

©Michele Cohen 2011, FROM THE BOOK, PARALLEL PARK MARYLYN DINTENFASS BY ALIZA EDELMAN, 2011, HARD PRESS EDITIONS

INTRODUCTION

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Rarely does art and architecture form the seamless bond evidenced in Fort Myers' new parking garage, a studied improvisation in form, color, and light. Marylyn Dintenfass' *Parallel Park*, like alchemy, transmutes the ordinary into the extraordinary, providing both a physical and imaginary civic gateway. A generic parking garage is now frequently mistaken for an art museum. Without other competing signifiers, the structure's neutrality allows *Parallel Park* to reference art—liberating the project from symbolic expectations often associated with public art commissioned for courthouses, schools, or hospitals. Here, the artist's brilliantly hued abstract evocations of tires, movement, and American car culture take center stage.

The essays that follow provide multiple perspectives on *Parallel Park*. Aliza Edelman contextualizes the imagery within the artist's oeuvre and the broader framework of America's love affair with the car. Barbara Hill, art consultant to the City of Fort Myers, describes the commission's history and the collaboration that formed to support it. John Driscoll's interview with public art expert Jennifer McGregor probes the qualities that distinguish *Parallel Park*, which as McGregor aptly observes, is "about transformation, transforming not only her [Dintenfass'] original art, but the building itself as well as the surrounding environment." This government commission successfully unites architecture with artistic vision and technological innovation, an operatic achievement that pushes boundaries for the artist and art in the public realm. *Parallel Park* turns limitation into opportunity.

The installation is a culmination of much of Dintenfass' work over several decades, drawing on her architectural ceramics comprised of modules and frames, color investigations, exploration of scale, and experimentation with digital media. The triangular aluminum tubing of *Parallel Park* is a three dimensional frame for the art, a massive segmented canvas rhythmically punctuating all four sides of the building. The imagery and colors, enlarged to this heroic size, derive from a recent series of monoprints and paintings. Computers make the mechanical reproduction of the artist's hand on giant mesh sheets possible, a beguiling conflation of human and machine. In the resultant Kevlar panels saturated with pigment, the artist's stylistic markers of "progression, movement, and gesture" activate every façade of the building, which recedes behind the art.

“Everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate,” writes Gaston Bachelard in the *Poetics of Space* (1964). Dintenfass’ studio work, indeed, derives expressive power from her combination of opposites—a rational grid with gestural color, a disparate quadrant rupturing the harmony of three others. Difference sparks conversation, and the completed works seethe with energy. Reflecting on finished paintings that appear uninhibited and effortlessly luminous, Dintenfass explains, “things are not what they seem,” revealing that the work actually emerges from a pre-conceived mental picture and a laborious process.

Parallel Park is no exception. Born of a need to provide ventilated sunscreens, it weds utility with high art: it endows color and form with a purpose that goes beyond aesthetics. Though stationary, it is in constant motion, seen through the eyes of moving pedestrians and motorists. The bold design and complex color relationships, coupled with shifting light and a changing sky, provide infinite visual experiences, or what Dintenfass calls “payback” for her viewers. Under the searing Floridian sun, *Parallel Park* can be both transparent and opaque, and at night, illuminated from within, it becomes a flickering lantern. A permeable membrane, it is both soft and hard, shield and aperture. Made from building blocks of color, it consists of individual panels, vertical strips, and whole facades, projecting and dipping. As a hybrid of architecture, sculpture, and painting, there is tension between surface and structure and a merging of autobiographical explorations with public space.

Like Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *Surrounded Islands* of 1982, a memory of vivid pink against the blue and green of Florida’s Biscayne Bay, *Parallel Park* wraps a colorless structure in brilliant colors, patterns, light, and shadow, transfiguring a mundane civic amenity into a vision. Unlike Christo and Jeanne Claude’s temporary projects, *Parallel Park* leaves the residue of memory but lingers; it is both evanescent and permanent.