



NICOLAS PARTY: PASTEL

Exhibition dates: October 10, 2019-February 15, 2020

Opening reception: Friday, October 11, 6-8pm

The FLAG Art Foundation | 545 West 25th Street, NY

The FLAG Art Foundation is pleased to present *Nicolas Party: Pastel*, a two-floor exhibition by the artist, on view **October 10, 2019-February 15, 2020**. Conceived as a unified environment, Party transforms FLAG into a rose-colored stage set for a suite of four soft pastel, Rococo-inspired murals that serve as a foil to, and occasional backdrop for, a selection of pastels from the eighteenth-century to present day. Artists include: **Rosalba Carriera** (1675-1757), **Mary Cassatt** (1844-1926), **Edgar Degas** (1834-1917), **Louis Fratino** (b. 1993), **Marsden Hartley** (1877-1943), **Loie Hollowell** (b. 1983), **Julian Martin** (b. 1969), **Toyin Ojih Odutola** (b. 1985), **Chris Ofili** (b. 1968), **Jean-Baptiste Perronneau** (1715-1783), **Billy Sullivan** (b. 1946), **Wayne Thiebaud** (b. 1920), and **Robin F. Williams** (b. 1984).

The exhibition centers on soft pastel, a fragile and ultimately temporal medium that experienced its brief golden age in eighteenth-century France, and arguably Europe. Venetian-born artist **Rosalba Carriera**, described by Party as the centerpiece and impetus of his presentation at FLAG, is credited with not only having popularized small-scale pastel portraiture, which was coveted and widely copied at the time, but for also revolutionizing the physical medium by binding powders into uniform sticks. Noted for their radiant palettes, lustrous tones, and gauzy atmospheric qualities, Carriera's commissioned portraits of Venetian nobility, Grand Tourists, and European aristocracy made her one of the first female artists to achieve international acclaim and independent financial success prior to 1800. At the time, Pastel was praised as a painting medium for its lifelike quality, or "bloom," it conferred upon subjects. The distinctive appearance results from the physical characteristics of the powders themselves, which reflect light from the facets of their finely divided particles and the air spaces in between, evoking a sense of light and accounting for the pastel's velvety, matte quality¹.

Pastel portraits by Carriera and **Jean-Baptiste Perronneau** represent the short-lived Rococo² pastel craze and underscore the extravagant outfits and makeup for *petites femmes* of the period: rose-bud-shaped lips, pale skin, and powdered hair, with embellished bodices cut to accentuate a sitter's breasts and décolletage. An emphasis on appearance was shared by wealthy men (*petits-maîtres*) of the Rococo period who "painted" their faces—often with same pastel pigments used in paintings—wore garments that exaggerated their natural proportions, donned elaborate wigs, masks, shaped facial patches³, ostrich feathers, flowers, ribbons, jewels, and the color pink—used liberally throughout the exhibition at FLAG. This non-binary approach to gender presentation was soon rebuked by Enlightenment critics as libertine, effeminate, and anti-Revolutionary (or pro-monarchy). François Boucher's (1703-1770) *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour*, 1758—a source inspiration for one of Party's large-scale murals—was a target of particular aesthetic and political derision by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) who wrote, "This painting is the embodiment of the corruption and decadence of the French aristocracy."⁴

¹ Shelley, Marjorie. "The Rise of Pastel in the Eighteenth Century." Corresponding with the exhibition *Pastel Portraits: Images of the 18th-Century Europe* (May 17-August 14, 2011) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Bulletin*, Spring 2011. (paraphrase)

² The Rococo era began in France in 1730 (to around 1770) before it eventually spread to United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, Bavaria, and Russia.

³ At the court of Louis XV, a patch (*mouches* or "flies" in French) worn at the corner of the eye indicated passion, the center of the cheek was gay, the nose was saucy, a patch on the upper lip suggested kisses, and the forehead was majestic. A patch worn on a dimple was playful – and a murderess wore her patches on her breast! Often people wore up to fifteen or sixteen patches at once. (Angeloglou, Maggie. *A History of Make-Up*, Studio Vista, 1970, p 73.)

⁴ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "The Social Contract and Discourses." *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Science*. London: Everyman, 1913. pp. 115-142.

