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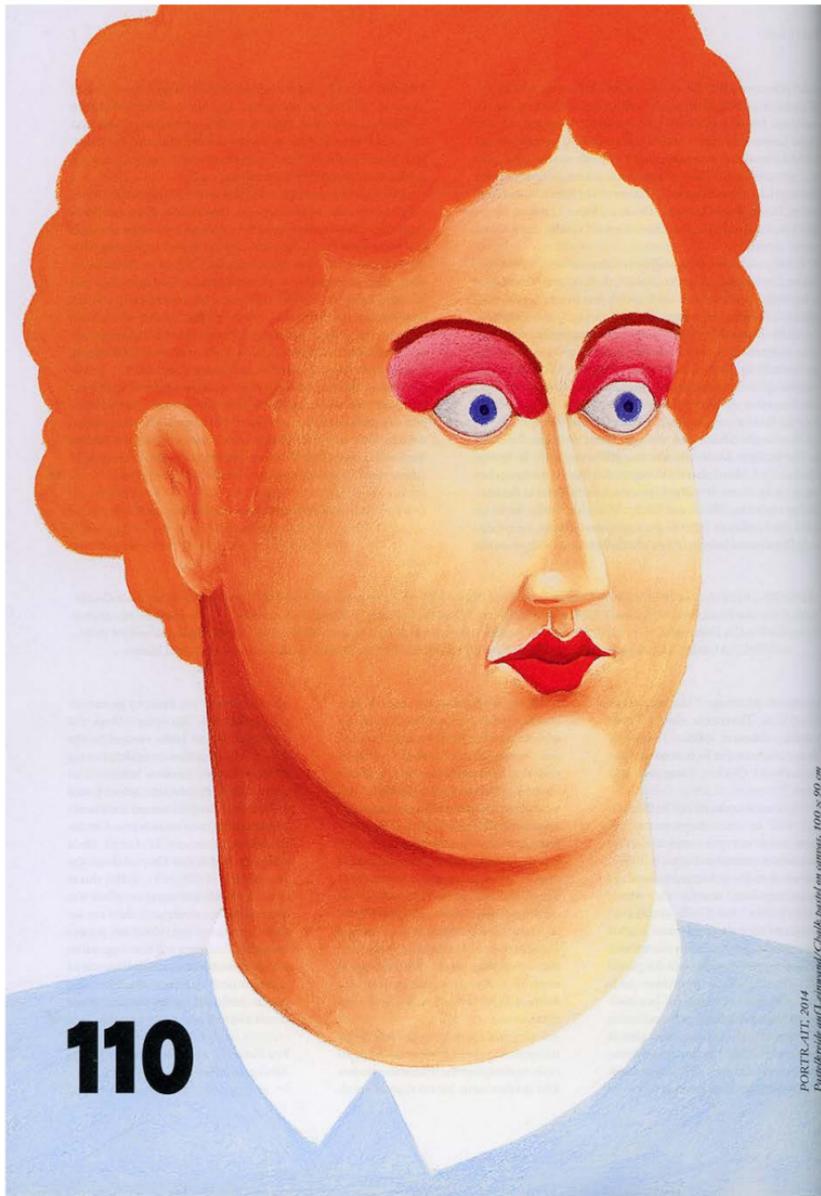


**"Painting as Code"**  
**Nicolas Party**  
**Lily van der Stokker**  
**Albert Oehlen**  
**Julia Wachtel**

**Tom McCarthy &  
Nicolas Bourriaud  
on the Digital  
Sublime**

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PORTRAIT, 2014  
Pentelbrücke und Leinwand / Öl auf Leinwand, 100 x 90 cm

