

Jules de Balincourt

A Place To Which We Can Come and For A While 'Be Free To Think About What We Are Going To Do'

Across twenty years, Jules de Balincourt has returned over and over again to paint small groupings of people – often in natural settings, frequently at night – who appear to have assembled either by plan or spontaneously, coming together in common cause, or simply because humans tend to be drawn to one another. *The Gathering*, from 2003, presents eight naked figures seated at a table, four on each side, an ocean beach just beyond – another recurring feature locationally. Is this a meeting of a small tribe, or commune members? We have no way of knowing for sure. What can be inferred is that they have gone back to nature and organised themselves. Although not immediately noticeable, what appears to be a desalination device anchors the bottom right corner; they need water to survive, as we all do. Humans have always united to establish and protect their mutual interests for their survival, or with particular purpose. That same year, de Balincourt painted *Free For All*, a night-time rescue at an animal-testing laboratory, a scene illuminated by a hovering helicopter as animals are carried off or happily run free. Correctly or not, we might imagine their activist rescuers to be the same individuals who had met earlier on that beach to plan the operation. These figures may well migrate from one painting to another; certainly they come from the same species, appearing more or less interchangeable. They inhabit what we know to be the fiction of

painting, a fiction which is true for the mere fact that it doesn't attempt to obscure the complete invention of a world based equally on the everyday, the imagination, and dreams – all intertwined within the artist's lived experience. It's only the painter who shows us this convergence, as do filmmakers since the emergence of Surrealism. Re-makers of reality – to borrow J.G. Ballard's term – they invite us in, allow us to roam around a place which only exists in the fluid space of an image, within its frame, or sequentially, frame-by-frame.

Any number of de Balincourt's nocturnal assemblies are set around a campfire, or a bonfire, *Peaceful Protesters*, 2003, most prominently. In this scene, a dozen figures form a circle around the flames, holding hands and naked – modern-day Adams and Eves? – suggesting a ritual engagement in a magical location, a wood primeval. Haven't humans come together in this way from the beginning of time, and since the discovery of fire? Light in darkness, warmth in a cold, damp cave, human connection most of all. (The title of a 2008 painting brings this ultimate necessity to the fore: *Heat Seekers*.) In another early work, *Human Resource Center*, 2003, with unclothed and disrobing figures inside and emerging from a modern office building, the term now understood as HR serves as the backdrop for a conflagration/cleansing. Of course, the artist hadn't meant to predict anything decades prior, but to paint a scene representing, with some measure of levity, the refusal of institutional supervision, and thus social control. Although all these works are contemporary, these images register as archetypal. It's no surprise, then, that de Balincourt keeps coming back to a dispersed tribe drawn to similar settings as if by gravitational pull, in parallel to the power of recurring dreams. There is something the artist believes in, which may be what he seeks, as most of us do: community, shared purpose, a sense of connection to one another and to the natural world. Artists, like writers, spend an inordinate amount of time on their own, in their studios, at their desks, alone in thought. A painting, an essay, is meant to reach out to the world, open up to it, awaiting a response, if any, as the products of our mind ripple outward.

Twenty years after those earlier images were created, in the midst of what has been a prolonged, divisive moment in American politics, de Balincourt would paint *Nocturnal Negotiations*, 2024. Small figures are seated together to the left and to the right, tall trees behind and above, some swaying noticeably in the wind. The open area between the figures and the trees emphasises the dark water beyond,

