

## The Rule Breaker

ENOC PEREZ PICKS UP A PAINTBRUSH.

ALEXANDER WOLF words BRAD HARRIS portraits



**FROM TOP:** Five views of Enoc Pérez's studio. *Bacardi Bottles (silver/yellow)*, 2010. OIL ON CANVAS, 20 x 16 IN. Pérez. **OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:** Four views of Pérez's studio. *Hearst Tower, NY*, 2009. OIL ON CANVAS, 80 x 60 IN.

## People like Enoc Pérez's

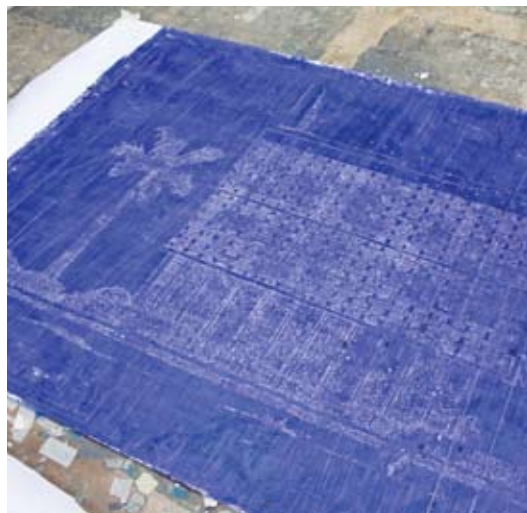
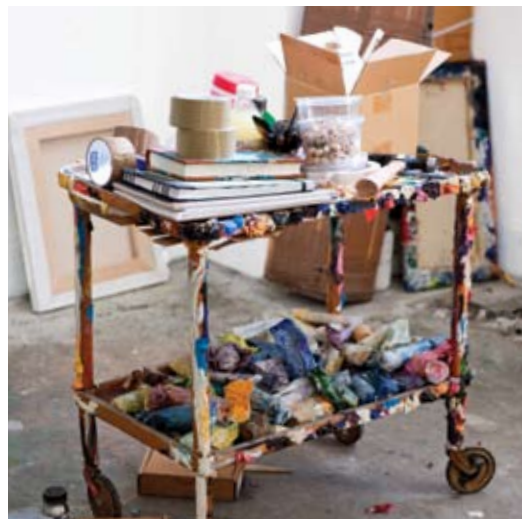
paintings. At his recent exhibitions in New York City—at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in 2006 and 2009 and in the lobby of the Lever House in 2007—gallerygoers could be seen contentedly gazing at canvases depicting his favorite buildings, nude studies, and still lifes. But viewers captivated by Pérez's seductive imagery might also be taken with the artist for an entirely different reason: his idiosyncratic, strictly brushless technique. Until recently Pérez had not picked up a paintbrush in 20 years. Instead, his custom had been to make a preparatory drawing on paper for each color to appear in the finished work, apply oil paint to the back of these sheets, and then hold them up to the canvas. At this point he traced over the sketches so that the paint stuck, effectively drawing the image onto the canvas.

I visit Pérez's studio, in a nondescript office building in midtown Manhattan. Outside the elevator on the seventh floor, one of several arrows scrawled on the wall promises ENOC PEREZ. Dozens of squeezed-out paint tubes are piled in a colorful pigment burial mound in the center of the studio, a raw white room furnished with only a few scattered chairs and the long desk where we sit together discussing his paintings. He announces that he has just bought several paintbrushes. "I've been doing paintings in the same manner for a while," he says. "You start proving certain things that you wanted to prove to yourself. So what's next?" His old procedure

is still evident in the canvases scattered around his studio, but most also betray the use of a brush. On one, the artist is in the process of portraying the façade of Norman Foster's Hearst Tower as a harlequin pattern of glass triangles in bright colors, applied with different types of brushwork. Another thus far consists only of a background of overlapping blue and yellow color fields. Pérez—a lean man with thick glasses and a thicker accent—gestures emphatically when discussing his work and chooses his words carefully. "The art I love most is art that challenges itself," he tells me. "You can always challenge a public. You can always do something obscene and shock people. But when you have a method that people like and then you turn it upside-down—now we're having fun."

Pérez was born in 1967 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and grew up next door to a local painting academy, where he started lessons at age eight. His father, José, is an art critic. The regional tradition of printmaking is echoed in his pictures to this day, as are the rum bottles, palm trees, and beachfront resorts of his youth. Pérez traveled to New York in 1986 to study painting at the Pratt Institute, later earning his master's degree at Hunter College. "You react against what you're taught," he says, remembering the concept-based values of his professors. "Words like *romantic* or for a painting to be beautiful—not a good thing. So I wanted to make something really beautiful."

Pérez also remembers feeling the need to grapple with the methods of certain giants of New York painting. Tellingly, all the names he mentions in this regard—Jackson Pollock, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol—were similarly interested in alternative means of mark making. Looking around his studio, one sees that breaching his self-imposed boundaries has resulted in a deeper exploration not only of the many ways paint can be applied but also of the subjects he loves to portray. Of these one is by far the most prevalent.





**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:** Three views of Pérez's studio. *Casa Malaparte (Night)*, 2008. OIL ON CANVAS, 7¾ x 12 FT. *Bacardi Bottles (silver/yellow)*, 2010. OIL ON CANVAS, 20 x 16 IN.

"Rum bottles are like self-portraits to me, a vehicle to do research," says Pérez. "There's something else that comes into play here that you can't necessarily control, but you have to allow for it to exist. It allows me to be true and maybe even develop new ways of making things." In fact it was while making a rum-bottle painting that he decided to pick up brushes again. A recent, mostly black painting conveys the images of two rum bottles and two glasses through their bare essentials: the silhouettes of the former and the rims of the latter rendered in hot pink, with a few passes of the brush in electric blue to add a new dimension. It's difficult to determine the sequence of color layers. You can barely make out the words *Light Dry* and *Dark Dry* near the top of each bottle.

The motif of light versus dark runs through Pérez's work of the past decade, particularly the pictures of buildings portrayed both by day and at night. The daytime ones are about the structures themselves, about finding character in architectural detail. Near the end of our visit, Pérez points to a bright painting of the Italian Rationalist architect Adalberto Libera's Casa Malaparte, on Capri, which the artist sees as "another character" in Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Le mépris*. Looking at the small image, which Pérez made for himself, I wonder at how this thoroughly modern structure—with its horizontal, shiplike exterior—fits so unassumingly into the island's landscape.

It is in the night paintings, however, that Pérez reveals his emotions. "If demons are there, I tend



to express them in the palette," he says, pointing to a dark depiction of the same Capri house that he sees as "an image from hell." The painting demonstrates the power of his brushless technique: A succession of uneven vertical lines in the dark purple foliage surrounding the building were made by clawing at a piece of paper loaded with paint and pressed against the canvas. Now that the intermediary paper technique is only one of many possibilities, we can look forward to watching how Pérez continues to experiment within the boundaries of pleasant imagery, which he just might prove aren't boundaries at all. **MP**

