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PARTY TIME

by Dodie Kazanjian



Nicolas Party, 37, a wildly versatile and imaginative artist, pictured here in his Bushwick studio. Sitings Editor: Phyllis Posnick. Photographed by Stefan Ruiz.

The images in Nicolas Party's paintings are simple, vivid, inexplicably funny, and profoundly odd. He paints the face of a man in a brown hat with a large snail on top, against a background of cerulean blue. Or a still life of three pears, one red, one yellow, and one green, cuddling up to one another like kittens. Or a landscape of red, leafless, sticklike tree trunks whose sparse upper limbs reach out but fail to connect. Party's paintings are figurative and grounded in the three traditional genres of landscape, still life, and portraiture, and he is never at a loss for things to paint. "There's a big traffic jam of images in my head," he tells me when I visit him in his Brooklyn studio. "They're calling out, 'Hey, look at me. I'm good; what about me?'"

A 37-year-old Swiss who divides his time between Bushwick and Brussels, Party is shockingly versatile. His paintings come in oil, watercolor, spray paint, acrylic, and, for the past five years, in the somewhat arcane and fragile medium of soft pastel. He makes sculpture giant portrait heads in wood, plaster, and metal, some with the ability to talk. He creates environments, rooms entirely populated with his decorative flourishes and jeux d'esprit. Also murals: Last June, he completed sunrise, sunset, a 400-foot landscape-in-the-round at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. It was inspired by Barack Obama's statement, after the 2016 election, that "no matter what happens, the sun will rise in the morning."

As Ali Subotnick, who curated an earlier mural project by Party at Los An-

geles's Hammer Museum, describes it, "Nicolas collapses the past with the present and future. A finger can conjure Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam and at the same time illustrate the swipe of an iPhone. He never gets stuck in a formulaic pattern."

"Dinner for 24 Elephants," Party's first show in a commercial gallery, took place at the Modern Institute in Glasgow in 2011. It was also the first in a continuing series of animal-themed dinner parties, for which the tables, chairs, plates, and surroundings are all Party-made, a stage set for an evening-long performance piece in which the artist, as an inept waiter, is one of the performers. In place of the usual gallery dinner after an art opening, the dinner is the show. In Glasgow, 24 selected guests (curators, artists, collectors) sat at a long table on wooden cubes painted to look like pachyderms. "Everybody there lost a bit of his or her own character and merged with an elephant," he explains. "And you can't really be serious on top of an elephant stool." Whether anybody actually felt elephant-like is debatable, but the event was widely talked about, and many heard Party's name for the first time. Since then, he's done dinners for 24 dogs, 24 sheep, and 24 assorted animals. "Nicolas has a great sense of humor but also a poetic seriousness," Toby Webster, his Glasgow dealer, tells me.

Just over six feet tall, slim, with neatly trimmed dark hair and beard, Party projects a fast-moving, playful energy. He grew up in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, in a sixteenth-century house in Villette, a ridiculously picturesque village of 300 people on a lake outside Lausanne. (Charlie Chaplin spent the last years of his life nearby.) His English is fluent, rapid-fire, and occasionally hard to understand van Dyke is "van Dick"; moss is "moose." His clothes are impeccably Italian-Gucci, Missoni, Prada—and his self-executed tattoos include an elephant on his right foot. Two items he's never without are an iPhone-size sketchbook and an oval Alvin artist's eraser. He doesn't drive or know how to pump gas or go to the doctor. He's never been married, but three years ago he met Sarah Blakley-Cartwright, an ebullient young American writer and editor, and they've been together ever since. Marriage is definitely in the air. "If we stay together, we'll have kids," he tells me, "because that's what we humans do."

When he's not traveling, Party is in his studio, two large rooms with a view of the Manhattan skyline, from nine to six every day, making new work. His five galleries-- in Glasgow, Zurich, Brussels, Milan, and New York--have no trouble selling it. When I visit, he's working on a group of pastel portraits and landscapes. An industrial-size vacuum cleaner, which he uses several times a day to keep the pastel dust from building up, sits in the middle of the room. Some of the pictures here are bound for Art Basel Hong Kong, others for the Magritte Museum in Brussels, where he and the Belgian Surrealist will go head-to-head in a late-spring exhibition--Magritte and Party are well matched in the aesthetic-oddness department.

