

CHICKS AND CARS

FORD DESIGNER IS ALL ABOUT CURVES IN HIS DAY JOB AND HIS ART

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By ERIN CHAN

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Camilo Pardo sits on the spotlight-white stairs of his downtown Detroit studio, unfazed by the model in a tube top and miniskirt made of aluminum discs, her hand perched on his right shoulder for visual effect.

Pardo ignores for now the attentions of Vanessa Gray, whose outfit he designed, and instead cradles another model, this one of a red 2005 Ford GT.

He designed the car, too.

Pardo's talent for oil painting - and his longstanding and lucrative job as a designer for Ford Motor Co. - make him much more than just a party-boy bachelor who has a skateboard half-pipe inside his studio and who throws rambunctious, if not legendary, parties.

He is, in fact, a multifaceted artist whose paintings sell for \$4,000 to \$6,000 and whose car, the Ford GT, is one of the hottest-looking American cars on the highways.

As he speaks on the stairs, Pardo gestures in animation, as if in rhythm with his thoughts, which have latched onto an explanation of why he loves to paint the very things - women and cars - that appeal to so many men.

Women, he says, make for intriguing figures because of the "contrast between the waist and the hips, the change in proportion." Their arcs, he continues, are not unlike the curves of, say, a car fender.

Pardo, 42, paints females and vehicles with as much constancy as he does consistency, as his second solo show at C-Pop Gallery, "For the Price of Fuel," attests.

At the gallery, Pardo's paintings of women hang across from Pardo's paintings of cars; both pulsate with drips and drops, speed and spontaneity.

Pardo has managed to flourish as an artist and designer who can navigate the corporate and the bohemian, who feels just as natural in faded \$3 Levi's from Value Village as he does in a trench coat from Christian Dior.

Rich Rice, 33, a photographer and arts advocate who rents a studio in the Bankle Building that Pardo owns on Woodward at the edge of Midtown, explains it this way: "He is this unique individual that has created this world so special that it

makes people fascinated with him."

The world as seen through Pardo's silver I.c. Berlin glasses manifests itself in curves and ellipses, through aluminum and alloy.

Zooming north on the Southfield freeway inside Pardo's 2005 Ford GT (despite designing the vehicle, Pardo had to buy his own), it feels at times as if he hovers slightly above the everyday world, especially when his "white like an airplane" vehicle revs.

Emanating an easy attitude and an approachable demeanor - he's a Type B personality living at a Type A pace - Pardo has become a celebrity of sorts.

After a recent presentation at the Fairlane Training Center in Dearborn, Ford managers from all over the planet surrounded Pardo and his GT in the parking lot, shooting digital pictures of the car, and in the case of Nguyen T.T. Nguyen, 42, who is based in Vietnam, with Pardo himself.

"He's awesome," she says, sporting a giant smile after posing alongside Pardo, who sports a slicked-back ponytail and a bit of goatee.

Pardo gave the Ford GT, originally a 1965 race car, a limited-edition redesign for the road. Ford will make 4,000 GTs in 2005 and 2006, he says, and has priced them at about \$150,000 each.

An hour later, as Pardo filled up his GT at a Marathon gas station in Ferndale, a woman emerged from a black Chevrolet Cavalier to say, "You're Camilo, the artist, right?" and proceeded to ask about his parties.

Oh, those parties. Once, during a fashion show at his studio, Pardo orchestrated an eye-popping stunt in which women dipped themselves into a tub of melted chocolate "like a banana" and wore Hershey's Kiss-shaped hats on their heads.

Just naked women dripping chocolate?

"They wore a thong and pasties," he adds. "And shoes."

Stilettos, of course.

Next month, just before the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Pardo plans on hosting his ninth Designers Night, a private gathering for the auto set. Counting his annual Halloween and birthday bashes, that means he throws at least three big parties a year.

But with the Rolling Stones or John Lennon or Underworld or Daft Punk blaring from a white Sony stereo picked out to match his '60s-inspired Mod furniture (some of which he designed), it's as if Pardo holds a private party every evening. Though he also owns a home in Grosse Pointe, he hangs out and sleeps mostly

at his studio, where he can unleash his creativity.

At the studio on a recent Tuesday night, the 5-foot-8, green-eyed Pardo at various times mixed oils with drying agents, helped a friend try on a bikini made of purple Crown Royal whisky pouches and grabbed a lantern and a bottle of Beck's beer and climbed the concrete steps to the second and third floors of his building. The ballroom and balcony there have decayed, but Pardo insists he will reconstruct them soon.

His friends wander through the space, a place they often compare with Andy Warhol's Factory, if not for the multitude of paintings hanging on the wall then for its energy. Dabbing some baby blue paint on a canvas while seated on a skateboard, Pardo attributes a part of that to his background.

