



CASE STUDY #6

LUIS COLMENARES

Artist

Jean Lafitte Parkway



A native New Orleanian, Luis Colmenares designed and built restaurants and their interiors in New Orleans, restaurants like Emeril's, Nola's, K. Paul's, Red Fish Grill. Before Katrina, he had 25 artists working for him in his City Art Studios. After Katrina, he had a devastated studio, destroyed equipment, and scattered workers. He went to Chalmette and started doing roofing, so he could start building up his art business again.

How did you first get into art to begin with?

Oh gosh, I've been doing art all my life. I kid people I don't have a job: I just do art.

Tell me about what the artistic community was like before Katrina.

It was incredible. We had a wonderful art community here. Pretty much all of Julia Street was really popping; a lot of the artists were doing incredible art. But you know, something changed, too. When some of these artists left and they came back, a lot of them came back with a different look to their art. A lot of the artists put in Katrina into their artwork, and I think more, maybe, more soul to it or more thought into some of their pieces. Look at J'Renee's pieces before: she painted these beautiful people of color. Then when she came back, she was doing more of—not voodoo scenes, but more New Orleans devastation and people in the background and broken houses, but beautiful paintings. With everything, my art has changed too. I was doing just very cute decorative stuff, and now I'm trying to do more serious pieces.

When did you first get back to your studio after Katrina?

I think about two and a half weeks, maybe three weeks, I got back to my studio. It was totally devastated. We took a bulldozer, took everything out on the street, and then cleaned as much as we could, put whatever we could save inside. It's really hard going from a studio that could produce everything to having one welding machine—not even gloves—and having to try to work with that. I had a little bit of savings, so I decided to invest it into getting roofing equipment. And then we started doing roofing.

I did roofing for about a year and a half in mid-city Chalmette and some in Uptown area. I did 56 roofs all together and helped rebuild about three houses.

Who were you working with?

Well, I had a crew. I had a crew before the storm that was building my studio spaces for me, and when the water came in and took all their tools away, I basically purchased their tools again so that they wouldn't have any hardship. And then they came to work for me, and it was just a crew of five kids—five young guys.

So you were doing roofing for a year and a half, and was it your intention to keep doing that?

No. Roofing and doing construction was something that my father in a sense taught me. My father was a very hands-on man. He taught me a lot of things, so construction was very easy for me. I just went in and decided that I would do a



little construction work. I kept it under small amounts of money so I wouldn't have to get a lot of licenses and things like that.

So tell me, when did you restart your studio?

What happened was I found one of my art patrons, and he owned about 40 properties that were all down here, that were devastated. And he owns a lot of leases on bars and restaurants. What I did was I made a deal with him to help me purchase a building and re-tool me—give me twenty-something thousand dollars to be able to re-tool.

What I do is I go in when he leases a building and I talk to the owners. The owners might have a theme . . . like Wimpy's Tavern was a New Orleans theme. I took [it] and did the New Orleans look in there. I crumbled the walls, and I did the barstools, and rosined the bar top, and I did everything very New Orleans-like.

Now all of a sudden I have a beautiful little place in Chalmette. Then he gets to put his poker machines in there and his cigarette machines. (He has an amusement company.) That way it's a win-win situation. So now, a lot of people say I only work for one person, but in a sense I don't. I work for one person, but I work for the people that are leasing the buildings, too. I do a lot of artwork out here.

So how did you come to that deal?

It was a strange thing. He needed somebody to help him and I needed work. So I think it was a symbiosis, trying to get both of us together to do something that we both needed. Right now I've done eight restaurants, three bars, two daiquiri shops, and one coffee shop in the Parish out of the year and a half that I've been doing this.

Why did you decide to move to St. Bernard Parish rather than stay in New Orleans?

Well, a friend of mine, Charles, that brought me here, he says that there are only two types of people in the world: people that live in Chalmette and people that want to live in Chalmette. But I came down here because I felt like New Orleans already had all the restaurants in the French Quarter done, and there wasn't going to be a lot of restaurant work for me to do. I knew I had to go somewhere where there was total devastation.

