

Nicolas Pol:

Life Goes On If You're Lucky
Paintings, sculpture, drawings

Allsopp Contemporary, London
Autumn 2005

Thoughts on the exhibition and the artist: Nicholas Aikens

The purpose of this text is to document, in writing Nicolas Pol's first solo exhibition: *Life Goes On If You're Lucky* at Allsopp Contemporary, London. By commenting on both the work in the show as well as drawing artistic comparisons the text will, I hope, serve as an insightful retrospective tool in years to come. It will by no means be a polished work or a definitive analysis of Pol's early career. Instead my aim is simply to cement in writing my understanding and experience of this phenomenal group of works and the artist(s) who made them.

A STOLEN EXHIBITION:

The setting of 8 Conlan Street seems tailor made for Nicolas Pol's work. The gallery's silver, sky-lit roof, its semi-warehouse feel and lack of pristine perfection lacks any obvious precedent or comparison. The long three metre high walls provide the ideal display panels for Pol's large canvases whilst the open space in the centre of the gallery gives the box and its display maximum attention. The gallery space, in many respects like Pol's work has the instant impact effect. Step up the ramp, through the door and see the walls lined with these intriguing, sinister, sensual art works and you have the feeling you have entered something quite unique.

Walking into the gallery the viewer is presented with a vast triptych on the end wall. The three works *Dzz Poisonous Blkt Pgrm*, *Untitled* and *Iggyrye Crops* (figures 1 -3) grab your attention with their vast format, bold colours and intricate but decipherable content. Of the three walls it is the only one to be given over solely to paintings and subsequently serves as a formal reference point for the show as a whole. As the viewer takes their eyes away from the main, mural-like display and looks closer into the foreground the eyes fix on the immaculately produced box standing on its white plinth. *The Keep Britain Tidy Letter* (figures 4 – 5) is a master class in fraternal collaboration and positions the show conceptually. As we shall see both the box's conception and production offer an invaluable insight into the artist, his motivations and concerns.

The right wall of the gallery includes two large canvases (*Herbie's Piglet*, figure 6 and *Vertical Projection of Gertrude VI Dressed as a Penguin*, figure 7) as well as a small relief (*Mind the Shit*, figure 8) and three works on paper (figures 9 – 11). This wall is perhaps the most unified in content. *Mind the Shit* picks up the motif of the Paizer machine in *Iggyrye Crops* whilst the largest of the drawing has the fictitious *VEK VEK* across it, taken from the same canvas. Hanging next to this is a small collage that steals the main lettering from *Herbie's Piglet*, 'Uncle F(u)r. On the far right *Vertical Projection of Gertrude* puts the pseudo-scientific Swisson Sticks in two dimensional form whilst also being another wonderfully worked collaboration between Nicolas and his elder brother Mathias.

The left wall juxtaposes the slick, electric colour and composition of the *Untitled* (figure 12) canvas with the much more subtle, fizzing *Isla de Encata* (figure 13) whilst *Kopf*(figure 14)s, the second relief hangs alone, warning of danger behind the box.

When viewed as a group of works or, further still as Pol's first solo display of his artistic interests and intentions *Life Goes On If You're Lucky* appears as a fusion of the wildly fantastical and the deeply sincere. Amongst the canvases, relief's, drawings and sculpture the artist has

stolen ideas, thoughts and moments from the world around him and a world he takes the time to invent. He even steals from himself as motifs and themes reappear in different contexts around the gallery. The combination of graphic design and painstaking draughtsmanship, of the lavishly applied and the more crudely conceived sections of paint reflect both the cynical and the inspired within the show. With these works Nicolas Pol has re-ignited the excitement of large format, elaborately conceived paintings yet also points the way to a much wider artistic practice. It is because Nicolas Pol seems reliant on the world around him that he cannot be constrained by the medium of paint or the four corners of a canvas. The canvases will always serve as the benchmark in this show; they will serve as the immediate point of reference for the viewer. Yet we seem to be seeing a much larger and more rewarding discussion beginning to form.

As I stated earlier *The Keep Britain Tidy Letter* for me positions the show conceptually and artistically. It is of course the only sculpture in the show and its immaculate laminated surface and complex graphic design contrast with the roar canvases surrounding it. The Swisson Sticks, as the text on the gallery wall explains (see end), are a set of fantastical apparatus designed to cope with the effects of magnetic pole inversion. Without delving too far into the scientific (or make-believe) background Pol has taken the real (though infinitely improbable) possibility of the magnetic poles inverting and provided the ultimate bio-chemical answer: The Swisson Sticks. As the detailed diagrams and accompanying text explain the various sticks serve different functions in this envisaged time of agricultural Armageddon. Through different molecular frequencies, electro-magnetic impulses and cyber seasoning the Swisson Sticks hold the key were such a catastrophe ever to occur.

