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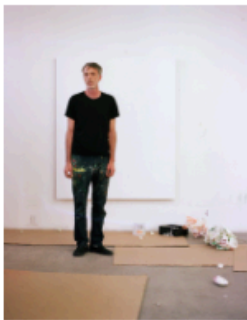
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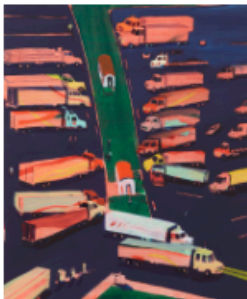
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## Jules de Balincourt: 'I can't be painting bouquets of flowers and pretend that everything is wonderful. That doesn't interest me'

**The painter's uncanny worlds reflect the post-9/11 zeitgeist with a beguiling charm. The world is a fragile, unsettling place, he says, and it's difficult not to respond to that**

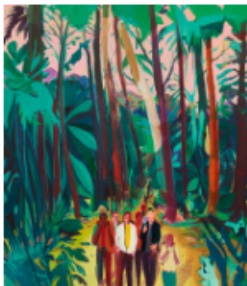
by EMILY SPICER



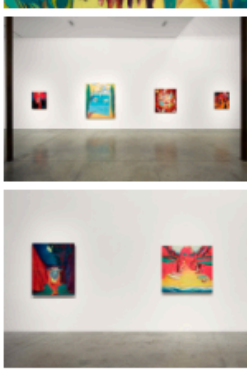
Jules de Balincourt's paintings are rich in colour and technique, but to call him a painter's painter suggests that his works are in some way inaccessible, or that they have a narrow appeal, when in fact the opposite is true. De Balincourt (b 1972, Paris) is the most democratic of artists, who refuses to raise conceptual or intellectual barriers between his work and his audience. And he is refreshingly candid about it. "I'm not referencing art history, I'm not referencing art theory," he tells me. For De Balincourt painting is about translating the world into a visual vernacular "into this funny archaic thing of painting".



De Balincourt's images beckon us with delicious colours and seductive miniature worlds that unveil themselves bit by bit, as a dream might be remembered piecemeal throughout the day. Like a psychedelic Bruegel, he paints detailed scenes of people busying themselves in their uncanny worlds. And on the face of it, his candy-coloured stripes and evocative palm trees speak of paradise and playtime. But a pervading disquiet lurks in the details.



Dried Up is a painting with an ambiguous meaning. When we see a



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### Link

Victoria Miro Gallery,  
London

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Peter Doig

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Waters of the Nile

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Lands

Body Language

Jules de Balincourt:  
Itinerant Ones

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Californian swimming pool, we also see David Hockney, parties, sunshine and wealth. But this pool is empty. The brilliant blue void below the gleaming diving board is littered with chairs and rubble. Is it a symbol of broken dreams, or is it a fortuitous discovery? Perhaps it is both. One person's downfall can spell another's beginning. This is real life, this is the view of the disillusioned post-9/11 generation and it makes Hockney's vision of the 1960s and 70s look empty and impossibly idyllic.

Duality and uncertainty are De Balincourt's strengths. A sunny cove with bright pink rocks, scattered with picturesque boats, appears at first glance to be a holiday scene. But no one is paddling in the sea or sunbathing on beach towels. Instead, small groups of people stand around uneasily, apparently waiting for something. Have they just arrived, or are they about to leave? The painting's title, *Sanctuary*, hints that all is not well with the world beyond the neon cliffs.

So what of the *Stumbling Pioneers* in the title of De Balincourt's most recent exhibition? What are De Balincourt's miniature figures looking for? I went to the Victoria Miro Gallery in east London to talk to the French-American painter about meaning in his work, his return to Los Angeles after a 20-year interval in New York, and the very roots of painting in his life.

**Emily Spicer: Your work reminds me of Peter Doig's, but, as I say it, I worry you may have heard that many times before.**

**Jules de Balincourt:** I think the main thing that links us is tropical landscapes, but the painting style is pretty different. I think Peter is much more of a romantic. And he works from photography. I love his paintings and I love his sense of colour. I think we're both interested in similar sorts of imagery and these Gauguin-esque landscapes. But my work has slightly more irony or humour in it. Peter's is very sincere, not that mine's not.

**ES: It seems to me that there is also a sense of pessimism under the surface.**

**JdB:** I guess the humour and the irony are different forms of pessimism. Which one do you think is pessimistic?

**ES: Lost Highway. There are just a few figures walking over the crest of a hill in the centre of an empty road. It looks almost apocalyptic.**

**JdB:** I think a lot of my work was really inspired by being in California. California is this sort of utopian Garden of Eden – this sun-drenched little paradise. But it's a fine line between utopian/dystopian narratives. [California has] become so hyper-populated and the pollution, the density of people and the homelessness are really bad.

[My paintings are] like crossroads. They can go in either direction. It's completely utopian how easily information can travel, how easily we can travel. But at the same time, there's also a global tension or anxiety that's becoming more and more present. So my work teeters between these two worlds.

Sometimes my paintings are just about travel or displacement or transience or these nomadic itinerant, citizens of the world. It's difficult to tell whether people are tourists or refugees. There's an ambiguity about it in my work. Like the empty pool in the painting Dried Up. Does it belong to a small-time millionaire gone bust, or is it an old abandoned house that we're going to take over and make nice? Is it about taking on an old thing and bringing it back to life, or is it the end of someone's empire?

