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a creative conversation

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Nightclubbing (We're Nightclubbing)

Casper White's proposal for his 2017 BP Portrait Travel Award was to go clubbing in mainland Europe, and photograph, paint and draw people being in the moment. But the project only began to resolve itself when he returned to Wales. **Rhiannon Lowe** spoke to him, just after his show opened at National Portrait Gallery.

I've met up with Casper White in his Cardiff studio. The 13 paintings for his exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) have left the building, and we're looking through the source material from his travel award project, and the works that didn't make the final cut. The official description of his project says: "The BP Travel Award 2017 was won by Casper White, for his proposal to create works about music fans in clubs and concert venues in Berlin and Mallorca, representing an often youth-related subculture that is not traditionally recorded in portrait paintings". Given that research projects evolve quite quickly, is that description still valid?

Casper White: The project is around music, about the things that happen in the spaces where there's music – clubs, gigs, record shops – that was the initial impetus. The feelings that exist in a night club, or a rock club are pretty timeless, in that they could've existed in the '50s, '40s, '20s, and before that. I was looking at art collections, when I was in Germany, and they have pub scenes from the 1900s, and there are people with masks on, and there's... frivolity. The artists aren't painting them to say, 'we've got bars', but because 'this is what's happening'. And that's where things happen; it's where people meet – lovers, partners... prostitutes; it's where people get together, split up; it's where real moments happen. Later, the work became about these minor sensations, minor moments. When you look back at 19th century painters – say Toulouse-Lautrec, not that I'm a fan necessarily – they didn't really have the weight of 'Fine Art' on their shoulders. They were picture-makers, and I'm interested in the language of portraiture and picture making. If I have confetti on the floor in front of the work, that comes out of a knowledge of portrait painting, not installation art.

Rhiannon Lowe: Tell me about when you went clubbing.

CW: I went to Leipzig and Berlin with my girlfriend and some mates, started drawing in the bars and nightclubs. But it wasn't enough; you're only catching so much. I took these photos in Berlin – see those two going at it in one of the bars? – people dancing, watching bands. Not sure if anyone was aware. But I felt like a voyeur. I mean, these spaces, being in them, it's pretty fucking intense, it can be; you go clubbing, it's safe, but full-on, but it just didn't come across that way. We tried the same in Palma as well, and in Magaluf.

RL: You did some beforehand in Cardiff as well, watching Boy Harsher?

CW: I needed to try this, go there, go clubbing; but actually, a writer doesn't write a book about clubbing by just going to a club; you go home and reconsider it. At the same time, I'm reading books about clubbing, and they offer a certain feel; I think maybe film can convey clubbing more; but then, if you want that clubbing feeling for real, just go clubbing? Yeah, these were quite intense environments, and they come across as... polite, in the photos I took. I decided all I can do is try and distil something, and then it becomes something else. I'm trying to look at clubbing through the history of portraiture.

Anyway, the morning after clubbing in Berlin, in our dormitory cell beds, I took loads more photos, and I was doing sketches; they weren't great, but the sensation was there. This one of Hannah, and this of Lara, the one with the bottle and the phone, I mean, that happens, that's true... that there's another bed, just next to Lara's; someone hidden in it. They're so true of the time; they were so hungover, out of it. I was doing little drawings, and I was excited, thinking this was it. But it wasn't; it was vital though, part of it. I mean, look at Lara's pose, there in that photo, lying in the park the day afterwards, arms out, on her back. There were moments I caught, luck really; some of them work.

RL: That other one's great, just asleep on his face... What happened when you got home?

CW: I got George and Mabli to come over to mine in the morning, with hangovers, after going clubbing in Cardiff. I'd realised they could inhabit that moment, that space, wherever it was. I didn't need to be painting in a club to convey the things I wanted to. I could walk away from the club, try and deconstruct what I was looking for, all the sensations I was trying to convey, portray, and reconstruct them in the studio. I would go to the corners of clubs and pick up old left behind things – bits of clothing, paper, confetti. I tried to keep everything from when I went to Berlin and Majorca, all the tickets, papers I found. These drawings are ones by other people; when I was drawing in one of the bars, others joined in as well. I'm going to keep them, maybe use them as ground for other works in the future.

Anyway, I tried to be a voyeur, tried being a documentary maker, I tried being in it and dancing; but actually, to convey the kind of things I was thinking about, I had to take a step away, and abstract it. Not blurring, or making it harder to see, I mean thinking about it as an idea, and then change that idea. I wanted to make it unreal as well, make it a cleaner version of the club; I mean more... precise.

