

SKARSTEDT

Forbes

Steven Parrino, Paintings and Drawings, 1986-2003, Skarstedt, East 64th Street, New York

June 18, 2019 | By Clayton Press

“The purpose of Steven Parrino’s dark romanticism was not to make his life into a work of art, but to construct a work of art while risking his own life. Ultimately, this last imperative points towards a rock ethos of art.”

Christophe Kihm, *Art Press*, May 2007.

The obituary began, “Steven Parrino, 46, an Artist and Musician in a Punk Mode, Dies.” In a moment, the career of a maturing artist ended full stop on January 1, 2005 as a result of a motorcycle traffic accident in Brooklyn. After a major 2007 exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris)—*La Marque Noire* (The Black Mark)/*Steven Parrino Retrospective, Perspective*, and a commercial presentation at Gagosian Gallery (Madison Avenue), Parrino’s work has been infrequently shown in group and solo exhibitions.

Now, a selection of paintings and drawings can be viewed at Skarstedt’s luxe gallery at 19 East 64th Street, the former home of Wildenstein & Co., a fabled Old Masters and Impressionists gallery. The five-story tall, limestone edifice was built in 1932 by Horace Trumbauer, a prominent architect from the Gilded Age into the Great Depression, who was something of a time traveler. He mastered several historic styles for his clients, building suburban estates and urban townhouses for the American tycoons who typified the era. Interiors were often fashioned by the Paris firm of Allard et Fils, one of several decorators he would use. Wildenstein & Co. would be Trumbauer’s final building in New York, which he lavished in a French Baroque style. “Grand elegance” was Trumbauer’s signature.

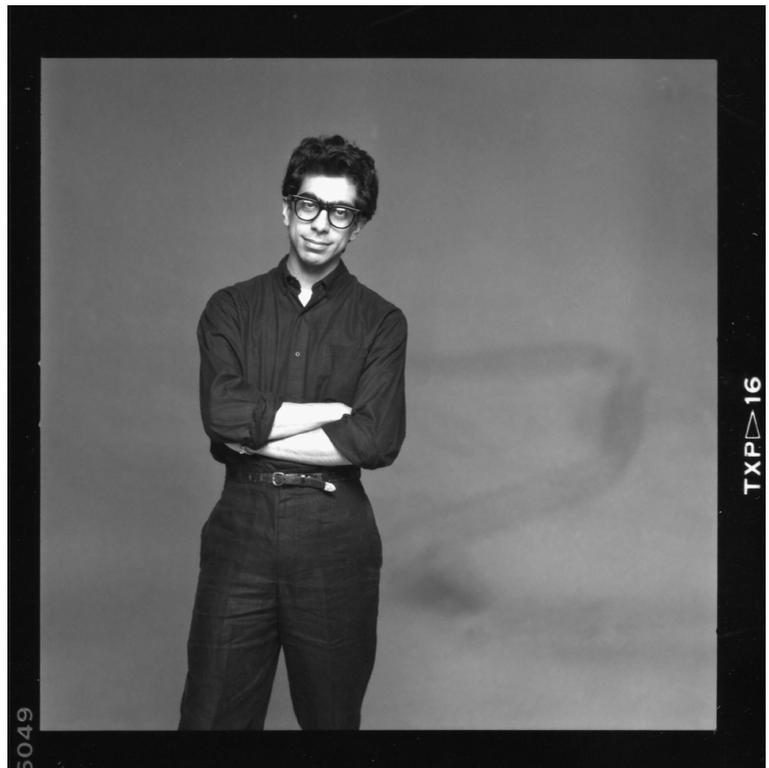


Image: Steven Parrino, 1986. © James J. Kriegsmann Jr.

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Sold several times since 2017, the modernized building became a second Upper East Side venue for Skarstedt in March 2019. The gallery's exterior is unchanged. Its interior retains the memory of Trumbauer's designs, including a dramatic staircase and 20-foot ceilings crowned with decorative moldings. Skarstedt's current space is a contrast to a conventional "white cube" gallery, pervasive in Chelsea, and an even starker difference with more bootstrap galleries Downtown.

Skarstedt's presentation of Parrino's paintings and drawings is a reminder of how the passage of time and changing contexts can dramatically alter how we view art. Steven Parrino first showed his paintings in 1984 at Nature Morte, an East 10th Street artist-run gallery. The East Village in the 1980's was the epicenter of a downtown bohemian-punk art scene rebellion, where artists challenged prevailing critical theory. Peter Nagy, one of the cofounders of the gallery commented, "Artists are basically our audience." Moreover, Nagy wrote, "What we wanted from art was a self-consciousness, in terms of the artist's position in history and potential in the marketplace. . . Surely, much of this work relies upon the historical precedent of Conceptualism for its identity." The scene was a "reinvestment of the 'young energy that in the 70's went into the rock music scene. A lot of the bands in the 70's were former art school students disillusioned with the art world.'" It was a pivotal moment in the art community, and Steven Parrino was an active participant.



