JASON MARTIN: THE INNER EYE

Warum, die Frag' ist oft zum ir ergangen
Wählst du zum Gegenstand der Malerei
So oft den Tod, Vergänglichkeit und Grab?
Um ewig einst zu leben
Muss man sich oft dem Tod ergeben [1]

Why, the question is often put tome, do you choose
death, transience and the grave so often as a
subject for your paintings?
To live one day eternally, onemust give oneself over
to death many times.

CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH

In order to speak about painting, the definitionswe have inherited from traditional and historical criticismhelp us to establish ways in which to read works through our own perceptions. However, they can easily lead us astray when approaching a particular work. These definitions can act as categories which limit the visual field, rather than opening it out to a more detailed or specific understanding.Whetherwe are dealing withmore general terms such as «abstract» or «figurative», or more detailed terms such as "minimalism", these concepts tend to emphasise style, as opposed to intention, sensation or even evocation. They end up as a barrier between vision and understanding, becoming, in essence, screens that inhibit a personal response.

Perhaps more than anything else, paintings today are personal experiences that help us better understand the challenges that visualisation raises. The work of Jason Martin has been weighed down by labels to a certain extent. All of themhave been mere short-term comments, and all have been imprecise or incomplete.

J. Martin was associated with the YBA (Young British Art) group of the 1990s because of his participation in some of their collective exhibitions held at the beginning of that decade. These shows emphasised the vitality of a new generation of British artists trained in various London-based schools (particularly Goldsmiths College), where an atmosphere of debate was encouraged and the divisions between various departments were abolished. However, itwas through his participation in *Sensation*, an exhibition of works from the Saatchi collection at the Academy of Arts in 1997 (which generated a furore in the sensationalist press) that he was unhesitatingly linked with a group of artistswithwhomthe only thing he shares in common is belonging to the same generation. His work at that time was defined as minimalist and monochromatic. He would make each piece using a single brush stroke and by means of brushes especially chosen tomatch the size of each work. These single brush strokes left regular longitudinal marks over surfaces such as aluminium, steel or plexiglas, occasionally interrupted by slight breaks in the rhythm through short cuts or wavy lines.

This working method was, in itself, a statement of principles. When applied to this type of work, the term «minimalism» can only vaguely define an absence of more manual action, whilst in general, some critics believe it can cover a variety of painting styles encompassing such disparate artists as Jackson Pollock, Robert Ryman, Bridget Riley, James Hyde or David Budd. [2]

However, a careful look at the work of these artists would demonstrate that this classification is not only bogus, but is fundamentally flawed and even outrageous.

If it were necessary to look for some parallel, we could perhaps be more justified in making comparisons with the work of Domenico Bianchi (another artist whose economy of means results in a richness of nuance) or perhaps turn to Gerhard Richter and Helmut Dorner for examples of how paintings can acquire depth of meaning and feeling.

In fact, the work of Jason Martin in those years tended to distance itself from the gestural. Through itsmodulation, or its slight breaks in rhythm, it took on an industrial appearance upon which «machine error» could be read; itsmonochromatic appearance broken up by the nuances generated by the brushstrokes, creating areas of highlights. It is painting on a knife's

edge; the paint meticulously applied, forcing one to look at the painting as pure painting, allowing for its slow evolution into a physical and psychological map. [3]

In effect (and this is something that his later work would confirm), this early and critically distancing approach, determined by its single brush strokes, tended to lead to a reconsideration and a reformulation of the meaning of the painting, dismissing (or at least reinterpreting in a richer form) labels or terms as ambiguous and generic as «abstract», «figurative», «ornamental», «minimalist», «gestural» or «monochromatic»; approaching the idea of landscape, woven into a surface that is both psychological and scenographic.

In his work, his economy of means (exercised using a single colour), opens up a prodigious range of sumptuous detail and nuance, which changes in accordance with variations in available light, or in the types of illumination under which the work is viewed. His paintings do indeed take on the condition and character of a landscape that changes and is transformed from the increasing brightness of the morning sun after dawn to its dimming and setting as day turns to night.

In an interview that David Sylvester 4 had with Francis Bacon in 1962, the former asked the latter an apparently banal question: Have you ever wanted to do an abstract painting? This gave Bacon an opportunity to approach, in a very incisive way, the divergence between abstraction and figurative work. The painter related how as he painted the various parts of a face in a portrait, facial features would appear as imprecise shapes that had little in commonwith eyes, nose ormouth, but these forms would eventually combine to give a close resemblance to the person he was trying to paint. The artist had achieved a very special penetration point in which the image walked the high wire between «what is called abstract and what is called figurative».He later concluded that he found it difficult to understand why one type of painting connected directly with the nervous system, whilst another related a story that was received via the brain. It is evident that with a long tradition of abstract painting and another of photographic representation in his background, any antagonism between figurative work and abstraction must be reviewed in the light of other considerations and not simply based on the presence or absence of clearly recognisable figures. The distinction Bacon makes between a painting that is received viscerally and a painting that is appreciated intellectually would appear to hint at different modes of production, although the intention behind themis not far apart; hence the reference to walking a tightrope. However, it would appear to be relevant to accept this distinction between two ways of reading a painting; one via physical emotions (the corporal) related to tensions of shape and colour, and the other related to a narrative discourse. Together they combine and interact in what we could define as the pictorial experience, both when the artist is creating the work and when the observer is contemplating it.