RL: So you posed sitters in the front room downstairs, at home?

CW: Or in the studio, or the kitchen. For Gareth [dancer Gareth Chambers]'s sitting, I put lights, a massive stereo on full, and turned the heating up. And he was great. He danced for an hour, in the studio. We tried lots of different lights, angles. Here are his photographs. He had a jumper on at first. I've made these photos much lighter, so I can use them, but the original ones were very dark, beautiful. Some of the shapes, there's a religious quality to them. I was trying to recreate the club in another place. It wasn't necessarily what I really wanted, but some of these came out really lovely, simple. And then I worked from the photos.

RL: Why confetti?

CW: It's not real confetti, it's made from the gels you use to change lighting. I was using them for when I had people back in the studio dancing, to photograph them, and I was thinking about making fictitious





situations to articulate real situations. So, for me, it was creating this sleight of hand. Also, confetti, when it's dropped on the floor, it talks of randomness, of rhythm, not painting.

RL: So it's not about occasion?

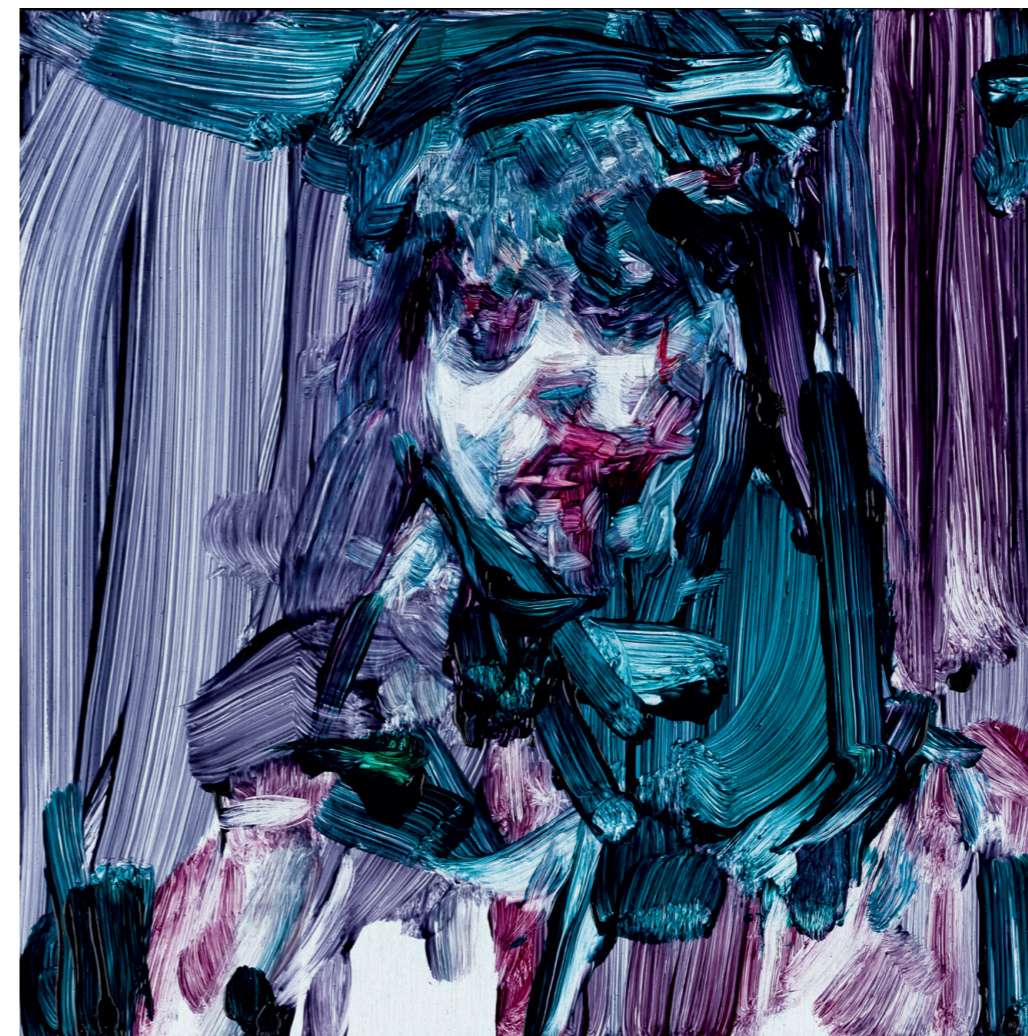
CW: It's definitely about occasion. But also the confetti catches the light, it changes it, and it's got rhythm; it's about this kind of wavering, pulsing, or change in surface. And hopefully, it relates to questions I'm asking in some of the paintings. In that painting of Emma, some of the diamond shapes – which are the same size as the cut confetti on the floor, same

colour range – they disappear/reappear; and then you have these lines, from the stripes on her clothing; the stripes are important, only one sitter hasn't got them, because he took his top off. I asked for stripes, because the movement in them created an interest. In some of the work, the stripes may be more interesting than the faces.

