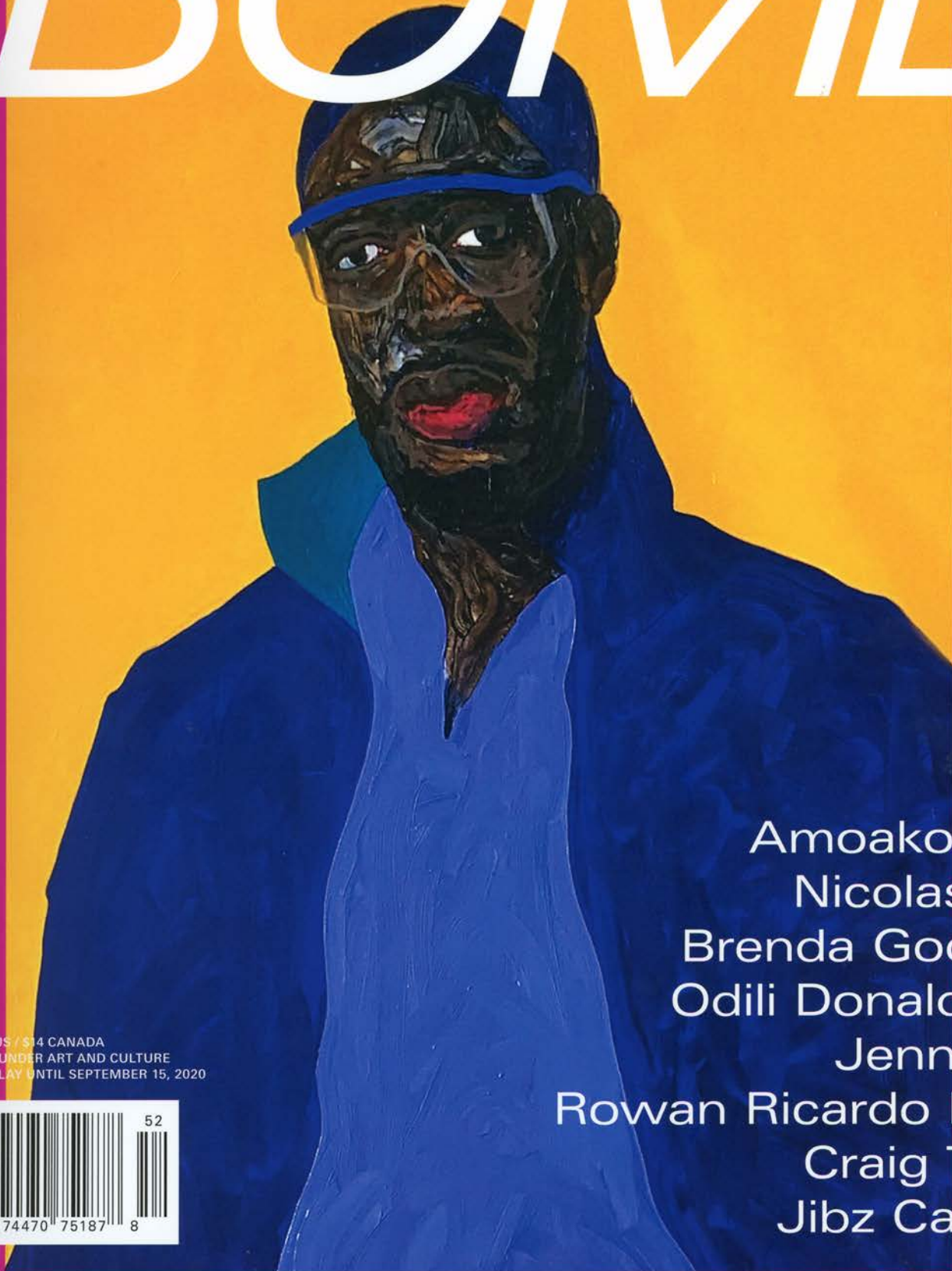


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Nicolas Party
by Jonathan Lee

In early February, before anyone I knew owned a face mask, I flew to Los Angeles and attended the opening of *Sottobosco*. It was the first solo exhibition in the city by the New York-based Swiss artist Nicolas Party, who just a few weeks earlier, in his studio in Brooklyn, had mischievously succeeded in encouraging my three-year-old son to use one of his possibly priceless foot sculptures as a monster-truck ramp.

