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MONOPOL

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painter Marco Pariani

"Sometimes I'm even dancing while I'm picking a brush"



Photo: Thomas McCarty
Marco Pariani in his studio

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It starts with an idea and a screenshot, and ends with abstract images. The path to this is joy and the struggle with colors. The artist Marco Pariani spoke to us about this pleasurable process before his London exhibition.

Marco Pariani's color language is colorful, sometimes shrill. His compositions appear playful, sometimes delicate, sometimes rough. He places them like still lifes in the middle of the canvas against a mostly monochrome background. But what at first glance might still be reminiscent of figures quickly dissolves into rollercoasters of lines, towers of shapes and painterly, blurred areas of color. What is behind this? The Italian, born in 1986, is now showing new paintings in his solo exhibition *Painting Bakery* at the Skarstedt Gallery in London. He spoke to us about his current work.

Marco Pariani, one can still see objects in some of your pictures. Cars, candles, toys. Is that true?

Oh yes. I mean, I'm the only one who knows what the real subject of the painting is. I used to play a lot with titles that indicate just a part of what is represented, in order to try to put the attention somewhere else. I've always been inspired by figurative things, so I don't know if my paintings can be categorized as purely "abstract." Honestly, I don't care that much. My paintings are based on screenshots of figurative things, mostly, and tons of objects related to Christmas holiday decorations.

Christmas decorations? Are you in the Christmas spirit when you paint? A mixture of anticipation, contemplation and drunkenness? Or maybe a mix of escape and irritation?

I hate Christmas. I hate everything about it, especially the fact that you have to stay with family and give gifts as a "rule."

I've used Christmas as a reference point in my paintings for almost ten years now. I first started quoting people and their behaviors, and then I started to paint dogs dressed up for Christmas. I liked the idea of representing Christmas in my paintings just to remind to myself of what society could be for a few days. But ultimately, like I said before, the Christmas screenshots became important for colors and compositions, which is all that matters to me.

My mood while painting is a mix between enjoying the moment and fighting with colors. It's not an easy mood, but I feel great at the end. I like that everything else is disappearing while I'm working. I think just of what I'm doing, which is such a relief.

Let's talk about your new exhibition *Painting Bakery* opening October 8 at Skarstedt Gallery London. What inspired you?

I'm using pictures of gingerbread houses and cookies. It's funny to see them incorporated into my paintings. I like the colors and the way people try to decorate them. It is still something related to Christmas, but way different from inflatables and Christmas trees. The main thing will be the background. I'm working with white and black gesso, light colors and black gesso together, and blue and black. It's going to be fun!

In *Painting Bakery* there is the work *Allsorts Still Life* : a dark background, but in the middle many light, more abstract shapes. There are very painterly parts there, like in the green and yellow areas. How did these pictures come about? Are you completely detached from the original object here and are you reacting as a painter to your painterly traces? Or are you still reflecting on the process of abstraction?

It's always a feeling. I start with an idea based on the screenshots that I have, but sometimes I'm not even following them, or I follow them just in the beginning. In that part of the painting you mentioned, for example, the idea was pretty different, but I did the right part first, and I changed my mind for the left side because of the composition. I'm not thinking about abstraction while I'm making a painting. It's more like asking myself what I need in order to have a nice composition and a nice conversation between the layers and colors.

Just feelings, I guess.

In the work *A Little Face And A Bunch Of Flowers* you could see a plane flying under a rainbow. It looks very sensual, watery and you can also see the fun in the picture. In the past, dark images were often explained in terms of death and dramatic references, but in your painting there also seems to be a liberation. Or am I mistaken?

Thank you. I like that you're seeing an airplane. It could be, why not. Black is a great color. A really complicated one, but that's why I've been trying paintings with a black gesso background for a while. I've finally figured out a "solution" after trashing a lot of them.

I had to switch my thinking completely to understand how to play with the black gesso, and I also spent months with a darker background on my phone.

I like that you're seeing liberation and not dramatic references. It's good for me to hear because I have a deep feeling for colors that is way far off from moody references. I don't believe in color moods, honestly.