RL: Because of the shift in surface?

CW: I think so. These ones, they're on a metallic surface that reflects light. While I was in Berlin, I was looking at gesture, mark-making of classical works – masters,

like bloody Rembrandt – and seeing that they were painting with a kind of quivering mark, and that they were working by the light of a candle. If you look at a Rembrandt by candlelight, it looks like a person; it looks different in contemporary lighting. My work is going to be seen with bright gallery lighting; I'd like to try to portray what a contemporary light source is like – and contemporary music – through the paint. I was also looking at Sickert a lot, while doing this project, not to paint like him, but his way of using gestures and marks to convey something that didn't necessarily show the person. There are his famous Camden murderer paintings,



and those figures are kind of shadowy – suggestions of people, of faces – he was going for that. And he'd use a grid, and that grid would sometimes become part of the work. So, you have this beat or rhythm, that is the diamonds, then you have these gestural marks that are kind of translucent; they suggest form. Mabl's figure, as a whole thing, comes together because of the lines and the gesture; it's not because I've portrayed a really good figure. And it's the same as sound, and dance; you can talk about music or clubbing in the same way. Those sensations, those fleeting moments, where things come into focus, go out of focus. The painting of Dan there looks like it could break down to nothing. There's maybe about a thimbleful of paint on the whole work.

RL: You used metal because it's easy to remove as well as lay on paint?

CW: Painting on metal is half removal with every brush stroke you make. It's pushing,

and smearing. When I'm looking at the painting of Dan, I'm thinking more of lip gloss than I am oil paint. There's that cliché of lipstick on a mirror; it's not that, but it's an awareness of cosmetics, or beautifying, of contemporary light sources, rhythms, colours.

RL: The way makeup can skid across a surface in a very similar way.

CW: Definitely. These occasions, what I'm painting, they're things that could happen in dark clubs, night-time, but these are actually really light paintings. None of them rely on a black; the contrast is not turned down. And even the darkest mark on each is cut through with the reflective zinc or steel surface below. The ones that are the most successful are, in fact, the lightest, like the two with the diamonds on. They're the ones that articulate my idea; are they particularly good portraits? Maybe not.

RL: The diamond confetti shapes, they were on a piece of fabric you used at g39 in Cardiff,



and you used the fabric with paintings, hung it under and over the top of works.

CW: Have you seen *Freaks and Geeks*, the TV show? It's awful, I love it. At the start, the characters are posed in front of a backdrop that you can see the edges of and behind it; and the actors are just... there, lame, awkward, playing themselves, playing themselves, in front of the drop. The drop, it becomes more important than the sitter. So, I made these backdrops, and I'd call them people's names, introduce them, like, 'This is "Josh"', and I'd put the backdrop on the wall as if it were a portrait. That person, who it was named after, maybe never saw it, wore it, or stood in front of it, but the material becomes this thing that could then have something happen in front of it. So, I used it as a kind of distancing tool, a shorthand to question – like a photographer knows how to use depth of field, or Vaseline. I'm really into this, but no one else might be. I mean, a lot of fine artists, who take themselves very seriously, their



work at the Portrait Gallery is just a backdrop for people to take selfies in front of, you know. I love that, and that I can talk about my work, and take it apart, but in the end, it's a piece of painted metal, on a wall, and people take their photos in front of it, it's just selfie-fodder.

RL: You had some earlier works with sitters wearing the same print.

CW: I had the sitters in stress positions, and worked from images, appearing in the media at the time, of the detainees in Abu Graib, dressed in sheets. I was using the imagery questioningly within art, without it being, 'I'm painting figures from Abu Graib', more like, 'I am interested in contemporary events and society'. I mean, George, Dan, Mabli, they appear gender-neutral in ways, gender-questioning; in the same way there was all this imagery and information coming out of Abu Graib then, gender is the language that surrounds us today, and I want to make reference to that; it's important to me; it's not in your face and I'm not going to preach about it, it's just happening. I'm just asking questions about faces, portraiture in these situations.