**ES: It's the anti-Hockney.**

**JdB:** Yeah, I call it the generation X Hockney – Hockney and Alex Katz. The Vietnam war was going on and the whole civil rights thing was happening, and they were just making friends and swimming in the pool. They were not really trying to address any of those things, they just sort of turned a blind eye to it, or it wasn't something they were interested in. I like both Katz and Hockney. I like both of their work a lot. They've been an inspiration as well, like Doig. I'm just a different generation. [Their generation] had more faith in heroes or the idea of the hero, and I think my generation is much more sceptical and apprehensive. Superman ended up becoming a paraplegic man in a wheelchair and Lance Armstrong is a fraudulent cyclist. My generation is less hurrah, hurrah. They had more opportunity and promise than we did. I'm one or two generations after them, and it's just a different reality. They grew up on the Beatles and I grew up on Minor Threat.

**ES: When you returned to LA after so long away, did you feel like a tourist?**

**JdB:** I do feel like a bit of a global tourist in a sense. We were constantly moving when I was a child, so I have this sort of sense of transience. My work is about that too. My mum was a crazy, wild hippy. It was the 70s and she was recovering from a divorce and trying to find her place and we travelled a lot, so it took a while before I could really set some roots or feel integrated anywhere. I guess I felt perpetually like an outsider looking in – and I still do. I think it's important because it enables me to look at things objectively. It's almost like being a cultural anthropologist.

**ES: Do you think you would have been a different artist if you had stayed in France?**

**JdB:** I probably wouldn't have been a painter because France doesn't really support painting. I don't know what would have happened if I'd stayed in France, but it would have been difficult for my career to develop. There's far more opportunity in America for art.

**ES: Despite your success in America, your paintings represent something close to an antithesis of the American dream. You use bright colours, neon pinks and yellows, which draws the viewer in ...**

**JdB:** You're suddenly seduced and then you realise there's something slightly ...

**ES: Uneasy ...**

**JdB:** Uneasy, yes. And that's the reality of our world. It's a fragile, unsettling place, especially in America after 9/11. There was a paradigm shift, there's no doubt about it. Ever since then the world is a fucked-up place and it is becoming more and more fucked up and it's difficult not to respond to it. It's not that I'm a political artist, or that I have an agenda, it's just that I'm a hyper-aware and sensitised artist and I'm responding to that. I can't be painting bouquets of flowers and still lives of fish and pretend that everything is wonderful. That doesn't interest me. I'm more interested in this beautiful world and where we're at with it.



**ES: How do you begin a painting?**

**JdB:** There's no initial drawing or sketch or photography. It starts from a purely intuitive, subconscious place. I'm like a kid scrawling on a piece of paper at first. It starts as abstract shapes and forms and then eventually, after a day or two, I find something I can hold on to visually or in a narrative sense, and then I'll go from there. There's very rarely an initial plan when it starts. It sounds very daunting or uncertain, which it is, but that's always been my process, my anti-intellectual process.

**ES: When you were a child, did you start a drawing or a painting in the same way?**

**JdB:** When I was a kid, I was into drawing castles and little worlds like I do now. We used to visit castles when I lived in Europe and, unlike a lot of kids, I didn't really grow up on television that much. You see a lot of kids redrawing Superman or Bart Simpson or Spider-Man. For many kids in America, television informs their whole visual language and their cultural references. But I was growing up in America having these very French meals and my parents would drink a bottle of wine. It wasn't a typical American childhood. So my visual language came from my own very personal, weird place. A little bit of French, a little bit of Californian and a little bit Waldorf School, which was undoubtedly an influence. It is a very specific way of teaching through art and working with your hands and that was a great experience. It was very holistic. We were all learning how to knit, and play with clay and draw.

**ES: When you talk about castles and microcosms, it's clear that that is still very much a part of your work. Some of your worlds are like painted dioramas. As a kid, I would have absolutely wanted to dive into those paintings. I still do!**

**JdB:** Talking of dioramas, another big thing I was into was my train set. I would build a whole world, and all the crazy little houses and trees. It's almost like you're a master of your own universe. That sounds really terrifying, but you can reconfigure your own little world. I guess it's about escapism and fantasy too in some ways, just getting lost in another world that also has parallels to ours. None of my paintings is of a real place. They could be anywhere. It's personal but at the same time it's global. That's another important thing for me: I like the democratic nature of my work in the sense that it's very user friendly. There's a certain accessibility to it. It doesn't demand a rich knowledge of art history and it's not pseudo-intellectual.

A lot of the art world has this self-righteous complex. And there's anti-painting that's hyper-conceptual. If you're not from a sophisticated art world, there's no entrance into it. With a lot of conceptual, text-based, idea-based work, there's no visual seduction. A lot of the work now is about text and subtext and ideas. That's the irony of the art world because it pretends to be this socialist thing, fighting for the people, but really it's a convoluted little inner circle that's actually elitist and just pretends to be inclusive. My work is the antithesis of that. It's painting, which is the most base, primary form of art and it's image-making, which is borderline kitsch. So I'm teetering in these worlds of populist imagery, but at the same time still hoping to have some kind of poignant depth beyond making just pretty pictures. That's my challenge, to seduce the viewer. I still want to make beautiful things, but beautiful things that are mysterious, dark or sexy.

• *Stumbling Pioneers* is at the [Victoria Miro Gallery](#), London until 14 May 2016.