Walking into Hauser & Wirth for the opening of *Sottobosco* felt very much like stepping through a child's intricate dream. Everywhere I looked, on that night before America woke up to the repercussions of COVID-19, I saw that most intoxicating of all qualities: confidence.

Installation view of *Portrait with Snakes*, 2019, pastel on panel, 59 x 50 x 1 inches, in *Sottobosco* at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, 2020. Photo by Joshua White. Images courtesy of the artist.





There was the confidence inherent in Party's bold, brilliant colors; the confidence it takes to hang your eighteenth-century inspirations next to your own freshly finished works; and the confidence of nature herself, the butterflies and frogs and flowers that burst forth so powerfully from Party's pastel universe. The exhibition took its name from an Italian word for the undergrowth of a forest—also a subgenre of still-life painting devoted to nature's darker regions—but my predominant memory is one of beautiful, almost frightening brightness. It's as if the artist knew that within a matter of weeks we'd all be longing for an unreal outdoor life.

Sottobosco follows Party's major mural commissions for the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (2016), the Dallas Museum of Art (2016), and solo exhibitions at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, (2017) and the FLAG Art Foundation in New

Exhibition view of
Sottobosco at Hauser &
Wirth, Los Angeles, 2020.
Photo by Joshua White.

York (2019). In the last few years, charting his rise, celebrities have started offering eye-watering sums for his work, but the artist continues to exude the skeptical modesty of someone who knows that surface sunlight is not as interesting as what it illuminates. We carried out the following conversation over FaceTime in the darkness of our homes.

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JONATHAN LEE: From the perspective of a fiction writer, I wonder about storytelling in your work. Do you think of your individual paintings—or pastels or sculptures—in terms of stories? Or are the exhibitions the stories?

NICOLAS PARTY: That's a good angle. I will say that my paintings are more like characters in a story and my exhibitions have the capacity of gathering those different characters together. I like modifying the architecture of the gallery space in order to create a set for the paintings—changing wall colors, creating murals of or installing the actual historical paintings I'm inspired by. I need to create a decor for the story to be activated, similar to a theatrical stage. That's how I use the gallery space. When the show comes down, the paintings go on to play a different role in a different play surrounded by a different stage set that often I don't control. But there's a sense of creating a second narration, a world or a universe that is complete unto itself. Each character that Balzac develops in the ninety-one books comprising his *Human Comedy* is activated differently in each novel, depending on its context. Each of the 2,472 characters create a network that forms a whole—sometimes as a main character and other times as a very anecdotal presence.

JL: That idea of "second narration" is intriguing. I'm glad I was able to see your solo exhibition *Sottobosco* in LA before the lockdown. A key and fascinating part of the world of that exhibition was another artist's work, from 1663.

NP: Yes, the exhibition was all based on one painting by a seventeenth-century Dutch painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck.

JL: It's amazing how the painting glows.

NP: I love the fact that you can feel the work glow in a different way. You can feel the age through the material presence of the object. The cracks on the surface of the painting are like an old man's wrinkles showing the signs of time on his skin. I conceived the entire show around the van Schrieck painting to the extent of building a space, like a chapel, inside the gallery to show the original painting. The space becomes a show within a show that acts a little bit like a

Russian Matryoshka doll. A lot of my work shown in the exhibition takes direct elements from van Schrieck's paintings, using a method similar to sampling in music. The snake, the mushroom, and the frog that are seen in three of the four portraits are taken directly from his painting. In the fourth, the flowers were taken from Rachel Ruysch, another Dutch artist from that period, who also created sottobosco paintings early in her career.

JL: I like that Russian doll idea, as you refer to it. Wandering through the rooms did feel like that. But one thing that hadn't occurred to me until you just mentioned it is that Ruysch's work has its own form of

nesting dolls. She was inspired by van Schrieck and borrowed from him, and then you're borrowing from and referencing both of them, a continuation of the nesting of narratives or histories.

NP: Yes, there is a painting of mine that depicts two poppies. Do you remember? One of those poppies is taken from a painting by van Schrieck and the other from a painting by Ruysch. The Ruysch flower, which she painted when she was nineteen, is a copy of a van Schrieck painting of a poppy. I felt it would be meaningful to unite the two characters in the same room. I wanted to see if Rachel's flower and Otto's flower had anything to say to each other.

JL: Obviously, it's not unusual for artists of any discipline to bring references into their works. But is it unusual to hang those actual references on the wall?