"I think there's a certain amount of passion that's consistent in Latin people," says Pardo, who was born in Manhattan to Colombian parents.

His mother, Rosanna, first taught her son how to paint. She recalled how a school principal in Astoria, Queens, was so impressed with 6-year-old Camilo's work that he walked his paintings around to each classroom.

In 1973, after his parents divorced, Pardo, his sister and their mother moved to metro Detroit to be closer to an aunt. He graduated from Rochester High School, and by 1985, Pardo had parlayed his penchant for drawing cars into a degree in industrial design at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit.

Tom Thewes, a 39-year-old painter and the owner of C-Pop who went to CCS with Pardo, describes him with five words: "a god of industrial design."

Pardo was hired by Ford straight out of college, and has worked as a designer for the company ever since. He started right away at the advance studio, which focuses mostly on concept cars and is where Pardo says Ford put the college kids, because "we were all ballistic anyway and designing the wildest vehicles."

The 20 years with Ford have taken Pardo to Italy, where he designed cars for Ghia, a spinoff of Ford that no longer exists, and to Germany, where he helped create an international version of the Ford Escort. He also spent several years working on interiors for luxury cars like the Lincoln LS and designing such trucks as the Ford F-150 before becoming a manager of the company's Special Vehicles Team, where he worked on the Ford Cobra and Lightning. It's on the SVT that Pardo did his marquee work as chief designer of the Ford GT.

As he created the GT, Pardo also painted it on canvas, and some of those hang at Ford's world headquarters in Dearborn, as well as in the showroom of the Saleen Special Vehicles building in Troy, from which about nine Ford GTs are shipped out each day.

Back at the studio, Pardo's renderings of chicks and cars show themselves

through streaks and smatters of paint. He does not feel, for instance, that a painting titled "Space Suit" comes off as natural unless he has besmeared it with flares of red and blue.

"Let's add a little more personality," he says, flicking his brush to create colored specks. "There! There! There!"

Pardo says his work is sometimes criticized for repeating theme and style. He defends himself by saying that there's a rhythm to his consistency that can be found in all great art.

"What comes through in his expressionism is the sleek, the aerodynamic," says Rick Manore, 48, C-Pop founder and gallery director. "I call it autoerotic. It really evokes speed, sleek and sexy above and beyond all else."

In a serious, ambitious moment, Pardo says he would like to be internationally recognized for what he does, and change the course of design, much like what Frank Lloyd Wright did with his clean, appealing and transformative architecture.

Pardo says this while grasping the wheel of the Ford GT, which can hit more than 200 m.p.h., and one can't help thinking this Detroitier may just be speeding in Wright's direction – very, very fast.

CAMILO PARDO

Age: 42

Marital status: Single

Born in: Manhattan

Graduated from: Rochester High School and College for Creative Studies in Detroit

Lives in: Detroit and Grosse Pointe

Drinks: Heineken, Beck's and St. Pauli Girl

Hobbies: Skateboarding (he has a half-pipe in his studio)

Drives: White 2005 Ford GT (with a blue stripe), black 2005 Volvo S40, red 1982 Ferrari 512 BBi, black 1964 Thunderbird convertible, dark blue 1971 Fiat 500 and white Ford 1997 Econoline van ("We gotta have something to move the art"). Also has a white 1977 Donzi speedboat (with a blue stripe). He keeps most of the cars at his studio.

Speaks: English, Spanish and Italian

'FOR THE PRICE OF FUEL'

Art by Camilo Pardo

Through Jan. 15

C-Pop Gallery

4160 Woodward, Detroit

Noon-7 p.m. Tue.-Thu.;

noon-8 p.m. Fri.-Sat.;

1-5p.m. Sun.

313-833-9901

<https://www.cpop.com/gu/index.asp>

ILLUSTRATION: Photo CAMILO PARDO;Photo ELAINE LOK Special to the Free Press;Photo HUGH GRANNUM Detroit Free Press

CAPTION:

HUGH GRANNUM Detroit Free Press

BOTTOM: There are several of Pardo's paintings of the GT in the show.

ELAINE LOK Special to the Free Press

LEFT: Camilo Pardo designed the die-cut aluminum dress modeled by Vanessa Gray of Detroit.

ELAINE LOK Special to the Free Press

Camilo Pardo's studio is the scene of legendary parties and artistic experimentation. Here, the artist fits a model into a custom-made vinyl jumpsuit he designed.

CAPTIONWRITER: BELOW: Pardo designed the Ford GT, a limited-edition redesign of the 1965 race car, which sells for \$150,000 and up.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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