. "You can't tell where I started or finished; it all looks like it just appeared there."

He produced the wall painting, which emanates like blue and green rays of sunshine from a horizon line 61 inches off the floor, 28 feet in each direction, with help from another master tape painter, his friend Susie Rosmarin.



Parazette's Color Key 39.: Courtesy photo

Even with that expert help, it took four 12-hour days to complete.

"I don't enjoy it as much when it's a bit of a fire drill," Parazette said. "But the craft itself is endlessly fascinating — the thrill you get every time you lay a piece of tape and paint on it and pull it off, it's a beautiful thing to see that edge."

"Flyaway: New Work by Aaron Parazette"

Through Nov. 2. (A partner exhibit, "Texas Eclectic," features works owned by Judy and Scott Nyquist, the Texas Patrons of the Year.) Art League Houston, 1953 Montrose; 713-523-9530; artleaguehouston.org.

Also see:

"In Plain Sight," through Oct. 20 at McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond; 713-520-9988; mcclaingallery.com.

FRONT Gallery, 1412 Bonnie Brae, 1-4 p.m. Saturdays and by appointment. Info at frontgallery.com.