Far from simply revealing his wonderfully indulgent, dark imagination, *The Keep Britain Tidy Letter* shows most forcefully the way in which Pol absorbs information, steals an idea and manipulates it for his own fantastical and artistic means. You read the article, you browse the internet, you sit in a studio, you paint and before long you have the means with which to save the planet from your own invented catastrophe. By stealing an idea and taking it to its farthest and darkest conclusion he can then provides us with the solution. But Pol doesn't give us the sticks in sculptural form - he gives us the box with the promise, or implication of the sticks inside. The viewer must finish the process. For me, it is this form of conceptual alchemy that creates the depth to the show. Yet the high finish of the *Keep Britain Tidy Letter* or the semi-decipherable motifs patched together in his works on paper never entirely explains where this stolen alchemy takes us.

There is another element to the Swisson Sticks box set that is also worth a mention – and that is its collaborative nature. Though much of the pseudo-scientific theory and fantastical power of the sticks are conjured up by Nicolas himself, its production owes as much to the people working around Nicolas as to the mind of the artist. Through Nicolas instruction his brother Mathias formulated on the computer screen the various layouts and design for the box's cover. Nicolas also enlisted the help of a good friend, Alexis Le-tan, to find a company willing to produce a unique piece such as this with its unorthodox shape and high finish requirements. Rather than simply explaining how this object came into being through collaborative means my aim is to point out that this notion of the artistic thief is not confined to the realms of ideas and themes. It is that Pol quite literally borrows and uses those around him to fuel his own artistic ends. This is not to say there are passive protagonists here. Rather it seems Pol has an ability to entice, infect and inspire people with his ideas and his art.

If we look at the paintings we see stolen words and logos referring to those around him. In *Isla de Encata* we see 'Dizzy' stencilled in black along the bottom section of the canvas – a reference to his friend Alexis' young daughter, Dizzy. Yet the word and its stencilling also compliment the fizzing, slightly tender nature to this canvas. Again in *Iggyrye Crops* we see the Allsopp Contemporary logo inverted and placed on the side of the imposing Paizer Machine. The inverted 'A' in the logo then forms a 'P' for Paizer, the gallery too becomes part of the Pol fantasy machine. Yet this stealing, appropriating, and borrowing also reflects a more personal side of Pol's character and the way he conducts himself. Those who are close to him matter to Pol and as such he includes them in his art. Where he can he pays tribute to the people who make this thing tick.

Taking the notion of the thief quite literally Pol's *Kopff* is made up of a small metal swing door. The door was stolen from the end of a platform in a Parisian metro station. The swing door warns of the DANGER to those who pass through. Though not formally related to any of the other works in the show it reveals Nicolas' reluctance to keep real elements of the world separate from his art. Likewise in *Herbie's Piglet* the top two corners of the canvas have had terracotta material pasted on to it. When pressed Nicolas explained that walking through a metro station one evening he saw workers peeling away layers of old adverts. Nicolas' seized the opportunity and took what turned out to be the remnants of a 1950s Chanel advert. It now frames the Paizer Boar Brewing Glove. The literally stolen, then sit beside the conceptually

stolen and as a result offer each other the perfect antidote. By including these stolen fragments he forces us to look at objects in a different context and to reassess our relationship with them. Nicolas Pol grabs and steals and manipulates, reconstituting associations as he sees fit.

PAINTING PARASITE:

This term was introduced to Pol by his teacher and mentor at the Beaux-Arts, Jean Michel Alberola. "I hoped to encounter, copy or become that painting parasite."¹ Throughout his time at the Beaux-Arts Pol absorbed himself in his painting, half indulging in the tortured artist persona.² There is, without question echoes of the French Romantic tradition in his painting. Perhaps it is the *gravitas* that is evoked by the sheer size of these works, or the fact that Pol's canvases demand you take a leap of faith and jump into the bizarre world of Paizer machines, Boar brewing Gloves and Swisson Sticks. The idea of the parasite is a wonderfully self-deprecating idea but one that sits easily alongside the artistic thief mentioned above – a somewhat frenzied animal devouring everything in his path. Indeed if we look at *Dzz Poisonous Blkt Pgrm* the lines within the painting seem to sprawl across the canvas, akin to a spider's web of decipherable imagery and abstract forms. Another literal reference can be made to the parasite in the *Untitled* canvas sitting in the middle of the triptych. A strange, flying insect makes its way underneath the drips and gloops of this heavily worked surface. Or in *Iggyrye Crops* we see a sinister black crow over the top of a painted uterus. Never one to shy away from suggestive iconography, Pol's crow seems ready to devour the female organ. But, of course the term should not be applied simply to literal references in the works. Rather, Pol's adoption of the term reveals far more about his attitude to his art than to any choice of subject matter. Here is an artist who recognises that his art is there to be devoured and to do so he in turn must devour all that is around him. Hence we see this cross breed of cinematic references, personal tributes and the wildly fantastical. The canvases then become a melting pot of ideas and references. Again *Dzz Poisonous Blkt Pgrm* is an excellent case in point. This 3.5 metre long painting is a complex network of interrelated themes, stories and formal relationships and as such has almost been used as a vast page of a sketchbook. The stencil in the right section of the canvas serves almost as the parasites warning: *Life Goes On If You're Lucky*.

¹ Quote from the artist, see *J'en Rêve*, Fondation Cartier, Paris, p.161

² In the *J'en Rêve* catalogue Pol is quoted as saying: "It's the romantic idea of the artist everyone wants to be. Racked with torment, a torment that exalts, that engulfs everything ...", *ibid.*, p.161

Yet we must also recognise Pol's technical ability. He understands that to eat too much into the canvas would be to detract from its punch. Hence *Iggyrye Crops* is primarily made up of the vast off-set print of the Paizer machine and surrounding crops or the screen print in *Portrait of Gertrude* is balanced, but not overshadowed by the painted penguin or multi-coloured Swisson Sticks. Compositionally his canvases bear the hall marks of an academically trained painter. Foreground and background off set one another so that the eye is never allowed to sit still. Equally he seems to be a master colourist. In *Isla de Encata* pinks, greens and blues are added with sparing subtlety. The result is that the canvas is punctuated but not consumed by coloured patterning. In contrast the sinister looming figure in *Untitled* comes out of a vortex of electric pinks and blues. Here colour is used as an atmospheric weapon and has an element of cartoon literalism about it – a futuristic, sexual canvas.

So then, it is this combination of the master technician, the romantic tortured artist, the parasite and the thief that produces these ambitious, bold, illuminated canvases. Coupled with this you have an artist who is already being given the means with which to explore various artistic avenues. One can only guess that as these differing elements fuse and grow over time we will see a more total artistic onslaught - one that is by no means confined to the realm of a painting parasite.

FORWARD AND BACK: PRECEDENTS AND PROSPECTS

“The one thing that is patently clear about [his] activity is that he has accorded himself a freedom from all authority except that of his own will.”³ This statement of course could and should be applied to any artist whose subjective and creative power marks him out against his contemporaries. Perhaps placing Nicolas Pol alongside Sigmar Polke at this early stage in his career is dangerous. However, for the purposes of this text there are some interesting and insightful comparisons to be drawn. Firstly we should deal with the blindingly obvious. Both are primarily painters at a time when the openness of contemporary art practice tends to drive

³ Margit Rowell, ‘Stratagems of Subversion’, *Sigmar Polke, Works On Paper*, MoMA, New York, 1999, p.10

artists away from a medium seeped in historical complexes and academic discussions. Painting has died and been reincarnated too many times for any serious suggestion of a 're-birth' or 're-evaluation' to hold any weight. Yet paintings ability to fuse the subjective, technical powers of the artist with the *gravitas* of a medium that has evolved, dissolved and revolved for hundreds of years affords it a unique place within contemporary art. Sigmar Polke recognised that power and manipulated it as a means to fuel his artistic ends. He also recognised the power of conceiving the exhibition and its installation as a body of work and something that should be viewed as such. His 2003 exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art, *Sigmar Polke: Recent Paintings and Drawings, 1998 – 2002* gave the artist the opportunity to target particular themes at this very particular audience – namely the presence, or lack of, moral authority in the world's largest economy. In this exhibition, however, as is seen throughout Polke's career, his intended message is not forcefully pressed or overstated, rather his paintings ease in to such weighty discussions through a "gallant modesty of not knowing".⁴ There is both an ambivalence and transcendental nature to these works that produce an unmistakable sense of alchemy, an alchemy that finds echoes in Pol's *Life Goes On If You're Lucky*.