Portrait  
**Nicolas  
Party**



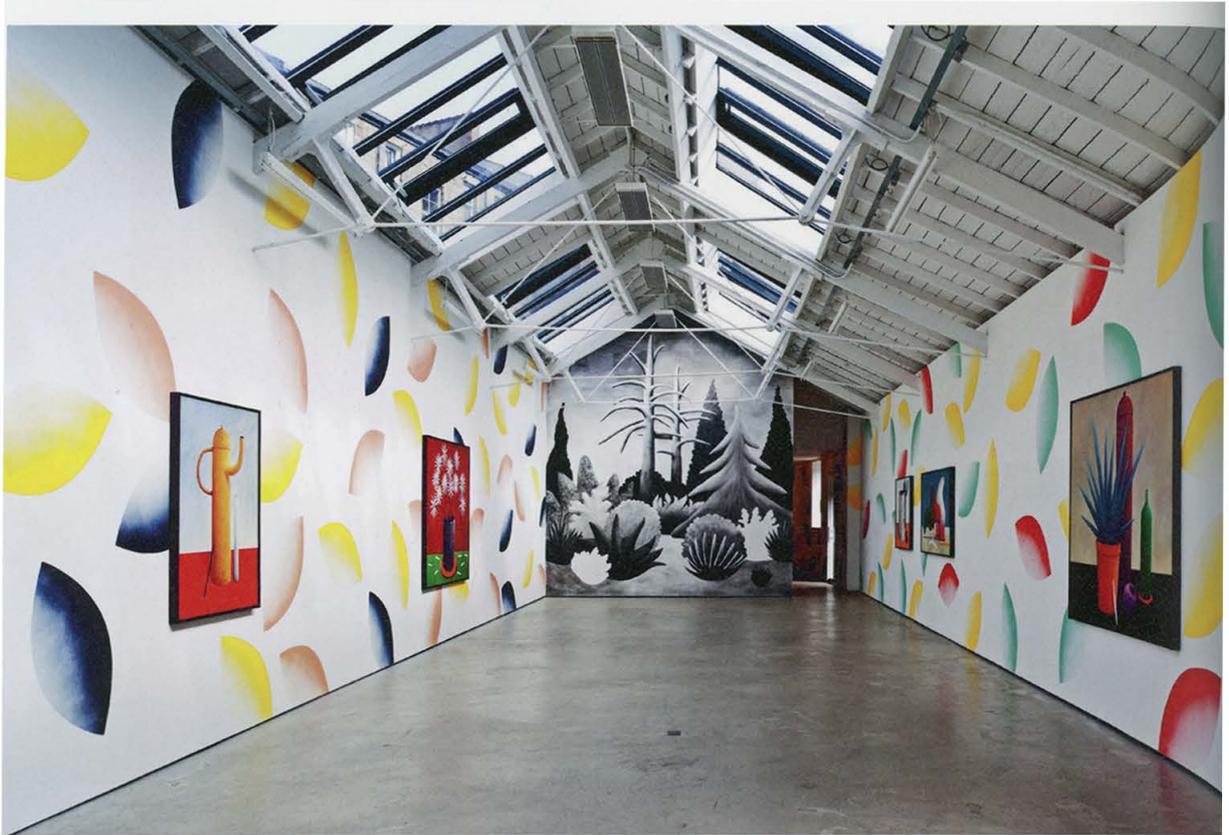


*Installationsansichten/Installation views "Dinner for 24 Elephants", The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow 2011*



LANDSCAPE, 2014  
Pastellkreide auf Leinwand / Chalk pastel on canvas, 150 x 100 cm





*Installationsansicht/Installation view "Still Life oil paintings and Landscape watercolours", The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow 2013*  
*Installationsansicht/Installation view "Pastel et nu", Centre culturel suisse, Paris 2015*



**„Wenn man auf einem  
Elefanten sitzt,  
verhält man sich anders“**

**Die Technik mag sich weiterentwickeln, aber die Kunst wird nicht besser, sagt Nicolas Party. Gelassen und ohne Ironie arbeitet er an einem der eigenwilligsten Werke in der jüngeren Malerei. Ein Gespräch mit Rita Vitorelli über das Naive, die Langsamkeit von Materie und die Vorzüge der menschlichen Hand.**

