

BEN BROWN FINE ARTS



José Parlá, *Seeing is Believing*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, 182.9 x 365.8 cm. (72 x 144 in.)

JOSÉ PARLÁ *PHOSPHENE*

11 October – 16 November 2023

PRIVATE VIEW: Tuesday, 10 October, 6-8PM (BST)

"Through 'Phosphene' I envision a community of memories to both stimulate and provoke questions in the imaginations of those looking at my paintings. This is a universal language for all human beings, so that it unifies, not separates, us." – José Parlá

Ben Brown Fine Arts is proud to present *Phosphene*, an exhibition of new works by New York-based Cuban artist José Parlá at the flagship London gallery from 11 October to 16 November 2023, coinciding with Frieze London. This will be the artist's second solo exhibition in the Mayfair space, following his highly acclaimed *Echo of Impressions* show in 2018. *Phosphene* forms the second part of a comprehensive exhibition that was preceded by earlier paintings from this series at our Hong Kong gallery in March 2023.

The significance of these works lies, in part, from their inspiration following the artist's near-death experience with Covid (2021) and unveils an exhilarating and poignant exhibition drawing on recurring themes in his practice, including urban space, human markings, memory and energy.

Parlá's *Phosphene* series began while the artist spent time in his hometown of Miami, Florida, during what was meant to be a brief period of respite between his schedule of exhibitions around the world. There, surrounded by nature and brilliant sunlight, the artist began to experiment with painting outdoors – a stark contrast to his industrial studio in Brooklyn – using the sun to elucidate the abstract visual language in his mind. This exhibition takes its title from the visual phenomenon that gives the impression of seeing light with eyes closed. Appearing as flashes of colourful light, such as dots, swirls or shapes that wander slowly across a person's vision, the term 'phosphene' is derived from Greek *phōs* 'light' + *phainein* 'to show'.

For Parlá's new body of work, the meditative sensation of letting the sun briefly penetrate his retina, producing an effect of hues, images and shapes appearing behind closed lids, was immediately translated to his paintings, creating mysterious, evocative landscapes of light and shadow. His intricately layered, seemingly asemic calligraphy, suggestive of optic nerves or arterial threads, is charged with obscured words and phrases, carriers of meaning in each work. This exhibition further explores his gestural, instinctual practice of calligraphy as a meditative, rhythmic process to his subconscious and interiority, the layers of inscrutable writing imbuing his paintings with both light and depth. The movement in the work is also reflective of the unique symbiosis Parlá experiences between sound and colour, listening to music as he paints to create a unique visual language, a form of synesthesia.

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Phosphene is comprised of eleven pulsating works executed during this fertile period of *en plein air* painting, which build upon the experimental phenomenon of retinal closed-eye hallucinations and conjure complex memory abstractions as a dense maze of paints and textures. The works continue Parlá's lifelong dialogue with the urban subconscious, the tempo and flow of the streets, and musical inspirations such as his roots in the conception days of Hip Hop culture. Furthermore, they are imbued with a quiet yet powerful spirit of survival that calls us to consider notions of legacy, ownership, and the imprints we leave behind.

"When I paint, I experience the feeling of synesthesia that brings my body into the painting. There is an alchemical connection through material, music and movement that becomes the dance that incorporates polyrhythms of Cuban music, and Hip Hop into the language of my gestural mark making. That energy is both personal and provocative." – José Parlá

Parlá is celebrated for his arrestingly energized paintings and installations that offer an abstract, visceral form of storytelling through palimpsestic layers of mixed media and dynamic calligraphic writing, accessing memory, history, language, and the universality of the human experience. In a rich building up of surface, his signature gestural line recalls the layers of city walls as witnesses that allude to the passage of time and to the theatre of life. They reflect the movement and textures of neighbourhoods, the physical impressions left around cities by time and people, and the inspirations and experiences which imprint on our psyche, weaving together the stories of Parlá's recent past and at the same time exploring the collective memories of the world through which he travels. This exhibition further explores his gestural, instinctual practice of calligraphy as a meditative, rhythmic process to his subconscious and interiority, the layers of inscrutable writing imbuing his paintings with both light and depth.

"My intention in this work is to invite a meditation and a question – what do we see and what do we imagine when we close our eyes? What does it transcend us to? Where does it take us to?" – José Parlá



Photography © Rey Parlá, Courtesy of Parlá Studios

ABOUT JOSÉ PARLÁ

José Parlá (b. 1973, Miami, USA) is a critically acclaimed, multidisciplinary artist working in painting, large-scale murals, photography, video, and sculpture. He started painting walls in Miami's underground art scene of the early 1980s and went to study at Miami Dade Community College, New World School of the Arts and Savannah College of Art & Design. Parlá's work has been exhibited at The Bronx Museum, The Bronx, NY; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Istanbul'74, Istanbul; SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA; Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY; National YoungArts Foundation, Miami, FL; Van Every/Smith Galleries, Davidson, NC; and the Havana Biennial, Havana, among others. Parlá's work is in several public collections including the British Museum, London; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; POLA Museum of Art, Hakone; and the National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana. Permanent Public Arts projects include commissions by New York City Department of Design and Construction Queens Public Library, New York, NY; The University of Texas, Austin, TX; One World Trade Center for his monumental mural painting, *ONE: Union of the Senses*, the largest painting of its kind in New York City, in the tallest building in the Western Hemisphere; Barclays Center, New York, NY; Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, NY; André Balazs' Chiltern Firehouse, London; North Carolina State University's Hunt Library by Snøhetta; and at Concord City Place, Toronto. Parlá currently has five large-scale landscape paintings featured in *Brooklyn Abstractions: Four Artists, Four Walls* at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY.

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