

CRISTIN TIERNEY

East End artists' works joined by geography, theme at Parrish Art Museum

By Deidre S. Greben

Special to Newsday

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Days before a show of her minimalist paintings opened at the Parrish Art Museum, Virginia Jaramillo, 82, was asked how it felt having had to wait till now to be in the spotlight.

"Wait? I wasn't waiting," she said. "I was working."

"The Harmony Between Line and Space," comprising five of her most recent canvases, is only the second museum exhibition of Jaramillo's work in the more than six decades she has dedicated to making art. Along with the outer-space-inspired abstractions of John Torreano and new pieces by video art pioneer Peter Campus, it is one of three solo shows currently on view at the East End venue featuring local talents at the zenith of long careers.

"While all three artists are very different, they all make us heighten our awareness," Alicia Longwell, the museum's chief curator, said of the octogenarians' discrete bodies of work. "They want us to really pay attention."

That lofty ambition recently had Jaramillo climbing to the top of a ladder while working on one of her outsize compositions in the spacious studio attached to her split-level Hampton Bays home.

"Sometimes they wouldn't stick," she said of the circuit boards that describe "They Spoke Without Talking," the veteran artist's first-ever assemblage. The perch made it easier, Jaramillo explained, to view the geometric composition constructed on panels, which she laid flat across two sawhorses to get the computer components to adhere.

"Our whole lives have become about interacting with technology," she said, explaining her uncommon choice of medium. "So-and-so posts they had a banana split for lunch. No one bothers to have deep conversations anymore."

'Like a journey'

An interest in how entities interact has been a consistent theme of Jaramillo's enduring practice. "Each piece is like a journey," Jaramillo said of her process. "I don't know what I will discover. I put in a color. The painting tells me if it is right or not. It tells me where it wants to go."

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Joined by concurrent solo shows, Peter Campus, left, Virginia Jaramillo and John Torreano stop for a photo outside the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill. Credit: Gordon M. Grant

Here, in "Quantum Entanglement" and its counterpart, "Quanta," networks of thin vibrantly colored lines traverse vast expanses and then dissolve into a haze of

bright hues bleeding from the canvases' side edges. Though Jaramillo employs a spare vocabulary, her paintings relay significant discourse. "It is not a negative void," noted Longwell of the works' corresponding black and white fields, "but has weight and content."

Jaramillo's riff on Einstein's scientific theory of how particles affect each other even if separated by great distance mirrors how disparate influences have shaped her own long artistic career.

Born in El Paso, Texas, Jaramillo grew up in East Los Angeles responding to the multicultural stimuli of her immediate environment in addition to her Latino heritage.

Jaramillo said she had wanted to become an archaeologist, that is until one of her paintings was selected for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's annual exhibition. Both her age, 18, and gender — she signed the canvas "V. Jaramillo" — had been unknown to the organizers, a fact that speaks to her images' universality. "It was the only way I would have gotten into the show," she explained.

A little more than a decade later, in the early 1970s, works from Jaramillo's "Curvilinear Paintings" series were included in the Whitney's annual exhibition in Manhattan and in "The De Luxe Show," alongside abstractions by the likes of Kenneth Noland, Larry Poons and Jules Olitski, in Houston. Last year, the Menil Collection marked the 50th anniversary of its groundbreaking exhibition staged in an abandoned Texas movie theater with a survey devoted to the only female and Latino participant. It was Jaramillo's first-ever solo museum show.

According to Longwell, the concurrent featuring of Jaramillo and two of her male contemporaries at the Parrish was more serendipitous, essentially an outcome of them living and working on the East End. While stylistically the three artists are distances apart, correlations — as the laws of quantum entanglement so dictate — surface beyond the geographic location of their homes and studios.

Though before now Jaramillo hadn't met Torreano, who splits his time between Sag Harbor and Manhattan, or Campus, a resident of East Patchogue, she is not surprised to find their images in sync with her own artistic vision.

"We are all intrigued with time and space," she said, noting how the dawn of the Space Age affected the direction of their respective work.

Exploring space

In fact, images of stars, nebulae and galaxies, particularly those recorded by the Hubble Space Telescope, have served as source material for Torreano's mural-size paintings, the jumping off points for depictions of his personal cosmos.

