

# Fast cars and snap reactions

Artist Patrick Mimran tells Paul Sullivan about his provocative billboard signs, the humour in his work and how he ended up running Lamborghini

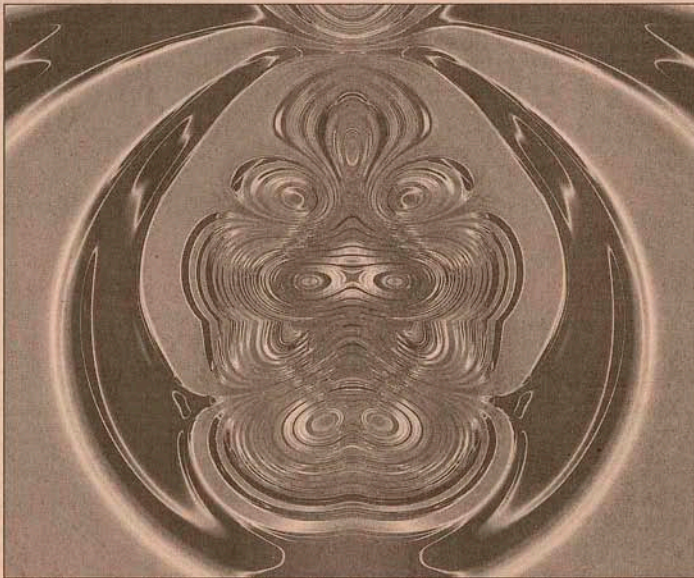
In person, Patrick Mimran is much more affable than his art might suggest. The French-born Swiss artist is best known in New York for his provocative billboards along the elevated rail tracks in west Chelsea. The signs, in the heart of the gallery district, range from the amusing – “A bad artist needs a good dealer” – to the banal – “If we walk on two legs and carry around an enormous brain, it is to express our own taste.”

During the 1980s when artists such as Eric Fischl and Julian Schnabel made provocative work all the rage, Mimran was working for his family conglomerate, The Mimran Group. That might explain why the 49-year-old artist with his thatch of grey hair resembles a well-off father of three (which he is) far more than a provocateur.

Mimran, who had his first photography show at age 15 in Lucerne, was in New York recently to prepare for an exhibition at the Milk Gallery, a few blocks south of his billboards. Opening on Thursday, “Altered States” consists of digital photographs he took last year in Rajasthan, India. The 60 images, mostly of Hindu deities, have been enlarged and manipulated to enhance the colour to an almost psychedelic level. The central piece is four synchronised films that culminate in a crescendo of colour and sound.

“When I was in India I took photographs of little pieces of temples, of marble reliefs, of frescos – only close-ups of things. I really wanted to get inside things,” he says. “The video starts with some pictures of gods and goes very fast” to approximate the feeling of reincarnation.

Speed was Mimran’s initial fascination. In 1980, having left art school after his father died to join



‘Brahmātic’ is part of the ‘Altered States’ exhibition consisting of images that have been enlarged and manipulated

his two brothers in running the family conglomerate, he heard about an opportunity to take over Lamborghini. The car company was in bankruptcy and being run by the Italian courts. Mimran and his brothers were able to snap it up for \$1m.

“When you’re young you like sports cars,” says Mimran, who

was then 24. “I was very passionate about it.”

Near the end of the decade, Lamborghini was humming along, and Mimran was looking for a big Detroit carmaker to increase its presence in the US. Chrysler was the only one interested. “The fact that they made ugly cars did not concern me so much,” he says. “I had to find a partner.”

When Chrysler made an offer for 51 per cent of Lamborghini, Mimran rejected it by saying they should buy the whole thing. They did in 1987 and just as quickly as Mimran had gone into the car business, he was out of it.

Having spent those years painting at weekends in Geneva, Mimran was free to work on his art. He began dabbling in encaustic, the wax painting process used by Jasper Johns. He describes these paintings as “a little bit hieroglyphic”.

Around this time he had a small show in Italy – “it was not influenced by cars in any way,” he quipped – and also started to work more on composing electronic music, which had been a hobby.

On the surface, Mimran’s life was shaping up to be that of a rich dilettante. But then he had a show for his paintings at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, and the British filmmaker Peter

Greenaway commissioned him to create the score for *Stairs* and used one of his compositions in *The Pillow Book*.

“It was a very interesting collaboration for me,” Mimran says of working with Greenaway. “We did a very big light show in Rome in 1995. It was quite an interesting experience to see thousands of

people listening to your music – and liking it.”

By 1998, after a second Marlborough show, Mimran began dabbling in video art when he was offered a show in Valencia. “For me it was a good chance to mix my passions for images and music,” he says.

Other multimedia shows followed, including a well-received piece called “The Tower of Babel” that featured 50 sets of people speaking different languages.

“There’s a certain bit of humour in it,” he says. “Humour is a very important barometer in my work. It’s a good way to transmit an idea without hurting anyone.”

As for the ubiquitous signs, he says they were ways to make humorous statements about people’s perceptions of art, and he is genuinely shocked that they could be taken any other way. “You can’t be in the mood to be humorous all the time,” he says. “They’re just to provide some thoughts about art.” He adds, “There are many subjects I will never touch, like the subject of religion.”

His next show is inspired by Hinduism, but he considers his approach non-religious. “I don’t touch religion to criticise it,” he says. “It’s an expression of my own experience in India. It’s what I felt in a Hindu temple, from the beginning up to Nirvana.” If that exalted state is reached, digital photography will have gone to a different level.

‘Altered States’, November 18 to December 9, Milk Gallery, 450 West 15th Street, New York, NY 10011, tel: +1 212-645 2797  
www.milkstudios.com  
www.patrickmimran.com



This charming man: artist Patrick Mimran in Rajasthan for his latest project



Mimran's show is 'an expression of my own experience in India'