There's a little pizza place [here] that's called The Home of the Gorilla. I walked in there, did a few little things for him [the owner], and he feeds me. We did it for free for him because we knew that we're gonna end up buying a few thousand dollars worth of pizzas in the next two years, so we go in there and we get fed.

Also the coffee shop, Ben was the first person with a coffee shop in the neighborhood, and we'd been looking for one because we had to go to New Orleans to get good coffee. When he opened, I was on his doorstep, and we talked for a few minutes. He needed a menu board, so I made him a menu board, and I got fed a lot of coffee and a few croissants, and then I started making other pieces for him and we just became friends.

It's a wonderful, small community where they've embraced me, and I'm helping, hopefully, to bring art and beautify Chalmette.

Now a lot of people in Washington or elsewhere would say, "You know this is an area that's just been devastated. You need construction workers down here; you need medical personnel; you need people to pave the roads. Artists, florists, yoga studios, stuff like that, that's silly, you don't need that in a post-disaster area."

Wow. To me, I see a piece of art, and it makes me smile. I think it gives you a little bit of joy. In a place where you walk down the block and you see devastation, hopefully one day there'll be a piece of art in that park. I think you have to beautify at the same time you're rebuilding, but a lot of these places that aren't being rebuilt and that are being knocked down to slab level are an eyesore. I don't know how you bring art into that, but you have to bring art back into the community somehow to beautify, I think.

You've been working a lot with small business entrepreneurs. What's the role that they play in rebuilding?

We have two or three little construction places here. We have Home Depot, too. They were a blessing because they came back so early. But these mom-and-pop little operations that sell building supplies and things like that when I was doing sheetrock, I could go to them and say, "Look, here's a check. Can you hold the check for three or four days? I need this much sheetrock to hang." And then I got paid by the end of the week, and I went and paid them.

So, they're working with us. You can't do that at Home Depot. It's very hard to have cash flow because of the situation. Labor, you have lots of labor; you can get labor almost anywhere. You can get it in front of Home Depot; you can get it from a newspaper; you can hire locals, labor is easy. But being able to fund the job before the job is done—a lot of people don't want to give you any money up front for you

to build their roof or fix something for them—that was my biggest hardship of doing construction. But I got over it by using all the mom-and-pop operations. If I needed nails, if I needed roofing materials, I went to a little mom-and-pop one, and they were fabulous.

Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?

Ah yes, I like innovation. I like to do things that are very innovative. What I like to do when I design a restaurant or bar is make one piece of each. I'll make a bar stool; I'll make a chair; I'll make a table; I'll do a chandelier; and then I'll hand it to other artists to make 20 or 30 pieces for me. Because I just don't have the time to produce big amounts of stuff, I'll take those pieces, bring them to another machine shop, and they'll make all the frames. Then I'll bring those to another place, to another artist that has worked for me, and he'll do all the leaves and vines that are on them. And then I'll get them back, and I'll get to touch them by painting them.

What do you think is the future of St. Bernard Parish and of New Orleans?

Well, the people from St. Bernard are very, very hearty people. They put on their shrimp boots, and they got to work after the storm. If you look down a lot of the streets, you don't see any FEMA trailers. The people in St. Bernard have gotten back and just started working as hard as they could to get this back and that going.

Why do people in St. Bernard, as you say, "Put on their shrimp boots and get going?"

These people, they're Isleños. They were people that had boats and worked with the water, and shrimp, and all these different industries. And I think these people, they don't care about a storm. They care about a storm; they care about losing things, but they want to rebuild like they had it before, so they're not thinking of taking that big lot and building a high-rise on it.

I know a lot of people didn't build their houses like they were supposed to, but if it floods again, they'll do the same thing. They'll cut out their sheetrock; they'll slap it back on; and they'll go back in and live in it again. They just want to keep their little cottage that they had before and live the life they were living, a peaceful life. It's wonderful.