

Nicolas Party

Cascade

27 January
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Press Release

For *Cascade*, Nicolas Party's third exhibition with the gallery, the artist presents a group of new works, including pastels, cabinets and oil-on-copper paintings. Large tripartite pastels and smaller cabinet paintings point to a new trajectory, both formal and technical, that has opened up in his practice. Mastering the all but forgotten art of painting on copper, Party's paintings are as luminous as their historical counterparts. A group of single arched pastels and oil-on-copper paintings echo the shape of the cabinet's central panels.

Nicolas Party's triptychs belong to a genre with a rich historical legacy. From *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1410) to Francis Bacon's triple portraits, artists have long worked, whether by convention or choice, with this distinctive organisational structure. Immersing himself in the art of the past—as both a wellspring of inspiration and a model for looking at the world today—Party created two large pastel triptychs in which the natural world takes centre stage: trees dominate one, clouds the other. As iconographic motifs, the images evoke a wealth of associations, be they visual or literary, secular or spiritual. Party's interest in these subjects is related to his fascination with classical art historical genres (the landscape, the still life and the portrait, for example) and their continuous renewal across time, space and cultures. Yet Party is deliberately non-specific in terms of his references: he does not strive for verisimilitude in his art, nor does he slavishly iterate on the works of past masters. What he creates, instead, are open-ended tropes that encourage us to consider the network of connections and meanings behind these archetypes. His triptych of trees submerged in a swamp might prompt one to think of the biblical flood or Monet's paintings of the inundation at Giverny in 1896. Or perhaps J.G. Ballard's book *The Drowned World* (1962), in which climate breakdown reduces Europe to a network of lagoons. Since many other allusions and references are also possible, the viewer is encouraged to journey into subjective interpretation.

If Party's large pastel triptychs mirror the scale of historical altarpieces, then his oil-on-copper cabinets are analogous to the small portable paintings, or icons, that were traditionally made for private worship. He also reproduces the grisaille paintings that often adorn the reverse of these ancient artefacts. When closed, the monotone compositions in grey and white would conceal the vivid interior colours. The opening of a triptych in a church or home was thus an act of revelation: an experience that has nearly vanished today due to the inherent fragility of historical panel paintings. Party's cabinets are imbued with the promise of movement, of closure and disclosure. In contrast to the pastels, these oil-on-copper works feature a central 'portrait' as the primary subject. They are the kinds of faces that recur throughout the artist's oeuvre: silent, enigmatic, inscrutable and anonymous. Each face is flanked by symbolic motifs taken from the natural world: trees, burning forests, seahorses, bats, tulips and snails. The connotations are manifold. From medieval manuscripts to Dutch still lives and Matisse's commanding abstracted forms, the snail, for example, has represented many things over the centuries. It is a creature to which Party frequently returns.

These and other motifs, including ruins, waterfalls, caves and clouds, recur in Party's single arched pastels and oil-on-copper paintings. Humans have attached symbolic value to extraordinary natural phenomena since time immemorial.

There is also an elemental quality to these depictions of the natural world, with water and fire symbolising, respectively, the origins of life and its ultimate destruction. The absence of flora and fauna is an invitation to consider whether such images reflect a pre- or post-human world. Six similarly arched figurative works—three in pastel, three on copper—form allegorical counterpoints to the landscape-themed paintings. In these images, Party combines evocative portrait busts with different symbolic attributes. Moths, for example, have long been associated with transformation and resurrection, while bats and skulls, familiar to us from memento mori, are powerful reminders of human frailty and transience. Nicolas Party's interweaving of the human and physical worlds in *Cascade*, through images that radiate both beauty and devastation, highlights not only their indivisibility but also their precariousness.

Nicolas Party (b. 1980, Lausanne) lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include *L'heure mauve*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal (2022); *Nicolas Party: Triptych*, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan (2022); *Boilly*, Le Consortium, Dijon (2021); *Stage Fright*, Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover (2021); *Rovine*, MASI Lugano (2021); *Heads and Cave*, Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp, Cully, Switzerland (2021); *Pastel*, FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2019); *Arches*, M WOODS, Beijing (2018-2019); and *Magritte parti*, Magritte Museum, Brussels (2018). In 2021-22, he completed *Draw the Curtain*, a public installation for the Hirshhorn in Washington DC.

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#nicolasparty
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Clouds, 2022
soft pastel on linen
210.1 × 150.1 cm, 82 ³/₄ × 59 ¹/₈ in.

Photo credit: HV-studio
Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels

Xavier Hufkens

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Triptych with Red Forest, 2022
oil on copper and oil on wood
open: 31 × 49 × 6.5 cm, 12 ³/₁₆ × 19 ⁵/₁₆ × 2 ⁹/₁₆ in.
closed: 31 × 24 × 8.3 cm, 12 ³/₁₆ × 9 ⁷/₁₆ × 3 ¹/₄ in.

Photo credit: HV-studio
Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels



Waterfalls, 2022
soft pastel on linen
285 × 180 cm, 112 ¼ × 70 ⅞ in.

Photo credit: HV-studio
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Swamp, 2022
soft pastel on linen
150 × 200 cm, 59 × 78 ¾ in.

Photo credit: HV-studio
Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels

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Portrait with a Bat, 2022
soft pastel on linen
150.1 × 110.1 cm, 59 ¹/₈ × 43 ⁵/₈ in.

Photo credit: HV-studio
Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels

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Portrait by Axel Dupeux
Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels

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