

JUXTAPOZ FALL 2020

A HUG FROM ON TOP OF YOU

by Sasha Bogojev



"Sottobosco" Installation view.

There are many elements in Nicolas Party's work that justify the princely position and reputation he's built so swiftly. We could begin with a deft interpretation of classic visual imagery. From still lifes to portraits and busts, to grottos and landscapes, his prolific oeuvre is firmly rooted in traditional art. Or we can talk about the immersive experiences he has conceived and built, transcending the ubiquitous white cube into theatrical presentations. Then there is also his skilled fondness for the unfairly neglected medium that is soft pastel, all of this encompassing a wide-ranging practice of drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, ceramics, and his own brand of performance. His iconic sculptures and unique pictures can convey the venerable patina of an ancient culture or the futuristic rendering of a utopian vision of the future. His enveloping installations and presentations pack up a singular and unforgettable experience.

And while working on this feature, I realized that timelessness also came through in a conversation I had with Party in Brussels back in Nov 2019. We spoke the day after his opening of his solo show with Xavier Hufkens, and it provides a great insight in the range of serendipitous influences and experiences that framed his interests and practice.

Sasha Bogojev: I want to start with the most obvious question about the transformation of spaces. What are the roots of your fascination?

Nicolas Party: When I finished school, I had this kind of art space in Lausanne with two other friends, and we organized shows and things. We would invite people to do shows, and every few months, we would have a music-related event and build a kind of a set. We'd put different stuff on the stage, the walls would be painted, and so on. When I got to Glasgow, I kept going with those walls and when I started

having shows, I was also doing a lot of murals. I think the breaking point for the physical intervention, in terms of architecture of the space, was the Karma show in New York in 2017.

Oh, so this was actually fairly recent?

Yeah, the Karma gallery in the Lower East Side is one of those long rectangle spaces. I think my first feeling was when you enter a space like that, you see the whole show at first look. But if you have paintings, or a body of work that isn't just one series, you might want to form different families of work and have them interact. Although the space wasn't really big, I divided it into three areas and created the arches between, which totally changed the space and the experience of the show.

I also wanted to ask about arches because I have a feeling they are really your thing. When did you fall in love with them?

I did two pastels a while ago with arches, the only two pastels with houses. I still want to go back to that, but I haven't yet. The Karma show was the first time that I used arches, and as soon as I did, I was like, "Oh my God, that's very powerful and it works extremely well."

I read something about you perceiving the arches like a "hug from on top of you," which I really love. Can you describe the attraction, as in, where does it come from?

Arches have been used, obviously, in a lot of temples or churches and they make you feel very different when you cross through them in those spaces. And I think the architectural aspect is apparent because, if you use small stones, you need to have their forces joining in the center. That, I think, is very beautiful, these symbols of two forces that are joining right in the middle, and you are passing between them. So there's this feeling, and I really do believe that can affect you, along with the colors, basically the forms and shapes in different aspects of space.

There are a lot of places with amazing arches, but the one that is maybe my point of reference was the Convent of San Marco decorated by Fra Angelico in Florence. There are all those frescoes in all the monks' cells, everything full of arches with a classic court in the middle. It's very, very modest, but the architecture is extremely powerful. When I saw it, I thought, "Wow, this really is a way to have an effect." I was looking for it to be warmer and then also maybe disrupt a bit of the modern kind of architecture, which has a very cold, kind of rational aesthetic that definitely did not fit the feeling of what I wanted to do.

Keeping in mind that you build spaces specifically to present certain works, do you have concerns about what happens with them after shows, in terms of how and where they are presented?

No, because I make work in the studio. I see the gallery as the stage, and for me, it is kind of difficult to just get on a raw stage. I want to make modifications to welcome the paintings, so, in effect, they can act in a better way. If they go to another destination, that's up to that person because they can function by themselves. Typically, collectors will buy a painting and display it with a lot of different objects—furniture, other art, people, so often that's actually a great environment. It turns out to be interestingly curated because it's very organic, where each object can be feeding off the other. I think blank space can work for some pieces, but very often, the empti-

ness of the space does not really serve the work. But now this seems to be kind of the rule, very modern, very white, very clean, and, in my opinion, I think very often it's actually a disservice to the work.

Earlier you referred to painting murals. What type have you done?

I started doing graffiti when I was 12, so that was a lot of “murals” [laughs]. I've been talking about how, when doing graffiti, especially on the highway, on a train, or by the train tracks, you need to grab the attention quickly 'cause everything is moving. It's like advertising, so you will see a lot of strong contrast, very graphic colors, bold letters. Those are very common elements that are very close to logos. So I think that, because I was doing that for so long, it surely influenced the way in which my work is very direct.

