

**Nicolas Party**  
**Cretaceous**  
**The Modern Institute, Aird's Lane**  
**10 June – 23 September 2023**  
**Preview: Friday 9 June 2023, 5-8pm**

For *Cretaceous*, Nicolas Party's sixth solo exhibition at The Modern Institute, the artist produced an exhibition occupying Aird's Lane and the Bricks Space comprised of large pastels and intimately scaled oil-on-copper paintings displayed on freshly painted walls. Collectively, the pieces highlight changes in scale and focus, from sublime mountains and waterfalls to an intimate painting of a small baby. While they contain a variety of subject matters, Party imbues each work with a compelling timeless quality, speaking to the artist's abiding concern with classical symbols and iconography.

The exhibition's title takes its name from the geological period which ended in a mass extinction event 66 million years ago. In this sense, Party's title can be understood as both a response to the apocalyptic moment humans find themselves in, where many of the earth's species are being made extinct due to climate change, and a more general meditation on the creative and destructive qualities of natural forces. Throughout the exhibition, Party also utilizes his expansive knowledge of art history to work consciously within the established genres of Western art. This enables him to reduce a style to its essence, engage with its metaphorical potential and question the categorisations inherent to each format.

In his pastels, Party presents the viewer with various imagined subjects. The landscapes all depict singular, archetypal vistas that engage with the Romantic notion of the sublime – the internal and emotional mixes with the external forms of nature. The mountain and waterfall pieces, void of humans and animals, have a particular mystical, immutable quality and, as such, remain open and poetic statements to which the viewer can respond. The waterfalls utilise close tones of blue and green, their compositions a nod to Gustave Courbet's celebrated waterfall canvases from the 1870s. Party's calm mountain silhouettes are less graphic than many of his previous works and embrace more abstract and atmospheric elements, recalling Georgia O'Keeffe's expansive paintings of clouds and sky from the mid-1960s.

Party's waterfalls and mountains stand as a balancing force to the fiery 'Red Forest' pieces. The singular motif, forest fires, is the closest to an image of climate disaster in the exhibition. The metaphorical images of destruction, speak to a perennial human anxiety about the end of the world. Recently, Party has been considering the precedents for this kind of imagery throughout art history, particularly paintings of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Art history remains a key area of research and inspiration for the artist. In the 'Red Forest' landscapes, it allows the artist to place apocalyptic thinking within a tradition, trace human's relationship to the environment across time and consider the precedents of figuration in painting.

The absence of humans or animals in his landscapes is conspicuous in contrast to Party's paintings of dinosaurs and of a baby. The gravity of the landscape tableaux sits alongside these hopeful and playful inclusions. Like the landscapes, both focus on enduring subjects which to some extent exist outside of time. The painting of the baby chimes with European paintings of the Christ child. The dinosaur works are the result of Party's study of the history of dinosaur illustration and, in particular, how it changed over time as scientific understanding evolved. While steeped in art historical consideration and research, Party's paintings remain stylistically cohesive, graceful and idiosyncratic. He is fascinated by the shifting meaning of these motifs and symbols across cultures. In tandem with the various elemental landscape scenes, these works construct an elegant, humorous and wide-ranging consideration of the passage of time – of transience and flux.

Selected solo exhibitions and commissions include: 'Nicolas Party: Triptych', Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan (2022), 'L'heure mauve', Montreal Museum of Fine Art, Montreal (2022), 'Rovine (Ruins)', MASI Lugano, Lugano (2021), 'Heads and Cave (Têtes et Grotte)' Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp, Cully (2021), 'Polychrome', The Modern Institute, Glasgow (2019); 'Arches', M WOODS, Beijing (2018); 'Magritte Parti', Magritte Museum, Brussels (2018); 'Head', The Modern Institute, Aird's Lane Green as part of Glasgow International (2018); 'Space Speakers', Modern Art Oxford (2017); 'Dinner for 24 Sheep', The Arnold and Marie Schwartz Gallery Met, New York (2017); 'sunrise, sunset', Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC (2017); 'Cafe Party' commission, Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh (2017); 'Three Cats', The Modern Institute (2016); Palazzo Antinori, Florence (2016); 'Hammer Projects: Nicolas Party', Hammer Museum, LA, 2016; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas (2016); 'Cimaise', CAN: Centre d'art Neuchâtel, 2016; Neuchâtel; 'Snails in Notting Hill' (with Jesse Wine), RISE Projects, London, 2015, 'Panorama', SALTS, Basel (2015); 'Boys and Pastel', Inverleith House, Edinburgh (2015); 'Pastel et nu', Centre culturel suisse, Paris (2015); 'Trunks and Faces', Westfälischer Kunstverein, Muenster (2014); 'Landscape', Kunsthall Stavanger, Stavanger (2014); 'Still Life oil paintings and Landscape watercolours', The Modern Institute, Glasgow; 'Still Life, Stones and Elephants', Swiss Institute, New York (2012); 'Still Life, Gold and Peeling Paint', ReMap 3, Athens (2011); and 'Dinner for 24 Elephants', The Modern Institute, Glasgow (2011).