NP: I think, for a show in a commercial gallery space, it's quite unusual. Conventional gallery exhibitions show an artist's work from the last six months. And that's the case in my show for all of my own work; the van Schrieck is not for sale and is displaced from the gallery's agenda. The object feels old, and the space

Nicolas Party, *Two Poppies*, 2019, soft pastel on card, 23.5 x 23.5 inches. Photo by Adam Reich.



doesn't feel like a gallery. The visitors experience a jump in the timeline of what they see. The presence of such an old object influences the perception of the very new works of mine in an interesting way.

JL: You also used a lot of references and samples in the show you created at the FLAG Art Foundation this past fall, including works by contemporary artists who deal with color and portraiture.

NP: The pastel show at the FLAG Art Foundation was something I had always dreamed of doing. An opportunity to create a set where not only my own work but also works from artists I admire will be displayed. Pastel paintings from 1760 to 2019 were all in conversation with each other in an environment specially designed for them. All the walls of the gallery were painted in varied colors, with pink being a dominant presence. We also changed all the doors into arches as in the *Sottobosco* show. I was excited to have wall murals executed in pastel and then have other artworks hanging on the murals' surface. The juxtaposition worked like a collage, where two different images formed a new one when joined together.

Another important part of that process was how the murals were conceived. Each mural was designed based on a painting from another artist. For example, one mural was made after Jean-Honoré Fragonard's painting series called *The Progress of Love*. I cropped his painting for the mural, only keeping the treetops. We hung a portrait by the Venetian Rococo painter Rosalba Carriera on top of the mural. What you see in the show contains all those layers: the

Installation view of *From Jean Honoré Fragonard, The Progress of Love, 1773, 2019, soft pastel on wall, 918 x 134 inches. Mural inset with Portrait of a Lady at Three-Quarter Length by Rosalba Carriera, n.d., pastel on paper, 22 x 17.25 inches. Photo by Steven Probert.*









original Fragonard painting, my mural version of the Fragonard, and the Rosalba portrait. Together they form a new work.

JL: Why is the history of pastel important to you?

NP: I didn't know anything about pastel when I started to use the medium seven years ago. As I became more in love with this technique, I learned more about its particular history. My main exploration was to understand why this medium is so underused today and throughout art history. Pastel as a medium is deeply rooted in the eighteenth century; it was extremely popular then and particularly used by women artists, the most famous being Rosalba Carriera. Her popularization of the medium in the early eighteenth century had a tremendous influence on art history. Since that period, pastel has been heavily associated with femininity. This connotation was detrimental among the art academy after the French Revolution. And still today, this aspect is palpable.

JL: You mentioned earlier that your paintings are sometimes "like characters in a story." What about the individual figures in paintings or sculptures as characters? A fiction writer might spend some time thinking about the backstories of those individuals, the events that have made them how they are, or the experiences that informed the expressions on their faces in a given moment. Do you think about the past lives of figures in your work, or only the lineage of the work itself?

NP: It's true that any painting has various backstories and trying to understand those is an important part of the practice. For example, I started doing pastel portraits after seeing a Picasso pastel portrait. His was made in reference to Greek classical sculpture. While looking myself at Greek

sculptural portraits, I was intrigued by their androgyny, and that aspect then started to appear in my own work. One influence can't help but reference another, and it sometimes feels like the backstories of a painting are an invitation.

While creating an object that exists in the present, you feel that there's nothing else other than this. It's almost like the artwork doesn't have a function; it's a part of nature, like an animal or a rock. You don't question why it's here. Of course, it is made by a person and thus has a genealogy with references and cultural influences, which could be seen as the backstory of the character. Maybe that's why you feel that the painting exists for itself. Separated from all of the heritage that justifies its existence, something Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation" helped me see.

JL: When did you fall in love with trees in your artwork?

NP: I've always drawn trees. You never really know if you start repeating an element of your vocabulary out of habit or because it contains something endlessly meaningful for you. If trees keep returning in my work, it must be because I feel I'm still making discoveries by being with and working with them. As soon as I stop having a conversation with one of my characters, I don't paint it anymore. That happens regularly. For example, I don't paint pots anymore. I used to spend so much time with my pots. But we don't talk anymore; we don't have anything to say to each other.

JL: Did you say pots? Do you mean like Morandi's vessels?

