

# INVISIBLE

Michael Pribich ————— By Emily Colucci



Whether immigrant workers who complete backbreaking manual labor, Mexican kitchen workers—known as “cocineros”—who staff New York City’s restaurants or the forgotten shared cultural history between Latin America and the United States, New York-based artist Michael Pribich represents the overlooked, unnoticed and ignored. Using materials imbued with symbolic significance including hair, brooms, cutting boards and bags, Pribich’s mixed media works engage with issues as fraught as class, immigration, labor, race and ethnicity, allowing viewers to confront the largely unseen realities of American capitalism.

Visiting Pribich’s studio on New York’s busy Canal Street, we caught Pribich before he left on an extended trip to the unlikely travel destinations of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Revealing travel influences his art “in the most direct way,” we spoke with Pribich on his new series sparked by his residency in Mexico, the familial history behind his passionate interest in labor and how he hopes to motivate change in viewers.

Entitled *Bolsas*, Pribich’s newest series lines the walls of his Chinatown studio, featuring gauzy bags covered in intricate leatherwork and other seemingly unexpected objects such as bread, fried pork and multicolored ribbons. Conceived during his

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creatively fruitful stint at 360 Xochi Quetzal residency in Jalisco, Mexico, Pribich based his *Bolsas* on the woven, multiuse bags carried by construction workers in the region. Although he “was prepared to not really do work—just travel” in Jalisco, Pribich was inspired by his observation of the resident laborers, recalling, “There’s this flow to everything. There’s a connection to labor and work, as well as sustenance, that was really appealing to me.” Having the bags sewn by a nearby upholstery worker, Pribich gathered his diverse materials in Guadalajara, using locally sourced objects to allude to the wide variety of craft and artistic

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## <sup>1</sup> **Milagro Mop**

mop frame with human hair, silver Mexican Milagros, 72 x 9 x 2 in., 2015

traditions in the city. For example, Pribich commissioned a saddlemaker in Guadalajara's leather district to handcraft the delicate stitching on the bags. "I said, 'I need a piece of leather with some decorative vernacular stitching.' Right away, he did it and I could see it was beautiful and affordable. He got into it and my instructions were just imagery that represents Mexico," he explains.

From leather to ribbons culled from the city's ribbon district, the Bolsas symbolically assert Mexico's cultural history. Describing the works as his response to the Whitney Museum of American Art's monumental survey exhibition *America Is Hard To See*, Pribich notes, "I was thinking of extending that subject to how Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean are hard to see because we've disavowed our history. That really bothers me. I thought I'm going to use this time in Mexico to represent what my concept of Mexico is."

While an aesthetic departure, Pribich's Bolsas continue his longtime interest in manipulating unconventional materials to highlight difficult yet essential topics, primarily in regards to labor. In perhaps his most well-known ongoing series *My Labor, Your Culture*, he constructs conceptual and minimalist sculptures from recognizable utilitarian objects including workman's gloves in *Endless Work* and a mop in *Milagro Mop*, rendering the invisible class of service workers visible in an artistic context. Further cementing the physicality of the workers, Pribich also utilizes hair, which he reveals, "symbolically takes you into the next world." Considering his choice of materials, Pribich reflects, "Everything I use has meaning. Whatever the subject, I try to link the materials to that subject."

**Endless Sweep**

broom, steel rod,  
chrome chain,  
54" H, 2007

(far right) **Azucar  
Bolsa**

recycled sugar bag,  
stitched leather  
panel, colored  
ribbons, 37 x 3 x 22  
in., 2015



With his mother's family from Mexico and his paternal heritage Serbian-Croatian, Pribich's creative response to social and labor issues directly relates to his own familial history. "My Mexican grandfather immigrated to Texas then Colorado and California," reminisces Pribich, "He worked as a farm worker and a cannery worker. He raised nine children that survived. My father's family were carpenters and union workers. They always talked about work...That's what I grew up with. As an adult as I became more aware of social conditions and what I wanted to do as an artist, that history kept coming up for me."

Not only influenced by his own family, Pribich's knowledge of the hierarchy rampant in the contemporary art world through his years as an art handler also motivated his turn toward more politically oriented artwork. Referring to his Cocineros series, which was his first "where the focus was about a social issue specifically—not casually but directly," Pribich explains the series evolved from blue-chip artist Richard Prince's car hoods. Installing one of Prince's hoods for a major collector, Pribich became disturbed by the disconnection between Prince's version of American opportunity and his own. "Richard Prince's hoods don't speak for me," says Pribich, "or so many people I care about. I wanted to make a body of work that did speak or make visible the cocineros. I guess it started in anger, which is an energy that informs a lot of things I do."

Describing his engagement with relevant subjects as "certainly aligned with activist thinking," we asked Pribich if he thinks art has an inherent social responsibility. He responds, "To be contemporary art, I think it has to have a social responsibility. I think that more and more. I think we're going down the slope too fast and the planet is diminishing too quickly to not be aware of that. To ignore that is not acceptable to me."

Through his art, Pribich forces viewers to interrogate their own relationship with work, as well as various classes of workers. Contemplating how he would like to affect change in viewers, Pribich articulates, "I think affecting consciousness that we are all human beings and equal. Also slow down a bit and pay attention to what's going on around you. It's abhorrent to me the behavior of so many people in the street or apartment building who don't notice you. I think there's something wrong when human beings ignore each other. There's this greater distance between humans and art wants to bring humans together. On the real highest level, that's what I hope my art can do—bring people together to pay attention to their surroundings and other human beings."

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**Hair Block for Carlos Llaguno**  
cutting block with cutout, horse hair, 24 x 18 x 5 in., 2007

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