

Petzel

"How Jorge Pardo Turns Light, Color and Form into a Phenomenology of Seeing," *Observer*, Elisa Carollo, December 8, 2025

OBSERVER

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"We live in a world where what can become a medium keeps getting more interesting," the artist told *Observer*. "Artists tend to fear technology, as if it might replace them, but I think that's just another medium we can use creatively."



Installation view: "Jorge Pardo" at Petzel in 2025. Photos by Meg Symanow, courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

Known for his sensorially engaging, mesmerizing environments and installations of color and light, Cuban-born Jorge Pardo moves fluidly between contemporary art, design and optics to stage what could be described as a "phenomenology of the senses" in place. His shows become sites that activate, test and heighten both sensorial and cognitive responses, encouraging an awareness that how we encounter, process and communicate the world is far more an act of participation than passive reception. "I like to think of my art as tools to think with," Pardo told *Observer* as he was completing the installation of his latest show at Petzel—his 12th solo exhibition with the gallery—on view through December 20.

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Although Pardo does not limit himself to a single medium and often crosses into design and architecture, he still describes himself first and foremost as a sculptor. Yet, as he admits, what truly interests him is how people behave: the way he thinks about space centers on the interactions among objects, environments and viewers. To animate that kind of behavior, he notes, requires an arsenal of tactics and tools. "Over time, I became curious about things that revolve around art—spaces, architecture and the objects people collect," Pardo said. "Even if they aren't artworks, people can have a special aesthetic or emotional relationship with them. I started thinking about how those things could become installation material—or more importantly, about the problems that arise from the differences between them. Those differences are installation problems."



Jorge Pardo. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

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Pardo's practice revolves around a continual inquiry into how different objects—with their aesthetic and material characteristics of color and form, as well as the complex systems of symbolic, social and political meanings they carry—can activate psychological, cognitive, emotional and mnemonic responses in viewers. He plays with the ways objects can turn into symbols, reactions and messages, generating meaning in the process.

In this, we can see Pardo's work as a reflection of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which similarly emphasizes the embodied nature of perception by placing viewers in sensorial environments that require physical navigation and awareness. With his now-iconic colorful acrylic hanging pendants and floor lamps, as well as his paintings, Pardo leaves clues—traces that open meaning and evoke reactions. Closer to the metaphorical logic of poetry, he places elements that evoke situations rather than testing responses in any scientific sense. What the show exposes is, quoting Merleau-Ponty, "the body as our general medium for having a world."

At the same time, Pardo's fascination with lamps stems from their nature as sources of light and therefore all color and visibility. "Light makes things visible, and visibility is what visual artists work with," he said. "Lamps are interesting because they shape light—and the environment. You can mold light's quality, its spectrum and how it affects space and other objects." To Pardo, shaping light in space is itself a generative gesture, making lamps feel like making drawings, painting in the air.

"I think very structurally, but always through process," Pardo explains, pointing toward one of his seemingly abstract paintings—a kaleidoscopic choreography of color that appears like a chameleonic surface of matter just about to transform into something else. "This painting is made of maybe ten other images. Some are famous paintings, some aren't, some are photos my daughter took," he said. "They get scrambled in the computer, then drawn by hand, then reprocessed again. It's always a kind of scrambling, but never a direct one."

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Pardo refers to his paintings as "artworks to think with." Photos by Meg Symanow, courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

He appropriates images from the seemingly infinite digital repertoire of human expression, dissecting and reassembling them into new compositions that appear random yet ultimately find their own sense of harmony. Once the digital drawing is complete, vectorized outlines are laser-etched onto canvas and hand-painted with an effervescent palette of marigold yellows, pearlescent blues and mossy greens.

