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NICOLAS PARTY SHARES THE HEALING POWER OF ART DURING QUARANTINE

by Lucy Rees



Nicolas Party, Trees, 2020.

PHOTO: © NICOLAS PARTY, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

Artists around the globe have been sheltering at home for the past few months, but despite the widespread uncertainty and lack of access to their usual studios and materials, creativity still flows.

When COVID-19 hit, the Swiss-born, New York-based artist Nicolas Party, who is known for his color-saturated paintings, large-scale murals, and sculptures, rented an Airbnb home in upstate New York with his girlfriend. What he anticipated would be just a few weeks turned into a few months. Adjusting to this temporary new way of life, Party has been passing the time researching, reading, reflecting, and going back to a favorite medium: watercolor, the results of which are now on view in a new online exhibition titled “Canopy” at Hauser & Wirth.

Armed with a few pads of paper, pencils, and paint, Party scoped out the perfect nook with two windows overlooking a small pond. With an old desk and a piece of board he found outside, he fashioned a provisional workspace. “That’s my little setup! It’s really makeshift and messy, and I have cardboard boxes around me,” he tells Galerie. “I have a great studio in Red Hook, but I didn’t always have that, and I am totally fine to work in any type of situation. I have my paper and water and my podcasts and music, and I can just go on.”

It's been a busy few years for the artist, whose star is on the rise. He recently signed on with mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth, where he had a solo exhibition at the Los Angeles space during Frieze LA in February. He then had a major survey exhibition featuring works produced from 2013 to present slated to open this month at MASI in Lugano, Switzerland, and another exhibition in Beirut over the summer. "In a time of crisis, it's hard to say that there are positives, but it's true that over the last years, with a show after a show and such a packed schedule, it was sort of nice to not be traveling as much," Party says. "I have always loved watercolor, and I hadn't been doing it because I was always caught up with shows."

The new online exhibition includes 11 atmospheric landscapes depicting the light-filled canopies of treetops. "It definitely took me a while to catch up with the medium," he tells Galerie. "After painting for eight hours a day, I discovered a lot, and when I go back to the studio, I am going to try a lot of different things with pastel through what I learned." Party's vision of nature is distinctive, marked by sumptuous colors and fluid, gestural shapes. "I grew up in the Swiss countryside so I am used to being surrounded by nature. I am very happy to have the chance to be back, especially during the spring. The human atmosphere is very grim. but nature is not aware of this."

Inspired by the likes of Charles Burchfield, George Grosz, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Joseph Mallord William Turner, Party has been delving into the history of the classic American landscape painters and the 19th-century Hudson River School. "When things open again, I am so looking forward to going back to The Met to see those masterpieces in real life," he says.

Party has also been busy working on his design for an extensive mural due to be installed in the Children's Hospital Los Angeles in partnership with the nonprofit organization RxArt, which commissions artists to create work for hospitals around the country. The vibrant, poetic installation will transform a long and otherwise daunting hallway that leads to the hospital's operating department. "I was thrilled to be asked to take part, and I hope putting some colors in the space could make the experience even a tiny bit better."

Of the healing power of art during this time, Party says: "We have recently seen very touching videos of people in hospitals on respirators who can't talk, and their loved ones will play music to them, which can make them relax or feel better. Art can be considered anything that adds something to your life—from music to someone who writes a poem for their girlfriend or boyfriend to a great novel, or a painting. In my opinion, it is the most important thing that exists. I strongly believe that art has an extraordinary power."