



A Method to Their Sadness

Part painter, part printmaker, Enoc Perez renders unrequited love and urban isolation

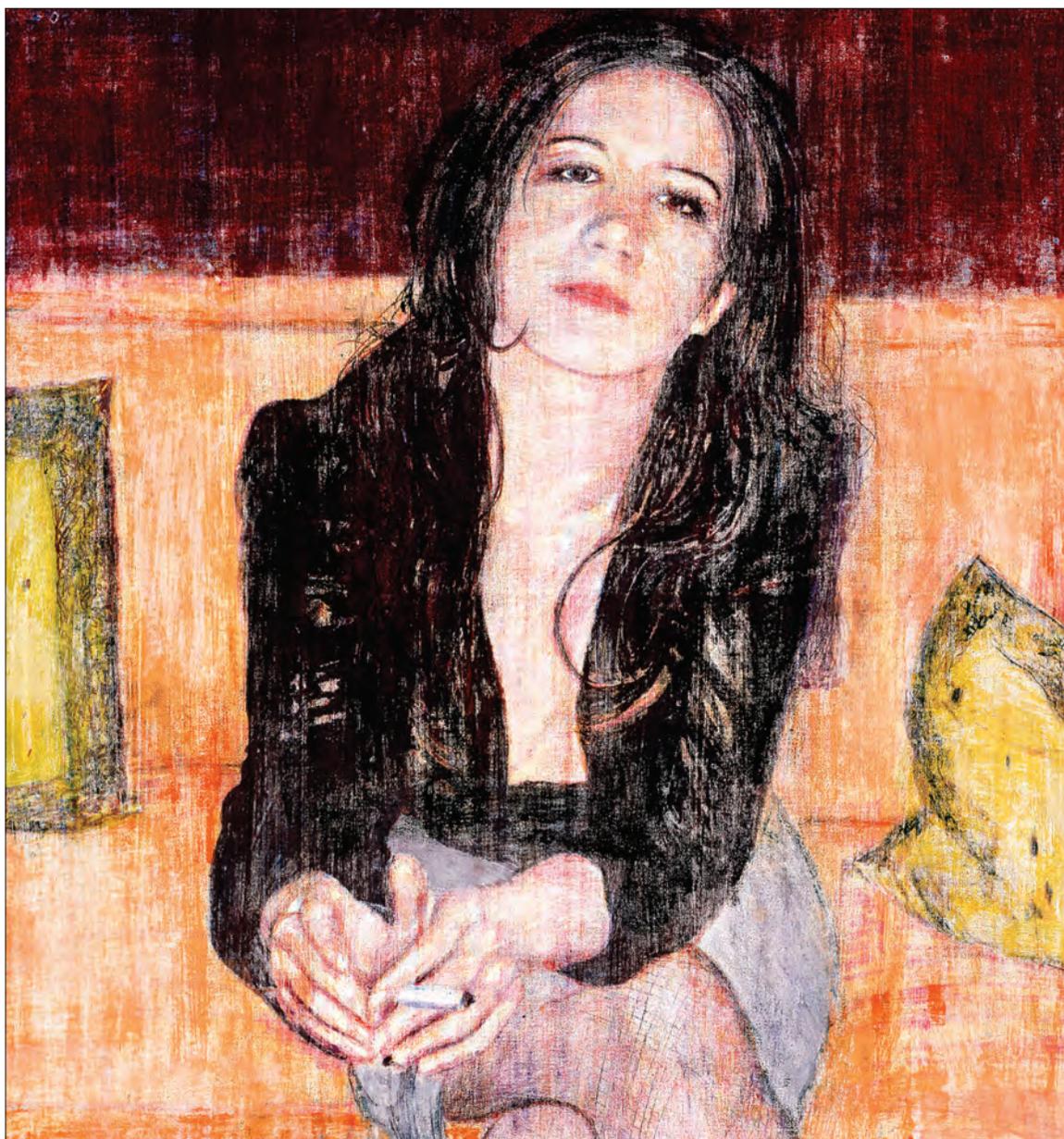
BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

Whether painting beautiful women who seem just out of reach, shimmering Modernist buildings, or half-empty glasses after an evening's bacchanal, Enoc Perez conveys an affecting blend of glamour and isolation, optimism and loneliness.

"My work always has this sense of melancholy in it," says the 41-year-old artist, who has new series of large-scale architectural paintings, portraits, and still lifes on view at Galerie Michael Janssen in Berlin through the 20th of this month. "We are not necessarily going through the happiest of times in terms of the news. I'm not really interested in a narrative, but I can tell you how

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it feels to be around today through my palette.”

