JORGE PARDO, *Untitled*, 2002. Walnut wood tables and chairs, colored spackle inlay, blown colored glass, polished aluminum, and 186 light fixtures. Overall: 10 x 20 x 20 m. Installation view, Abgeordneten-Restaurant, Paul-Löbe-Haus, Berlin

jorge pardo

ART AND NOT

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Jorge Pardo couches his ontological investigations in delicious colors and shapes. His paradoxical sculptural constructions may be as *comfortable as an armchair*—to recall Henri Matisse's ambition for his painting—and at the same time engage a nearly opposite Duchampian problematic of ever-shifting grounds of aesthetic experience. Few artists have become so well-known for their seductive involvement in craft and color, and at the same time for their ability to sustain a philosophical discourse about the very nature of artistic practice.

When is a house not a house? Pardo built his own residence, *4166 Sea View Lane*, as an exhibition for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 1998. After being opened to the public for the exhibition, the approximately 3,000-square-foot, three-bedroom sculpture built in the Mt. Washington neighborhood of Los Angeles is now in fact the artist's family home. This begs the question: now that it is no longer open to the public as an artwork, is it still art? Such open-ended questions form the basis of much of Pardo's aesthetic and ontological provocations.

Formally, *4166 Seaview Lane* shares a great deal with the tradition of utopian mid-century modernist domestic architecture especially associated with Los Angeles—most notably the single-family Case Study houses built in the 1960s and '70s. Unlike those mostly rectilinear, steel-and-glass forms blurring inside and outside into one ordered, photogenic geometry, Pardo's house presents an *un*-photogenic, irregular, windowless perimeter wall of redwood siding, following (not

slicing into) the falling contour of its site and largely eschewing scenic views from its hillside location. The room-wide structure coils around a sloping interior courtyard, foiling the photographic gestalt and hinting at its self-involved ontological concerns. Rooms are arranged with less attention to visually and spatially determined sight lines than to a deadpan order of daily experience: sleep, bathe, cook, live, work. That said, the house's complex shapes, expressed mainly in wood and the liberal use of interior color attached to the artist-designed, built-in, and free-standing furniture and accessories, assemble into a quite lively and comfortable whole. Within that inviting domestic frame are numerous more subtle visual games that reinforce the understanding that the design of this *private* space is definitely intended to engender *public* discourse.

Pardo's house is one of many worldly utilitarian constructions, at the core of his oeuvre, that the artist has designed and built. Invited to participate in *Skulptur. Projekte in Münster 1997*, Germany's decennial sculpture festival, Pardo set a long wooden pier into the town's scenic lake. At the terminus of the pier, a walled-in enclosure at first denies the view (in the same way as the enclosure of Pardo's house), but then affords access to the lake with exterior stairs that encourage sitting and swimming. The key feature of the pavilion's interior is that it houses a cigarette machine. The pier beckons the viewer, like an ideal German Romantic subject, to venture into the midst of nature to contemplate its picturesque sublime in the manner of a Caspar David Friedrich painting. Yet Pardo's composition is phrased as a dialectic series of contrary moves: the walk invites the viewer to observe nature; the walls discourage the lookout in favor of a darkness enclosing the otherwise uber-urban, banal vending machine offering cancer-causing cigarettes; but the steps outside the walls allow a comfortable viewing space that is beautifully intensified by the measured pause and meditative sightseeing suggested by smoking a cigarette while looking into the landscape. Isn't the image of the subject smoking and gazing into the distance the contemporary filmic equivalent of Friedrich's painting?

By scripting a back and forth of visual and experiential expectations, culminating in the especially surprising inclusion of a cigarette machine within the restrained and at first unassuming monochrome abstraction of the pier, as well as by including the more subtle gesture of building the German pier out of the artist's native California Redwood, Pardo charges the work with a reflexive consciousness. Equally important, its reflexiveness is accomplished not with irony but rather a flourish of humor that makes its (German Romantic) aesthetic reference newly accessible in present experience rather than becoming a de rigueur critical/art-historical

commentary. The pier slides in and out of its artistic self-consciousness as easily as Pardo's house.

