

NICOLAS PARTY



NICOLAS PARTY, PORTRAIT, 2016, painted on cardboard, 31 1/2 x 23 1/8" / Pastell auf Karton, 80 x 60 cm. (ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND XAVIER HUPKENS, BRUSSELS; THE MODERN INSTITUTE/ TOBY WEBSTER LTD, GLASGOW; KAUFMANN REPETTO, MILAN; GALERIE GREGOR STAMER, ZÜRICH / PHOTO: ISABELLE ARTHUIS)

Nicolas Party

The First Form of Art

NICOLAS PARTY & ALI SUBOTNICK

ALI SUBOTNICK: At first glance, your work may not come across as political, but I know that you think about your responsibility as an artist and a citizen to be engaged politically. How, then, would you say your work is political?

NICOLAS PARTY: I make a lot of decisions that are political in my work. One is the idea of making something that is accessible. I think about how to reach, and not judge, certain types of audiences. I was taught in art school that the audience that goes to a museum to look at pretty pictures is an uneducated audience that doesn't have the knowledge to engage with your work. And then there is a sense of egotism or pride when your own parents don't "get" your work. Before art school, when I was doing traditional landscapes, they loved my work. And then I started to make more conceptual work, and they came to one of my shows, and they were not disappointed, but they were like, "I don't get it." They felt judged by the work, and by me.

ALI SUBOTNICK is curator at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

AS: Yeah, it's intimidating and isolating. It's an insider language.

NP: I try to be conscious of how I can reach people like my parents and to think of an audience in a broader way. I'm trying to reach people who aren't necessarily part of the small contemporary art circle—which I'm not saying is a good or bad circle, but it has specific codes and languages that not everyone can understand.

AS: So you adopted a kind of universal language: landscapes, still lifes, portraiture.

NP: Exactly.

AS: To pull them in with something that's familiar.

NP: Exactly. The murals I make are also part of that effort. They come out of my background in graffiti and street art, which engage with a more general crowd because they're public. The visual attraction or seductive aspect of an artwork is important. We still approach art with our eyes.

AS: How did graffiti lead you to where you are today?

Do you consider it a political act?

NP: Deeply. When you're thirteen or fourteen years old, you want to rebel against society, your parents,

and authority. And to make yourself visible in that manner is a very political act. It's like an individual trying to prove your existence in society: "I'm here. I exist." And at that age, it usually comes out in very primary experiences with skateboards, music, sports, and graffiti. For young people, skateboarding is a way of taking over your city. You're trying to claim it for yourself. Graffiti was a very important culture for me.

AS: What did you paint back then?

NP: I was doing more or less the same thing as now. I was making a lot of picturesque oil paintings of the mountains where I grew up in Switzerland, as well as doing characters, and graffiti monsters and cartoonish things, and tags on trains. A lot of contemporary

artists started with graffiti. Graffiti artists can recognize who used to do graffiti in one second. In my work, it's easy to recognize it. I still use spray paint. I still use tricks to create the illusion of volume and depth that I learned from graffiti.

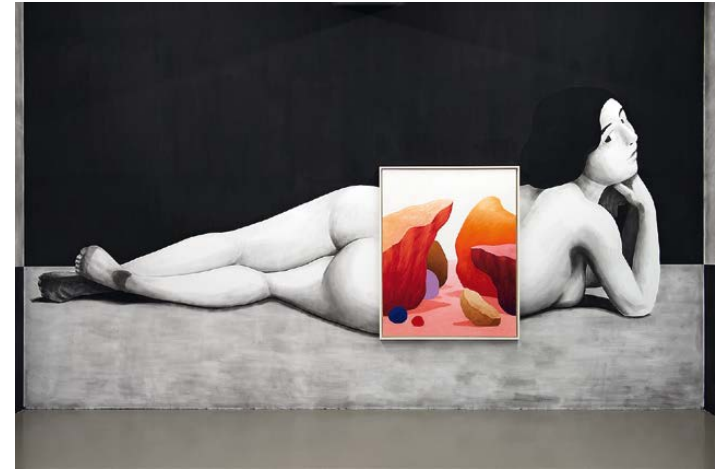
AS: How did you move from graffiti to more classical wall murals?

NP: When I started art school, one of my first projects was a very large Abstract Expressionist-style drawing. Maybe I wanted to show that I could do more than cartoons on the wall, so I decided to try out big abstraction. But I was not very good at it. So, I made icebergs. I painted three big icebergs.

AS: Those were your first murals?



NICOLAS PARTY, UNTITLED, 2016, oil paint and pastel on wall, dimensions variable, installation view "Hammer Projects: Nicolas Party," Hammer Museum, Los Angeles / OHNE TITEL, Ölfarbe und Pastell auf Wand, Masse variabel, Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST)



NICOLAS PARTY, "Pastel et nu," 2015, installation view, Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris / Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: MARC DOMAGE)

NP: Yeah, they were big icebergs in spray paint. I was fascinated by the idea of transformation—I also explored melting objects in 3D animations.

AS: How was that work received?

NP: When I was an undergraduate at the Lausanne School of Art, students were typically not allowed to work with patterns—if you wanted to do that, you needed to go to design school; it was a very strong distinction. But John Armleder was a teacher there at the time, and he took from Warhol's practice—trying to bridge decoration and art, objects of design and painting, which was something I found very liberating. Armleder encouraged us to make patterns and choose colors for their attractive character, as you would in graffiti, without fear of judgment. And then

in grad school, at the Glasgow School of Art, I discovered the work of Marc Camille Chaimowicz.