**“If you sit on an elephant,  
your behaviour changes“**

**Technology may continue to advance, but that doesn't mean art is getting any better, says Nicolas Party. With a calm and irony-free attitude, he has been developing one of the most idiosyncratic practices among young painters today. A conversation with Rita Vitorelli about naivety, the slowness of matter, and what's special about the human hand.**

*ansichts/Installation view "Boys and Pastels", Inverleith House, Edinburgh 2015*





Installationansicht/ Installation view "Pastel"

## **"Morandi was observing his pot for so long – a life time – that he was able to see matter moving"**

*Still life, portrait, landscape, abstraction – you work through all genres of painting in your murals, pictures, and installations. And we meet a lot of familiar acquaintances: David Hockney, Morandi, Picasso, Matisse, Botero, Félix Vallotton. Would you say that you're sampling art history?*

I think that when you use mediums like painting and drawing, ones that have been practiced for so long, dialogue with other artists is very common. If you decide to paint an apple, you will have a dialogue with everybody who has painted an apple before, which is a lot of people. Looking at one painting through the lens of another is very natural. Everything we look at is compared to what we know. I think that's how we value objects and ideas: by comparison. Instead of the word "acquaintance" I would use "dialogue". It's a nice idea that your painting could somehow have a dialogue with another one. Vallotton and I can't have a conversation. But if you hang a Vallotton painting in the same room as one of my paintings, the two

works will speak to each other. I don't know if they will get along, that's up to them.

*A lot of works by a younger generation of artists are said to be afflicted with historical amnesia. In your case, (art) history seems to be your main material. It's more than just a source, it's the content of your work. You rework what already exists. Why is that of interest to you?*

I love looking at paintings from all sort of periods. I'm fascinated by how an almost 2,000-year-old mosaic of an unswept floor can provoke joy and stimulate me. When you look at an artwork from the past, you feel that time becomes much more elastic. Time and history become a "zone" where you can travel. I love reading Patrick Modiano these days. In each of his books, the main character has trouble remembering part of his past. The more you read the book and fol-

low this character, the more you go into the past and into different parts of time. In literature you only need to write "it was 1945" and then you're there in the past. Every time you finish a Modiano book, you have the feeling that you just walked through a space where time could be travelled in every single possible direction. A simple melody that was written 600 years ago can still be as fresh as when it was created. When you hear that melody, you feel that time is not an absolute value. In his films, Chris Marker shows us how to time-travel; his approach to time, memory, and history is truly inspiring. In the beginning of *Sans Soleil* the narrator says: "in the 19th-century, mankind had come to terms with space, and that the great question of the 20th was the coexistence of different concepts of time ... I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember, we rewrite memory

much as history is rewritten. How can one remember thirst?" Art in all its forms can allow humans to feel time very differently from how our body tells us to feel it. Nature always reminds us that our body will disappear soon; that life is a very brief moment. This is not the case in a still life.

*The still life obviously plays a big role for you. I really like the word "still life". Something alive, but with no movement. It makes me think of the children's game, "1, 2, 3 Soleil", where you need to freeze when a designated player shouts the word "sun!" You need to stay perfectly still, and the player has to observe if anybody is moving, making any signs of life. Everybody is alive; it's just a game of pretending for a moment that time has simply stopped. It's like a life drawing class*

where the model has to stay still, like a Greek statue. And when you paint a flower, the same thing is happening: the object you look at is moving, it's just that you don't see it because it's too slow. And if you were to observe the flower for two weeks, you would see that it's moving and transforming. That's what Morandi was doing. He was observing his pots for so long – a lifetime – that he was able to see matter moving. Clay or glass or any kind of material is also always moving and transforming, just at a different pace. If you look at Morandi's paintings, you can see that everything is moving and that the pots are in the process of transforming into something else. I guess the word "still life" (or "nature morte") is a good example of what art tries to achieve: merging two opposite notions into one object. Life is not

still and nature is not dead, but maybe a painting can be.