NP: Yes, I certainly love Morandi's pots. He surely spent time with his pots, and they never ran out of great conversation. Pots are somehow also a great metaphor for painting. You represent the container but not the contained. You don't paint what's inside the pot, what's hidden within it. Painting is forced to describe the appearance of things, the surface. Do you remember the end of *Indiana*

Jones and the Last Crusade? He has to choose between, let's say, fifty different cups. The camera shows all the different containers. Indiana has to figure out which one is the Holy Grail just by looking at them. If he chooses the wrong one, he's going to get killed, and if he chooses the right one, he gains eternal life. When he finally chooses the cup, he fills it with water and drinks. The water would have been the same if he had chosen any other cup. What is magical is not the water, but the pot itself.

JL: It's the container that's magic rather than the contents.

NP: Exactly. And Indiana chose wisely.

JL: If you'll let me play the role of bad psychologist for a moment, I'd say that it makes sense to me that you'd be an Indiana Jones fan. He's an adventuring archaeologist and you're also interested in collecting artworks by forgotten artists from bygone centuries—albeit less dangerously. And didn't you tell me once you were also an obsessive about Hergé's character Tintin as a kid?

NP: The character of Indiana Jones was very influenced by the character of Tintin, who also lies somewhere between a journalist and an archeologist. I grew up reading Hergé's books, and I go back to them often. Rereading what you enjoyed as a kid brings back that feeling of excitement you had the first time. But revisiting a book makes you discover new elements that you didn't notice at first.

My favorite Tintin is *The Castafiore Emerald*, a Hitchcockian story where the MacGuffin concept is employed perfectly. At every step of the narration, Hergé plants false clues; the reader is deceived by appearances. The first layer of the plot is dead simple: the opera singer Bianca Castafiore is staying with Tintin and Haddock in Marlinspike. One morning she wakes up screaming; her precious emerald has vanished. Tintin has to find out who stole it. The entire book is wonderfully built into of a series of misleading clues that

Nicolas Party, *Portrait with Flowers*, 2018, pastel on canvas, 59 × 47.25 inches.
Photo by Isabelle Arthuis.



always lead Tintin and the reader in the wrong direction.

I can tell you one of the many little tricks in the book. The first drawing the reader sees on the very first page of the graphic novel shows a magpie in a tree looking at Tintin and Haddock walking in the forest. Toward the end, Bianca is leaving the house, even though the emerald is still missing. She is going to Milan to sing a Rossini opera *La gazza ladra*, the thieving magpie. Tintin then realizes that there never were any thieves but only one little bird. The same bird the reader saw on the first page of the book.

JL: Your canvases are rarely busy, and they don't draw attention to their

own complexity. You paint seemingly simple shapes and colors, and the viewer's eye knows where to go. But the more one unpacks the paintings, the more references one finds. Is there something in the coexistence of simplicity and secrets that appeals to you?

NP: I like simplicity that has an inherent complexity. I love the idea that Morandi painted vessels for most of his life, seeking to capture the metaphysical. He was capable of achieving this by just observing. I love what Cézanne shows us. You can paint a few apples and make a very complex work of art. If you look closely at a rock, you can see the

Still Life, 2017, pastel on canvas, 55 x 51 inches.
Photo by Thomas Mueller.

universe within it, and one of the best ways of looking closely at something is to paint it. I do feel that it's actually more logical to approach complexity through a simple subject. How many masterful pieces are made of the simplest of subjects? Someone could paint a few sunflowers and make a masterpiece out of it.

JL: Here's another novelist's question: do you think about things like suspense and surprise in your work?