RL: You mentioned one of your sitters, Gareth [Chambers, featured elsewhere in this issue]. I was thinking about EXCESS, his event last night, and his wider practice in relation to what you're doing.

CW: Gareth's performance openly talks about experiences within a gay

club scene. I think what Gareth is trying to convey, is something that maybe a lot of people aren't even aware happens; you know – taking poppers, dancing really close to other sweaty people, specifically attractive dudes, and whatever; he's done that, he's in that. I am not saying my work is an experience of a gay club, even though I have painted people who are gay and who I've drawn and studied going clubbing; but just that it's interesting. What I hope I am making are these beautiful moments, which can take place in dark, sweaty, questionable, even seedy places, sometimes sober, sometimes intoxicated. These places are where the real world is happening, in pubs and clubs, despite Tinder and Grindr and all that.

RL: Also, last night, the audience and venue, it created a particular vibe.

CW: Yeah, I think if it had been somewhere else other than Chapter, and maybe there had been a different set of people there, it might have been a proper dance party. If it had been in the museum, however, it would have been observational. It sort of split between the two. You know when Gareth was walking through the groups of people who were more observers, like you, that's actually what it's like in a club, those fleeting moments, catching the eye of someone, or not, or if you see someone in the middle of what could be a good time, or a bad time – that, for me, is very interesting. I mean, the paintings I did, the ones of Mabli, Emma, Dan, they couldn't necessarily have been part of Gareth's



first spread:
Into a light (Mabli), Berlin, **Casper White**, 2018, oil on stainless steel; photo: Prudence Cuming; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

second spread:
Next day 2 (Mabli), Berlin, **Casper White**, 2018, silverpoint and pencil on found record sleeve; photo: Prudence Cuming; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

It just feels gross, Berlin, **Casper White**, 2018, oil on zinc; photo: Prudence Cuming; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

Next day 1 (Owain), Berlin, **Casper White**, 2018, pencil and watercolour on found paper; photo: Prudence Cuming; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

third spread, left hand page, left to right:
Next day 5 (Emma), Mallorca, **Casper White**, 2018, pencil and watercolour on found book cover; photo: Casper White; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

Next day 3 (Emma), Mallorca, **Casper White**, 2018, pencil and watercolour on found neon paper; photo: Casper White; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

Next day 4 (George), Berlin, **Casper White**, 2018, pencil and watercolour on found book cover; photo: Casper White; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

third spread, right hand page, left to right:
This is now (Dan), Berlin, **Casper White**, 2018, oil on zinc; photo: Casper White; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

Have to warm up to the feel of it (Mabli and George), Berlin, **Casper White**, 2018, oil on canvas; photo: Prudence Cuming; courtesy the artist and National Portrait Gallery, London

current spread:
Tomorrow and all the time (Mabli) **Casper White**, 2018, oil on zinc; courtesy the artist

show, but they spoke of those moments. There was that point when two of the dancers were dancing against the wall, leaning with their hands up, backs towards us, I thought, this is it, I could watch a video of this, it would have been good video art. It speaks of outer body, ecstasy, 'what the fuck are we doing?' Why are there these places, these places where out-of-hours things take place, and how vital are they? They just are vital. It's interesting – these spaces are really inclusive, but also super un-inclusive. And, that's why I wanted to try and paint in them. Museums of art, they're seen as trying to be inclusive, and they're clearly not.

The portraits that I think are the more successful are where there is more to it than just paint. With this project I set myself up for something very difficult, and I have made some of my worst portraits; but they touch upon some of the things I want them to. It feels like a first step, not the last. There's a language that you build up. My knowledge of the language of painting is relatively broad and developed, but the reason this was interesting to do, was that I didn't just want to convey the language that I already know, and the NPG was excited by that.

The show ended up being very different from what I thought it would be: drawings, on found materials, like a book I found the following day, after clubbing; a dance record sleeve, from the '40s, a 10", it's called something like, *Dancing in the Club*, like ragtime, big band. These drawings could be of those people in the '40s. The drawing of Mabli on that sleeve, it's a better drawing, not only because the lines are rhythmic, but also because it's super-intimate. For me, that's one of the more successful ones. It's not beautifying, it's of hangovers, coming down, it's pretty honest; it's not about vulnerability necessarily, but an openness of that moment.