So, when you combine the wall color with the painting, do you devise the space first or do you paint the work and then plan the wall colors?

Definitely, the paintings first, which I make in a very traditional way. I do a sketch first, then a slightly bigger sketch with some colors, and then I do the painting. After that, I conceive the show, so the colors actually come when I'm in the space. Sometimes, because of the production timing, they will ask me to choose the color before I arrive, but that is usually not a good thing. That process is actually very organic. For example, the yellow for the room in this show was chosen because of the trees you see through the window.

The motifs you work with are the ultimate classics—portraits, torsos, landscapes, still lifes. How did you form a connection with such emblematic images?

Actually, while I was doing graffiti, I was doing a lot of very, well, what we'll describe as traditional painting. I grew up in a picturesque Swiss landscape by Lausanne, with a vineyard and lake, and as a teenager, I really liked the paintings of the area where I grew up. So this classical idea of a landscape was always there.

When I went to art school when I was 20 years old, this totally changed, as I was discovering all this stuff that I found fascinating. At that point, I was making fewer classical things and I tried to make contemporary art, but I was not very good at it. I think I was quite unsettled and lost with this idea of finding a context or a concept that generates the form, instead of the opposite. I mean, that's a very simplified way to say it, but when you're a student, you need to find ideas that feel interesting. So, by the time I left for Glasgow, I was painting as a sort of reaction. Like, I'm just gonna paint flowers or a mountain, so nobody will ask me “Oh, what's the idea?” Because it's a mountain, it's very simple.

Then I discovered that those subjects, like trees and portraits, have been used by far the most because they are the most powerful, so full of meaning, symbolism and history. And that was very liberating. I could paint trees because trees are not less or more relevant now, or in 2000 years, or 2000 years ago. The idea of the “tree” is so full that I felt comfortable to paint a “good painting” of a tree or a sunset. And a sunset is another good example—if we think it's beautiful, it's not only because it's pink, but also because it's the only moment you can witness what's happening in this universe. And that is, obviously, totally mind blowing.

You see yourself primarily as a painter, right? Is that what you studied?

I see myself as a painter, yes, but in art school I studied cinema. I was actually in “new media” or 3D animation, and I did a lot of those.

Ha, yes, I actually do see that in your work now. Like the appearance of your sculptures.

Well, it’s funny, because I was doing all those for almost 10 years. I was actually looking at generating very, not that impressive, but very simple, abstract shapes that were moving and stuff. And I still like those things, but I’m kind of the only one. [laughs]

What are the qualities you seek in your sculptural work?

I think what I was looking at, almost unconsciously, because when you work so much with something, you get infused by it, was how those programs are basically making a trompe l’oeil of the volume. It’s all about trying to fake the volume, and how they use the lights and the shadows is extremely simplified. It’s like perspective in the Renaissance.

Hearing you say that points to a reason why your work has such a timeless feel.

Yeah, I really like that. I almost don’t do pots anymore, but I was into them for a long time. It was very different from Giorgio Morandi, because he absorbs the shapes, and I was basing them more as an idea of their volume. Anyways, I saw once a very straightforward and obvious painting hanging in a museum, I think in Italy, of a few little Egyptian alabaster recipients. I actually have one of them at home. They are very simple. They look a lot like a Morandi, and there is this totally timeless feel of the shape, like a tube, that was 3000 years old. Because they made so many of them, you can sometimes buy them, so you have this thing in your hand, and it’s a pretty amazing feeling. It’s been through a lot of hands over these few thousand years, but it’s the most simple and quite beautiful object.

How do you see this idea coming through in your work?

I think the element of timelessness is really fascinating with painting because there’s so much tradition attached to it. I think that art is always very interested in what is not changing. Very few artists paint, for example, technology. It’s very rare. There’s moments, of course, but typically, with an artist, say, like Claude Monet, they’re going to paint those objects that almost symbolize a kind of timelessness, or time passing. The cathedral, or a water reflection.

I think that’s because painters also look at the time much more flexibly. In science, you can’t argue that there’s progress that is made. But in painting, no, you can’t really say art is better now than in 1710. You can’t say, “Oh, Picasso was much better than Velasquez.” Well, no, they’re both very good. And also you can still see a Velasquez painting now or, let’s say, Rembrandt’s self portraits and be like, “Wow, that tells everything about getting older, and looking at yourself, and aging.” And, of course, they seem old, but that’s probably what concerns people the most. Looking at your face and realizing, “Oh, I’m getting old,” and what it means to get old, what it means to know that you’re going to die.

I think that, typically in portrait, or let’s say Cezanne’s apple, if I paint an apple now, I know that the apple that Cezanne was painting was not the same one, but it didn’t change. It’s maybe a little bit more red now, but is more or less the same. And the face, we haven’t changed much either. But if you paint an iPhone and you’re the

only one to do it, in 50 years, nobody will know what it is.

I want to talk about your installation and curation at FLAG Art Foundation in 2019. How did you go about selecting the artists, especially the contemporary ones?

So, the show is about this medium, the soft pastel that I use. It's really based on my six years of experience with it and my discovery of its very specific history. When I started to use soft pastels, I didn't know anything about them, and it was, in a way, by accident.

I was doing oil painting at that point, and I was actually trying to render those very perfectly, from dark shade to white shade and just having perfect fades. With oil painting, I mean, you can do everything with oil painting, but it's just quite difficult. [laughs] There are so many different techniques, hard brush marks, or like Ingres, super perfect. I kind of wanted to do the Ingres thing, and obviously, I was totally not able to because I don't have the knowledge. You don't see any kind of brush marks and everything. It's totally amazing, kind of anti-Velasquez, more like Flemish still life when it's perfect.

I have a feeling that you have become kind of synonymous for soft pastel, like a spokesperson.

I think, especially now, I've made a point of it. When I started to do that and I did not know anything, I fairly quickly realized that nobody was doing pastel. I would ask friends, and nobody was using it. I was going to a museum or an art fair, because those are good representations of what people right now are painting, and I was not seeing anybody using it. Like, people were using a lot of oil pastel or the oil stick, but never the soft ones. They're very, very different. When I got invited to a show about the history of pastel, I was kind of thinking, "Okay, I am going to learn about the history of this medium!" And so the show was about that, like a concise history of the medium.

Do you mind giving us a quick overview of that history?

It was in the early 1700s when a woman called Rosalba Carriera really developed this technique and asked different fabricators to make many more colors available. She became an extremely famous artist doing those portraits, and that kind of really started the huge trend of people doing mini portraits. There were actually a lot of women at that point doing that, because it was not a medium that you had to learn at the Academy. Because, at that time, tubes obviously didn't exist, so to do oil painting, you had to actually have a pretty good studio. You needed to make the actual paints, and that was a big part of the operation. You also had to have an assistant. So when they did watercolors, and then those pastels, and then later the tubes, painters could go out and everything. So women, they could just be home and paint, because they were not allowed to go to the Academy.

That generated a pretty amazing, dynamic moment of art history, which was pretty dominated by portraiture. But, by then, the Academy, obviously very masculine, started to look at it like, "Well, this is much easier than oil painting." Those women were doing portraits and flowers, so this medium got solely attached to this very conservative, masculine idea of, "Well, painting is oil, it's a big thing, and all those women doing portraits is just ridiculous." Then the French Revolution happened,

obviously also extremely masculine, extra complicated, and so, the pastel disappeared. Since then, more or less, it's never been a medium. There's obviously Degas, but you have Mary Cassatt, who was a very good example of an artist not always getting respect because she was a woman depicting women and babies, and she was using pastel.

How did you connect the contemporary artists that work with this medium into that historic narrative?

The story that I was trying to tell in the show is that, even now, including the people that I chose in the show, most of them are only doing the sketches or drawings with soft pastel. Actually, Toyin Ojih Odutola is the only one who uses the pastel for a finished piece. Robin F. Williams, who does all the sketches and shows them, she calls them drawings, although the painting is the final thing. Loie Hollowell is the same thing. And then there was Wayne Thiebaud, obviously older, but at the end of the day, he's famous for his painting, not his pastel. The argument is if nobody does pastel... I mean it's obviously a shortcut, but it's because of the same reason.

This was obviously a milestone moment for you to discover the medium.

Yeah, totally deblocked. Because, with oil painting, it was way too slow. To take a year and a half to do a painting is a nightmare. I was like, "Oh, my God." Because it was changing, changing, changing, and you need to let it dry first. It's just so annoying.

You seem to feel that the show at Karma was a milestone moment, and that was only three years ago. Did your career just skyrocket from that point? How difficult is it for you to navigate the art world in such circumstances?

First, I'm almost 40 years old, so I'm not that young. You know, for some people that happened, let's say, the marketing thing, especially, when they were in their late twenties. I think that's much more difficult for a lot of obvious reasons. But, I have to say, I've been talking to friends who have been unlucky with the people they work with, or galleries. I never had any problem with my galleries. I work with six now and I never had any arguments.

So I'm just very lucky and fortunate. Even now, with the recent auction results, I don't feel any bitterness or like, "Oh, those people are making money on my back," or whatever. I mean, first of all, I already made a lot of money because of that stuff, so I can't really complain. The people often say, "Oh, is it okay?" Well, yeah, there are worse problems to have.