

FRIEZE D/E

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STRANGE FRUITS

by Chris Sharratt



Landscape, 2013, spray paint on wall, installation view, The Bothy Project at the Walled Garden, Glasgow

Nicolas Party is talking about Tintin and showing me his just-finished portraits made using pastels. It's an unexpected twist by a painter known for a Giorgio Morandi-style obsession with depicting pots. Yet while his precisely executed still lifes feature objects whose rhythmic, conical forms suggest almost-human characteristics, conversely these yet-to-be exhibited portraits don't look like people at all. With their comic-book strangeness and intense colour palette, they are more like painted objects or Fauvist cartoon characters. Rather than painting portraits of anyone in particular, it's the materiality of the pastels and their relationship with the paper that this Brussels-based Swiss artist is exploring.

For Party, an active graffiti artist in the 1990s before studying at Lausanne School of Art and then Glasgow (where he lived until recently), the ability of painting to animate, shape and transform surfaces – from canvases to walls – is central to his practice. He has turned rocks into oddly-shaped, outsize fruit (Blakam's Stone at R4, Ile Seguin, Paris, 2012); he's painted stools, tables and plates and designed a seven-course 'still life' dinner (Dinner for 24 Elephants at The Modern Institute, Glasgow, 2011; Dinner For 24 Dogs at Salon 94 Freemans, New York, 2012). In group and solo shows, his teenage transgressions with a spray can have given way to lively, colour-soaked decorative patterns that animate gallery walls. Outside walls, too. As part of the group show 157 Days of Sunshine (The Bothy Project at The Walled Garden, Glasgow, 2013), Party turned a long brick wall on a derelict site by the Forth & Clyde Canal into a brightly-coloured, spray-painted forest landscape.

Party hopes to do similar public murals in the future (Zurich is mentioned), and while this and other project-based activities could be seen as digressions from the main event of 'proper' painting, they in fact provide an essential point of engagement with both ideas and other artists. Murals are the social, conversational counterpoint to the solitary, painstaking process of painting with oils.

Party's approach to exhibition design also has its roots in this collaborative aspect of his practice. While on the MFA programme at Glasgow School of Art, he would curate shows by other artists, responding to and intervening in their work by painting abstract patterns on walls, frames and plinths – disturbing the information of the work with yet more informa-

tion. 'Staging' paintings in this way is a defining aspect of his own exhibitions, too, as seen earlier this year in his first major UK solo show, at the Modern Institute in Glasgow, *Still Life oil paintings and Landscape watercolours* (2013). Seven new oil paintings produced over a 20-month period took centre-stage, presenting the still life tropes of fruit, flowers, sausages as well as the artist's favourites – tea and coffee pots. But although they display a seriousness about painting's craft and traditions – art historical references come thick and fast, from Jean-Baptiste-Siméone Chardin to David Hockney – there is a lightness and humour in the works. There was also a lively interplay between the paintings and the exhibition's wall mural of multi-coloured ovals – spray painted and in charcoal – that snaked through the gallery.

The show at The Modern Institute included two charcoal wall drawings – up-scaled versions of a selection of trees featured in his vividly-coloured and fantastical landscape watercolours, themselves studies for future oil paintings. Party has often worked with charcoal, its simple, primal nature providing an immediate, tactile and transparent connection with the wall's surface – it doesn't so much cover as trace. For his solo show next spring at the new Kunsthall Stavanger, Norway, he intends to present an entire exhibition of charcoal wall drawings – landscapes, still lifes and, possibly, his portraits. Shortly after the Stavanger show, for one day only, he will stage a public project in front of Westminster Cathedral, London, as part of a curated series of events titled *Till We Have Built: Victoria*. Plinths, painted to resemble upward-pointing fingers – recalling Party's 2012 installation, *19 Fingers* (shown at R4, Ile Seguin, Paris, 2012) – will play host to a troupe of acrobats.

Painting, in this case conceived as a live performance, is again the motivation – the acrobats reference works by Marc Chagall, Picasso and more. For whether he's screen-printing posters (as he did with *Poster Club*, a group of Glasgow-based artists), creating an impractical, too-big book incorporating other artists' text (*Dust: A Journal of Entropy*, 2010), or designing a jazz festival's promotional poster (*Cully Jazz*, 2013), Party is always operating in painting's slipstream; its processes and techniques are never far from his mind.