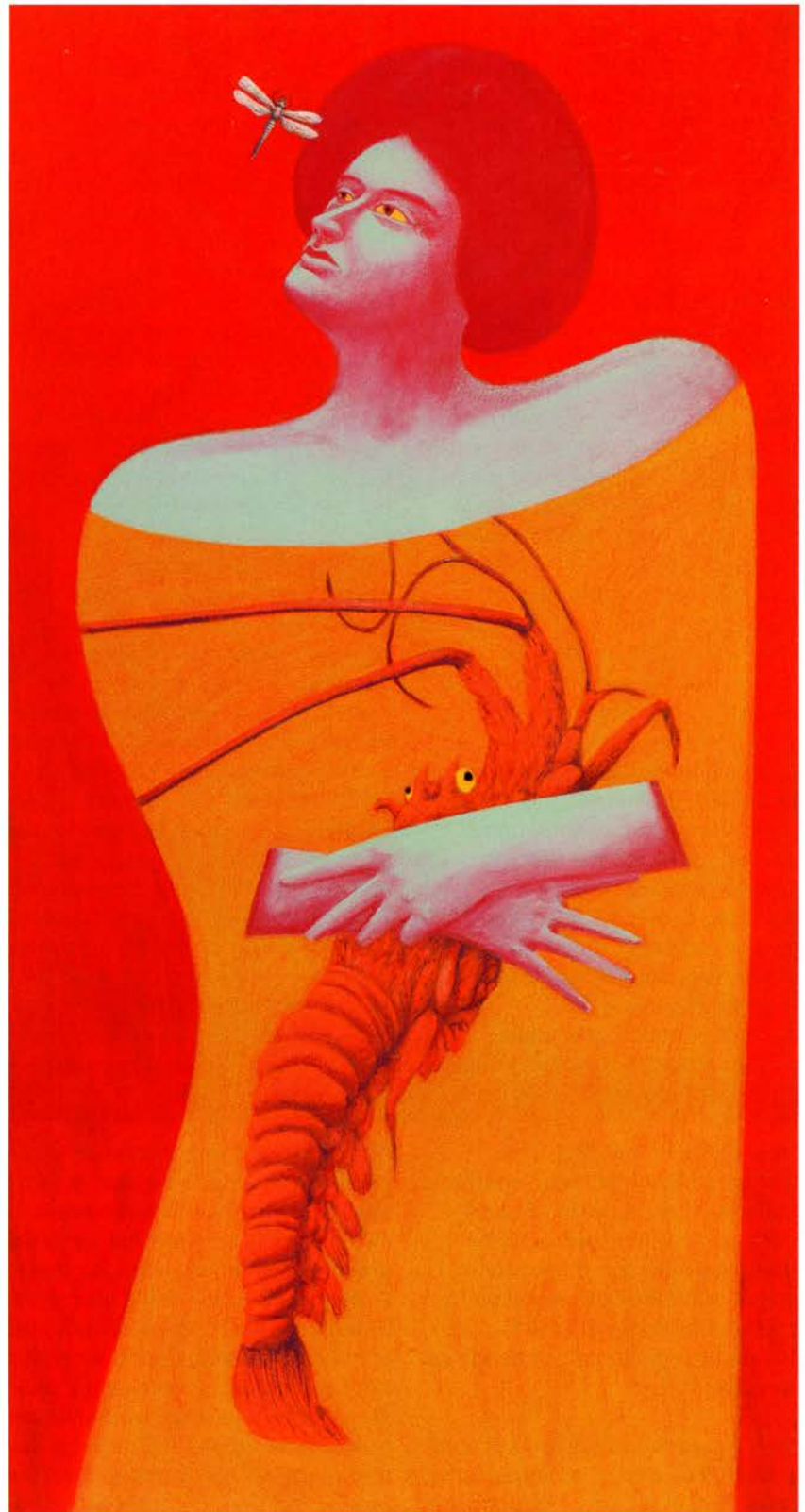
NP: Alfred Hitchcock's use of classic suspense to arrest the attention of the viewer is very inspiring to me. Once the viewer is captured by that suspense, Hitchcock delivers the complexity of the movie. In *Vertigo*, the classic love story structures the first layer of the movie and hooks the viewer, but as the movie unfolds, the love story becomes merely anecdotal and the complexity of the narrative can be revealed. This level of complexity within a Hollywood movie is what makes Hitchcock Chris Marker's favorite director. In his movie *Sans Soleil*, Chris Marker describes the complexity beneath *Vertigo*'s classic storyline. He makes the point that *Vertigo* is about the vertigo of time. The spiral of the title sequence, repeated in Kim Novak's hairdo, and then echoed in the rings of the sequoia tree, points to that theme developed throughout the movie. Hitchcock had the ability to craft something complex from something that appears very simple.

In my own work, I want to grab the audience directly and "lock" them in the work as long as possible. When the viewer is inside the painting, my hope is that its complexity can be revealed. You stay inside it because you feel that there is still something there that you don't see. Remember the scene in *Vertigo* when Novak's character is in the museum staring at a painting for hours? She is trapped inside the canvas waiting for the painting to reveal its mystery. That is also a form of suspense, the feeling that you have yet to see something that is still invisible to your eyes.

JL: It's interesting you mentioned *Sans Soleil*. In my memory, the film has this sense of different countries merging into one another through this collage-type form. I'm thinking about memory and technology and all that sort of stuff. But how much are you thinking about actual locations in your art, when you make them? Because I don't look at your work and think, It's definitely that place as opposed to another.

NP: None of my paintings are directly located. The location is basically their own space.

Portrait with Langoustine,
2019, soft pastel on linen,
67 × 35.5 × 1 inches. Photo
by Adam Reich.



