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ART KING

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South Florida painter wants to help other artists succeed

In a drab, purple-gray Pinecrest warehouse, hidden behind a roll-down aluminum door, Miguel Paredes is busy creating art. Countless paintings, popping with color, are propped up against the crisp, white interior walls.

In one, a Jessica Rabbit-type vixen slinks against an edge of the canvas. In another, a rosary-bedecked child rides a train, staring straight ahead as several Yosemite Sams bounce around the scene.

Paredes applies paint to his canvas with deft, authoritative strokes - a man who has confidence in his skills.

Unlike most artists, however, Paredes also has an entire staff of assistants and managers at his beck and call.

His cellphone rings constantly - he is a master of juggling three or four callers at a time. He even has a driver - engaged on this afternoon in taking Paredes' beloved chow-German shepherd mix, Misty, to the vet.

In addition to being a successful artist, Paredes is also the owner and founder of PK Graphics, a multimillion-dollar printing company.

Eight years ago, Paredes began PK Graphics out of his Miami Beach apartment. Today, the company has blossomed into one of the largest high-quality postcard and flier printers in the United States, with three locations and 144 employees. Last year, it pulled in \$20 million.

The studio in Pinecrest is the beginning of his next venture: an art publishing firm that he says will help other artists achieve greater success.

Paredes has come a long way from the days when he was a broke artist living in Miami Beach, working as a chef to pay for studio space and art supplies. He hasn't forgotten how difficult it can be to earn a living in the art world, and PK Graphic's success has allowed him to serve as a benefactor to Miami's lesser known artists.

"Independent artists looking for sponsors for their shows, they call me," he says. "They know I'm a sucker for that."

That's what has motivated him to start Paredes Publishing, set to open in July.

"I'm doing this because I've lived everything from being a starving artist to becoming a successful artist," he said. "It's going to be run by an artist who understands an artist's needs."

"I don't want to be one of those publishing companies that sells 1,000 prints and then doesn't pay the artist. There's a lot of misrepresentation of artists."

Paredes has invited two artists he'll be promoting, Ivan Reyes and Attila Lakatoush, to share his studio. "We're just getting some chemistry going," he says.

Lakatoush is working on a series of collages - Reyes offers suggestions and occasionally applies a layer of glue, a piece of torn newspaper, or a swipe of paint to the canvases.

"I can get it going to a point, but [Ivan] takes it in a whole new direction," Lakatoush says. "The color that he's doing right now - it's incredible."

Paredes Publishing will sell both the originals as well as a limited edition run of prints.

"They're pretty great," Lakatoush says proudly, examining his work. Then he changes his mind. Turning to Reyes - who has just finished turning one collage into two with the aid of a box cutter - he says, "Take out the girl."

Reyes eyes the object of Lakatoush's displeasure: a winged coquette type who is competing for attention with the umber outline of a horse. "Are you sure, man?" he says. Then, he picks up his paintbrush and the girl's figure slowly disappears under a layer of pale green paint.

TALENT, NOT FRIENDSHIP

Although Paredes counts both men as friends, he makes it clear that it was their talent that led him to sign the two. He points to Reyes' proven ability to appeal to the commercial market without sacrificing his artistic sensibilities - in addition to adorning the walls of numerous galleries, Reyes' prints have been favored by art publishing companies and interior designers for the past decade.

As for Lakatoush, whose designs have promoted South Beach clubs and Washington D.C.'s AIDS Alliance, Paredes is drawn to his style.

"Attila just knows how to interpret beauty - he's pretty unique," Paredes said.

Paredes critiques Reyes and Lakatoush's work with the voice of a collector - over the years, he has amassed an impressive selection of artwork in his Pinecrest home.

There's a Dali, a Picasso etching, paintings by Lee Quiñones and Julian Schnabel, as well as Paredes' latest acquisition: a War of the Worlds-inspired silicon sculpture by Colin Christian, depicting a girl being attacked by insects.

"It's a beautiful sculpture," Paredes says.