Pol's 'message', if we are forced to break it down into its most basic parts is that information overload within our current multi-media society should be treated with sly scepticism. Whilst 'truths' are forever forced upon us by the powers that be we should take the time to invent, imagine and steal, to float between what's around you and what you dare to imagine. Yet this message is not forced upon us or laid out with meticulous precision and clarity. Rather, much like Polke's Dallas show the message lies in the vast array of gathered images and assembled thoughts. Furthermore the message comes across through its prior conception and the artist's ability to pick images and coax associations out of the viewer that subtly push this message through. Pol's use of the fantastical Paizer Corps, his tender use of language in *Isla de Encata* ("Hide stuff" / "I'm so stupid") and his seductive use of paint means a sense of romantic rule breaking and dark imagined worlds permeates, in different degrees, throughout the show.

The other comparison I would like to draw is with the late German artist Michel Majerus. Majerus's oeuvre, cut short but hence now falling into its allotted art historical slot, poses questions about what painting is still capable of – can it compete with the multi-media

⁴ Dave Hickey, 'Sigmar Polke's Appointment in Texas', *ibid.*, p.23

onslaught both in the public domain and in the art world?⁵ Again, it is easy to cite formal similarities between the two in their appropriation of logos, cartoon imagery and more gestural passages of paint. Yet what is so fascinating about Majerus and why I have chosen to draw comparisons is the dialogue he undertook between painting and installation. Whilst his paintings were simultaneously poetic and distant it is through his diverse use of sources and his Hoover-like digestion and reconstitution of information that forms the link between these two European artists. By accepting installation as a forceful tool with which to address his audience Majerus was not only able to enter into discussions relating to the content of his art but how that content be perceived when placed in differing dimensional forms. I.e. Paintings relationship to space – how the two dimensional world of the canvas can be offset against the very real world of the gallery floor and where the two should meet. In Majerus' solo show at the Monika Sprüth gallery in 1996 – 7 the artist produced a series of boxes showing Mario and *Toy Story's* Woody sitting corporately on their sides. Whilst Majerus' paintings constantly drew from and subsequently commented on the worlds of computer games, animation and mass-marketing the message is never quite as clear as in these tailor-made factory produced boxes. My point is not simply to draw comparisons between artists who produce paintings and boxes or to draw a line from Warhol through Majerus to Pol. Rather to express that what I see beginning to form in this exhibition is a dialogue between the invented space and worlds of the canvas with the real space that the non-2D work occupies in the gallery and how the viewer may react when placed simultaneously within both.

Allied to this is a further element to Majerus' approach that can be seen to be forming in Pol's show. There is a fascination with the 'spectacle' of the art exhibition and its ability to infiltrate the here and now. Coupled with this is the recognition that one's attention is fleeting. Perhaps we can find similarities between Majerus' apt take on the world of advertising in his 1999 piece *What Looks Good Today May Not Look Good Tomorrow* with the title of this show, *Life Goes On If You're Lucky*.⁶ Both are simple, hard hitting statements delivered with authority and a touch of humour. And both simultaneously embrace and parody the vast conveyor belt of spectacles that we are made to consume.

LIFE GOES ON IF YOU'RE LUCKY

⁵ The most comprehensive text produced on the German artist is *Michel Majerus – Installations '92 – '02*, editors, Peter Pakesch, Gijs van Tuyl, Robert Fleck, Veit Görner, Marie-Claud Beaud, Cologne, 2005

Experiencing the production, installation and completion of this exhibition there was an unmistakable feeling that Nicolas Pol was growing more and more excited by the position he found himself in. It must be a strange thing – to see for the first time a large room given over to the display of your work, to see the environment and atmosphere you can create when you control the viewer's experience. There must be a sense of empowerment and inspiration when you walk around the room and feel for yourself the relationships that you sought to evoke. Nicolas Pol's spectacle of stolen fantasies and dark world of fizzing moments show an artist wanting to immerse himself further and further into his creative process. For me they show an artist becoming the creative thief and the painting parasite, one who has the ability to develop dialogues and discussions both in and outside the gallery arena. For the lucky few, life goes on.

⁶ The tragic irony of using this statement in relation to Majerus did not escape me.



Figure 1: *Dzz Poisonous Blkt Pgrm*, 2005, oil and glycerol on canvas, 200 x 350cm



Figure 2: *Untitled*, 2005, oil and glycerol on canvas, 200 x 190cm



Figure 3: *Iggyrø Crops*, 2005, screen print, oil and glycerol on canvas, 350 x 200cm



Figures 4 & 5: *The Keep Britain Tidy Letter*, 2005, off-set print and oil on reinforced card, 106 x 190 x 16cm

Figure 6: *Herbie's Piglet*, 2005, off-set print, oil, glycerol and collage on canvas, 200 x 200cm