This process opens a series of additional readings of Pardo's work, including a postmodern structuralist inquiry into the meaning and essence of images amid the continuous overflow of visual information enabled by the digital realm. Notably, Pardo has been working digitally since the mid-1990s. Yet this has never been about testing the limits of the machine; for him, the computer and the digital elaboration it allows are simply other tools, mediums through which to develop creative output. "We live in a world where what can become a medium keeps getting more interesting," he said. "Artists tend to fear technology, as if it might replace them, but I think that's just another medium we can use creatively, a tool to investigate the possibilities of image. It's romantic to think the digital space is any less or more than oil paint."

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In the large canvases on view at Petzel, a far-reaching set of art historical sources—from Monet's *Haystacks* to the conceptual interventions of artists like Michael Asher—converge and blend into a synesthetic and synchronous abstract ensemble of color, light and form. Similarly, Pardo's hanging pendants and floor lamps draw upon both Monet's *Haystacks* and Warhol's *Shadows*: through architectural software, the artist machines mythic lighting effects, so deeply entwined in art historical discourse that they collide within a single object.

In this sense, Pardo's work seems to embody the very process through which the histories of art, design and architecture evolve in a continuous interplay of references, echoes and inspirations. At the same time, these paintings address the condition of any image in the digital space, subject to inherent fluidity and suspended in a flow of constant transformation within the relentless circulation of data and information.



In his paintings, far-spanning art historical sources are digitally overlapped, converging and intersecting as vertices of light, color and form. Photos by Meg Symanow, courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

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Through it all, process—and the questions guiding it—remain central for Pardo. "The process—how something is decided, executed, used, or misused—is important," he said. "An exhibition might come from something I'm reading or filming and from that I extract problems or questions that instruct the work."

"Artworks first need to present themselves as aesthetic problems. They have to reside within the visual, first and last," he added. Even the colors he uses—though often associated with his Cuban upbringing—are employed primarily to explore the instinctual reactions they generate. "Colors are universally active; they force decisions without language. It's too easy to assign sensorial things to geography. Chromatic sensitivity isn't exclusive to one place. I just feel better when I use color relationships that make sense to me. I design palettes—gradients, patterns and series of relationships. Sometimes I use paint chips from hardware stores to test combinations. When I finalize a palette, it's done—I know it's solid."

Yet even in selecting colors, Pardo works mainly by intuition, trusting his own sensorial responses. "It's entirely intuitive," he clarified. "Of course, as a trained artist you learn color theory, but at this point, it's muscle memory."

His work now operates at the intersection of perception and cognition—the sensorial and mental dimensions of image-making and meaning-making that shape our sense of reality. Yet he always leaves his pieces open to multiple interpretations. His inquiry focuses less on the aesthetic in the modern sense than on *aisthesis* in the Greek sense of a study of human perception. As for the Greeks, *aisthesis* and *noesis* (intellect) are not separate opposites but complementary; here, the senses mediate between the material and the intelligible. In a more Husserlian sense, Pardo's work stages the intentionality of perception itself: every color, form and reflection directs awareness toward the act of seeing, turning the artwork into an event of sensorial and cognitive awareness rather than a static image.

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Pardo's hanging pendants and floor lamps draw upon both Monet's *Haystacks* and Warhol's *Shadows*. Photos by Meg Symanow, courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

His practice is an exercise in phenomenology that is also an epistemology, exploring how the senses, intertwined with psychological, cognitive and cultural dimensions, create an ontology. "My art is all about making optics—for ourselves first, as artists," he explained. "We see things because of how we think about what we're seeing. The objects left behind are just traces of that thinking." The experience of seeing becomes both a philosophical and epistemological act.

Ultimately, Pardo grapples with one of the most fundamental questions of all: how we experience the world and how we form an image, a sense and a memory of it. To him, art is a tool to think with, pushing us to question the essence of reality: what we see, what we experience, who we are in relation to it. "Those are the fundamental questions: Where am I? What am I experiencing? Who am I?" he said, agreeing that his work, in the end, heightens awareness of experience itself.

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Pardo builds on his interest in fusing machine and handmade media to create works that are paradoxically bound to conditions of time and space. Photos by Meg Symanow, courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

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