Infotainment, Card, 1985.

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After completing his BFA degree at the Parsons School of Design in 1982, Parrino showed his work in gallery and institutional group exhibitions in New York and other venues in the United States and Europe. One show, *Infotainment*, was organized by Anne Livet, an independent curator, in collaboration with Nature Morte's directors, Peter Nagy and Alan Belcher. It featured the work of seventeen East Village artists, who were interested in media critique and evolving Conceptual strategies. This was in stark contrast to figuration and neo-expressionism popularized by the West Broadway galleries in SoHo.

Parrino—both artist and musician—was considered an experimental nihilist. In *THE NO TEXTS (1979-2003)*, a 2003 publication that is essentially a notebook of the artist's thoughts, Parrino said: "My relation between Rock and visual art: I will bleed for you." In this simple utterance, Parrino defined himself as an artist protagonist of a new era. His work was almost always a physical "assault" on the object. He exhibited painted environments that involved monochrome walls pounded with sledgehammers; sleek metal sculptures whose bent, folded and glued elements related to his seemingly abused and tortured canvases; and collages that pieced together newspaper stories and magazine spreads with duct tape.

After his death, the 2007 Paris exhibition at Palais de Tokyo was more than *just* a retrospective. It had three components: nearly 100 works by Parrino from 1981-2004; an exhibition of artists who had influenced him and an exhibition titled *Bastard Creature*. The latter evolved from two exhibitions of next-generation artists who Parrino supported by organizing exhibitions of their work in *Bastard Kids of Drella* (Dijon, 1999) and *The Return of the Creature* (Bregenz, 2003.) Bob Nickas, perhaps the definitive Parrino authority, wrote,

"One passes through the last fifty years of American culture in the work of Steven Parrino, from the hipsters, hot rods, grotesque queens and bikers of the 1940s/50s to the hippies, Harleys, porn stars and punks of the 60s/70s, to their re-emergence today."

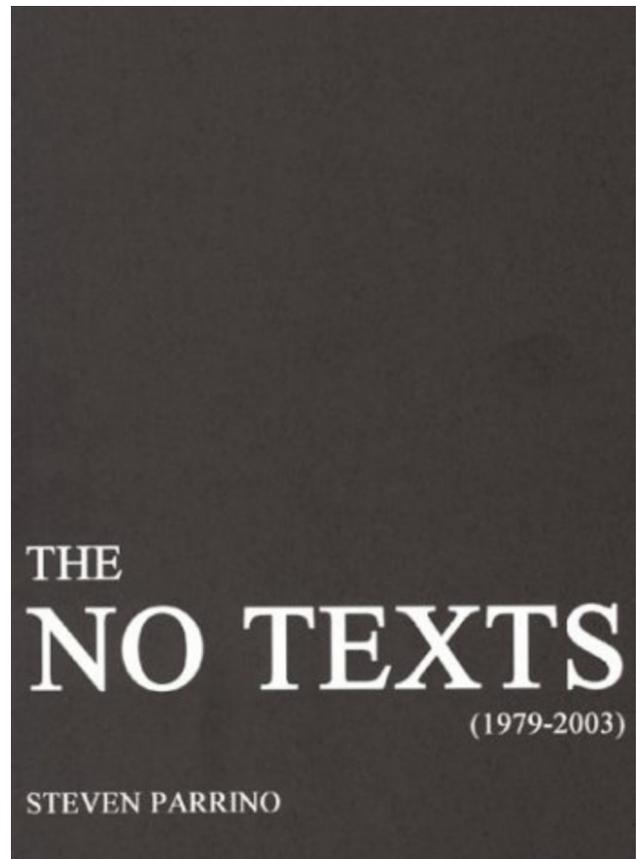


Image: Steven Parrino, *The NO TEXTS (1979-2003)*, 2003.

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The Palais de Tokyo exhibition featured work by Vito Acconci, Kenneth Anger, Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Frank Stella, Sturtevant and Andy Warhol. Nonetheless, this is only a sample of sources or influences from the Post-War avant-garde filtered by Parrino. The art that interested Parrino was in “the base of American art, starting with Johns and Rauschenberg, and pioneered by artists such as Stella, Judd and Warhol.” Throughout his brief career, Parrino was “blurring the lines between contemporary art and experimental music before it became the *passé* of every undergrad Liberal Arts major,” as Lee Escobedo wrote in 2017.