*When you make a still life, do you work from memory or from specific sources?*

At the moment, I don't use photography and don't make sketches from reality. I usually start from the images I have in my memory. If I want to draw a tree, I look into my memory, go to the "tree box", open it up, and look at what's inside. I really like this exercise. Your memory makes a very interesting and surprising selection. In my case, my "memory tree box" is naturally full of drawings and paintings of trees. I remember a tree that someone was cutting down in a Bergman film. I don't remember the title, plot, or anything else about that movie; just that moment with the tree.

NICOLAS PARTY, born 1980 in Lausanne. Lives in Brussels. EXHIBITIONS: *Boys and Pastel*, Inverleith House, Edinburgh (solo); *Pastel et nu*, Centre culturel suisse, Paris (solo) (2015); *Trunks and Faces*, Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster (solo); *Landscape*, Kunsthall Stavanger (solo); *Pastel*, Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich (solo) (2014); *Just What Is Not Is Possible*, Museum Folkwang, Essen; *Still Life Oil Paintings and Landscape Watercolours*, The Modern Institute, Glasgow (solo) (2013). REPRESENTED BY Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich; The Modern Institute, Glasgow; kaufmann repetto, Milan/New York

*And the portraits: what is your interest in these androgynous, mask-like faces?*

Two years ago, I saw a Picasso show and I was blown away by a pastel portrait. It's a small work from his neo-classical period, dated 1921 and titled *Tête de femme*. I bought the postcard and went to the art store the next day to buy a pastel kit. I had never tried working with pastel before and started to copy Picasso's portrait. And while I was working on it, I wasn't seeing a woman on the postcard, just a portrait. Not a man or a woman, just a human head. When Picasso made his pastel, he was looking at a lot of Greek sculpture. I think he wasn't paying attention to whether they were men or women; he was just fascinated by the perfection of the faces. He was probably also intrigued by their androgynous aspect: some statues of men

could be women and vice versa. The title of this pastel means "head of woman". Not "head of a woman" or "portrait of Julia": only the word "head" and the word "woman". I think Picasso chose to include the word "woman" because he knew that the portrait could just as well be a man, and he wanted to make sure that we would look at it in a particular way. I think it's interesting not to know if it's male or female.

*In your last exhibition in Edinburgh, "Boys and Pastel", still lifes and portraits hang on top of wall paintings and drawings of swiping fingers that look like they're making lines on an iPad or iPhone.*

Hands and fingers are a very common subject in art. It seems natural to look at what we actually use when we're making objects. Our fingers are con-

stantly making the first and last connection with the things we interact with. When I'm making a pastel, I'm mainly working with my finger directly on the surface of the canvas. If I do a portrait, my fingers touch the lips, the eyes, the nose; I'm massaging them with a lot of care. I can't imagine a better tool than my hands to give a massage. Those ten fingers are the best instrument you can imagine; there's not much to improve. What humans are creating these days are objects for the hands, and not the other way around. The makers of the iPad had the idea that we could use our fingers to interact with the screen, not our nose or our feet. This new gesture of swiping the screen could just be added to the infinite ways we use our hands in daily life.

*How will the digital change painting? And how will the high-resolution Retina display change the way we want to look at things?*

Technical inventions always have an impact on the way we make art. And sometimes it's something simple, like the invention of the paint tube, which made it possible to go outside to paint. These days we have the computer, the Internet, and the high-resolution Retina display. We have access to billions of bits of information that we can look at on a very beautiful screen. But it seems our creativity is lagging behind the computers we make. Our eyes haven't changed their resolution yet. We have the same hands with five fingers that artists used 30,000 years ago to paint animals. The computers we're making are extremely powerful and their evolution in the last 20 years is truly amazing. But within those last 20 years, humans haven't changed much. In the world of technology we can use the word "progress": cars are better than before and if you go to a hospital

now, it's probably better than it was 200 years ago. But I don't think you can use the word "progress" in the cultural world. Our culture is not better than before; art is not better than before. And humans don't seem to improve that much either.

