

# PublicWorks



**JORGE PARDO**

***Untitled, 2001***

**A commission for the 224 Albany Street  
Graduate Dormitory**

**Architect: S/L/A/M Collaborative**

**Jorge Pardo** was born in Cuba in 1963, and came to the US in 1969. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles in a house he designed himself that was realized as part of a major exhibition of his work at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. He has exhibited internationally in major museums, and has completed several permanent commissions, primarily in Europe. In 2001 he was awarded the prestigious Lucelia Artist Award in recognition of exceptional creativity by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

**Jan Tumlir** is a Los Angeles-based art writer who teaches art theory and film criticism at Art Center and Cal Arts. He has also taught in the Fine Arts Department at the University of California at Riverside and the Otis Art Institute. He is a contributing editor at *Art & Text*, *Artweek*, and *X-tra*, and is a regular contributor to *Los Angeles Weekly* and *Frieze*. His writings have also appeared in various other publications, including *Art Issues*, *New Art Examiner*, *Documents*, and *Plasm*.

**About MIT's Percent-for-Art Program:** MIT's Percent-for-Art Program, administered by the List Visual Arts Center, allots up to \$250,000 to commission art for each new major renovation or building project. The program was formally instituted in 1968 but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on the Institute's campus. In 1985 architect I.M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on a Percent-for-Art Program for the Wiesner Building and plaza, home to the List Center and the Media Laboratory. Other Percent-for-Art works include a terrazzo floor by Jackie Ferrara for the Tang Center and out-door sculptures by Louise Nevelson and Tony Smith. Other publicly sited art includes works by Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, Beverly Pepper, Michael Heizer, Victor Burgin, Jennifer Bartlett, Bernar Venet, Frank Stella, Isaac Witkin, and Jacques Lipchitz.

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## Jorge Pardo Goes to College

For an artist who habitually makes such beautiful, or at least elegant, things, it may come as a surprise that Jorge Pardo is such a committed iconoclast. He claims unequivocally that his work “is not about the commodity, not about the object.” And, moreover, that his “is a social practice,” meaning that it is concerned with the world not as a static or absolute idea, but as a product of social relations.

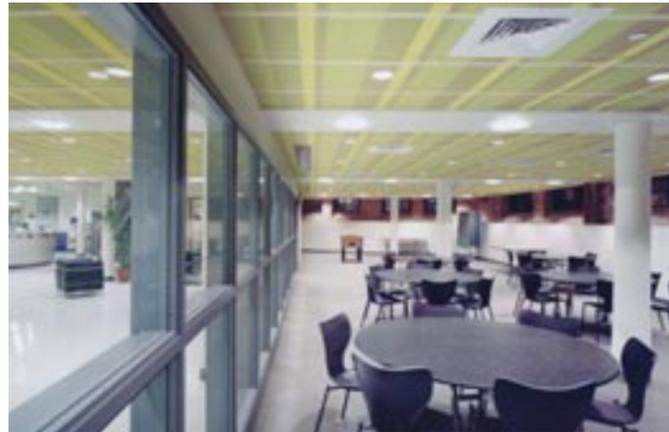


Photo: Jane Farver

Untitled (2001)  
Jorge Pardo (standing)  
Silk-screened ceiling tiles and  
painted metal grid system

Ceiling tiles silkscreened by  
Jo Watanabe of Watanabe  
Studio, Brooklyn, NY.

Commissioned by  
the MIT Percent-for-Art Program  
Installation photos by  
George Bouret



This world is subject to change, whether as a consequence of one's own efforts to change it or not, or even in direct opposition to these efforts. Pardo is a realist in this regard, and yet he maintains that it is the artist's responsibility to exert a certain willfulness in regard to the public reception of his work, to publicly manifest not just a commodity-object or aesthetic, that is, but a specific idea, while bearing in mind that the idea is precisely the most vulnerable proposition of all to outside influence and corruption.

This is not necessarily a contradiction. “Any artist who is in control of their practice,” says Pardo, “is in control of their practice because they know what it means. And they know what it means because they've lived in the world and they've developed a fairly sophisticated understanding of how it works at the time that they're working.” In regard to the both subdued and striking character of his incursion here into the general ambiance of MIT's dormitories, the

complexly interrelated questions “What is it supposed to mean?” and “What does it actually mean?” will tend to provoke a single reply: “Not much.” As we have seen throughout the history of modernism, the most effective way to control objective meaning is to reduce or dispense with it entirely. It is a strategy that this artist deploys knowingly, the refusal to mean being the one instance of intentionality that is easily “read,” as it were.

Jorge Pardo has enthusiastically absorbed the look and lessons of modernism into his own repertoire, drawing upon a finely articulated legacy that stretches from the Russian Constructivists and Productivists to the Bauhaus, and then further to Minimalism and beyond, but the outcome is something else altogether. A central mitigating factor is the city of Los Angeles where he came to hone his skills, and which is known less for its modern art, its collections of modern paintings and sculptures, than for its modern buildings.

