NICOLAS PARTY

by Annie Godfrey Larmon

Nicolas Party, *Red Portrait*, 2017, soft pastel on pastel card, 31 1/2 x 22 1/4".

Ingrid Sischy once located a disjunction in the critical response to the doughy imps of Fernando Botero's paintings—there didn't appear to be a consensus as to whether the Colombian artist's work was a parody of the bourgeoisie or a bourgeois parody. A similar ambiguity might be attributed to the comely chalk pastels of Swiss artist Nicolas Party. With crisp, saturated graphics, Party moves through the genres of portraiture, landscape, and still life, keeping each categorically distinct, and keeping it all contemporary by borrowing art-historical styles with post-internet abandon. We see in the work elements of Botero, but also of Pablo Picasso, Giorgio Morandi, Milton Avery, John Armleder, Alex Katz, Charles Burchfield. . . . I could go on. All of this sampling should amount to a Frankensteinian plurality, but instead, these appropriative compositions cohere into something seamlessly Party. The excess of reference inscrutably empties the works out—they are ready vessels in which one might arrange any bouquet of Party's forebears, but they are also slickly singular, or signature. Branded, even. It's the confluence of these qualities that makes Party's work difficult to square: Is it a vacuous apex of painting in the promiscuous digital age, or is it critical of the vacuity caused by such promiscuity?

At Karma, Party constructed a series of rooms connected by low, arched doorways, each space with walls—most supporting a single work—painted in reverberant monochromes: Yves Klein blue against dewy lavender, carmine next to smoky chartreuse. The effect was reminiscent of the immersiveness of period rooms, though one wondered in what era one had arrived. In each of the five portraits on view (Red Portrait, Blue Portrait, etc. [all works 2017]), the subject barely hummed from the hue of the ground, which was in turn nearly indecipherable from the color of the wall on which it hung. These figures, subsumed by their radiant environs, were rendered flatly. Disaffected and spectral, each seemed to be a mere host for a set of piercing eyes, which are always treated the same: white almonds, like targets, between vulva-ish, agape lids.

If, per Erwin Panofsky's formula, a portrait aims to convey both a sitter's idiosyncrasies and what the sitter shares with humanity at large, these portraits fail on both counts. By design, Party's figures are at once nondescript and uncanny, unnatural. By contrast, his paintings of fruit and forests anthropomorphize their subjects, which are visibly susceptible to the abuses of time. In Two Pears, the fruits of the title are flaccid and wan, their skin sloughing downward; but they have a mopey, dog-

like disposition, as though they are waiting to be stroked. Likewise, in Landscape with the Moon, evergreens in a copse seem to huddle together under a hiemal sky. Though all of Party's subjects are situated in barren landscapes, nature is depicted as reconciled and agentive to its fate, while humans are dispossessed.

Of course, Party's chosen tropes always tell us something about power, perception, and technology. In this light, we might think of his work's equivocation as intentional. These paintings, collectively, give us a scrambled vanitas, that order of images fixated on ambition and futility, permanence and death. Party updates the genre for a world driven by optics and automation and stored on the cloud—one that is constructed on disrupted understandings of transience and pleasure alike. The peeled eyes of Party's subjects caution against placing oneself above nature, privileging image over presence, grounding desire in pictures rather than bodies. Perhaps he wants us to feel alienated in our own seduction.