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The French Artist JR Brightens the Montauk Highway*

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His photographic installation will illuminate the exterior of the Parrish Art Museum with an image of playful innocence.



A detail of the work “Les Enfants d’Ouranos” by the French artist JR. It depicts children at play and will be installed on an exterior wall of the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y.
Credit: The artist and Perrotin

By Hilarie M. Sheets
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This article is part of our Museums special section about how art institutions are reaching out to new artists and attracting new audiences.

As warmer weather draws more people to the East End of Long Island, a joyful vision will beckon across the long horizontal facade of the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y., that will be visible from the Montauk Highway.

To be installed by Memorial Day, a giant photographic composition depicting larger-than-life silhouettes of nearly 40 children, running as if to converge on a soccer ball, will radiate a kind of white light against a black expanse stretching more than 200 feet.

It is an instantly recognizable image of play, printed as a black-and-white negative with inverted tones onto reinforced fabric affixed to the concrete exterior of the museum. Titled “Les Enfants d’Ouranos,” the piece is the work of the Paris-based artist JR, known for his site-specific photo-based installations in public spaces globally that show the humanity of individuals and communities that are often overlooked.

“I was really trying to capture that moment of lightness and innocence of all children before the weight of the world falls on them,” JR said in a phone interview. His installation for the Parrish is drawn from his series of the same name, “The Children of Ouranos,” which debuted in March at Perrotin gallery in New York.



The artist JR is known for his photo-based installations that show the humanity of individuals and communities that are often overlooked.

Credit: Pari Dukovic for The New York Times

In Greek mythology, Ouranos was the primordial god of the sky and father of the Titans. “All those gods, before whoever they became, they were just children,” JR said, interested in metaphorically representing the possibilities of youth as divine.

The Parrish mural is a composite of photographs of children playing soccer taken at refugee camps in Mauritania, Ukraine, Rwanda, Greece and Colombia. “Some of those places are totally forgotten,” he said. “Children are thrust in between a conflict that has nothing to do with them.”

For the series “Déplacé-e-s,” the project from which “Les Enfants d’Ouranos” evolved, JR printed photographs of individual child refugees, beaming and animated, onto fabric panels stretching 120 feet long. Unfurling these banners in public plazas across Europe with armies of volunteers, JR used drones to capture images of these actions from a bird’s-eye view — the vantage point of warplanes.

His first image in “Déplacé-e-s,” called “Valeriia,” presented the playful 5-year-old as a surreal giant, carried aloft by hundreds of tiny people on the ground, shot in front of the Lviv opera house at the start of the war in Ukraine. “Those planes from Russia could see that there are children under them,” said JR. The image was reproduced on the cover of Time magazine and went viral.

In February, he united five images of refugee children from five countries at the Piazza San Carlo in Turin, Italy, with more than 1,000 volunteers stretching the banners.

“It looks like those kids are just playing together, like there are no borders,” said JR, who was born in 1983 in Paris and raised in the projects on the city’s outskirts, his family originally from North Africa and Eastern Europe. His first public works were as a teenager, writing his initials in graffiti on walls as a way of saying he existed.

Image



In February, JR displayed five giant images of refugee children from different countries at the Piazza San Carlo in Turin, Italy, with more than 1,000 volunteers stretching the banners. “It looks like those kids are just playing together, like there’re no borders,” JR said.

Credit: Alessandro Di Marco/EPA, via Shutterstock

The “Les Enfants d’Ouranos” series is the first time JR has experimented with reproducing his photographs directly as negatives. For the works at Perrotin, he transferred the glowing silhouettes onto reclaimed wood, heightening the contrast by hand-painting the background in black ink.

“He’s bridging photography and modern art in a very different way,” said Ariel J. Kliegerman, a director at the Perrotin, who finds a poeticism in the new technique. “The light sources and tonal relationships are reversed. The outlines of the children become more clearly defined, their individual features softened.”

JR said he liked how the process obscured the particulars of race and ethnicity, rather emphasizing the children’s dynamism and movements.

“You go back to the essence of life,” he said. “When you look at those artworks, you actually don’t know if it’s a painting, if it’s a photograph, if it’s on the moon. You lose all sense of context.”

For the Parrish director, Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, who invited JR to adapt multiple figures from “Les Enfants d’Ouranos” into the composition for the museum’s facade, their ambiguity is their strength. “We see these children as more universal than anchoring them to a particular conflict zone,” she said.

Since the Parrish began installing work on its exterior facing the highway — the first was a video piece by Clifford Ross in 2017 — “our facade is one of our most important galleries,” Ms. Ramírez-Montagut, the director, said. “I want to signal the fact that we will be working with our communities that are underrepresented and underserved, which is something JR does with incredible mastery and compassion. He builds bridges. It’s inspiring and optimistic.”

JR’s engagement with timely issues and his inclusiveness make it easy for people to love his work, said Anne Pasternak, director of the Brooklyn Museum. There, in 2019, he had his first major museum exhibition in North America, a career survey that traveled to London; Groningen, Netherlands; and Munich and opens at the Lotte Museum of Art in Seoul on May 3.

In the Parrish installation, “the light is really an illumination from the children,” Ms. Pasternak said. “There’s something very direct, maybe obvious, but also very beautiful about that — the idea of childhood, joy, the sense of play, their light shining and guiding us.”

She added that people won’t be able to not see it when they’re driving by the Parrish. “It forces you to think about the plight of others,” she said, “while you’re going off onto your glamorous weekend in the Hamptons.”