*A lot of today's art production is very clever, well done, strategically conceived, and therefore boring. Sometimes I miss the naivety. Your works radiate a kind of naivety.*

Gauguin said: "I want only to do simple, very simple art." The idea of simplicity is very beautiful and maybe naivety is a tool to get there. Naivety is a good way to keep a distance from all the noise that is sometimes created around the work. It's a natural reaction to try to create a little bit of space for yourself in this cacophony. For me, one way of doing this is to try to focus on doing something simple; trying to work on my naivety.

*Let's talk about specific works: Dinner for 24 Elephants (2011) and Dinner for 24 Dogs (2011). These were dinner parties in galleries where you designed everything: the tables, the chairs, the plates, and the way the food was served. What was the idea behind this? Why elephants and dogs? What were the roles of the gallery space and the people invited?*

The first dinner, the one for 24 elephants, was my first project with a commercial gallery, the Modern Institute in Glasgow. I knew that showing my work in this institution would have a big impact on my practice and I wanted to play with this specific context. When you're a young artist, you keep hearing about the idea of networking: making connections in order to be successful. And you keep hearing about art dinners, where a lot of this networking happens. Making decisions around a dinner is an old ritual – from the bible to the G7. Sharing food while making decisions is an important tradition.

*Dinner for 24 Elephants* was basically a set for an artist dinner. Instead of going to the dinner after the opening, the show itself was the dinner. I designed all of the elements as if they were props for a theatre set and all participants felt like they had a role in a play. The guests were selected by the gallery directors, and the two directors and myself were waiters. The dinner took place in the gallery space, under their bright lights. Everybody there sat on an elephant, and if you sit on an elephant, your behaviour changes.

I did a second dinner in a similar context: a very chic commercial gallery on the Upper East Side. Up there, dogs are a big thing and are treated like very important people. They look stylish and charming. We often say that the owner looks like their dog, so I called this work *Dinner for 24 Dogs*. It was like a Woody Allen movie.

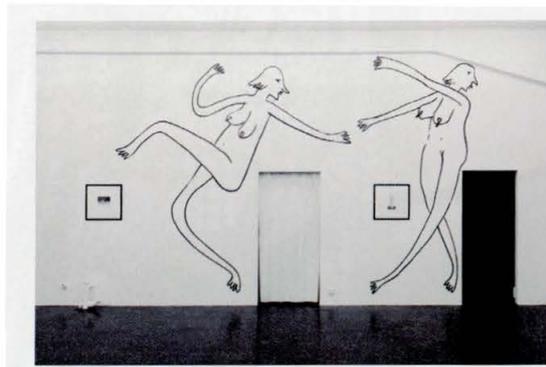
*Your wall works often feature simplified forms that are colourful and decorative, expanding across the walls of the exhibition*

*space. Do you want to improve these sorts of existing surfaces? Or improve given situations?*

Surface is one of the most important questions for every artist. Art's ambition is to reach your brain, your soul, your heart, your guts; everything inside your body. But an artist creates a surface. And an artist, especially a painter, faces both reality and surface every day in the studio. There is always the question of the container and the content. I think we all know that the surface of an object is an essential aspect of its content, but we always value what is inside more than what is outside. The label on a tomato can might lie: it can tell you that what you're going to eat will be delicious. But the inside of the tomato can, the actual soup, will never lie to you. When you paint a tomato can, you're limited to its surface. Even if you paint the soup, it's not the soup itself but only an appearance. So art can be seen as a lie, as something superficial. There have been extremely important

cultural debates around these questions. During the Protestant Reformation, one of the big debates centred around images and what could be represented or not. And because painting was seen as a dishonest form, it was forbidden to paint God, since God was not a lie. These days, with the Muhammad images, the debate seems very contemporary. The word "image" shares one of its roots with the word "ghost". *Imago* was used to describe the shadows of the dead, the visions and simulacra of the real world. Maybe paintings, books, and old melodies are like ghosts that travel through time and history. ✓

*Rita Vitorelli is an artist and editor-in-chief of Spike. She lives in Vienna and Berlin.*



*Installationsansicht/Installation view „Still Lifes and Two Naked Women“, Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zürich 2012*