



# Space Invader

By **STEPHEN MAINE**

Attesting to the raw power and harsh beauty of Steven Parrino's best work, a sweeping show now on view at Gagosian's uptown flagship more than lives up to the postmortem discussion of the artist's studio practice, multifaceted collaborative activities, and tragic death at the age of 46 in early 2005. Even in its embrace of damage and failure, the work is poised, and

## STEVEN PARRINO

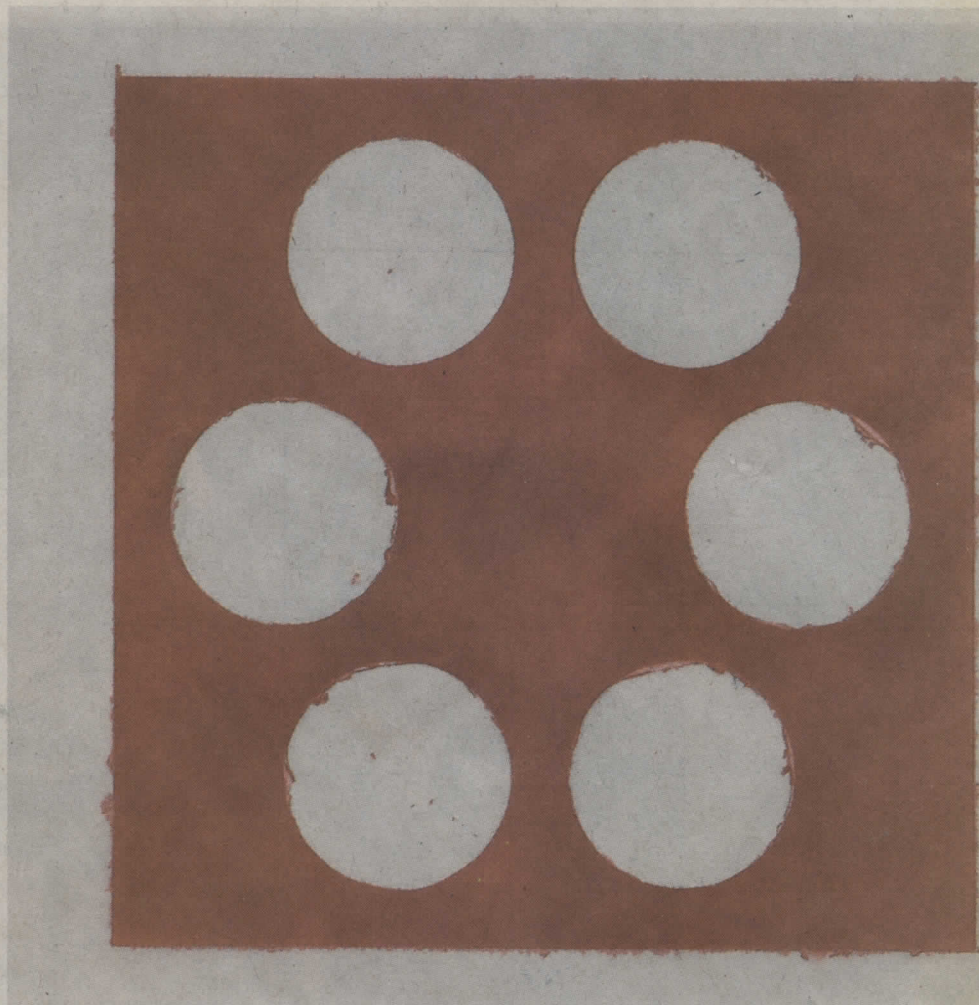
*Gagosian Gallery*

completely self-assured. The current focus among abstract painters on the primacy of materials owes much to the work of this artist. Twenty years ago, at the height of theory-driven explanations of pictorial strategies, Parrino insisted that each of his paintings was "not a representation of something, but a concrete fact." Despite the artist's battery of references — to Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Lucio Fontana, Kasimir Malevich — the work is thoroughly Parrino's own. He didn't just take command of his influences; he put them in a headlock and wrestled them to the floor.

The Brooklyn-born artist was better known and supported in Europe (particularly Switzerland) than in his native country, despite strong critical notice for several New York shows (notably at Team). Gagosian is handling the artist's estate; this exhibition assembles 55 works spanning the artist's career, from "Untitled" (1977), a smallish, silver, enamel-on-canvas square, to "The Chaotic Painting" (2004), a drum-tight, quizzically titled, 6-foot-tall equilateral triangle in glossy black that points floorward.

The early painting's conspicuous border of staples presages the artist's "signature" works, in which a monochromatic or striped canvas is wrenched from its stretcher-bar moorings, scrambled slightly, and restapled to the frame with the resulting buckles, crumples, and folds intact. In this abuse of routine studio procedure, a substantial amount of surplus, previously hidden canvases, is introduced into the image. Sometimes the marginalia have got drizzled paint or boot prints on them. Parrino called these paint-

## GALLERY-GOING



Steven Parrino, 'Untitled' (1998).

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ings "misshaped," in smirking homage to the "shaped" canvases with which Mr. Stella set abstraction on its ear in the mid-1960s. (A word guy, Parrino termed his mannerist, willfully compromised approach to abstraction "deformalism.") Several "misshaped" canvases are on display here, including "Skeletal Implosion 2" (2001), a tondo 7 feet in diameter. The viewer's attention is exquisitely torn between the painting's barren circumference and, nestled among glossy black and matte white inch-wide stripes, its puckered navel.

Parrino was big on circles. He cut five of them into the 9-foot-wide "Stockade (Existential Trap for Speed Freaks)" (1991). Hung close to the floor, the painting sardonically equates the sensory deprivation of Minimalism to a kind of pictorial torture: aesthetic purity as public humiliation. The artist otherwise sends up the sanctity of the picture plane in "The Self Mutilation Bootleg (The Open Grave)" (2003), a big, black painting, broken and slumped like a corpse against the wall. Its sole

feature is a coffin-size, oblong opening; the painting doubles as its own site of interment. "Spin-Out Vortex 2" (2000) conflates the two features: It is a six-foot-square canvas of the scrunched variety, coated in black enamel and outfitted with a central, circular cutout that you somehow think you could leap through, wall or no wall.

Gagosian's relatively low-ceilinged fifth-floor galleries are not always right for the space-devouring paintings, but they serve smaller works well. Parrino allowed himself tremendous latitude in his drawings and collages, recycling imagery culled from biker culture, comics, B movies, and sex magazines, and incorporating photographs, black electrical tape, clotted spray paint, and crushed vellum. These works provide a window into the artist's psyche, disclosing his perverse fascination with cultural trash. The most boring merely stake out an attitude: The circled A of anarchy makes an appearance, as do the swastika, and an elongated X that evokes the Confederate battle flag. But the more intriguing merge

seamlessly with the abstract canvases; subtle and insidious is the enamel-on-vellum "Untitled" (1998), in which a hexagonal arrangement of six white circles on a red field alludes to the chamber of a revolver. (A pencil notation across the bottom of the work suggests the image was intended as a major painting some 8 feet across, but apparently the canvas was never realized.)

A related work, "Absence/Shift" (1990), is hung in a shallow space that has windows overlooking Madison Avenue. Twenty feet wide, this pair of matte red canvases sports circular cutouts suggesting reverse Japanese flags. The hole on the left panel of the diptych is centered, and the one on the right drifts rightward, but in this cramped space, you can't back away far enough to properly take in its wicked, wall-eyed sweep. It just wants to shove you out the window and into the street.

Until November 3 (980 Madison Ave., between 76th and 77th streets, 212-744-2313).