## NATURE REBORN

*Reflections on the paintings of Nicolas Party*

Tim Ingold

Who can tell of what the sleeping baby dreams? One of the great mysteries of life is that no-one can, although we were all there once. So far, the baby whose diminutive portrait holds the key to this entire exhibition, having only recently opened her eyes to the world for the first time, has witnessed almost nothing of it. Ostensibly, she has no knowledge of mountains, waterfalls, forests or sunsets. In his *Principles of Psychology*, dating from 1890, William James famously speculated that ‘the baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion’.<sup>1</sup> It takes time, thought James, for the growing infant to make things out – whether visually, aurally, olfactorily or haptically – from the ocean of light, sound, smell and feeling within which she is primordially immersed. But if that is so, how could her dreams possibly be filled with forms and creatures that we, with more experience, can recognise in the world around us?

The problem is that in our maturity, babyhood is always something to look back on, not something to look forward to. The child looks forward to becoming a grownup, the adult – perhaps with mixed feelings – to advancing old age. But who looks forward to becoming a baby? True, there are peoples, such as the Inuit of Greenland, in whose cosmology the cycle of life spans generations, such that grandfathers can return as new-borns and are addressed accordingly, as both older and wiser than the parents who bore them.<sup>2</sup> Inuit people would find nothing strange in the idea that the baby’s dreams are filled with glacial mountains, oceans and sea-ice, for these would be but memories of their previous life. But to those of us raised on the assumption that life is a one-way passage from cradle to grave, the idea would appear incredible. For we are convinced that our very capacity to reflect on infancy proves it to be a condition we have already left behind.

In growing up, however, we turn our backs not only on our own infancy. We do the same, also, to that very elemental earth to which we owe our existence. Under the rubric of ‘nature’, we put this world behind us, as an originary condition which it is the destiny of our human selves to subdue. Even as we worry about the mass extinction of species resulting, directly or indirectly, from this subjugation, we think of nature not as a harbinger of the future that awaits us but as an archive from the past, to be saved from destruction and conserved. Thanks to the efforts of geologists and palaeontologists, we know much more about this past than in previous centuries. We know that continents have drifted over the face of the earth, and that their collision has

raised massive mountain ranges. We know that hundreds of millions of years before anything resembling humans appeared on the scene, these landmasses were covered with great flowering trees and inhabited by reptilian dinosaurs. And we know that there were later periods when swathes of its surface were covered in ice.

Taken together, the mountains, the forests, the dinosaurs and the ice paint a fabulous picture of a primeval world-before-humanity which fills the pages of natural history books. Children are encouraged to marvel at these distant epochs, separated from our own by almost inconceivable spans of time. Yet in this picture, what is perhaps the most marvellous thing of all, the human baby, pales into insignificance. It is but the tiniest and most ephemeral speck of living matter in the vastness of the universe. How may this marvel be recovered? It was of course the great achievement of modern science to convert the cosmos – the manifold of heaven and earth that opens from the inside into the very plenitude of sensory experience – into a universe that is objective, exterior and indifferent to our concerns. In this conversion the infinite horizons of conscious awareness are reduced to a vanishing point. Yet in the birth of a baby, an event of infinitesimal significance on the scale of the universe expands to truly cosmic proportions. It is nothing less than the birth of a world.

Restoring the marvel of this event requires us to turn the tables on the scientific worldview. It means folding the universe outside in, so as to regain a vision of the cosmos. This, according to phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is the specific task of the painter. Merleau-Ponty compares the painter's vision to that of the new-born, on first opening her eyes to the world. For the painter, however, every time is a first time: their vision, as he puts it, 'is a continued birth'.<sup>3</sup> Yet it was precisely from this power to give birth to a world, in every moment of existence, that 'nature' originally took its name. It comes from the Latin *natus*, 'to be born'. The Roman philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus, in his prose-poem *De Rerum Natura*, dating from around 50 BCE, called nature 'the creatress of all things' (*rerum natura creatrix*).<sup>4</sup> But nature's creation is ours too. It is not as though we arrive as spectators, peering out through holes in the head, as we might through a telescope, on the scene unfolding before us. From the moment we open our eyes, if not before, we are already in its midst.

What, then, if the new-born world of the baby's dreams were dreaming too? We can no more fathom the depths of nature's dreaming than we can access the dreamworld of the sleeping infant. It is not a world that can be known or studied by any science. But where the baby sees a world, we see its bulbous

head. Apparently unsupported, cradled in swaddling clothes, the head is like a magic orb, invisible to its wearer, but rendering the wearer visible to others. If nature were newly born like the child, what orb would it wear? Could we imagine a landscape with surfaces as smooth and contours as rounded as those of a baby's skin? In the paintings of Nicolas Party, I see the orb of nature's dreaming. They portray nature in its natality, not – as in so many naturalistic portrayals of landscape – in its antiquity. In these portrayals of a new-born world, mountains glisten like marshmallows, forests are aglow and waters thread like ribbons through rocks as yet unworn. Even the dinosaurs, in their birthday suits, emerge cleansed from the moonlit waters of some primordial ocean, ready to play. With the birth of every child, the dream of nature is reborn.

1 William James, 1890, *Principles of Psychology*, volume 1, New York: Henry Holt, page 488.

2 Mark Nuttall, 'The name never dies: Greenland Inuit ideas of the person', in *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*, edited by Antonia C. Mills and Richard Slobodin, 123-35, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.

3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and mind', translated by Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, edited by James M. Edie, 159-90, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964, page 168.

4 Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* [The Nature of Things], *Book 1*, line 628), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0130%3Abook%3D1%3Acard%3D599>, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> May 2023.

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