Pardo's many other projects in both public and private locales occupy a similarly ambiguous territory between social function and discursive form. The artist has built exuberant public streetlamps (*Penelope*, 2004, installed in Wolstenholme Square, Liverpool), a temporary cinema of colorful translucent walls (*Oliver, Oliver, Oliver*, 2004, installed at Braunschweig Parcours, Germany), and another private house for a client in Puerto Rico featuring an angular swimming pool lined with brightly colored tiles in a gradient of hues from red-orange to yellow-green (*House for César and Mima Reyes*, 2004). Restaurants and bars have a been a favorite genre, in part because, as venues intended for pleasurable social interaction, they are insistently contrarian to the sacred space of the churchlike museum or the utopian political aspirations of a Marxist-infused avant-garde. It's as if Pardo has tempered the visually beautiful, but perhaps ideologically overreaching, ambitions of modern art by amalgamating its forms to the everyday social experience of Bohemian café life. Pardo's insistence on making art that can also be used (not-art by traditional definition) is disarming and can even seem momentarily disingenuous to the highly rarified discourse of art criticism. But the paradoxical status of Pardo's objects as both art and not-art affords them a mobility of consideration that may offer some resistance to being quickly consumed merely as images in the catalogue of art history.

In the especially self-conscious frame of the art gallery or museum, Pardo's gestures become pointedly contrarian. In 1997, and again in 2005, Pardo introduced full-scale boats into the gallery environment. His 1997 *Untitled (Sailboat)* is sort of a Duchampian assisted readymade: a famous California sporting yacht design adjusted subtly by the artist, partly in homage to Rudolph Schindler, the great Viennese modern architect who immigrated to Los Angeles. Pardo's love of sailing, his having always lived near water, and his ever-present appreciation of Southern California's tradition of design (that of European artist-designer emigrés as well as high-tech sporting and aeronautical design and engineering) are evident autobiographical sources for the project. But the work, like his house and the pier, outputs an impersonal object with modified functionality instead of an object of private reverie. Marcel Duchamp's readymades were chosen from seemingly unassuming generic objects alchemized into the realm of aesthetic discourse by the intentionality of the artist. Pardo, by contrast, starts with an object of great inherent aesthetic merit further tuned by his own aestheticizing adjustments. In the artist's hands, the readymade sailboat trades in a tiny bit of its functionality in

order to reveal its truly monumental aesthetic potential. Duchamp's readymades are junk made resolutely art as framed by the artist's critical facility, but Pardo's sleek boats can easily slip back into the water.

Chairs, tables, and lamps; an entire bedroom set including paintings; a series of Donald Judd-esque wine coolers shown with beautiful paintings vaguely recalling Matisse cut-outs; and even weirdly shaped clocks and lamps all may comprise the non-utilitarian, "traditional" art content of a Pardo gallery exhibition. Like Matisse's painting, Pardo's art is infused with saturated color, a love of patterns within patterns, craft objects that surround everyday life with pleasurable imagery, and the suspension of time while looking (the "easy chair"). Yet, like the cigarette machine in his pier, Pardo's seductive art usually bears unexpected perversions of reading that require more complicated consideration. For example, as the vivid conceits of his gallery assemblages are dismantled into individual lamps often used to light space and his wine coolers often used to cool wine, the Duchampian mechanics of the functional object made into art are literally reversed.

The museum can provide ideal raw materials for Pardo's ontological mechanics. For example, at the Manhattan Dia Center for the Arts, the artist was commissioned by curator Lynne Cooke and myself to create a project on the ground floor of Dia's spare Richard Gluckman–designed Chelsea warehouse that had been converted into a museum. Encouraged to take license with the building, Pardo occupied and modified the entire architectural container in form and meaning. He enlarged Dia's entrance from one small door to three large transparent double doors, dissolving the glass-brick walls that obscured Dia's interior from the street into perfect transparency. He lined the gallery's floors and numerous vertical columns with an intensely colorful random array of orange, red-orange, rust, mustard, yellow, light blue, light green, and avocado, square and rectangular, shiny, glazed tiles made in Mexico. With input from Dia's staff, he redesigned the gallery's ticket-taking desks, made coat-check lockers of white-painted sheet steel and wood, and created an enlarged bookstore of equal visual weight to a gallery and separated only by a floor-to-ceiling glass wall.

