

# PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

## JULY 5, 2019

### PARTY TIME: SWISS ARTIST PUTS MARBLE TWIST ON MARBLE HOUSE

by Sean Flynn



A crane installs Nicolas Party's sculpture into position at Marble House on Friday. (Peter Silvia photo)

Of the 20 pieces in Nicolas Party's collection, seven of them are, not coincidentally, created in marble. The exhibit opens officially on Sunday and runs through Sept. 22.

NEWPORT — Michael Pressler and John Roberts, both from Jersey City, New Jersey, were touring the Marble House on Friday afternoon looking for hidden pieces of contemporary art in each of the Gilded Age rooms and hallways.

Pressler found the modern portrait of Alva Vanderbilt, for whom the mansion on Bellevue Avenue was built, hanging across the hallway from Vanderbilt's traditional portrait.

"That portrait looks like Art Deco to me," Pressler said. "She seems to be carrying a banner from the women's vote movement."

Vanderbilt was a well-known suffragette.

Roberts was fascinated by sculptures of two oversized brightly colored fingers, one stretched out reclining on the main bed in Alva's bedroom, the other finger laid out on the long lounge chair.

"It's a little creepy," Roberts said. "I wonder what the artist was thinking?"

The two men were discussing two of the 20 pieces of art created by critically acclaimed Swiss artist Nicolas Party, who is now working out of a studio in Brooklyn,

New York, and has a home in Brussels, Belgium.

Of the 20 pieces, seven of them are, not coincidentally, created in marble. Two of the pieces are painted, but marbled. Built between 1888 and 1892, Marble House was made of 500,000 cubic feet of marble.

The special Marble House exhibit will open officially Sunday night and continue until Sept. 22

Curated by Dodie Kazanjian and jointly presented by The Preservation Society of Newport County and Kazanjian's project ART&NEWPORT, the exhibit is a site-specific installation Party created for the Marble House.

Kazanjian, born and raised in Newport, is a writer best known for her work as a longtime contributing editor at Vogue magazine, but she is also the founding director and curator of the nonprofit contemporary art space Gallery Met at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Party, Kazanjian and Trudy Coxe, CEO and executive director of the Preservation Society of Newport County, were on the lawn of the Marble House on Friday afternoon overseeing the installation of a large women's bust created by Party. After he designed it, he had it made near Florence, Italy, shipped to the U.S., and painted it in his Brooklyn studio.

"I'm having a group of characters interacting in the house," Party said about the exhibit. "When you have a house not lived in for many years, you think about the people who once lived there. These are all full bodies, figures or body parts like torsos — and the marble cats. Cats have nine lives and they still have presence."

Those fingers Roberts was asking about?

"All the body parts act as a body," Party said. "My view is the finger in the bed is crying. The finger in the day bed is consoling her, talking to her. It's a conversation."

In the bed in Consuelo Vanderbilt's room is a reclining marble figure of a woman gazing towards the ceiling, seemingly lonely.

Coxe envisioned her thinking about Consuelo's upcoming marriage to the Duke of Marlborough, a marriage her mother forced her into. Alva wanted her daughter to become royalty, and the duke needed funding for his castle.

"This is all very new and experimental for us," Coxe said.

She quoted the head of the Marble House guides, Marcia Garcia, who said: "This is the most exciting and innovative thing we have ever done."

"There is nothing better than doing an exhibit like this in a house museum, where

the people are missing,” Kazanjian said. “Nicolas Party never loses the sense of play, coupled with a deep knowledge of art history.”

Party was educated in Europe. He graduated from the Lausanne School of Art of France in 2004 after he decided to become a full-time artist. He received his master’s degree in fine arts in 2009 from the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland.

His paintings and sculptures are figurative and grounded in the three traditional genres of landscape, still life and portraiture, Party said.

The paintings come in oil, watercolor, spray paint, acrylic and, for the past six years, in soft pastel. He makes sculpture-giant portrait heads in wood, plaster and metal.

“The artist also enjoys working in marble, so there is a natural connection between his oeuvre and house itself,” said Leslie Jones, the Preservation Society’s director of museum affairs and chief curator.

Party “chose different places for the art, putting the pieces in spots that create a discussion about what was and what’s new,” Jones explained. “There is contrast in the narrative.”

For example, there is a giant orange foot in the Gothic Room, or a big green torso in the gentleman’s sitting room of William K. Vanderbilt.

“The result [of some of this art], at first glance, can be perplexing and definitely weird,” Kazanjian said. “But look again, step into his vivid and dreamlike world, and you’ll be riveted by images you’ve never seen before — and you may never forget.”

Alva Vanderbilt envisioned Marble House as her “temple to the arts” in America, as a 39th birthday present from her husband.

“Alva Vanderbilt and Richard Morris Hunt [the architect] made a bold statement when they built this house,” Coxe said. “Nicolas Party’s work makes an equally bold, and fun, counter statement.”