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Abstraction processes are different for every artist. Not only in painting. There is also abstraction in land art or conceptual art. How is it for you? Do you start in your head when you see something? Or does abstract painting just emerge spontaneously on the canvas, without a plan?

I did some figurative paintings back in the day, and one day after I was working on a background, I just said to myself, “you’re having more fun doing this part than doing the subject.” It was then that I understood it was time for me to move on. After that, I started to represent things the way I wanted to: destroying the pictures with my mind and painting them just how and where I wanted to.

For me, abstraction is seeing things differently than how they are in reality, or putting more than one thing together to create a single picture. I start in my head, but after looking at pictures. It also comes to me during the preparation of the background, but it becomes more and more clear just after all the background layers and the final drawing with the spray paint are applied.

The only spontaneous part of my work is related to the colors. Usually, I think about the colors before starting a new painting, but while I’m working on it the colors are more like a feeling.

Some things are lost in abstraction, such as the figure and its contours. What is added instead? Is it about colors and compositions? Or rather about feelings? About painterly games?

In my dream world I would love to be just a painter and avoid explaining my process or relating my paintings to what was there before in terms of the subject matter. My only interest is working between drawing and painting: the contrasts, colors, spray paint and oil paint, and the relation between the background and the subject.

For me, a good painting is done just after the colors and the composition are working great with the background.

I like that you mentioned painterly games. I think that everything I have in mind is described with these two words—the most difficult and dangerous way of making paintings.

Can you tell me more about the painting games?

Maybe we are talking about a feeling, when I’m picking up one color after another, a brush, a spray can with a different cap, and I’m enjoying my time while making a painting at the studio, like playing a good game. Something like playing as a kid.

People often avoid talking about the fun of painting. It sounds better when the artist is suffering. But artists have always enjoyed work. What exactly is this fun for you? And what advantages does it bring to painting?

I don’t know why, but people are still interested and fascinated by the suffering side of an artist. For me, it’s more like an old story that doesn’t make any sense now. Of course, suffering is part of the entire process, and part of life, but I’m always having fun in one way or another.

Fun, for me, is related to enjoying the process and the painting games—sometimes I’m even dancing while I’m picking a brush or a color.

Having fun is when the struggling and the suffering are way less present than the fun, and that brings a sort of power into the paintings. I can feel the energy at the end while looking at a finished work. But fun is not an easy thing to achieve when alone in the studio.

The painting *Umbrella Dog*, 2020 shows a composition of bundles of strokes, lines, loud and quiet colors, overpaintings and overwriting. Can you tell me more about this painting?

This painting, that I still consider one of my favorites, is from 2020. I did it during the pandemic, and I had some fun at the studio while making it. It was one of the first paintings where I used a gun-sprayed acrylic background, and the subject was a composite of screenshots of dressed up dogs (I worked with that imagery for years).

This painting was pretty fast in terms of arriving at the subject, and it was great working on it because of the size, too. I like the upper part with just a “game” of spray paint. The overwriting is “MP 20.” I did this kind of signature for the entirety of 2020 because I felt that I needed that during that year, and it was working well with the subject too.

How did the practice of spraying paint come about? Are you also interested in graffiti and post-vandalism painting on the street?

In the first painting I really did, back in 2005, I used oil and spray paint like I’m doing now. I’ve always had a feeling for spray paint, the colors and all the different caps available to make tons of different lines.

Spray paint is a difficult tool, and I’ve always been fascinated by the most difficult things to do in paintings. I think it’s a huge part of my work and my process.

If you mean just the use of the spray gun for the painting we discussed before, it was a tool I needed to make that kind of background. I’m always doing research. I’m obsessed by materials and colors.

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Graffiti has always been a great inspiration for my work. I remember in middle school I had a graffiti diary with tons of pictures, and I was drawing characters and my name in an old school graffiti style. I like the energy that graffiti bring to a city, the colors and the way they interact with the buildings. When I moved to Brooklyn, in 2019, I started shooting graffiti on box trucks. I have more than a thousand pictures and it's been an inspiration for colors and backgrounds too.

I don't think I could live in a city without graffiti. It's a bad sign culturally. That's one of the reasons why I love Brooklyn so much.