appropriately ultramarine, a lighter blue sky and a milky moon bisected by a pale blue cloud. The point where the sea and the sky meet, that far horizon, may represent an idea of limits and limitlessness, the unknown. One 'side' may have gone to meet the other, to resolve their differences, to join forces? We can't be certain. The narrative element in these works is elusive, open-ended, though in being left to speculation we understand that the artist wants the viewer to participate. Simply stated, to come to the painting is to attend the meeting. Artworks, ideally, serve as meeting points. While de Balincourt has made portraits and paintings with central figures, he is well aware that humans, no matter how self-important, are small in relation to the vastness of nature and the universe beyond. Here we note the prevalence of the moon in de Balincourt's cosmos. It hovers in the sky in many of his paintings, and in some it is ruby red, which is how it appears during a total lunar eclipse, falling entirely within the shadow of Earth. We can easily imagine early humans being equally spooked and fascinated by this phenomenon. In prehistory, our human ancestors would have stared up at the moon and the stars in ways not so different to how we find ourselves absorbed by screens today. In our time, to stand beneath a luminous night sky or at the edge of a beach continues to elicit the same questions: What else is out there? What do we know of worlds beyond our own? The recurrent moons in de Balincourt's paintings may also serve as a reminder that we live in a time of information rather than knowledge.

Another recent painting, *Tree Handlers*, 2024, is dominated by a wildly animate tree with an undulating trunk, whose branches are in motion, some with small hand-like leaves; below it, three figures are seen to the left, another three to the right. Despite its recognisability, the image verges on abstraction – for de Balincourt the space of freedom within painting: nature biomorphically alive. In *Figures in a Landscape*, 2024, groups of between two and four are distantly seen hiking a massive mountain which, despite clearly reading as terrain, has been rendered as a Pointillist-Impressionist composition, an overall flurry of dots and strokes set against orange/peach hills, with pale purple peaks above. De Balincourt has always been a vibrant, unpredictable colourist, almost a modern-day Fauvist, and in any number of recent works he places colour-on-colour, immersing the image in a near-monochrome dream-like field. *Red Dawn*, 2024, suffused in deep crimson, has an eerily sci-fi feel, two figures – watchers on a hill, another of the artist's recurrent images – overlook a Mars-like landscape.

For de Balincourt, as for many artists before him, abstraction is ever-present in nature. As he sees it, nature is strange, animistic, alive. In occupying our mind's eye, it may reside and grow verdantly inside us, an idea no better represented than by a nocturnal portrait, *Jungle Blues*, 2024, a blue-on-blue head in profile, with surrounding flora and fauna completely internalised. Is this what the person imagines, where they want to be, or once were? 'Paradise Lost', paradise regained. In another work, a seascape with land and hills beyond, the image, as in a Picabia transparency, contains another, a face looking out at us, eyes in a yellow sky, a nostril set in the beach, lips immersed in serpentine waves. The artist's approach in these and other paintings can be understood as improvisatory, the way that music, unwritten, is imbued with a sense of free play, lines responding to and dancing around one another, extended in the moment. Never an artist to make preparatory drawings, de Balincourt's initial rendering is always done directly with paint on panel. The ground comes first, the atmosphere, and the figures follow. He creates a stage, then sets it for the actors with their parts to perform. Of the ground, we might say: If you paint it, they will come. 'They', of course, are the figures, but also the viewers who eventually arrive. In recent years, what we identify as the liberation his figures seek is evidenced in de Balincourt's own hand, what he himself seeks, a picture-making more loosely flowing and organic than ever before, lines and colour possessing a logic and life of their own. In both art and music, a high level of fluent improvisation, what appears spontaneously in the moment, in fact requires a lengthy path towards what only seems an effortless performance.

The starting *point* for these remarks was a work by the American conceptual artist Robert Barry, *Marcuse Piece*, 1970 – ongoing: *A Place To Which We Can Come And For A While 'Be Free To Think About What We Are Going To Do'*. The quote fragment is from the philosopher Herbert Marcuse's *An Essay On Liberation*, 1969. It serves as an apt metaphor for art as an expansion of thought: Art is such a place to which we can come. And if the gallery serves as an actual destination, for this artist the natural world offers the ultimate point of departure. For Jules de Balincourt, *the place to which he can come and be free to think about what he is going to do* is nothing less than painting itself.

Bob Nickas, New York, Aug. 26, 2024. This writer, a curator of over 100 exhibitions, was Curatorial Advisor at MoMA PSI, New York from 2004–07.