Cooke collaborated closely with Pardo, absorbing his intentions, and proposed in dialogue to exhibit in the new space a clay design model for the new Volkswagen Beetle. With that gesture, the symbolic exchange was completed. The museum container was made art, and an artifact of beautiful but utilitarian function was situated as sculpture, albeit almost overwhelmed by the exuberance of its frame. Pardo reframed the object of museum display; but more importantly, he reframed the institution as a whole, exchanging Dia's quintessentially isolated,

neutral, and minimal white box for an electrically charged container visible and accessible from the street.

Perhaps the most surprising result of that contrarian reversal was the ease with which the gallery, without irony, accommodated Pardo's program. After the initial presentation, Cooke worked closely with Pardo to stage exhibitions of other artists' work, specifically the work of Gilberto Zorio and Gerhard Richter. For Zorio's viewer-participation sound work, Pardo invented a colorful serpentine curtain to enhance the visual experience of an essentially conceptual and auditory piece. Cooke's selection of Richter's work was focused on objects and paintings consisting of neutral, transparent, or reflective materials intended to absorb their environment. Pardo's wildly unneutral container only heightened the effect of Richter's constructions. By selecting objects that involved sonic and visual reverberation, Cooke creatively engaged and extended Pardo's gambit in a recursive reframing of exhibition practice.

Collaboration is an essential feature of Pardo's method, key to its making. Contexts, clients, curators, and creative assistants all figure into the final results. "I don't just enjoy collaborations," the artist says. "They have become a point of departure for the work. You can enter a discursive with the entities that are going to frame you. It's another way to add complexity to the project."[1] Pardo shuns the purity of individual artistic gesture in favor of the rich complexity of the many contingencies of any particular situation in which his work might be developed. "I'm of the generation that can't be sustained by the idea that there's purity in anything, or that works of art solely belong to the artist, or their ultimate meaning to the art historian," he says.

Pardo embeds his work in the problem of the many contingencies not only of its making (its conceptualization), but also of its reading, in the sense that his work is set up, for the viewer, to move in and out of its status as an artwork. "The gesture I make is different from a picture," he explains, "because I want the viewer to forget and remember that they're in and out of it. That's the premium space in art. Like in film, for instance: the films I like are telling stories but they're constantly reminding you that they're films." Thus, Pardo's work is less a Duchampian examination of the boundaries of what might be called art, than a pleasurable Matisse-like dance across and along those boundaries.

The sculptures in Pardo's first solo show in 1990 in Tom Solomon's Los Angeles "Garage" gallery indeed conjured Duchamp's readymades: a dish rack, baseball bats, a ladder, a shipping palette—cheap everyday objects industrially fabricated of wood. But Pardo had subtly remade and replaced some of

each object's component parts with various other woods—some quite exotic, like African Bubinga, and carefully finished with oil or lacquer; others cheap and industrial, like particleboard; still others composed of materials with local, Californian connotations, like redwood. These hybrid objects sit squarely on the fence between utility and beauty, art and not-art, and have the same ontologically self-reflexive quality consistent throughout Pardo's oeuvre. But many other readings are possible. The objects seem to embed the problematic of the utopian aspirations of the modernist enterprise, from Duchamp to the mid-century, California modern movement well-known for furniture of high-minded, affordable, industrial design, as well as high-end handcraft. How do modernist ideals and mass production relate to each other after almost a century of hindsight? And how is Pardo's awareness of his own experience of "class transformation," from Cuba to California, and from immigrant memories and a working-class family to the realm of high art, also embedded as a problematic in these early works as well as his subsequent production?

Always self-reflexive, sliding back and forth between art form and actual function, the beauty and utility of Pardo's work is how sensuously it engages our visual attention or practical use, but never gives up its multifarious identities and paradoxical nature. Our easy delight in its form is ever enlivened by the philosophical questions it summons.

NOTES

1. All quotes by Jorge Pardo, in conversation with the author, May 2008.