In the new wave of figurative painters, Party is one of the most original, and

definitely the most playful. “His work is a bit like de Chirico’s, a kind of meta-physical painting pervaded by a sense of stupor,” says Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of the New Museum in New York. “He combines memories of Magritte with the dream of a distant and imaginary Orient... an invented geography.”

Party recently bought a large town house in Brussels “because I kind of needed to invest a chunk of money instead of buying Gucci and art,” he says, laughing. Most of the art he buys is not contemporary; he has his eye on a “not very good” Tintoretto drawing that’s coming up at auction. “I’ve always preferred Monet over Manet,” he confides. “Nobody prefers Monet over Manet.” In spite of having a house and studio in Brussels, he currently plans to live in New York for the next ten years. Consistency is not his strong point. As the middle child in his family (older brother, much younger sister), Party had what he describes as a “fantastic childhood,” living in that idyllic village and skiing on weekends at the family chalet in the mountains. His father, Philippe, now retired, was a government-employed tax accountant. His mother, Catherine, was a stay-at-home housewife until Nicolas was in his teens, when she took over the bookstore in Lausanne’s Hermitage Foundation museum, which is focused on Impressionist and early modern art. Party never expected to have a show there, but several of his paintings and a large mural are in “Pastels,” the museum’s current show of paintings from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century, which includes such masters of the medium as Degas, Manet, Redon, Klee, and Picasso.

Party’s favorite relative was his Scottish grandmother, who scandalized the family by leaving her husband for her female lover. “My grandmother gave me a lot,” he says. “She was telling me 24 hours a day how amazing I was, and how I would be the next Picasso.” She took him to Paris on his tenth birthday and introduced him to the Louvre and the Musée d’Orsay.

Party’s twin passions as a child were drawing and *bêtise*, meaning dumb pranks that your parents don’t know about, “like playing with fire, stealing, breaking things.” The drawing led to painting, first in watercolor, then in oil—deftly realistic images of the mountain landscape around him. *Bêtise* led eventually to graffiti and street art. In 1992, when he was twelve, he and a friend began spending their weekends breaking into rail yards and spray-painting trains. The graffiti craze that hit New York in the seventies and early eighties had spread to Europe, and Party, with his brother, Ian, and the friend, were obsessed by it. They got caught a couple of times. “There was an epic chase, the best one, that lasted the entire night, with dogs and a lot of policemen.’ Tagging trains, spray-painting vacant houses that they broke into, and getting chased were so exciting that they often took precedence over going to school. Party was kicked out of high school as a result, and never graduated.

As we walk from his Bushwick studio to the apartment he shares with Blakley-Cartwright, street art is all around us. “I want to do a mural on that wall,”

he says, pointing to a huge, tan warehouse with no windows on one side. A few blocks farther, a group of people listens intently to a woman talking. “Look, that’s a street art tour with a docent,” Party says. “Sometimes they take pictures of me and ask, Are you a local? No, I’m a white Swiss kid who’s come to Brooklyn.”” The neighborhood is rapidly gentrifying, though, and street art’s days are numbered.

Party finally left tagging behind after graduating from the Lausanne School of Art in 2004 and deciding to be a full-time artist. (He got his MFA at the Glasgow School of Art in 2009.) Becoming an artist today is a lot easier and a lot harder than it used to be. Anything goes because there are no rules. “The big time of modernism, which lasted for almost a century, ended some years ago,” Party says. We’re now in his Bushwick apartment, a loftlike second-floor walk-up. It’s full of books, his drawings, small objects and period furniture, and a great, weird canvas on the sitting-room wall by Louis Eilsheimius, an American painter whom Marcel Duchamp helped discover in 1917, and who has become a favorite of Ed Ruscha, Jeff Koons, and other artists.