Parrino’s painting has often been characterized as rough and tough. Yet, except for experiments with shaped canvases (à la Frank Stella), his stretcher bars were often conventional, typically square or rectangular. The painted surfaces of his canvases were often monochromatic, with a preference for silver and black,

harkening back to Ad Reinhardt. Like Luciano Fontana and Piero Manzoni before him, Parrino “got physical” with his work, manipulating the canvas. But his intent and actions were entirely different, as he described:

“By unstretching the canvas, I could pull and contort the material and reattach it to the stretcher, in effect misstretching the painting, altering the state of the painting. The painting was, in a sense, deformed. This mutant form of deformed painting gave me a chance to speak about reality through abstract painting, to speak about life. (*Altered States: American Art in the 90s*, St. Louis: Forum for Contemporary Art, 1995, 7.)”

In the 2007 catalog essay for Gagosian, Vincent Pécoil, the art historian, author and curator, wrote that “the distinction between abstract painting and figurative pop art is irrelevant, for Parrino understood his work as a form of realism, as it was redefined in postwar American art.” Yet, Parrino’s art was nearly free of

precise external references; it was “informed,” to use current art speak. His art was inspired by the anarchic history of Dada.



Image: Steven Parrino, *China de Sade*, 1987.

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The majority of Parrino's exhibitions in commercial spaces calmed the restless punk agitation in his work. Such is the normalizing effect of white cube aesthetics. The most recent survey of Parrino's work at The Power Station (Dallas, 2017)—*Dancing on Graves*—offered a marked contrast to white cube exhibitions. Its raw industrial architecture was ideal for resurrecting a *sense of nihilism*. Now, in Skarstedt's decorous galleries, Parrino's paintings and drawings are elevated from Lower East Side grunge to a pristine luminosity.

In the context of Trumbauer's "grand elegance," Parrino's wall works and paintings exude sumptuous beauty and taste. His stretched and wrinkled canvases are draped as elegantly as an evening dress by the French couturier Madame Grès or as radically as the pioneering, androgynous punk fashion of Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons. *Blue Idiot* (1986), a painting with text, is a rumpled homage to Iggy Pop's 1977 debut solo album, the title of which was inspired by Dostoevsky's ironically titled novel. Parrino used certain words, like idiot, "for their physical bulk. This bulk or weight is in the look of the word, and in its meaning." *Crow-Bar Piece* (1987), a 53 x 167-inch painting, retains a destructive, punk sensibility. Skarstedt described it as "an example of his synthesis of the two most significant movements in modernism: abstract expressionism and the monochrome tradition. The black painting is altered, violated and attacked, translating Pollock's action to destruction. The corruption of the flat surface of the monochrome only re-affirms its energy and vitality."

Each of the four paintings from Parrino's *Death in America* series (2003) is a vortex, sucking the viewer in. Installed in four different galleries, their dissimilarities are not immediately apparent. Two works are the same size, 106 x 71 inches. Acrylic silver squares are rakishly draped on their stretchers. A third work is a silver neat square conventionally stretched with two additional paintings, painted and wrinkled, placed on the floor before it: success and failures. The fourth painting is a large canvas with a silver- and white-striped square image, again relaxing elegantly on its stretcher bars.



Image: Steven Parrino, *Blue Idiot*, 1986.

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In addition to his paintings, Skarstedt is presenting a series of black and white photo-collages from Parrino's 1994 *Amphetamine Monster-Mill* series that were first exhibited in 1995 at Art & Public in Geneva. The photo-collages—each of which is something of a time capsule—elevate the aesthetics of negativity, focusing on punk counterculture. Shown in the small gallery adjacent to the reception area, this series of works on paper is the most visceral evidence of Parrino's art (and humor).



Steven Parrino. *Untitled (L'Idiot) #20, Amphetamine Monster-Mill*, 1994.

As might be expected, many of these paintings and drawings have been seen before as they have cycled through surveys and group exhibitions. But at Skarstedt, the retinal joy borders on exuberant, even with the collages. Previously, Nickas described Parrino's work as "autonomous, uncompromising, and tough as nails." This exhibition is a reminder about how in art, as in life, time softens the urgency of methods and generational anxieties. As Parrino concluded in his artist's statement "The Disorder of Black Matter" for the Swiss Institute's 2-person show "BLACK BONDS / Jutta Koether & Steven Parrino" in 2002,

"It may sound strange to say, but I still think that painting should arrive towards the highest quality (advanced painting). Painting can be beautiful and vital (maybe more now, since the art world is based, or shall I say debased, by the ordinary on a colossal scale.)"

His work, even when it seems more intentionally disruptive, possesses both grand elegance and eloquence—a combination that is unusual in contemporary art. In his own words, Parrino summarized that his "work does not function as an illustration for an idea. The painting is not a picture, not a representation of something, but a concrete fact. Art must exist on a human level and deal with, experience on that level."