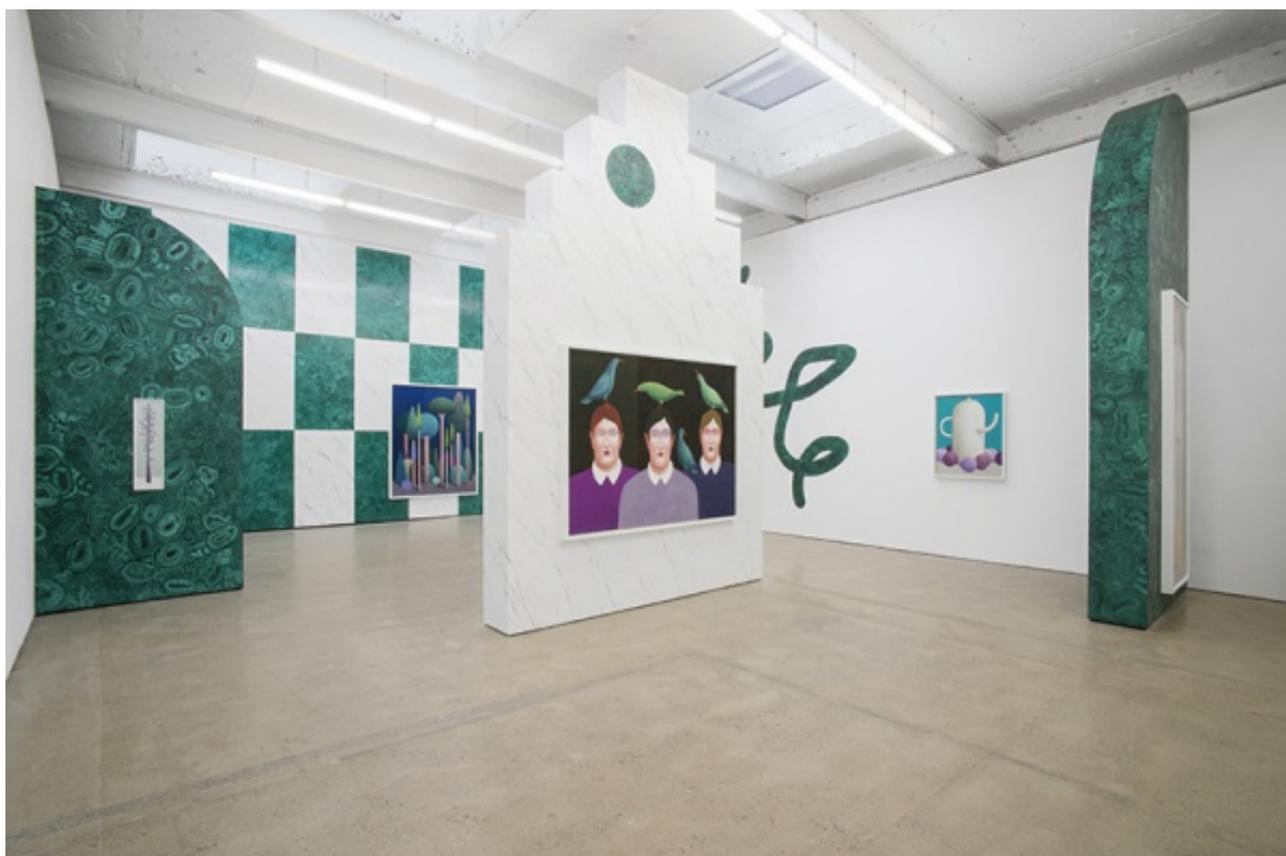


Nicolas Party "Three Cats" at The Modern Institute, Glasgow
October 11~2016



Nicolas Party interviewed by Nicholas Hatfull

Nicholas Hatfull: Most pressing, I need to ask about the cats in the show you just opened at the Modern Institute in Glasgow. Their faces are highly unusual; they look like they might be based on an ancient carving.

Nicolas Party: I started doing cats this year. I have done four so far, and they have all ended up having the same face. The cats are not based on anything in particular, but are a mash-up of the rich iconography of cats represented in imagery throughout history. My cats fit somewhere between Balthus cats and Egyptian cats. A mix of strange sexuality and distant postures.

I'm also fascinated by how animal symbols shift through history. Cats, always a symbol of female sexuality, have been celebrated in certain periods of history and condemned in others. In ancient Egypt, fertility and motherhood were highly celebrated through the symbol of Bast. The advent of Christianity ushered in different ideas, and the symbol of cats shifted to represent dangerous perversity and the decadence of female sexuality. In the Middle Ages, female sexuality was extremely repressed. Cats were associated with witches, and killed en masse.