One architect in particular would strike Pardo as a potential model in his ability to combine an ambitiously idiosyncratic formalism with an acute sensitivity to the social functions of space: Rudolph Schindler. This consciousness of the social as a kind of content literally shaped by the aesthetics of the built form, so germane to the architecture of Schindler at least, would have all sorts of novel and striking repercussions upon the work of art. That a practice of extreme reductivism vis-à-vis questions of meaning should serve to highlight not the object “in and for itself,” as Clement Greenberg famously put it, but the social stage that enfolds it, that affects it and is in turn affected by it, remains enormously provocative.

To date, Jorge Pardo's oeuvre has taken in several suites of furniture (tables, chairs, beds), various other sorts of domestic articles (lamps, ceramics, fabrics), a full-scale pier, a boat, and some houses. These projects have grown steadily in their scope and ambition over the years, the artist operating at the point of convergence of an ever-expanding range of disciplines and discourses: architecture, landscaping, interior design, product design, and, of course, art. Throughout it all, however, he has never ceased to paint and draw, to model and carve, to spontaneously make things by hand—intimate, singular, funny/sad little things that stand aside, alone (albeit uneasily), and at the same time feed right back into the larger works as a sort of preliminary sketch. In the end, what stands out is not the admittedly staggering diversity of it all so much as the precarious sense of equivalence that Pardo promotes between the small and the big, thrift and ostentation, the solid wood-shop humility of the artist as amateur craftsman and the elite ultra-sophistication of the artist as “full-time leisure specialist,” to quote Thomas Crow.

In Pardo's own words, he wants to explore “the minimum conditions of expectation” that would sustain “a juxtaposition between one thing and another,” that is, “between shows and objects and institutions” of both art and non-art varieties. With respect to the ceiling tiles installed here, with their screen-printed plaid pattern of muted greens, browns and yellows, we can say that it is a painting of sorts that has been dissolved into its architectural context. It is not the first time that Pardo has hung his work high, up and out of the horizon line of optimal art viewership, where it runs the risk of getting overlooked as such. If it is seen, then, it is only as the result of a special effort: one must crane one's neck, thereby very probably causing others to do likewise. In this way the viewer is enlisted to the cause of the work, a basic but effective manifestation of intent eddying outward from artist to viewer, from one viewer to another, and another, and so on.

This frank manipulation is what Jorge Pardo terms the “sinister” pole of his practice, and he counters it with the so-called “poetic” pole. The “poetic” is that part of the object, show or institution that becomes unmoored—Pardo says “speculative”—as a consequence of its integration into the system of art. There is a latent Duchampian strain working its way through these claims, but ultimately Pardo wants us to think past Duchamp's original act of contextual table-turning. The idea that “anything” can become art by dint of its (re)placement within the art gallery or museum, or simply because the artist “says so,” is no longer what is at stake here. “What's art worth today?” is rather the question that has preoccupied Pardo from the start of his career, and we can approach the totality of his output as a sustained and evermore complexly modulated meditation upon it.

The question, I have elsewhere suggested, is rhetorical, and the most immediate reply will be found on the gallery pricelist. It is as simple as that on the one hand (sinister), and not on the other (poetic). To bring a common object into the fold of art is typically to increase its value, but this will in turn entail a whole series of renegotiations with respect to its given purpose, function, and meaning. Likewise we can say that the given purpose, function, meaning, and value of the artwork will be subject to renegotiation once it is taken out of its proper context. But a part of it also stays fixed, and this is in effect transferred onto the new context and everything else that now surrounds it. For Jorge Pardo, it is all about “extending and intensifying the space of the speculative.” “Speculation” is related to the realms of high finance and poetics simultaneously, both of these being sites of perpetual renovation of their respective “languages.” It takes a certain measure of lucidity to make this connection, but then, as Pardo suggests, “In order to be an interesting artist you really have to understand your relation to other forms of production.” The key word is “really,” as in actually, practically. The question “what's art worth?” must be considered in relation to that which is not art and that which could be, as well as to the marketplace where all such arbitrations are finally made.

The market is what Jorge Pardo terms a “contingency”—one more factor operating on the meaning of the work, and that must be taken into account even if it is fundamentally indifferent to the artist's intent. Therefore, to “really” consider these questions of artistic value and meaning is to consider them politically, as the product of conflict, negotiation, and compromise. That Pardo's original proposal to MIT is nothing like the work finally installed is a concrete instance of this political process: what the work is is ultimately a truce between competing claims as to what it might have ideally been. The original, ideal plan (which was to have taken in the individual rooms) undergoes a process of gradual erosion as it butts up against these various contingencies, one after another. “There's a lot of different directions negotiation can take,” says Pardo. “It can be a negotiation where you want something; it can be a negotiation where you are preparing yourself to lose something.” Either way, though, the plan must change, as must the value and meaning of the work. The process of negotiation is always “impure,” according to Pardo, and what it requires on the part of the artist is not determination so much as flexibility.

If Jorge Pardo seems to get his way more often than not, it is only because the impurities and contingencies are factored into his work from the start. The culture of advanced art, of art galleries and magazines, is fundamentally defensive, according to him: “It's still in dialogue with these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions about nature being unbearable because you can't control the way people see it.” An earth-tone plaid “painting” on the ceiling of a college dorm building might not seem like the most radical blow against this entrenched ideology—it might not seem to turn the world upside down—but for that reason precisely, it is and it does.

Jan Tumlir