“In 2018, when you do a painting, especially if it’s a portrait, you obviously don’t try to be original—to make something 100 percent new,” Party says. “It’s probably more like 5 percent.” Only 5 percent? “Well, maybe 6,” he says, winking. “Painting is a much more modest kind of practice now. We are not the revolutionary artists. They are probably in video, where somebody like Jordan Wolfson can break things up and bring in something new and aggressive. With figurative paintings, you’re not going to shock anybody.”

Whatever the percentage of originality in Party’s work, it doesn’t look like anything else being done today. It’s a beguiling mix of influences and borrowings from many corners of art history, recent and mostly not so recent, and refreshingly purged of complex or virtuoso techniques. “Monet comes in all the time, and I’ve been looking at Félix Vallotton for at least fifteen years.” Last summer, getting ready for his debut show at Karma, his New York gallery, he was thinking about Christian Schad and Milton Avery. Images or fragments of images from works by other artists find a home in his paintings—trees from Fragonard, a Vallotton nude, a Morandi jug, a Georgia O’Keeffe flower, Gerhard Richter’s single candle. “The red sun in that one,” he says, showing me his Hirshhorn mural on the computer, “is Henri Rousseau. We had a Rousseau poster of The Snake Charmer in the living room when I was growing up.” His word for this is not appropriation but sampling.

It was when Party discovered pastels that his art really came into its own. A medium that flourished in the eighteenth century as a quick way of doing portraits, pastels had a second life with the Impressionists and Postimpressionists, and then largely disappeared from big-time art. Party got hooked in 2013, when he was “totally stunned,” as he put it, by a Picasso portrait called *Tête de Femme*, in a show at the Fondation Beyeler. There was something unforgettable about the image, the shading, and the intensity of the color. “When I saw it, it was ‘Oh, my God! I want to do exactly that.’” “He bought a

postcard of it, went straight to the art-supply store, picked up a box of pastels, and started copying the Picasso “over and over,” he recalls. “It’s been the source of all the faces I’ve made since then.”

Tête de Femme came from Picasso’s Classical Period, after World War I, when he abandoned Cubism to revel in his own playground of early Greek and Roman sculpture. The face is smoothly rounded, expressionless, and virtually androgynous. Party, who had been painting still lifes and landscapes, did only portraits for the next year although portraits may not be the right word. The subjects are not people you know, but everybody you know. The colors are arbitrary, unexpected, and much more intense than any other medium. There’s no emotional expression, but the visual impact is indelible, and the eyes just won’t let go of you. The quickness and freedom of using pastel gives him the same kind of thrill he used to get from graffiti and street art.

Party is just back from Europe, where he and Blakley-Cartwright went to the openings of the “Pastels” show in Lausanne, and of his latest gallery show in Milan. She had to leave early, and when she got back to New York, his “Good Morning” card was waiting. “Every morning we’re apart, Nicolas paints me a small picture that says, ‘Good Morning,’ she tells me. “He takes a photo of it and sends it by text so it’s there when I wake up. When we’re reunited, he gives me the paintings. He’s never missed a day.” They met online three years ago. Their first date began in Central Park. They took in “an intimate show of four van Gogh roses and bearded irises” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and had their first kiss in the Astor Chinese Garden Court. “He struck me as someone with utter clarity and confidence,” she says.

Party’s future direction as an artist is unpredictable. “I’ll probably never make abstract art,” he says during a phone interview. “I don’t see abstraction, don’t get the language, but who knows? If I felt like trying it, I would.” Throughout the conversation he is working on a pastel in the studio for his Magritte Museum show. The delicate and sometimes rapid scratching of his sticks on canvas is a pleasant obligato.

What he’s after, in the long run, is to make images that will transport people to other worlds, the way Rousseau’s Snake Charmer poster in his childhood living room did for him. “It didn’t take me to the jungle,” he says. “It took me to his world, just like Hergé’s Tintin comic strips did. I believe that what humans are creating culturally is much more powerful than the reality we live in. Nothing I do at the moment is based on the real world. It’s based on a very imaginary world that is created in painting.” He pauses, then continues: “The main thing is I love making art. I love the making and seeing things appear. When I finish a painting, I just want to start another one.” Before we hang up, he texts me the image he’s been working on. Nearly finished, it’s the man in a brown hat, looking straight at me. “I’m going to do a snail on his hat,” he says.