These days, cats continue to be a wide presence in our symbolic imagination, and a good marker of how we represent women in our society. Cats live at home. They are alternately sexy and wild (Catwoman), or cute and diminutive (Lolcats). I think it is useful to keep an eye on the changing ways a culture uses a symbol; cats seem especially loaded.

NH: Your double (and triple) portraits have an eerie presence that reminds me of strange historical examples like Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters (1594), or The Cholmondeley Ladies (ca. 1600). One quirk of these multiple portraits is the lack of psychological insight into the sitters. Indeed, your portraits not only have an inscrutable blankness, but feel like they might just be pictures of mannequins. They often look startled, and (I hope I'm not out of line in saying this) like they might not be all that bright—a quality that painting often seasons with an extra pinch of mystery. I'm curious to know the background of these guys.

NP: I did a lot of 3D animation when I was in art school. Images rendered on the computer are, of course, completely flat. They lack any connection whatsoever with anything that might be considered real, with history and personality. The new images we create are born from equations. In 3D imagery, the character and personality of what is represented is purely conceptual. It only exists in the mind of the viewer. Unlike an actor that we know has a life and is a human like us with the same set of emotions, the digital characters we create don't have any of those features. They are pure objects of our imagination, just as a character in a painting, or Gabrielle d'Estrées, or my own portrait.

The project of representation is always up against life itself. Like Dr. Frankenstein, the artist often doesn't want to create a sculpture; the dream is to invent a life. But the reality is that you can't create life, either with your pencil or with the computer. Even the best artist can only create an idea of what life looks like. Image-making history seems to always wonder: What is the status of all those images? Are the objects concepts, magic?

The accentuated lack of personality in my portraits, their mannequin aspect, is a way for me to preserve and portray just the barest shell of what an image is, pared down to portraiture's most basic elements. I retain only what makes a portrait recognizable, removing everything that makes a portrait personal. I look, then, to see if we still understand them as human, to see who they are and whether they have something to tell me.

NH: The advent of trompe l'oeil marbling in your work, and the illusion of malachite, calls to mind Roman wall painting. I find there's an uncanniness, too, to this technique; the depiction exists in a limbo between complete illusion and a sort of calligraphy. Even once you've spotted that it's composed of brushstrokes, it's mysterious in a way that real marble might not be. Am I barking up the right tree to suggest that the enigmas and charms of depiction itself is your overriding subject? You're not afraid of time-honored subjects, and this sharpens the focus on the manner of their rendering.

NP: Sarah Margnetti does the marble with me. She studied at an old-fashioned Brussels school called Vanderkelen, where students learn the traditional method of faux marbling. A teacher told her that rather than copy real marble, her painting should improve upon nature itself. Which I think is a fascinating idea. I think it says a lot about our relation to representation and images in general. It indicates that we create images in order to fill the gap between reality and our perception of it. We paint marble in order to show how we see marble, or maybe how we want to see it.

NH: You propose that the wall paintings might be stage sets for (pastel) performers: I imagine you would make a really extraordinary opera set. Do you have any plans or hopes in this department, or do you prefer to hint at it from the exhibition space?

NP: I would love to do an opera set! I listened to a lot of opera as a teenager, and I always wanted to be part of such a grandiose experience. So many great artists have done it that to make a worthy one would be an exciting challenge. I designed and produced a lot of stage sets for musical acts while working with two other artists in a group called Blakam. We must have done ten different sets. We loved the idea of creating a visual environment that is only activated for the duration of the performance. It's quite different than doing a show of one's artwork. A painting is meant to be, somehow, outside of time.

NH: The feline ghost of Balthus makes its presence known in this show, and you're pretty omnivorous when it comes to the history of painting; your trees have a distilled quality that somehow links Uccello to Carlo Carrà and David Hockney. Are you scanning for certain tendencies of depiction, daisy-chained across the centuries? A certain timelessness?

NP: I spend a lot of time looking at and engaging with painted images—much more time than I spend looking directly at nature. I am fascinated by how many people over time have painted trees, each one slightly different. Imagine if we could gather every one of those billions of trees into a single forest. I would love to walk through it. Which trees you would stop by, thinking one is beautiful and the next is ugly? Why this one instead of the one beside it?

NH: If there's a yin to a yang in your work, it might be something like the starchy, upright, and restrained versus unfettered profusion, richness, and delight. This must be in play even within individual works, but when diffracted across various idioms in your recent exhibitions, it's becoming a more fiendishly complex system of weights and measures. For instance, the bluntness of the more digital marks accenting the wall painting and the thud of the elephantine finger might be tonally counterpointed to the elegance of the trompe l'oeil and the soft perfection of the pastels. How do you approach the

orchestration of a show? Do you consciously insert elements that will take some shimmying to absorb into your repertoire, or is it more a case of following your nose?

