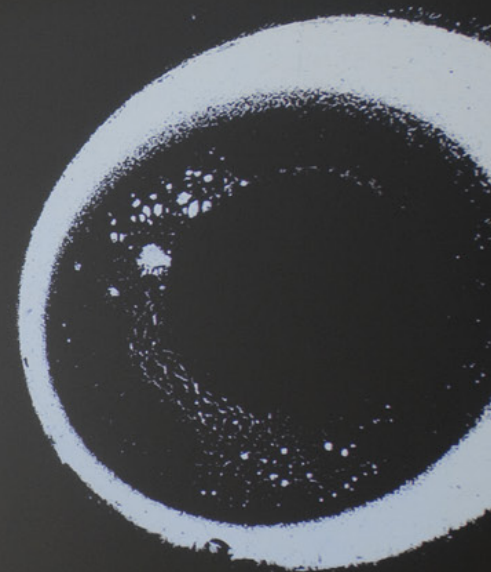


art

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ALDO TAMBELLINI

We are the Primitives of a New Era

PAVEL ACOSTA
AARON FLINT JAMISON
PABLO HELGUERA
LONELY GIRL
PAUL FEELEY
JOHN McCracken
ANNE TRUITT
BRAZILIAN NEO-CONCRETE ART
CAROL BOVE
JANET CARDIFF
CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART



PAVEL ACOSTA

Interview With a Thief

By Elvis Fuentes



Left. MACARRULLA, MANUEL, *Goat Song #5: Tumult on George Washington Avenue*, 1988, Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 x 1 in. (182.9 x 243.8 x 2.5 cm). Courtesy: Museo del Barrio, New York.

Right. PAVEL ACOSTA, *Wallscape*, 2013. Intervention in the permanent collection of El Museo del Barrio, 200in X160 in (508-406.4 cm)
La Bienal: *This is where we Jump*. New York, 2013. Courtesy: Museo del Barrio, New York.



Top. MACARRULLA, MANUEL, *Goat Song #5: Tumult on George Washington Avenue*, 1988, Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 x 1 in. (182.9 x 243.8 x 2.5 cm). Courtesy: Museo del Barrio, New York.
 Below. PAVEL ACOSTA, *Wallscapes*, 2013. Intervention in the permanent collection of El Museo del Barrio, 200in X160 in (508-406.4 cm) La Bial: This is where we Jump. New York, 2013. Courtesy: Museo del Barrio, New York.

PAVEL ACOSTA DOES NOT STRIKE YOU AS THE TYPICAL THIEF. He is too tall to pass by unnoticed. He is soft spoken and humorous. He is not fast enough to escape from the cops nor does he have a special nightly vision. Also, he is not agile enough to sneak into a heavily guarded building, unless said building is an art museum or gallery where he wants to exhibit his work, rather than steal the work of others. And yet, Acosta has made a career as an artist who focuses on stealing as a widespread and socially accepted practice in Cuba. He used to gather paint chips from old cars and building façades in El Cerro, a sprawling and overpopulated Havana neighborhood. He called this series, *Stolen Paint*, and he produced many works by applying the chips onto the canvases using the technique of collage. I visited his studio in Guttenberg, New Jersey (a 20-minute ride to midtown Manhattan via the Lincoln Tunnel), where he is preparing his first solo exhibition in the United States. The show will be curated by no other than legendary art dealer Bernice Steinbaum for Zadok Gallery in Miami. In the making are a series of life-size recreations of masterpieces from the history of art. Although Acosta can now afford expensive art materials that were out of reach while living in Cuba, he cannot help but to continue his old vice of stealing- only this time, the targets are merely images and walls from the fortified New York art museums.

Elvis Fuentes: How has New York impacted you in the three years you have been here?

Pavel Acosta: It is hard to say, but it has definitely impacted me in many ways, particularly the way I see art and painting.

EF: How is that?

PA: Well, in the sense that what I have seen exceeded my expectations. I knew that there was good painting, from seeing them in books and magazines, but I did not know that it was so good! I did not know that they were so good. It is different from what I thought, painters like Velazquez, Rembrandt, El Greco, David. It has been like resetting my own idea of what a good painting is. My visits to the Metropolitan have been really influential.

EF: How did you respond to that?

PA: I think that instinctively, I reacted by conceiving this new series of *Wallscapes*, in which I take layers of paint from the walls where these paintings have been hung to recreate the pictures. The physicality of this experience of encountering what is visually familiar but physically strange is somehow expressed there; however, like most of my work, it is very intuitive.

EF: So, this series of *Wallscapes* is entirely a result of experiencing New York?

PA: Yes, definitely. They have been made entirely here in New

York. Despite the fact that I use the same operation and technique that I have been using in my series of *Stolen Paint*, the structure is different, being much more complex and challenging. The technique for *Stolen Paint* consisted of using layers of paint to create images by means of collage. Usually these layers were symbolically stolen from old surfaces of ruinous building and cars in Havana. It was my way of reacting to the socially accepted act of stealing as a survival tactic. Now I pretty much do the same in the micro scale of creating the image, but neither the structure that supports the image nor the ideas behind it are the same. The process is now more concerned with striking a balance between my conceptual approach to painting, and the realization of a good painting, as good as the ones I have encountered at the Metropolitan Museum. My approach to painting has always implied a process-based or even performative nature. The newly added aspect to that approach would be that of a painstaking emulation of the old masters.

EF: But isn't this something you always did?

PA: One always looks up to the great artists, but there is something about seeing so many of them in so many different museums in New York that really struck me. Then I felt like an outsider all over again because I was no longer in Cuba, where I could access the institution because I knew people. Here I was, basically living the experience of the newly arrived immigrant, and all I wanted was to be able to access those institutions where I wished to show my work, but were now closed to me. This is how the idea of the Wallscapes, or thinking of something that will engage the museum, came about.

EF: Thus, the possibility of working on a site-specific project for El Museo del Barrio's Bienal was a good sign. How did it happen?

PA: Yes, of course, it has been great. The strategy worked; I designed something for El Museo, and after the curators of the Biennial visited me, I think they were interested in realizing this project. I asked for a wall in a gallery, and I wanted to peel off the paint from that wall in order to reproduce whatever was in front of it. It had to be in the permanent collection because I need to know in advance what I would reproduce. So, we did it exactly like that. The work in front of my wall was a carnival painting by Manuel Macarulla. This was interesting even for me because although I was going to do the same with whatever work they placed in front of me, the fact that it was an image of a carnival really surprised me and added more possibilities to the work in terms of content. It felt like what I was doing in reproducing this colorful work using the paint layers, mostly variations of white, was somehow a second peeling of the colors of the painting. Carnival is all about the flesh, and Macarulla's painting conveyed that. Thus, by re-creating it in whites, I felt like I was doing what many white-cube museums do: sucking up the colors of the painting to leave it lifeless.



PAVEL ACOSTA
Marina 1. From the Series: *Stolen Paint*.
 Recycled paint/canvas, 122X92cm, 2012
 Courtesy: Pavel Acosta



PAVEL ACOSTA, *Wallscape* (detail), 2013. Intervention in the permanent collection of El Museo del Barrio, 200in X160 in (508-406.4 cm)
La Bial: *This is where we Jump*. New York, 2013. Courtesy: Museo del Barrio, New York.



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EF: But as you said, this only happened because the work was this carnival painting. What if the painting in front of you was a minimalist painting?

PA: It would have been very different. I only need to experience what that would be like. But in any case, I feel strongly about this work because it is not just about the painting I was reproducing. Nor was it a simplistic device to get inside the institution. I think that this project also challenges the institution in a more physical kind of way. For instance, this is not a self-contained object, but something that directly affects the physicality of the museum because I intervened the wall in a way that is not possible to be repaired. There is no turning back. The way forward forces the institution to destroy the wall and create a new one, which is a metaphor for challenging the institution to periodically renew itself. I am always interested in working in this metaphorical plane as well.

EF: Now, let's talk about photography because you are working on something new.

PA: Yes, I have a new series, but it does not have a title yet. It is basically dealing with the idea of ripping still life images of their colors.

EF: They are white, so the result is very similar to that of Wallscapes.

PA: Well, that is interesting because it was not conscious. Actually, I started working on these photographs before I prepared the project for El Museo. I usually do not see the different mediums as separated from one another. I see them as tools that I have at my disposition to explore certain ideas, and I choose the medium almost instinctively. In that sense, it is a lot like what I was taught during my art education in Cuba – you pick the medium according to the necessity you may have to convey an idea or to create an image that you have in mind. So the fact that the photographs of de-colored still lifes and Wallscapes are white is purely coincidental.

EF: However, you have used painting and photography more frequently than three-dimensional mediums like sculpture and installation.

PA: That is true, but I must note that my process, either in painting or photography, involves some sort of performative aspect either on my part, like in these paintings in which I peel off layers of paint to use as material, or on the part of the subject that I photograph in my series of *Stolen Ethnic Background*. In this case, I asked people to pose for a portrait facing the sun. I was aiming at making them look like having this Asiatic feature, the typical almond-shaped eyes. It also implies the self-referentiality of the idea to photography because I was using light, the very material of the medium, to undermine its credibility as a repre-

sentation tool. But I also like to mix the mediums with a type of work that is unconventional.

We spoke a lot more about his art education in Cuba, his years with art collective ENEMA, which proved very influential, and the persistent error of his year of birth, which appeared as 1980 in *The New York Times'* rave review of *Wallscape*. As I left, I instinctively checked my pockets to make sure all was there and found out that he had slipped in a postcard announcing a group show in which he is included. Sometimes a thief may not want to take something from you; rather, he may just play a game to leave his mark.