



ART REVIEW: Shock and Awe in Julio Le Parc's Miami Retrospective

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by Elisa Turner

"This is not painting, it's watchmaking."

"I come every day when I get off work. It's a great detox."

These two wildly divergent comments came from people who saw [Julio Le Parc's](#) acclaimed exhibit in Buenos Aires, which attracted nearly 160,000 visitors in 1967. His international career in Europe and Latin America was accelerating. A year earlier, he had won the Grand Prize for Painting at the 1966 Venice Biennale.

All this was surely a heady coup for the Argentine artist, who had left his country in 1958 at the age of 30, when Argentina's political corruption bred mounting violence. Joining other compatriots, he settled in Paris, where he has lived and worked for years, though he often travels to Latin America.

Not painting [but] watchmaking? A great detox? Today, that unlikely pair of comments encapsulates the finely tuned shock and awe of the artist's impressive retrospective, "[Julio Le Parc: Form into Action](#)" at Pérez Art Museum Miami.

Yes, many works are intricately constructed with the precision of a Swiss watch. And the elaborate installation of his entire show at PAMM is a wonder to behold. At the same time, seeing one Le Parc work after another offers a magical sense of relief from the toxicity of the appalling topics dominating today's headlines.

The show was organized by guest curator [Estrellita Brodsky](#), a New York-based philanthropist and scholar who wrote her PhD thesis on Le Parc. "Form into Action" brings together more than 100 works from the late 1950s to 2013 and is the artist's first museum survey in the U.S.

Curiously, substantial attention to Le Parc's work has lagged in this country, although he was included in the landmark "Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century" in 1993 at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Meanwhile, he has exhibited in Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Havana, Lima, Madrid, Osaka, Paris, Rome, and Zurich.

Lured by the siren call of infinite experiments with light, motion, and color, Le Parc sees himself as an artist who creates experiences rather than discrete, static objects. He has worked with straightforward industrial materials like aluminum, Plexiglas, wood and motors, crafting and coaxing them into structures that shift and shimmy before our eyes.

"Form into Action" provides multiple experiences sure to startle the eye, body, and mind. It's very

easy to lose one's sense of direction when walking into the labyrinthine *Continuel-lumiere cylindre* (*Continuous Light Cylinder*). Visitors may, as this critic did, become lost for several disorienting seconds, colliding with wafer-thin and endlessly reflective mirror-like strips while struggling to find a pathway through it.



“Continuel-lumière cylindre (Continuous Light Cylinder)” by Julio Le Parc, 1962/2013. Painted wood, stainless steel, motor, metal disk, and lightDimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler, Julio Le Parc © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Everton Ballardin © Galeria Nara Roesler.

It's very playful, yes, but it can briefly provoke a spasm of anxiety or worse. Overall the exhibit is designed to push visitors into new territories, well beyond the traditional museum-friendly comfort zone.

Viewed as a magnificent metaphor, his work could ultimately be considered serious fun, launching subtle social and political challenges to the status quo. The artist himself has long opposed elitist views about traditional painting and politics, and those contrarian views are interlaced throughout his puckish and provocative art.

“Politics have always been central to Le Parc's artistic production,” Brodsky writes in the exhibit catalog. In his abundant writings, included in the catalog, it's clear that, as she explains, he is intrigued by the notion of art as “a tool for social change.”

“He's shaking you in a way that makes you feel present and conscious of your act of looking,” said PAMM Chief Curator Tobias Ostrander in a January 11, 2017, phone interview. Ultimately, he added, this strategy is designed to underscore “your own position as a political person.”

Organized chronologically, the exhibit takes us through the evolving stages of Le Parc's eventful career, moving from traditionally illuminated galleries to darkened spaces in which his bold installations create dancing shadows and gaudy explosions of light. The progression propels viewers into an increasingly carnivalesque experience.

Back when his career was taking shape in Paris, Le Parc diligently experimented with his growing dissatisfaction with the flat surface of the painted canvas, looking for ways to combine his passion for geometric abstraction with the tantalizing appearance of movement. Early in the show visitors will find the intricately composed gouache on paper *Projet couleur no. 1* (Color Project no. 2) and the dazzling painting *Série 38, no. 1* (Series 38, no. 1).



“Projet couleur n° 2 (Color Project n° 2)” by Julio Le Parc, 1959. Gouache on paper, 8 11/16 x 6 11/16 inches. Courtesy the artist, Julio Le Parc © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Georges Poncet.

Soon he could make his geometric paintings not only appear to move but actually to perform with shivers and shakes, as in his *Continuel-lumière mobile* (Continuous-Light Mobile) or the large black and white mural, *Virtual Circles*.