Watermelon Idea, 2021 is a typical composition of yours: colorful backgrounds and a kind of still life in the middle. But it is not really a still life, but abstract painting. Do the abstract forms become new objects that we do not yet know? Floating constructions?

This is a really good point of view because a few years ago, after a studio visit with a writer, the concept of floating constructions and still lives came up. He was looking at my paintings in the studio and he mentioned the subject as a landscape and still life, and we spoke about them as floating objects surrounded by a "frame" that I typically use to give the abstract forms the right power and make them breathe.

During that visit, I was amazed because I was working on paintings of Christmas inflatables—that was my first solo exhibition at Skarstedt Gallery, London, in 2022—and that made me think about the inflatables as landscapes, as objects laying on the ground surrounded by another landscape, which becomes part of an entire landscape itself. After that, I started working on a series of paintings that was part of Landscaping, my most recent solo exhibition at Skarstedt Gallery, Paris in September of last year.

Or is it more of an illusion? Should we look at abstract painting as if we were looking at a table set? Is that perhaps a good approach? To consider its elements as real as a fork and a plate?

Of course, the elements are real for me, but I can understand that they could not be real for many people that are looking at my paintings. The illusion is related to what I'm trying to represent, but I don't want to show it clearly. It's a game that I like to play a lot and that is keeping me busy. I like to hear people seeing something that is not even close to what the real subject is. It makes me think about abstraction.

What did you actually play as a child?

Football. I was so bad, but it was so much fun. I also grew up surrounded by fields. I played a lot, I was a savage.

Today you live in New York. What do you see as the main differences between abstract painting in the 20th century, for example between the New York Abstract Expressionists, and abstract painting today?

I think the main difference is that now we are making paintings after the digital era, with video games and computers, and cartoons. I think that these elements have been part of our childhood and brought us to a point of seeing things in a different way. We also need to be not just painters, but a lot of different things related to social media and communication.

I think that they were more focused on doing something "new," something powerful in a painterly meaning. And now we are, or we have to be, more focused on creating a story around what we are doing. Take Pollock for example. I mean, can you imagine a young abstract painter doing something similar right now?

We also have to deal with the "it's already been done" thing, but I think we are lucky to be here. We understand the idea of freedom and being ourselves, of being true to what we are doing at the studio.

I have a good friend of mine, he's 84 now, and he moved in NYC late in the '60s, and he tells me all the old stories, some of them involving meetings with people like de Kooning. And based on what he's telling me, I can confirm my point of view: they were more focused on the painterly side of doing things, on the persona at the studio, not outside of it. They were focused on dealing with the medium in the most scary and dangerous way, alone without having the possibilities to "share" their artworks quickly and easily on social media or a website.

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How do you deal with this “it's already been done” thing? Are there things you forbid yourself because of it? What can you still do and what not? Or to put it another way: Are there also things in painting that you can do today but couldn't do in the past?

The already been done thing doesn't bother me. I know what I'm doing at the studio and I've been working hard for a while now. I don't care for people that are always relating paintings to the great masters or other living artists.

I think we have to learn from the past and I think that painting is a really old way to express what we have in mind or our feelings, and sometimes we have some similar feelings, like in daily life too. I'm not talking about copying, but just using the same power while moving a brush on canvas, dripping the colors and a lot of different details.

I can see from books that the freedom that painters reached in the past is still contemporary. There are some old paintings that could be dated 2024 really easily. That's what I'm talking about.

I'm a pretty gestural painter naturally, so yes, I forbid myself to be too gestural to avoid having a final result that could be more like a painting from the '70s and not contemporary. That's why I use to keep a frame all around my subjects, for example. I think it gives them more power and it's something “new.”

The things we can do today are related to materials mostly. We have tons of possibilities, but I think it's more that there are things they did in the past that we can't do right now. For example, Cy Twombly. The gesture and the power of his work, it's been done from him and it's impossible to do it again now.

I think in the past painters had the possibility of doing new things, even the most insane, gestural paintings.

Now we have the same possibility of doing something new, based just on what we are, the most real we are while working, and the most interesting thing is the final result.

It's really hard to explain. It's a bunch of really interesting questions, but it's hard to explain a relationship between the past and the present. Painting has always been a huge dilemma, and it still is for me too.