



## Erik Parker By Austin McManus April 2013

For those who have shown little resistance for and enthusiastic participation in psychedelic drug activities, the paintings Erik Parker imagines could easily be visual soundtracks or snapshot reminders of past experiences. However, these activities are not a prerequisite for transcending or connecting to the altered realities he creates; it just makes them that much better! Parker's electric landscapes might be considered an escape technique for an artist constantly working in his studio. Paint where you cannot physically go, and along and with it, why not include a bugged-out, neon-bursting palette?

Two days ago I visited Parker in his Brooklyn-based studio. There I saw a landscape painting of a beach with a lone palm tree, embellished by an assortment of exotic flowers. From the window in Nicaragua where I am currently sitting, I see a lush tropical jungle on the coast, populated by several palm trees, a scene strangely similar to the painting in Parker's studio. The only difference here is that everything is less saturated, absent the riot of patterns. Fortunately, I have acquired a particular substance that might alter my perspective and usher the possibility of bringing Parker's painting to life.



**Austin McManus:** What do you enjoy most about living in Brooklyn? Your studio is in close proximity to my favorite doughnut shop, Peter Pan, by the way.

**Erik Parker:** Back when I moved here in '99, the vibe was different. It was totally a ghost town compared to what it is today. I definitely get frustrated waiting 30 minutes for a cup of coffee, but hey, it's good coffee right? Peter Pan is great, by the way. Get the sour cream glazed!

**AM:** When did your interest in using a neon palette begin?

**EP:** As a teenager, I took a lot of trippy street drugs. Besides the blacklight posters that are associated with hippie/druggie type shit, the bright colors in that visual culture were pretty rich. I remember when I went to the art supply store one day; they were the brightest things on the shelf. I was like, "Weird, word."

**AM:** How important is it to make art that translates clearly to the viewer, regardless of their social or educational background?

**EP:** I was a high school dropout from San Antonio. In South Texas there was no art to look at, just "pictures." I only had access to what I saw in comic books, television and billboards. There's a certain kind of visual vernacular that translates to everyone, not just those with access to highbrow institutions. It's extremely important to me.

**AM:** Your work in the past was influenced by a variety of American subcultures. Do you feel you need to experience those first-hand to be accurately informed and to include them in your own art? I believe the Internet allows for a high level of voyeurism. People begin to believe, without participating themselves, that they are experts.

**EP:** It's funny, I was talking to my crew about this the other day in regards to music. Back in the day, if you wanted an LP you had to actually go to the bins and dig through all the shit. You could actually see the album covers. The Internet removes any element of submersion, anything that is even slightly esoteric; a week later it's assimilated into fashion, music, art. You have to know your roots and really live through the real shit; trends have nothing to do with it.



**AM:** You have a fairly large record collection in your studio, so obviously you have done some digging. Any personal favorites or records that get played on repeat while working?

**EP:** Back in the day I used to DJ, and some of those old records made their way into the new bins. One of the benefits of being in Williamsburg is that there's a decent record spot around the corner from the studio. I like all of them, but a few getting heavy play at the moment include: Marly Marl's *In Control Vol.1*, *Hawaiian Magic* featuring the Orchestra of Lani Kai, Sleep's *Dopesmoker*, Martin Denny's *In Person*, Linval Thompson meets King Tubby's *Inna Reggae Dub Style Dis A Yard Dub*, and Funkadelic's *Electric Spanking on War Babies*.

**AM:** I know every color you mix gets its own unique, often comical, name. What are some favorites you have come up with?

**EP:** It's funny, I just started doing this off the cuff one day to keep track of which colors I use for certain paintings, and now it's a thing. There are probably hundreds; we have them all pretty memorized. Say we have a studio visit, and my assistant will be like, "Please tell me that flower was Sweet Jesus H2O," if you don't know what we're referring to, it sounds kind of nuts. Some recurring names include Whiteboy Steals, Dillsack, Kaws Blue, Night Goat, Hood Rat... it's endless.

**AM:** What are the most colors you have ever used in one painting?

**EP:** Honestly, it's hard to say, but probably 200 or so. We have about 75 different greens in rotation right now. It may seem excessive, but colors are important to me, and trust me, it makes a difference.