In grad school, I started to make murals with friends. We had an artist-run space, where we hung people's work on top of our own murals. We did a lot of set design. Basically, we allowed ourselves to create something purely formal and fun, but then we added an extra layer, like music or painting, so it was no longer just a set. When we curated a show, it was like making a layer cake. Basically, every two months or so, I would empty my studio and redecorate the entire space. I would invite an artist, and I would make my own vodka, and make a label for the bottle each time, and create a little event around this.

AS: What was the gallery that you ran?

NP: After school, about fifteen of us moved to an industrial space and built walls—the typical post-art school situation. I was living there for a time in my studio, and I opened a gallery with two friends, where we ran a program for two or three years. We invited people to do shows, and we also did shows of our own work. Maybe forty percent of the program was our stuff. We also created sets for concerts. Sometimes we invited a musician friend to perform, for instance, John Cage's *Child of Tree* (1975) or *Branches* (1976), and then we would pair it with something the exact opposite—super decorative, or big faces, to see how they worked together. It was fun for the audience because they would come for a concert or musical event, and would have the surprise of an environment that was painted only for that event, for one night.

AS: You were creating ephemeral events, yet you also have an interest in timeless subjects.

NP: I think time and its consequences, or mortality, are the main subjects in art in general, but I also think these concerns are why people are willing to look at art so much. It's a more complex, more elastic, bigger time than the time we live in. I think culture is very often here to remind us of that. You interact with this thing that was made before you existed and that will remain after you're gone, but that somehow makes you feel alive while you're looking at it.

AS: People find comfort knowing that it's not going to disappear.

NP: When I listen to the music of Serge Gainsbourg, a singer who is long gone, I feel extremely alive, which is a very difficult thing to describe. If you ask anyone



NICOLAS PARTY, *THREE CATS*, 2016, pastel on canvas, 53 1/8 x 59 1/8 x 2 3/4" / DREI KATZEN, Pastell auf Leinwand, 135 x 150 x 7 cm. (PHOTO: PHILIPPE DE GOBERT)



NICOLAS PARTY, "Cimaise," 2014, installation view, CAN: Centre d'art Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel / Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: ANTON SATUS)

what they would think of life without music, without images, without movies, without books, without any stories . . . it's impossible; they're all part of the same package.

AS: Like you said, time is an eternal subject in art. Who are some of the artists you appreciate for the way they addressed time in their work? You mention Monet often.

NP: I think that Monet was really fascinated by signs of time in all its forms. I think his choices of subjects were crucial—he painted a cathedral, a haystack, water. I think water was so fascinating to him because through water you can directly witness transformation—water is ice, snow, fog . . .

AS: All the different phases of matter.

NP: Yes, and all through the year and the seasons.

Nothing disappears; everything transforms. The haystack is obviously a sign of the harvest season, and the cathedral is one of the main symbols of human strength in the face of time. In most cities, the biggest and most interesting buildings are the cathedrals.

AS: How does that play into the fact that most of your murals aren't permanent? They have an expiration date.

NP: That's one reason that I like wall paintings—they're ephemeral. The work almost contradicts this idea of making something that will survive to outlast your existence. And yet, most murals don't ever totally disappear; they're covered up with paint, so the mural is still there underneath, just no longer visible. Mark Bradford's 2015 mural on the lobby wall of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles revealed the layers of past wall murals through sanding—you wouldn't normally see those old murals, but they're all there, on top of each other, like this big layer cake. I go to my galleries, and I know my old work is still there; I can even see little patches here and there. I also like that the mural is the first form of art.

AS: Like cave painting, and painted rocks.



NP: The rock is one of my favorite objects in art. You can hold in your hand something that took millennia to form into that shape. I think there's something quite magical about the idea that, with just a thin layer of acrylic, suddenly that little object becomes an apple. And it looks like it's rotting, which evokes mortality. Also, the painting on the stone will last for only a hundred years, at the most. The stone will lose layer after layer; it might be a stone with a very long life, which at some point, was an apple for a few years.

AS: Time truly is a thread connecting all of your work. Tell me about your project at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington, DC.

NP: The exhibition is called "Sunrise, Sunset." It's in a curved space, and there will be twenty little wall paintings depicting the sunrise and sunset.

AS: They show the progression from sunrise to sunset?

NP: No—you never know which is a sunrise and which is a sunset. I was asked to do this show was right after the US presidential election. Having a show in such a specific place and context, I felt compelled to address what had happened in some way. I remembered what Obama said on election night: "No matter what happens, the sun will rise in the morning." And I found that to be very beautiful. I think history has shown that when you see time in a little box, you tend to make very bad decisions. I'm talking about society as a whole. If you have the awareness of a much longer time line, you would likely never make those decisions. The Obama quote seems to express the idea that we can only witness the size of the world, and where we are, and in which type of universe, when the sun sets and when it rises. That's the only actual time that you can perceive that the earth is rotating. I think that's why this subject is such a powerful one. Apparently, monkeys climb up to the tops of trees to watch the sunset. They, too, want to witness something bigger than themselves, this huge rotating ball, this sun, that is making everything happen on the earth.

NICOLAS PARTY, ROCKS, 2016, pastel on canvas, 41 1/4 x 31 1/2" / FELSEN, Pastell auf Leinwand, 105 x 80 cm. (PHOTO: ISABELLE ARTHUIS)



NICOLAS PARTY, LANDSCAPE, 2013, spray paint on wall, approx. 19,7 x 98,4 ft, installation view "157 Days of Sunshine," The Bothy Project at the Walled Garden, Glasgow / LANDSCHAFT, Sprühfarbe auf Wand, 6 x 30 m, Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: PATRICK JAMESON)