NP: I think I'm trying to find the place where, as you articulated so well, contrary aspects meet. It doesn't work all the time. An example might be the chess pattern wall made of alternating panels of painted white marble and malachite. Once it was up, I realized with a sinking feeling that it looked like the wall of a Versace shop. I hoped the landscape I hung on top would act the way frescoes do in Renaissance Florentine chapels, adding refinement and intricacy, but I have to admit the wall still looks overdone. The balance is not right.

A happier example from the same show is hanging the white elephant pastel on the white faux-marble wall. Before the addition of the elephant, the painted wall didn't work at all. It looked heavy, more like the entrance to a bank. But when the elephant was hung, suddenly the wall's heavy aspect became much lighter. The idea of the elephant overtook the marble's weight. And the fact that the elephant was rendered in very light-colored pastel chalk made him look soft and almost ghostlike. The overall feeling was well balanced.

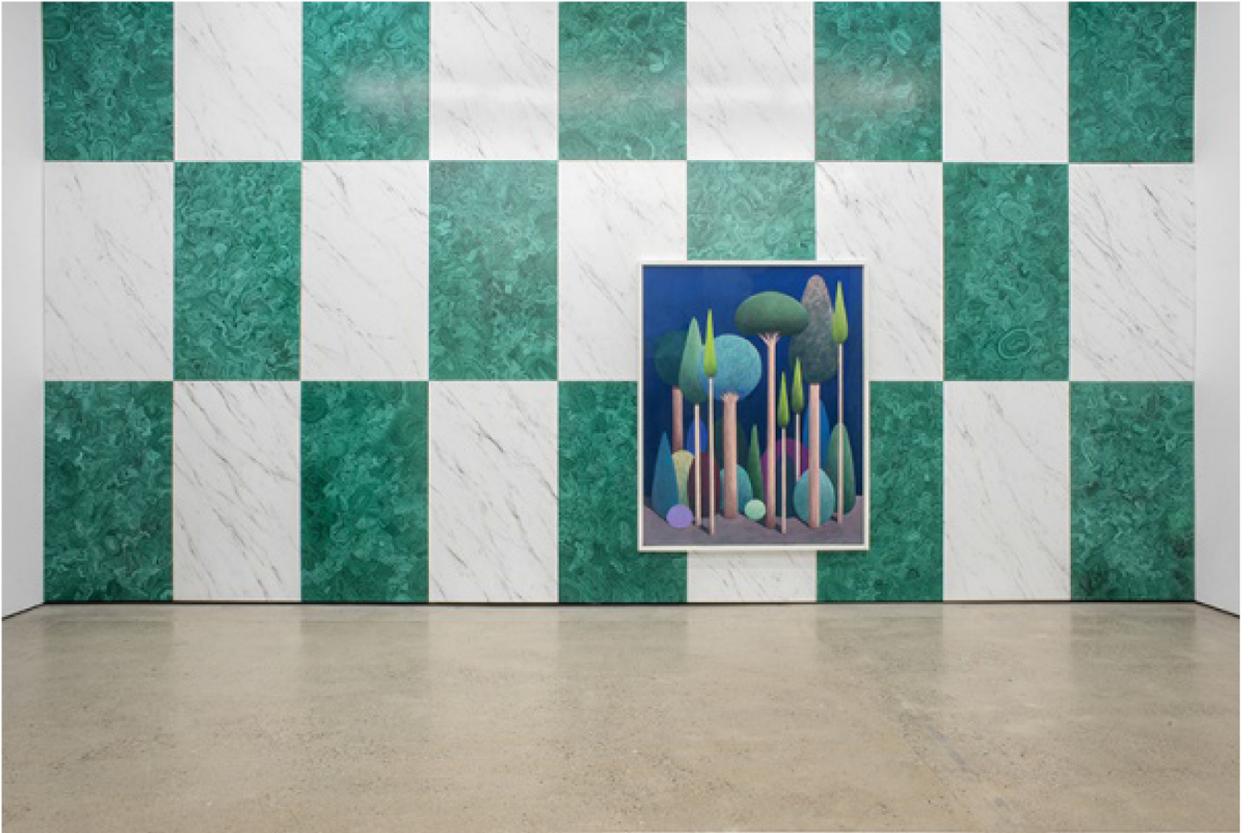
at The Modern Institute, Glasgow
until 29 October 2016











Nicolas Party "Three Cats" installation views at The Modern Institute, Glasgow, 2016

Courtesy: the artist and The Modern Institute, Andrew Hamilton / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow