

Chronogram

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art

Occhi Belli, Rome, Franc Palaia, archival color photograph, paint, paper collage, wood, spray, faux cement on Polystyrene, 34" x 46" x 3", 2023

Digging Deep

"FRANC PALAIA: URBAN ARCHEOLOGY"
AT GARNER ARTS CENTER

May 3-June 15
Garnerartscenter.org

The first time I met Franc Palaia I knew I was in the presence of an old-school badass. Our initial meet-and-greet-art-connectivity-chitchat swiftly evolved into a lively discussion about the downtown scene in New York City during the 1980s, the evolution of his graffiti-infused style, his life as an artist working in the Hudson Valley, and that time when the mighty Jean-Michel Basquiat commissioned Palaia to paint two small paintings for him and later incorporated elements of Palaia's imagery into his own collaborative piece with Andy Warhol. (True story.)

Since that conversation on Main Street in Saugerties, we have since maintained an epistolary exchange with a constant flow of dynamic news from his end, everything from his "Public Art in Poughkeepsie" tour (running since 2007) and his participation in recent group exhibitions around the US, including the Foto Focus Biennial in Cincinnati, Hudson Valley Museum of Contemporary Art in Peekskill, and Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz to his latest family sojourn in Rome for his daughter's wedding. (In 1985, he and his now-wife, Eve D'Ambr, an acclaimed historian and professor at Vassar College, met during their respective fellowships at the prestigious American Academy in Rome).

My ongoing communication with Palaia yields one energetic "artist update" after another, among them juicy tidbits about his past projects (his murals have been featured in Hollywood movies) and memorable short stories, notably his time as a drummer in the rag-tag Afro-funk new wave band Jon Wayne when the late Pope.L (born William Pope) was the lead singer. Pope.L went on to become an internationally celebrated performance artist. Palaia shared with me a screenshot of the band from a video that was featured at the MoMA memorial for Pope.L last year. Palaia can be seen hammering away on his drum set behind Pope.L as they command the room in a potent moment of musical mayhem.

Other messages from Palaia detail his extraordinary experiences in Manhattan during the height of '80s creative culture, including his stint as a set designer for the Actor's Studio, his work with Salvador Dali on a holographic film, and his job painting studio backdrops for Annie Leibovitz. Last summer Palaia bombed my inbox with many great images of his work as seen out and about in the world, including a picture of the renowned rapper KRS-One standing in front of his sculpture in the "Can't Stop, Won't Stop: Celebrating 50 Years of Hip Hop" show at Albany Center Gallery.

With this exhibition at Garner Arts Center, we encounter Palaia's gutsy artistic style in nearly 65 vibrant artworks including paintings, sculptures, photographs, and mixed media pieces that employ found objects and embody his many years of exploration and focus. Beginning with his early works that reflect his affinity for cave paintings to his later Styrofoam sculptural

photographs and his current works that contain imagery of war weapons, Palaia engages with diverse ideas both archaic and extant. What we don't see in this retrospective show are his many projects around the globe, including recent community wheatpasting activities in our region.

With their strong street-art edge, Palaia's artworks also express his admiration for the rich visual cultures of other countries, including his bright Chinese fresco series that incorporate Maoist-era imagery and other iconographical references from far-flung lands such as Italy, France, Turkey, China, Russia, Palestine, and Cuba. Among the most powerful elements of this show is the wall that includes his "dictator series" of decrepit portraits of living tyrants including Trump, Putin, Xi Jinping, and Kim Jong Un among other psychopathic overlords now dead and gone. Together these artworks illuminate a joyful jumble of symbolism and metaphors, everything from Western cartoon figures to classical European visuals culled from art history and everything in-between.

For 50 years, Franc Palaia has devoted himself to his dynamic art practice as a multidisciplinary "urban archeologist" artist and Renaissance man. Having received over 23 grants and fellowships in nine media categories (including murals, artist books, and curating) and bolstering a storied professional career in art, music, theater, performance, and documentary projects (among other areas of creativity), Palaia continues to realize a bold and confident body of work that confirms his status as a long-standing badass of his generation.

—Talesin Thomas