Paredes began developing his artistic skills during the early 1980s as a student at New York City's Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music, Art, and Performing Arts - immortalized in the musical and film *Fame*).

His years at LaGuardia coincided with the explosion of New York's pop-art and graffiti movements. Inspired by artists like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who bridged the gap between the streets and the galleries, Paredes took up graffiti. Like many graffiti artists, he signed his work with a tag, rather than his actual name. His moniker of choice: Mist.

"I guess that was pretty cool at the time," he says with a self-deprecating laugh.

Grffiti still has a firm presence in Paredes' work. He classifies himself as an "urban impressionist," and his recent paintings contain layered images, reminiscent of graffiti that has accumulated over time on a surface, tag-styled writing, and even a reference to Haring's famous *Crack is Whack* mural.

But, he says that, unlike some of his peers, he was wary of getting too involved in the scene - LaGuardia began expelling students who were caught doing graffiti. "They called it vandalizing," Paredes says.

In 1986, after graduating from LaGuardia, Paredes made his way to Miami. Skeptical about his ability to support himself as an artist, he took up cooking as a day job, while continuing to paint on the side.

"I had to cook to pay for my studio, and by the time I finished paying my bills at home and paying the studio, I was broke," he says. "I would do murals and some commission work just to make some extra money."

One of his early jobs was as a sous-chef at the David Williams Hotel in Coral Gables. After work, he would walk up and down the Miracle Mile, showing samples of his work to business owners and trying to pick up commercial gigs - "little odd jobs here and there."

Eventually, Paredes' culinary career took on a more glamorous tone - he worked at South Beach's Delano Hotel, befriending future culinary hotshots such as Douglas Rodriguez and Jennie Yip.

In 1998, Paredes accepted one of those artistic "little odd jobs:" designing promotional fliers for Groove Jet, a South Beach nightclub. It helped him notice a hole in the club's business strategy.

"Nightclubs are always coming up with marketing ideas at the last minute," Paredes says. "These guys needed stuff right away."

The problem was that printing companies that specialized in postcards and fliers took several days to turn product around. If a club didn't plan far enough in advance, its promotional team wound up scampering to Kinko's to make last minute photocopies.

'FASTER, BETTER, CHEAPER'

So Paredes decided to fill that niche: 24-hour turnaround for high-quality promotional materials.

"I was able to be faster, better and cheaper," he says. "I needed to be able to eliminate the competition."

These days, Paredes does it all. He's a businessman, at the helm of two companies. He's an artist, preparing a collection of paintings for an upcoming show. And he has a family - he, his four children, and his wife Joyce live just minutes from his studio. On most mornings, Paredes is up at 5:30 or 6 with "one of the babies" - his youngest two, Michael and Leo, are a year and a half and seven months old respectively.

"The key question is when do I sleep?" Paredes says. "I power nap - I've been power napping for 10 years." Although the responsibility of helming PK Graphics has limited the amount of time Paredes can devote to his artwork, he has managed to participate in several gallery shows and festivals over the past few years.

His next show, at New York City's Amsterdam Whitney Gallery in November, will feature a group of paintings, linked by their references to New York's subway system, that Paredes has collectively titled Train Series. According to Ruthie Tucker, owner of the Amsterdam Whitney, the paintings' style follows in the steps of Basquiat - who got his start as an artist tagging New York subways.

"We feel that [Paredes] personifies urban expression and urban power," she said. "I think he's going to be a constellation in the sky of 21st century art."

In spite of Paredes' busy schedule, the atmosphere in the studio is laid back. He, Reyes, and Lakatoush act like buddies, rather than business associates about to embark on a potentially lucrative, potentially risky new venture. Paredes, however, is optimistic.

"I think this is going to be bigger than just helping my friends sell a couple of pieces of art," he says.

Caption:

PHOTOS BY RONNA GRADUS/MIAMI HERALD STAFF COLLABORATION: Attila Lakatoush, left, and Miguel Paredes team up for a series of images. They're working in Paredes' studio. Color photo: Miguel Paredes (all A's), Attila Lakatoush and Miguel Paredes (a)

Memo:

Cover Story

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