Applied and blended by hand, Party's painterly use of the effortlessly smudgeable soft pastel medium is a formidable task when applied to large-scale, unprotected walls. The site-specific murals, created by the artist over four weeks, take inspiration from paintings by Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), whose theatrical if not artificial allegories of courtship, gallantry, and mythology became frothy and much maligned hallmarks of the Rococo era. Though faithfully executed in the style of the artists, Party deviates from the originals: in one, he focuses on the high contrast fabrics of Marquise de Pompadour's elaborate dress; in another, the non-natural landscape in Fragonard's *The Progress of Love*, 1771-73, commissioned for, and famously rejected by, the Comtesse du Barry, the last *Maîtresse-en-titre* of Louis XV⁵—Pompadour being the king's first. Party's murals, including one based on Fragonard's *The Birth of Venus*, 1753-55, are here layered with other artists' pastels that shift the narrative, intent, and conversation in the Rococo paintings. In the case of FLAG's opening wall, Party's tondo mural of hyperchromatic, flatly rendered gourds and fruit—a recurring subject in his work—is punctuated by an eighteenth-century, almost confectionery portrait of an aristocratic woman by Perronneau.

Pastels by **Mary Cassatt** and **Edgar Degas**, amongst the most renowned historical artists to work in the medium, depict intimate moments in the lives of well-to-do late nineteenth-century women. Cassatt's portrait of her sister-in-law in a pale blue gown (with eyes to match) counters Degas's more voyeuristic drawing, expressed in muted tones, shifting points of focus, and exaggerated forms. Loose, gestural pastels by **Billy Sullivan** chronicle the artist's broader circle of friends and fellow artists, while **Toyin Ojih Odutola**'s fictional portrait of a Nigerian aristocratic explores color, class, and race through intricate mark-making. **Robin F. Williams** and **Louis Fratino** assert the primacy of the nude: Williams's stylized women fuse early modernism and the staged informality of advertising, whereas Fratino's bedroom-eyed figures recall funerary portraits from ancient Roman Egypt. **Loie Hollowell**'s luminous abstractions suggest the body and echo **Julian Martin**'s graphic, sharply defined compositions based on still-life photography. **Wayne Thiebaud** channels Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779), Degas, and Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) in pastel confections that blend art history and pop nostalgia. **Marsden Hartley**'s spartan desert mountainscape is captured in textured patches of color, light, and shadow and capped in a blue corona. Nodding to Henri Matisse and Wassily Kandinsky, **Chris Ofili**'s, dreamlike *Charmant* series explores lyrical, sibilant forms (C and S and spiral)⁶—all signature motifs of the Rococo period—in a patchwork of blue, black, and aluminum leaf.

About:

Nicolas Party (b. 1980, Lausanne, Switzerland) is an artist living and working in Brussels, Belgium, and New York, NY. Party earned a BA in Fine Art at the Lausanne School of Art, in 2004, and an MA at The Glasgow School of Art, United Kingdom, in 2009. Party's recent solo exhibitions include *Arches*, M WOODS, Beijing, China (2018-2019); *Magritte Parti*, Magritte Museum, Brussels (2018); *Nicolas Party: Speakers*, Modern Art, Oxford, United Kingdom (2017); *Sunrise, Sunset*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC (2017); among others. His work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including *Nightfall*; curated by Erika Verzutti, Fernanda Brenner and Milovan Farronato, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels (2019); *The Biennial of Painting*, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium (2018); *SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL*, Parkett @ Nomad St. Moritz, Samedan, Switzerland (2018); *You Remind Me of Someone*, Frac Lorraine, Metz, France (2018); *Pastels du 16e au 21e siècle*, Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne, Switzerland (2018); among others. Party has been the subject of reviews and articles in publications including *Artforum*, *artnet*, *ArtReview*, *Artspace*, *Frieze*, *Mousse Magazine*, *novembre*, *The Wall Street Journal*, among others.

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⁵ Jeanne Bécu, the Comtesse du Barry, was convicted of treason for financially assisting members of the aristocracy who fled the French Revolution. She was sentenced to death by guillotine December 8, 1793, at Place de la Révolution.

⁶ Hyde, Melissa. *Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Circle*. Los Angeles, the Getty Institute Publications Program, 2006. (paraphrase)