“Continuel-lumière mobile (Continuous-Light Mobile)” by Julio Le Parc, 1960/2013. Wood, plastic, and light, Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Julio Le Parc © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: André Morin.

Like magic, colors and forms shape-shift from one second to another in *Cloison à lames réfléchissantes* (Partition with Reflective Strips). As the viewer walks past this work, a flat red lozenge dissolves into what could possibly be a winding road and distant hillside: Somehow Le Parc has caused hard-edge geometry to swerve into an abstract landscape. It’s all in the game that he plays with perception.



“Cloison à lames réfléchissantes (Partition with Reflective Strips)” by Julio Le Parc, 1966/2005. Steel, 91 3/10 x 109 x 31 1/2 inches. Courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and New York, Julio Le Parc © 2016. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: André Morin.

Le Parc’s fervent desire to upend two-dimensional painting—and by extension the way art has traditionally been perceived—blossomed in the rebellious 1960s when many social and political traditions were challenged.

His own rebellious mindset was sparked by witnessing Argentina’s political and social turmoil during the mid-1940s and 1950s, as authoritarianism reared its ugly head. That experience led him to become an active voice among artists opposing totalitarian regimes, particularly in Central and

South America.

As he wrote in his 1968 essay *Guérilla culturelle?*: “The idea is to awaken the potential capacity that people have to participate and decide for themselves, and to lead them to get in touch with others in order to develop a common action.”

His art has clear ties to the geometric abstraction of early 20th Century Constructivism, especially with its utopian ideals, as well as to paintings by Dutch modernist [Piet Mondrian](#), but Le Parc would go on to push forward his own game-changing approach to geometry. He’s made numerous contributions to 20th Century art, particularly with his ideas regarding the mercurial nature of perception engendered by the Op and Kinetic art movements.

There’s a trippy, optical radiance animating the mural *La Longue Marche*, installed in its specially constructed rotunda at PAMM, in which vivid colors appear to vibrate. It gleefully beckons visitors into a dizzying experience as they walk past the undulating shapes.



“La Longue Marche (The Long March)” by Julio Le Parc, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 10 parts, 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 inches each, 78 3/4 x 787 3/8 inches overall. Julio Le Parc © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: André Morin.

Throughout his career, this pioneering iconoclast has boldly updated the mind-dazzling, if not mind-altering, aura cast by the ways he manipulates light and motion to engage the viewer.

Le Parc’s enduring inquisitiveness and his thrilling unorthodox talent for setting simple geometric forms in motion take visitors to PAMM through a beguiling escapade. *Continuel-lumiere au plafond* (Continuous-Light on Ceiling) is best experienced by lying down on a very large ottoman and gazing upward at its twinkling constellation of shiny rectangles dangling from the ceiling.

There’s something almost rapturous about its luminous simplicity. An added bonus is that *Continuel-lumiere au plafond* creates a frieze-like strip of mysteriously morphing shadows on the surrounding gallery walls. These shadows lead to limitless speculation: could that be a tree, a bird, a horse? This ephemeral frieze even brings to mind early animations created by the 19th century devices called “magic lanterns.”

The show’s grand finale is *Sphere rouge* (Red Sphere). It’s a stunning example of his most recent work, both shockingly simple and complex. Approximately 10 ft. in diameter, it’s composed of close to 3,000 hanging translucent-red Plexiglas squares connected by nearly invisible threads.



“Sphère rouge (Red Sphere)” by Julio Le Parc, 2001-12. Plexiglas and nylon, Diameter: 122 11/16 inches. Courtesy the artist, Julio Le Parc © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: André Morin.

From a distance, it appears to be a fiery-red globe, dense in weight and volume, eerily suspended in space. When viewers step closer, its density is clearly revealed to be a mirage, its apparent volume composed mainly of air and thin slivers of plastic.

Seen either up close or faraway, the *Sphère Rouge* confounds our sense of what is robustly solid and what is ravishingly fragile. Perhaps they are one and the same? By constantly expanding his many gifts for visual experimentation, Le Parc provokes one question after another. What, at the end of the day, are we really perceiving?

With so much talk these days about “fake news” and a “post-truth” era, Le Parc’s assault on familiar modes of perception is more timely than ever.

BASIC FACTS: “Julio Le Parc: Form into Action” is on view November 18, 2016 through March 19, 2017, at Pérez Art Museum Miami, 1103 Biscayne Blvd, Miami FL 33132. www.pamm.org

A Symposium titled “IT IS FORBIDDEN NOT TO PARTICIPATE” takes place on Saturday, February 4, 2017 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Pérez Art Museum Miami will explore themes of political representation, surveillance and social activism through Julio Le Parc’s work.

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