It makes me think of the tradition of spatiality in religious painting. Take one of the most frequent subjects in Christian art, the Annunciation. This subject depicts one of the most immaterial episodes of the Bible, in which Mary is told of the creation of new life, conceived by that least visible—God—yet it's always painted into a very material setting. A dense architectural environment of columns, walls, arches, and marble floors often surrounds the figure of the Virgin Mary. The idea is to transcend the material space of the painting.

JL: On that subject of reality versus art, or the painterly or the fantastical, if such distinctions can be made, do you feel ever any obligation toward—or interest in—reflecting current events in your art? When you're going through a period like the current COVID-19 crisis, when we're all in lockdown with a literal plague outside, do you think that that will in any way find its way into your art? Not in a literal way, perhaps, but...

NP: My work does not directly respond to current events, but as a citizen I am living through this crisis and I am changed by it. I never know how those changes are affecting the work I am creating in the studio, but it will certainly have an impact. It's interesting to see how artists responded to crises of the past. For example, think of Goya, almost acting as a journalist responding very directly by depicting what he was living through in his work. On the other hand, in the middle of World War II, Matisse was making very joyful and colorful cut-outs.

JL: Yes, that's interesting. The context gets bleached away—perhaps particularly when, as with Matisse's cut-outs, or your own work, there is something bold and maybe even optimistic in the work that seems to almost want to shrug off the fact it was made by a given pair of hands on a given day.

NP: It is interesting that you set your novel *High Dive* during an important period of British history, Thatcher-era

1980s. In the book, I feel you as an author reacting to those events from two different perspectives, the memory or your feelings during the events of your childhood and then your understanding of those events decades later living in New York City. I think the reader can sense those two distinct feelings, feeling very close to the events and at the same time having a distance from them. Combining different times into one work is one of the great capacities of art. Time is an elastic value in an artwork. One of my favorite writers is Patrick Modiano, and he uses time as a flexible material in his novels. His characters often travel into the past through blurry memories. That makes the reader question their perception of the book's timeline. The reader is then also trapped in his or her blurry conception of the events and characters described in the book. You read in a fog, trying put the pieces together.

JL: I just read Modiano's *Honeymoon*, and it certainly has that quality. For me, with an artwork, figuring out the context behind the work is part of the joy of the puzzle. With a painting, over time, the date of creation is often one of the few pieces of information you're given besides a title, if there is one. Looking at the date, you get to guess and think back about what was going on at that time. Whereas with books, even with a recent book like mine, the time of writing gets often buried—between hardback printings, paperback editions, and then reprints. You don't really know when it was created. I'm not even sure I can remember...

NP: It is good to put time in perspective when you look at current events. If you look at the current situation only through the lens of the present, you could get stuck there with great anxiety. But if you are Sandor Krasna, Chris Marker's character in *San Soleil*, your conception of time and space is more open, making the present easier to handle. At some point in the movie, the narrator says that mankind had come to terms with space, and that the great question

now is the coexistence of different concepts of time.

JL: I thought we might end by talking about David Hockney because I know he's someone you admire. He shares some of your obsessions—trees, for example. Will you follow Hockney into iPad art and other mediums, or are you happy with the mix you've got? You've already got your color-saturated paintings, murals, sculptures, pastels, installations, prints, and drawings, and your work as a curator too. Maybe that's enough...

NP: Hockney said this great line yesterday on Instagram: "Do remember they can't cancel spring." And he just posted an iPad drawing of flowers that he made that morning. It is so strange to see all of nature blooming to life, while at the same time being confined and hearing the death toll rise each day. But Hockney is putting things in perspective, reminding us that bigger cycles are happening regardless of the current events.

It reminds me of the show I did at the Hirshhorn Museum, *sunrise, sunset*. It consisted of a series of wall paintings depicting sunset and sunrise landscapes. It was 2017, a few months after Donald Trump got elected. While working on the show I remembered what Barack Obama said the day before the presidential election results. "No matter what happens, the sun will rise in the morning." I used that quote in the show. It was the least political quote possible, but it was a great poetic reminder that we belong to longer cycles of time. It's fundamental to pay attention to the sunrise.

JL: And to Hockney's point, Trump can't cancel sunrise.

NP: Something bigger in terms of time and rhythm is always happening. Being aware of this simple fact can make you more anxious, but it tends to make me feel more at peace with the present.

Sunrise, 2018, pastel on
canvas, 63 × 70.75 inches.
Photo by Isabelle Arthuis.