Born in Puerto Rico, Perez moved to New York in 1986 to study at Pratt Institute and has made the city his home ever since. The son of José Antonio Peréz, a prominent art critic in San Juan, Perez grew up immersed in the language of art. “One of the most important things I learned from my father was to respect artists,” says Perez, who throughout his childhood and adolescence was tutored privately in classical painting by artist friends of his family. He traveled extensively with his father to museums, where he would collect postcards in order to paint his own versions. After graduating from Pratt in 1990, he went on to earn his M.F.A. at Hunter College in 1992.

Long enamored with Andy Warhol’s silk

OPPOSITE Enoc Perez and Gold Lever House, 2007, in his Midtown Manhattan studio.

ABOVE Carole, 2002, a portrait of the artist’s wife, jewelry designer Carole LeBris.

screens, Perez says he became interested in the idea of “manufacturing” paintings. He created his own print-based technique with an eye to Warhol’s production methods, as well as those of artists like Malcolm Morley, who uses grids, and Roy Lichtenstein with his systematic dots.

“I wanted to build upon some of the discoveries that these artists have brought to the table,” says the dark-haired, wiry Perez, who hasn’t lost his boyish enthusiasm for art or his thick Puerto Rican accent. “How do you make a painting that acknowledges art history and, hopefully, moves it forward?” Sitting in his studio one block from the Empire State Building, Perez—who last year had a baby boy with his second wife, jewelry designer Carole LeBris—describes how he first experimented

with monochrome canvases and printmaking while at Hunter. By drawing on a piece of paper with a coating of black oil stick on the back of it—a medium used by Jean-Michel Basquiat, who also influenced Perez—he could transfer images to his canvas without using a brush. After graduating he found himself attracted to the quality of copies produced by the four bottles of color in a Xerox machine. “I thought if I could do this with my method of transferring the drawings onto the canvas, maybe I’d have something interesting,” he says.

Perez began with the colors used to reproduce images in printing: magenta, cyan, yellow, and black. Working from his own photographs as well as those he found in books and on postcards, he faithfully drew the images on paper with the aid of a projector. Color-separating the source photograph by eye, he would make an identical drawing for each color, which he applied with oil stick to the back of the paper. Placing each drawing on his canvas, he redrew his images, pressing the colors into the painting like carbon copies, layer upon layer, to build composite images. When he couldn’t get exactly what he wanted with four colors, he added as many as 30 in his painstaking process and used extra little pieces of paper with paint on the back to accentuate certain areas with more pigment.

The striking results have the grainy, streaky

quality of old photographs, an effect Perez enhances by wiping his oil paints lightly with cloth before transferring them to the canvas, which he has covered with gesso to bring out the texture. “I thought it would be pointless to silk-screen on canvas after it had been so mastered

by Warhol,” says Perez. “I wanted to find something different that had a relationship to printmaking.”

While honing this technique during the mid-1990s, Perez was also going through a divorce that left him consumed with the idea of love. His artistic process may be rooted in the history of painting and printmaking, but the content of his imagery is deeply personal. “I started taking pictures of women I was secretly in love with. I’d go back to my studio and make these shrines,” says Perez. He snapped his subjects walking casually down the street or sitting intimately in bars with their boyfriends, whom the artist



Perez's Lovers, 2008, was inspired by Picasso's Blue Period portraits.

would edit out—except, perhaps, for a hand to indicate the women's inaccessibility. Perez first exhibited this work in 1998 at the Bronwyn Keenan Gallery in New York, in a show titled “A Year Without Love.”

Eventually, Perez met his future wife, whom he's painted many times. One ravishing portrait done while she was pregnant was in his show “Faraway” at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris last year. He encoded their early courtship in still lifes of chocolates and empty glasses, and in the first

building he painted, in 2001: a sleek Modernist San Juan hotel called the Normandie, built by an architect there to please his French wife (LeBris is also French). Perez snapped a photo of the hotel from a taxi window; attracted to its aesthetic, he obsessively sought out and painted similar buildings, seeing them as ready-made sculptures. He often worked from vintage postcards tinged with the retro palette that infuses these paintings—portraits, as he sees them—with a sense of nostalgia. They were shown as a group in 2003 at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York.