"I use 1219 BOWERY, FLOOR 2, NEW YORK, NY 10002 trying to do as an artist seeking new possibilities for painting," says John Torreano, standing here with one of his works at the Parrish Art Museum. Credit: Gordon M. Grant

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ices to support what I am trying to do as an artist seeking new possibilities for painting," he said. "I try to make equivalencies of those images, not to illustrate them but to

express a closer, more intimate connection with their magnitude and violence."

Ten of those paintings, dating from 1989, feature at the Parrish, fiery and explosive compositions such as "Edge" and "Gases in Omega Swan" and those with more mottled surfaces, like the more recent "Dark Matters/Dark Energy Collisions."

Torreano's early abstractions, on the other hand, exhibited a clear distinction between top and bottom. "Above was the sky, below the mud," explained the 80-year-old artist, "but then I decided I didn't want the up-and-down reference." His solution? Depicting outer space, an attraction "nudged along" by his Catholic upbringing in Flint, Michigan.

"What is the biggest possible shape you can think of? It's the universe," he noted. "Like the Church, I was elevating a point of view, transcending what it is."

Religious influence is also reflected in Torreano's inclusion of faux gems, a reminder of the vigil lights that were a prominent feature of his youth. First discovered by the artist in a bin on Canal Street back in 1970, the cut stones quickly replaced dots he had been using as tools to create illusions of space. He also started to make gouges in his painted plywood panels and add wood balls, underscoring the works' contrasting physical and illusory character.

That contrast is also explored at the Parrish by Peter Campus' signature "videographs," whereby he records movement within a fixed perspective, like that in a snapshot or landscape painting. The nine video loops — of a small tree on a grassy dune bending in the wind, seagulls floating near a duck blind, plankton in the

current lapping against a mooring — were all recently shot by the 84-year-old artist on the shores of Shinnecock Bay.

Campus' fascination with "converting the real into packets of light," as he described it, traces back to witnessing Neil Armstrong taking the first steps on the moon, an event beamed live to monitors back on earth through a camera mounted on the Lunar Module. Campus noted the video camera's independence in his artist statement. "I walk away while it's recording. It sees in a way I can't: in greater detail, with more patience."

Says Peter Campus, "I needed to make more peaceful imagery, building instead of dismantling." Credit: Gordon M. Grant

Making 'peaceful imagery'

A native New Yorker who worked in the film industry, Campus began to experiment with video as a viable art medium in the early 1970s. Encouraged by the seminal work of Nam June Paik and Bruce Nauman, he made his own inroads exploring identity issues through a panoply of formats and techniques. Later in his career, Campus directed his camera lens toward nature and landscape.

"I got tired of looking at my neurotic self, of all the *Sturm und Drang* and angst of looking inward. I needed to make more peaceful imagery," he said, "building instead of dismantling."

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Campus stayed close to home, eventually making solitary expeditions, video equipment in tow, around the eastern Long Island inlet. "Being over 80 and having had heart disease and cancer, I felt extremely vulnerable going into the grocery store and dashing out. I was pretty scared, and my work showed it," he admitted. "But once I got the inoculations, I loosened up and the work became less emotional — more spiritual."

Indeed, the transportive power of the imagery created by these artists, though through markedly different means, bonds them together. So does their decadeslong commitment, regardless of the vagaries of artistic fashion, to their projects. "They may take a victory lap, but then they are right back to work," Longwell noted. "They work every day at their craft. There is no slowing down."

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While Jaramillo plans to explore her own visual interpretations of brain waves, Torreano continues to mine photographic images of outer space, much as Cézanne returned again and again to portraying his beloved Mont Sainte-Victoire.

"It's that dynamic exchange between the familiar and mystery," Torreano said of the unyielding attraction to his subject.

Campus, too, continues where he left off. "Someone asked if I was lonely," the aging artist noted about his solitary excursions into the Long Island landscape, "but what I am searching for is something much greater than me."

WHAT "Virginia Jaramillo: The Harmony Between Line and Space," "John Torreano: Painting Outer/Inner Space 1989 to Present" and "peter campus: when the hurly burly's done"

WHEN | WHERE Through Feb. 27, 2022, Monday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Friday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Hwy., Water Mill

Visitors gathered for an opening reception on Nov. 6 at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill. Credit: Gordon M. Grant

INFO parrishart.org, 631-283-2118

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