**AM:** Can you tell me about the prints you were working on the other day in your studio?

**EP:** I just wrapped up a series of monoprints with Jo Watanabe and Pace Prints. Monoprints are basically prints, but with a large amount of hand-done painting, coloring, and collage. Each one is unique and varied while having a similar "template." I worked from two "templates," my take of an interior still life, and these weird, mix and match type diptychs that almost read as Egyptian friezes. The iconography in the prints switches from Haile Selassie to LL Cool J in .05 seconds.

**AM:** I find it interesting that your newer work was referenced entirely from images found on the Internet. The idea that you can find source material and transcend space by painting in your studio without ever leaving is fascinating.

**EP:** I wouldn't say entirely. I used some very vague and basic images, the shittier the better, as a skeleton, and altered it along the way until it became something totally different. Google can be a really great tool. If you don't know what to do, you tell Google and it does the rest.

**AM:** A recent show of yours, *Bye, Bye, Babylon* at Paul Kasmin Gallery, exhibited a body of surreal still life landscapes, which were significantly different from much of your previous work. How did you arrive at creating these types of images? Were there any particular influences, experiences, or ideas that brought about this change?

**EP:** I paint a lot, I mean like seven days a week. I don't treat my job as a "painter" or as an expression of a lifestyle. It's blue-collar labor, 9 to 5, seven days a week. I'm grateful that I can spend my time doing something I love. Always being in the studio means I don't get to go on vacation (with the exception of work related trips

or a show). These landscapes and jungles are fantasized versions of exoticism. Durer drew rhinos before he saw them; he just idealized them as what they represented to him. I think my paintings use a similar principle.

**AM:** In reading past writings about your work the phrase “distortions of everyday reality” appeared more than once and it has resonated with me. Can you tell me a little about this?

**EP:** I make pictures for other people to look at. While I'm totally into what you would call “painterly abstraction,” I also want to make sure that translates to everyone, not just other artists. Not everyone understands an expressive brush mark, but most can get down with flowers.



**AM:** You currently have an exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. The paintings on display are heavily text-based, and one that stood out for me was the outline of the United States map. Can you tell me more about this particular show?

**EP:** The image of the United States map is something I've been working with on and off since 1998. The most current incarnation I've painted is called “Preoccupied.” Instead of text I've used symbols and personalized visual bric-a-brac, and besides, what better template to use as an American artist than the map?

**AM:** I understand you enjoy bad television. What is your favorite reality show currently?

**EP:** Oh, man. My wife and I love “Bad Girls Club,” those girls throw down hard! What makes it even better is we're a Nielsen Family so what we watch goes down in the ratings charts! I could list a bunch more, but I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Howard Stern and Baba-Booey. The Howard Stern show gets a lot of play in the studio.

**AM:** Are there any contemporary artists whose work you are excited about? Do you get out to see shows often?

**EP:** I try to make it out to openings regularly. When you have three daughters it can be rough. But yeah, totally, there's a lot of great work out there. My boy KAWS is always doing some next level shit. Peter Saul is on point, sharper than ever. Shout-outs to Todd James, Adam Helms and Eddie Martinez, all doing some really cool, progressive shit.

**AM:** You mentioned Peter Saul. Tell me about your relationship with him. He had an influential role in your work practice, correct?

**EP:** I love Peter! I met him in 1992 when I was 23 years old at the University of Texas. He really got me, especially when no one else did. Growing up in South Texas, I never met anyone who actually made a living making art. Then I met Peter, and he was cool and had an awesome life. The thing with Peter is that he can be in and outside of the canon. He's weirder than the canon. He had his own pictorial thing going on, and still does. We've been close ever since.



**AM:** How would you describe your paintings to someone who has never seen them before?

**EP:** At the moment, indulgent, quixotic jungles and still lifes through the lens of a trap-music-cum-reggae fan. Like paintings you need a walking stick for.

**AM:** Any future projects you are particularly excited about?

**EP:** I'm really lucky, the past couple years have been so awesome, and I am extremely grateful. I have some really cool things coming up. I'm doing some really great product collaborations with the Standard and Norse Projects in Copenhagen. I'm really looking forward to my show in November at Honor Fraser in LA. I'm also having a solo show here in New York with Pace Prints this March, featuring the unique editions. Can't complain!