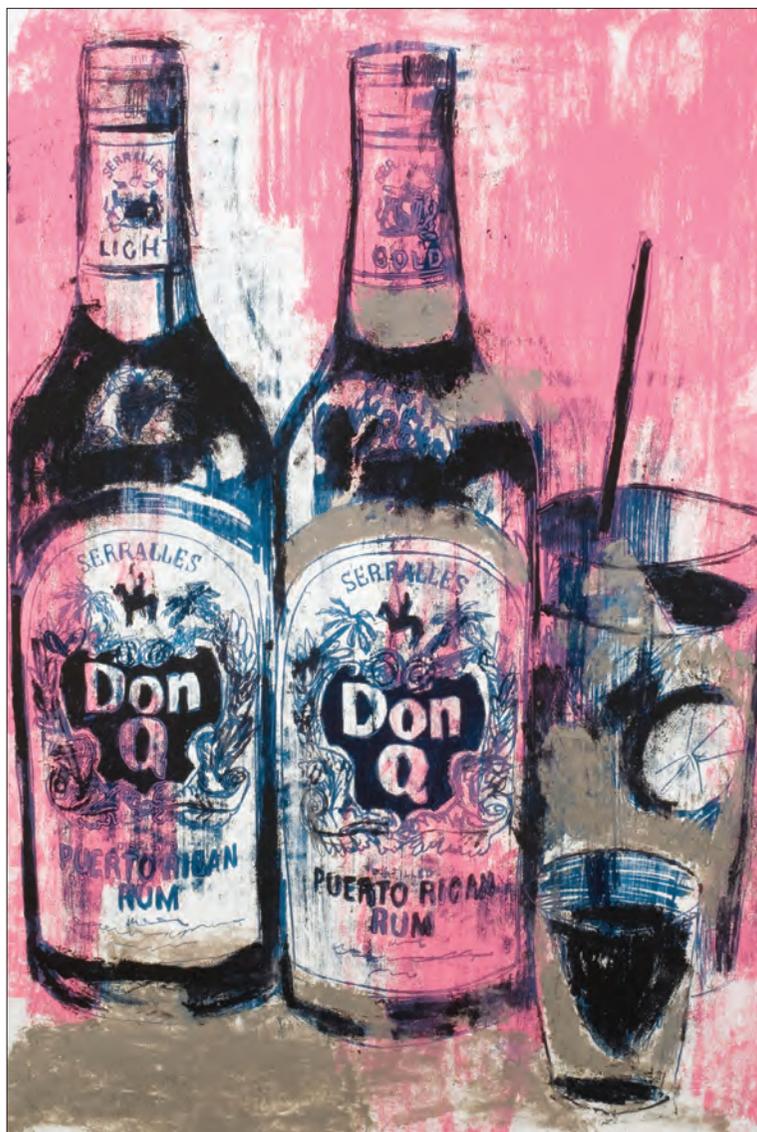
For Perez, the Modernist buildings in his adopted hometown—long viewed as emblems of hope—took on a layer of sadness and dread in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001. He explored this psychological dynamic by turning his focus to the iconic skyscrapers populating the canyons of Midtown near his studio. In his 2006 show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash—where his work sells for up to \$300,000—Perez

presented the Seagram Building, the MetLife Building, and the United Nations building, among others, as haunting and stoic, with rows and rows of gridded windows in moody hues. In a commission for Lever House—shown in the building’s lobby gallery last year—Perez pushed the abstraction further. Evoking Warhol’s serial Marilyns and Monet’s cycle of haystacks in different weather and light, he duplicated the Lever House facade in five canvases with shifting palettes, using metallic paint in two of them that renders the form ethereal.

Perez describes the process of making the New York buildings as punishing. “I felt like I was building them, going floor by floor. It was very obsessive,” he says. He worked from the top down within grids. Once he had laid down the basic structure, he used little pieces of paper with

paint to enrich the color window by window. “I couldn’t pick up a brush because the minute I pick up a brush, I lose. I’d be cheating.”

While such rules have always been an important conceptual framework for Perez, his recent series depicting large twin Puerto Rican rum bottles—included earlier this year in his first solo U.S. museum show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami—and the portraits on view at Michael Janssen mark the beginning of a looser approach. He still isn’t using a paintbrush, but he’s applying more expressionistic passages of color piecemeal with bits of paper rather than placing down full layers of color. “These aren’t so concerned about representation, and there’s nothing natural about the colors,” he



Perez invokes his Puerto Rican heritage in *Don Q*, 2007.

says, looking at the pairs of oversize rum bottles that line two walls of his studio. “I feel that I need to break my own rules a little bit to see what I discover.”

Perez is remarkably open to a wide range of influences and art forms—from Godard to Chris Rock, from salsa to hip-hop, from Velázquez to Jeff Koons, whom he admires for broadening the definition of what an artist can be. “I like some art better than other, but I don’t really hate any art,” he says. “The more you like, the better.” ■