Similarly, the George one; it's just a guy sitting down. We've all seen people sitting like that. I could make better paintings that could convey these things more clearly. I'm cool with that. I'm pleased that I want to continue with them though. It's truthful to the point of where I am with it. There are some works I did that look more like clubbing, or more like a painting of someone in a club; but they just didn't convey the decisions I made. Also, the fact I have undermined the drawing of Mabli by putting it on a record sleeve, that I've put these paintings on steel, using a tiny amount of paint, actually I like that idea, upsetting my own and other people's expectations.

RL: Is this work going against what you did after college, and then for a living for years?

CW: I'm trying to be grubby, straightforward, less of the, 'I must do this, use that paint, on canvas', all that; and that's what I've been known for in certain galleries – I know that language. The fact that I'm using materials that are unreliable – found objects, sheets of metal – and the reflections on the metal are very different depending on how you look at them; there's fallibility there and the subjects – hangovers, clubs, bars – those moments are fallible too. The one of Dan, from one angle, it can look like a load of diamonds in rhythm, then you go two feet to the left, the light is different and it becomes a sweaty person in a club; go another two feet, and you see his eyes aren't quite full, they're just gestures; the surface and the image break down again. The two pieces I'm most pleased with were the quickest ones. They're slick, glossy paint on steel, or zinc; it's like lip gloss, it's gross, like Vaseline, or sweat – sits upon a surface and can be wiped away; it speaks of transience.

When I look at an old master, I sort of trace the mark, say, of a hand, I can try and see how something is done. There's a famous Titian, and there's an arm, Mary's arm I think, and there's a veil hanging over it, and it's joyous, because that veil was definitely on an arm, but I can see the mark, and I can trace the gesture. And these paintings I've done, anyone can follow those gestures. When I'm in the studio, it's dark, I have blaring music; it's nothing new, but these paintings, they come from that place, they are of the space. It's a simple thing. But if you can buy into it, it's there. I think that if I were a young person seeing these, I could be excited by them, and I'm keen on that. I think that when I see the people who are liking them on social media, they know these feelings, the work speaks of something. These are not studios portraits, not like the winner of the main award this time. I'm a fan of portraiture, but I think these are more contemporary art.

RL: You still class yourself as a painter?

CW: To be honest, a lot of painting can be misogynistic, all boys' club. I'm not interested in that, but I am interested in painting, and my practice sits between dual worlds; it's a shit place to be in, because it doesn't fulfil fine art and it doesn't fulfil portraiture. I have to be careful now to make sure I am honing a discipline that I am actually proud of.

To say that one year's work comes down to a bunch of confetti on the floor, I'm happy with that. But I think that a lot of people might not realise that that's the most important bit. They'll walk up to the show and see a collection of paintings and drawings, and say,

'oh, there's an oil painting, oil on linen, oil on metal, found objects with drawings on; oh, and there's bits of confetti'. But the confetti is truly the rhythm and colours, and that's it really. I can see the issues with it; but this is the result of a period of research.

RL: What conversations did you have with the curators at the National Portrait Gallery about your pushing the idea of what a portrait is?

CW: The BP prize is meant to be the most prominent portrait prize, but I don't think it's the best representation of people's faces. I think I'm asking a lot of the regular BP Portrait viewers to make a leap in looking at these works, to get what I'm trying to put across. I do think that some of the faces in this show are the first, and maybe the last time that these sorts of faces will be shown there, for a while anyway. The next Travel Award is going to someone who painted a homeless person. It stood out, you know. We're all aware of the Portrait Gallery's history, of showing communicative tools that talk about hierarchy; it's a place where queens and kings, the upper classes, used to get portrayed, and we looked upon them; I'm trying to do something that is pretty much classless. When you start dancing in a nightclub, it's not really a class-based thing. A lot of the paintings at the Portrait Gallery are there to show the sitter. I'm not trying to do that; it's more about a moment of feeling. I mean, there are faces, so they're safe, but... I was chosen for the award because they were excited that I didn't know what I was going to do and, throughout the year, I could have done ten shows, and each would be totally different. And this last iteration, in no way do I think it is the perfect one, or the final. Actually I can take a step back now, and by the time it's toured to Edinburgh and Wolverhampton, it might be very different.

RL: Are you going to keep making paintings like these then?

CW: I'm going to get more sitters, because I'm realising what I think will work, won't necessarily.

Casper White's exhibition is part of this year's BP Portrait Award, National Portrait Gallery, London until 23 September 2018. It tours to Wolverhampton Art Gallery 13 October – 2 December 2018 and Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh 15 Dec 2018 – 10 March 2019

casperwhite.com
npg.org.uk