

FRIEZE D/E

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NICOLAS PARTY
THE MODERN INSTITUTE, GLASGOW, UK

by Chris Sharp



Nicolas Party, 'Still Life Oil Paintings and Landscape Watercolours', 2013, installation view

Nicolas Party is an artist who draws extensively on painting's past, though he isn't weighed down by it. Speaking in 2011 about his approach to the medium, he said: 'I'm playing with the ingredients I have in my kitchen, but none of those ingredients are original or unique [...] What I find exciting is that I know these elements are supposed to make a "good" painting somehow.' Implicitly eschewing the 'bad' painting of an earlier generation, Party's excitement with the traditions and process of painting, along with his inquisitive energy, was evident throughout this first major UK solo show from the Glasgow-based Swiss artist. Its straightforward title, 'Still Life Oil Paintings and Landscape Watercolours', emphasized Party's interest in the tropes of painting and its historical precedents, but its sober tone told only half the story.

There were eight still lifes, reconsidered and reworked over the last year and a half; in a small gallery space upstairs, seven landscapes all but glowed with lively, luminous colour. On their own, these exquisitely composed, precisely worked paintings would have made a compelling show. But Party's interest in the transformative properties of paint is such that a gallery's white walls are viewed as rather more than somewhere to hang work. Instead, they offer another opportunity to explore the shape-shifting physicality of paint. An opportunity, as well, to work in a more responsive, less painstaking way, drawing on his time as a graffiti artist while growing up in Switzerland in the early 1990s.

At The Modern Institute, the artist's habit of turning walls into a kind of stage set for his paintings – an approach Party has employed in a variety of ways for previous shows – revealed just how effective an exhibition-maker he is. The white cube's blank face was transformed into a warm-spirited dance. A troupe of spraypainted ovals fizzed with colour – red, green, blue, yellow – flowing out of the main ground-floor gallery into the office spaces and up the stairs. Even the corridor outside the gallery's toilets featured the pattern (in blue), although the toilets themselves were off limits. (This isn't always the case: for his 2011 installation at ReMap 3 in Athens, the spraycan was put to work in the bathroom, too.) Party's use of spray-paint for this decorative wall pattern (Decorative Pattern, 2013), and others before, was a

nod to his past involvement with graffiti. But it's the paint's materiality, rather than its appropriation by urban street culture, that he is interested in. It's a point that was emphasized in the upstairs gallery, where the even finish afforded by spraypaint was replaced by the softer, more inconsistent effect of charcoal – a journey from modern and manufactured to the most primal of mark-making materials.

Charcoal was also used in the main gallery to create two large-scale wall drawings (Landscape 2013, 2013), which reproduced aspects of the landscape watercolours. These mood-shifting interventions, positioned at either end of the gallery, provided a link between the two spaces and a striking formal contrast to the meticulously crafted oil paintings. It was in these that Party's art-historical concerns were most evident. Played out in a series featuring familiar still life subjects – bottles, flowers, pots, food – there was a palpable sense of what has come before, from the still lifes of 17th-century Europe to Pop art.

Yet, while Party's recurring coffee pots may recall the reworkings of Giorgio Morandi, his paintings avoid pastiche or homage. With the dimensions of objects often improbable and their colours unrepresentative, they create a strong sense of painting as something tangible – they are specific and of the now. It's a feeling that was made all the more vivid by the noticeable aroma of layer upon layer of oil paint.

These oddly beautiful still lifes and watercolours show Party to be assured in his craft and clear-minded in his view of what a painting should be. Wrapped in the warm embrace of his graffiti-inspired wall pattern, this 'good' painting was something very special indeed.