

Richard Parry's Elephant Series

Last year's Converse Emerging Artists Award winner on showing art from Kenyan baby elephants in a flat in Brockley

Arts+Culture Incoming

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- Text Lucy Morris



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The British artist Richard Parry gently handles irony to cast a satirical shadow with his work. His pieces often take a sardonic message and work in a sense of humour to produce art that belies their depth of meaning. After winning our Converse/Dazed 2011 Emerging Artists Award, Parry has continued to work within the boundaries of conceptual art which questions contemporary culture and the world around us.

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For his solo show at Bloomberg SPACE, Parry created a series of 'Elephant Paintings', which outsourced the practical dimensions of the work to Nairobi elephants and artisan screen-printers to tease out a message about London's current housing market and Parry's new Brockley-based abode. To tell us more about this project Dazed spoke to Richard Parry about art, commerce, humour and Chemi Chemi (the elephant).

DD: What was the first piece of art to move you/stick in your memory?

Richard Parry: The Last Supper painted by Marcos Zapata in Cusco in 1753. It is an official Church painting hanging in Cusco Cathedral Peru and depicts the Last Supper in the Catholic style except Judas has the face of Francisco Pizarro (the Spanish conquistador who murdered the last Incan Emperor) and Christ is eating a guinea pig. I think the Four Seasons Restaurant Commission (aka the Seagram murals) by Mark Rothko is a radical type of corporate art too.



Dazed Digital: What have you been doing since Dazed Digital last spoke to you?

Richard Parry: I recruited some baby elephants to help me do an art commission; outsourced the fabrication of the final paintings to artisan screen printers and bought a flat and did it up as part of a critically attuned art practice. The elephants are called Chemi Chemi, Ishaq B, Mutara and Olare. They live in Nairobi and I bribed a volunteer at the sanctuary help make and send their paintings. Lucie and Mark (LUMA) are artisan screen printers who I sub-contracted the job of realising the final works in three months. The flat is in Brockley, and so naturally I'd have to be utterly pretentious to say anything about it.

DD: What was the inspiration for the Elephant Paintings series?

Richard Parry: Horror at the way 'content' is manufactured or presupposed by wider economies of information and culture. Horror at hearing an estate agent say an area was 'up-and-coming' because there was a bottle bank there. And, horror at living in the Art World / Global Village! I also wanted to express these concerns through a series of paintings that would increase the value of my flat through their content, production values and accepting their ultimate vocation as decorative data or creative collateral within wider cultural systems.

DD: Your work, although holding gravitas, has a distinct sense of humour - is this important in art?

Richard Parry: I used to think so, but all that's changed.

Richard Parry, Elephant Paintings, Bloomberg SPACE until September 16, 2012

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LOIS STONOCK TALKS TO RICHARD PARRY

LOIS STONOCK How do you see the relationship between abstraction and figuration in your work? Some of the paintings in this exhibition seem to toe the line between the two approaches. *Free Loft Insulation*, for instance.

RICHARD PARRY It's hard to explain. But I don't see such a big difference. Both show something.

LS In the yellow areas one might see atmospheric effects, or clouds?

RP For me it's more an area I don't know, and an object I don't know.

LS Speaking of abstraction, this summer you designated the North Sea a 'radical project space' by putting a group exhibition there and going on holiday to Peru. I understand certain powers in the Embassy Gallery were initially not so happy.

RP I hoped that someone would be against this. Especially at the gallery. They told the truth. It was not a typical curated art exhibition. I'm not a curator. So they didn't like my radical Land Art initiative. It's their right. It's OK.

LS Do you get to see much other contemporary art these days?

RP You get so many art fairs, magazines and invitations and emails, it's too much! It's a strange development that there is so much art.

LS It's probably because of the market.

RP The market yes, and art people trying to redeem themselves by pretending to like art that has critical social content built in or plastered on, so their otherwise self-serving lives can seem a little less repulsive.

LS Do you think this is a good time for painting?

RP It's been almost the end of the culture of painting for years. And I was struck by this: I thought it cannot be – But maybe it's mediated through a weakening of ties between culture and location. The removal of art subjects and objects from certain sites in space and time, transcending territorial boundaries and their reconfiguration as realtime content in a Global Village consisting of things fundamentally in motion.

LS What's a Global Village?

RP It's like when an official Church painting incorporated quite outrageous pagan acts that were very anti-Christian in some ways. Caravaggio could show Judith cutting Holofernes's head off because the horror existed within a familiar thing, a commonly understood story. Nowadays the nearest collectively-understood information is data like *shouldn't we think about elephants a little more?* or House Prices – Whereas before, the king would just say to Titian, "Paint me a picture of Diana and Actaeon."

