

Nicolas Party

John Culcutt narrates
this painter's dynamic
visual lexicon

To state the obvious, Nicolas Party is a painter. To be more precise, Nicolas Party is a painfully slow painter, who produces only two or three finished canvases a year. Such slowness allows time and space to pursue other activities; the artist also makes sculptures and installations, drawings and prints, performances and curatorial projects. But these manifold productions occupy the shadow cast by his canvas – this is fundamental to any understanding of his art.

Party paints still lifes, typically jugs, pots and food items simplified to approximations of basic geometric shapes: cubes, cylinders, cones, spheres, pyramids. It is painting that interests him, not kitchenware. The materiality of vision is his priority, an immediacy of visual presence that halts language. Nevertheless, the murmur of art history surrounds and invades these works: Piero's geometry, Chardin's humility, Morandi's devotion, Cubism's wit, Guston's cartoonery, Hockney's faux naïveté. For Party, the past constitutes a paradox: it is present only as a site of loss, of alien sensibilities and limited comprehensibility to current experience. It is, to use Mieke Bal's term, 'preposterous', simultaneously coming both before (pre-) and after (post-) us.

The disposition of forms orchestrates a strong sense of pattern across the canvas – vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines exceed their descriptive function and conspire in angular rhythm, while curves interplay in supple arabesques. Colours are not observed from the

objects at hand; their ultimate referent is the colour wheel and the codified system of colour itself. Viscous oil paint stubbornly asserts its own protean presence: here slow and dry, here dense and worried, here moist and frivolous. Both the tonal lightness of the painting and the illusory light that falls upon the depicted objects, appear stark and hallucinatory, evoking the alarming lucidity of dreams and highs.

Sweet Geranium, 2008–ongoing, is the umbrella title under which Party pursues his self-initiated collaborative ventures (including a future stage-set design project). Originating during his time on the MFA programme at the Glasgow School of Art, *Sweet Geranium* began as a series of exhibitions curated by the artist, and mounted in his large studio. Exceeding the conventional role of curator, he would respond to the works he selected by painting his own abstract, decorative, pattern-like compositions on the walls and floor of the exhibition space, and by designing customised plinths as supports for work. For *Elephants at the Woodmill* (12 February–27 February 2011), an exhibition at The Woodmill, London, Party provided 17 plinths, each wrapped in the painted image of an elephant, upon which Woodmill studio members volunteered to display their works. (This show, incidentally, was the culmination of Party's *New Work Scotland Programme* residency at Studio Voltaire.) Another version of this collaborative work also appeared at the Royal Standard, Liverpool, April 2011. On this occasion, the elephant-plinths supplemented the work of randomly selected Embassy Gallery members.

The *Sweet Geranium* exhibition series lasted six shows and terminated on Party's graduation from the MFA programme in 2009. In phase two of *Sweet Geranium*, he has turned his attention to producing limited edition artist books. Of the seven planned, one is complete, *Dust: A Journal of Entropy*, 2010, a collaboration with artists Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan. The result is as awkward and gauche as the objects in his paintings, too unwieldy to hang on a wall, sit in a bookcase, or nestle comfortably in the hands. In each instance of the publication project, Party invites artists who work with text to submit a piece of writing that he will then respond to by manually transcribing and ornamenting it with imagery and assorted graphic marks (abstract and decorative) that serve to highlight the pictorial aspects of writing and the linguistic aspects of imagery. You are experiencing a version of this now: are you reading, or are you looking? (Party's paintings

often seem littered with the remnants of a ruined alphabet: fragmented reminders of Ks, Ps, Ts, Ms, Os, Qs, As.)

Small pencil drawings (namely, his still lifes) satisfy Party's need to produce finished, discrete objects, during those long periods when the oil paintings await completion. He makes painted stone sculptures too; the stone's obstinate density turned to fleshy fruit by the transformative power of acrylic paint. While the paintings mature in his studio, industrious Party finds new ways to make exhibitions. Ten years as a graffiti artist in Switzerland have attuned him to the wall as a viable surface to work on, and with. Thus, many of his gallery shows feature large rectangular charcoal drawings applied directly to the wall, while the remainder of its surface is covered in spray painted pattern. But behind their deceptive simplicity these works offer a subtle examination of painting's conditions of possibility.

Charcoal's soft granularity not only produces the *illusion* of self-sufficient forms, but also reveals the *actual* texture of the wall that provides the ground for these illusions. Acrylic spray, by contrast, serves to mask the same. To use Richard Wollheim's distinction, Party is not simply asserting the fact that the

wall is flat, in a tautological fashion; he is using this flatness. It is not simply the textured flatness of the wall that Party wishes to summon into dialectical relation with his materials. The wall also acts as a frame, imposing external limits upon the painting's planar extension, and he thematises this framing function in two distinct, but related ways. First, the rectangular pictorial fields of the charcoal drawings *repeat* the wall's rectangularity; second, the configuration of the patterned surface *denies* the limits imposed by the wall's borders – our eyes tell us that the pattern could extend infinitely. Such thematisation of the dialectical exchange between pictorial forms and the surfaces that support them (the literal flatness, tactile materiality and optical shape of those surfaces, their conventional rectangularity) provided the engine that drove modernist painting's development from the 1860s until the 1960s. The murmur of art history is thus audible once more in these works, and it is – astonishingly – the voice of Cézanne (rather than Sol Lewitt or Daniel Buren) that we hear most clearly.

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