Letter from Mallorca

Under Refurbishment

Magaluf is a new artist-run project space located in a former retail unit in a rundown shopping mall, named after the notorious Mallorcan holiday destination. While this might not be an uncommon setting for a DIY gallery in any metropolitan city, the broader locale of an excessively rowdy holiday resort might sound like an unlikely place to set up an artist-run project space, and that's because it is. As its founder, Mallorcan native Mario Suardiaz, tells me when I ask him about the local contemporary art scene: 'You're looking at it!' Aside from his space, art in Mallorca is decidely institutional. It is hosted by large museums such as Es Baluard Museum and CCA Andtratx, and a handful of blue-chip galleries mainly in the capital, Palma, which, according to the Mallorcan tourist board, has recently been cited by Sotheby's as 'becoming one of the most important centres of art in Europe'. However, while Mallorca may not have an underground art milieu (in a familiar story, Suardiaz was living abroad but returned home because of the pandemic), it has been possible for him to found the gallery in part due to dynamics of socioeconomic decay and creeping gentrification that are so often fruitful for DIY culture.

Magaluf's tourism industry is slowing, and not only because of the pandemic. For the best part of the past decade, there has been a concerted effort by Magaluf's local authorities and certain – but, of course, not all – business owners to shed its raucous reputation and discourage young Brits from visiting. The annual summer news cycle is always dominated by holidaying Brits engaging in debauchery, with abundant public sex, fights and (not infrequently fatal) attempts to jump from balconies into swimming pools, which happen so regularly that the verb 'balconing' has been coined to describe them. Understandably, this is a source of shame (although guide Antoni Janer's claim that Magaluf's tourism model 'trivialises uncivil behaviour that in England would be penalised by law' betrays an unfamiliarity with English high streets on a Saturday night). Accordingly, a number of initiatives have been rolled out, including curbs on nightlife. This has had some success, tourist numbers having dwindled from 10,000 a day to 5,000. The ultimate endgame is to transform Magaluf into a luxury resort on the model of South Beach Miami, Palma Nova-Magaluf Hotel Association and Melia Hotels alone having spent €250m refurbishing hotels to luxurious standards.

Of course, this will not only result in the exclusion of young working-class holidaymakers, but also many residents whose livelihoods will be impacted by a shift from quantity to quality in the local tourism industry. In addition to the myriad hospitality staff who will struggle to find work, it is difficult to imagine there will be a place in the envisaged future of Magaluf for vendors selling T-shirts emblazoned with the message 'I Heart Blowjobs' or cafes with plastic signs proudly advertising their signature stroganoff. And Suardiaz is acutely ambivalent about his position in relation to the gentrification of Magaluf. He describes how during his adolescence the town served as a refuge from the island's otherwise censorious Catholic culture, and points out that he chose Magaluf as the name of his gallery so that the tacky souvenirs bearing its name, with which he has always been fascinated, could serve as merchandise for the gallery. Indeed, in the same complex in which his gallery is situated, there is a shop selling virtually any item of clothing you could imagine emblazoned with the name, the owner of which

Richard Parry, 'I'm Going 2 Spain', installation view

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Suardiaz is clearly on good terms (he manages to haggle me a discount on a T-shirt declaring 'What Happens in Magaluf Stays in Magaluf'). Suardiaz thus bemoans the encroaching disappearance of the resort in its recent form, and claims that it is important for such bacchanalian spaces to exist. But one could easily claim that founding a gallery is the perfect tribute to it, because what else is art if not the sublimation of the impulse towards such excess?

Magaluf's inaugural show is, fittingly, by a Brit abroad. The London-based artist Richard Parry is exhibiting five huge monochromatic oil paintings of the Union Jack, each measuring around 3x2m. The show is titled 'I'm Going 2 Spain', named after a 1976 novelty song by Steve Bent, which Parry was alerted to by way of a cover by The Fall (a chaotic stereo mash-up of the two songs on a CD by Parry accompanies the exhibition). It is thus conceptually important that the works were painted in London's Lewisham and transported to Mallorca. But I don't think these striking paintings have much need for concepts in order to be appreciated. Parry had some very illuminating things to say to me about the show while I was in Mallorca, including the notion that there is something far more honest about going to Magaluf to see big paintings of the Union Jack, in contrast to viewing art which fetishises globalisation in the context of art fairs which serve to smooth its inherent violence. However, he has previously claimed – in reference to his 'jazz' series of paintings, which consist of the word jazz three times in various different colours – that 'repeating the same painting allows us to overcome the issue of content and concentrate instead on the thorny issue of aesthetics'. And my experience of the 'I'm Going 2 Spain' works is certainly one which primarily allows for concentration on precisely that prickly concern.

Painting a flag in the context of fine art inevitably calls to mind Jasper Johns or Peter Blake, a reference point cited to me numerous times by Parry himself. Rather than Pop Art, however, I think 'I'm Going 2 Spain' most readily recalls the movement's far more self-serious progenitor, Abstract Expressionism. One of my favourite observations on the show from Parry occurred as we were discussing the idle associations which the Union Jack's geometric patterns call to mind when abstracted from its nationalistic function. Parry compared the diagonal lines in his red painting to a famous cartoon by the New York School painter Ad Reinhardt, in which a suited man points at an abstract painting asking 'Ha Ha what does this represent?' only for the painting's shapes and lines to assemble themselves into a frown as it points back with the question 'What do you represent?' Parry's paintings fix us in our place as spectators in this way, forcing us to set aside preordained categories and give ourselves over to the paintings fully. The billowing depths of the blue painting's brushstrokes; the dazzling yet abstruse and impenetrable matt surface of the red painting; the tension between the placidity of the light blue painting's colour and the dynamism of the Union Jack's geometry all stake a claim to our attention as imperious as the empire which the flag once represented.

It is of course impossible to paint like the Abstract Expressionists today without seeming hackneyed and clichéd, but to paint like the Abstract Expressionists, with all their artistic energy and attentiveness to medium-specificity, through the mediation of a Union Jack is a different story. The ostensible irony of Parry's content is sublated, and the viewer is captivated by the artwork's particularity almost by an act of subterfuge. While punters go into a big blockbuster Abstract Expressionist exhibition anticipating and wanting an experience of sublimity, it is totally unexpected in the context of this show, and yet people are evidently receiving it: in a nod to the famous non-denominational place of worship in Texas adorned with Mark Rothko's meditative murals, many viewers have, independently of one another, referred to 'I'm Going 2 Spain' as 'The Parry Chapel'.

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a tourist shop in Magaluf