The paintings of JasonMartin also contain this agile oscillation between abstraction and recognisable figurative elements. His works evoke textures, gestures and very subtle shapes; they occupy the territory between stasis and movement. In this tension, it is possible to recognise objects, bodies, and, above all, landscapes andmaps. On occasion, his paintings deal with scenes of a psychological nature or scenes born of an inner vision; it is as if they were a way of losing oneself in forms that evoke other shapes.

Daniel Abadie, in a text entitled *Jason Martin and the body of painting*, 5when contemplating a series created in 2005, entitled *Nudes*, notes that in his work there is an evident pleasure in his painting and that: «For Martin's work exudes a sensuality that is corporeal – through the implication of the painter's body as he covers his canvas, but also in theway he gets into the very *flesh* of the paint, and makes the surface of thework a living, reactive *skin* under the caress of his brush.»

Evocations of the body, of the flesh, or of silky masses of hair, enmesh with a vision of plain or damask canvas, especially in the rectangular and panoramic formats whose reference points centre on liquid surfaces, on skyscapes, sand hills or snowdrifts modelled by the wind, all under the influence of extreme light. In short, disturbing landscapes that are often unsettling and force the viewer into amood of contemplation ormeditation. It is no accident that this exhibition in CAC Málaga has centred on a silent homage to the

paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, the painter who best incarnates the sensitivity of German Romanticism through an oeuvre dedicated to landscape and, above all, to the representation of those moments when we contemplate nature.

In Friedrich's paintings, the human figure, when it appears, is always subordinated to the landscape: it represents the viewpoint, it is the subject looking out at the world, the observer whose gaze blends with a nature that incarnates a pantheistic divinity. His landscapes incorporate the mystery of extreme light conditions, of dawn or dusk, and also frequently portray night scenes lit by moonlight. The most important thing in his landscapes is not a scrupulous attention to detail, but rather the scene's allegorical power. They are landscapes that invite one to meditate on life and death; paintings in which each and every detail is calculated and deliberately used for its symbolic effect. Jason Martin has chosen as his starting point the work *View of Arkona with Rising Moon*,[6] created by Friedrich in 1806, using a monochromatic register and a sepia technique, atwhich he excelled and on which his fame was based.

Friedrich, after training at the Copenhagen Academy from 1794 to 1798, moved to Dresden where he came into contactwith Adrian Zinggwho introduced himto the sepia technique. At that time, an interest in the pure form of neo-classicism stimulated the practice of techniques such as sepia, precisely for its monochromatic simplicity and the clarity of its results.

During stays in his native land, Friedrich travelled a great deal in Pomerania with special visits to the island of Rügen, making sketches from nature. Many of those that have been conserved in «The Great Rügen Sketch Book» would formthe basis of his sepia landscapes exhibited at the Academy in Dresden. William Vaughan in his book *German Romantic Painting* expands on this particular work, detailing the precision and control that Friedrichmastered in his use of sepia:

«Unfortunately most of these sepias are now faded, but the View of Arkona with Rising Moon – showing the northernmost point on Rügen with its prehistoric settlement seen fromthe beach of the village (...) – gives an idea of the superb precision of tone and design for which Friedrich became famous. The gentle light of the moon is suggested with exquisite control. The picture is equally remarkable for the way in which the conventional picturesque view has been intensified. The foreground leads in to the distant headland of Arkona, but Friedrich has compressed the relationship by cutting out the middle-ground and using boats to throw up silhouettes against the ethereal land in the distance, making it both more mysterious and qualitatively different from the foreground.» [7]

Friedrich frequently returned to the landscape of Rügen and at least two versions have survived showing the same viewof the Arkona promontory; two sepias in different light conditions, with slight variations, but very similar in size. The other version is entitled *View over Arkona at Dawn*,[8] created some years before in 1803. On this occasion, the dawn light blindingly illuminates the landscape, especially towards the horizon and the promontory itself. Comparedwith the 1806 moonlit work,we can note that one of the boats is not there, to be exact, the vessel whose mast marked the vertical axiswith the land forming the promontory, dividing the image into two, practically equal parts. Years later, in 1818, he produced a small format canvas entitled *Woman beside the Sea*,[9] in which, in the background, we can make out the same perspective of the promontory in the distance, only in this case the accentuated drama of the stony shore in the sepia works is no longer present. Instead there is a woman with her back to the viewer, sitting on a rock on the seashore contemplating the full rigged fishing boats as they sail by hugging the coast.

Friedrich was one of the first artists to become interested in the resources and effects that changing light produces. As evidenced in the sepia works mentioned above, he appears to have taken to heart the comments of the erudite philosopher J.G.Sulzerwhowrote that itwould be desirable that a landscape painter painted a certain landscape in different lighting and atmospheric conditions, but always from the same point of view. [10]

In a way, the light and textures used in these sepia works opened a conduit between the figurative and the abstract, acting as detailed investigations into the effect of texture and light, an intermediary point on the high wire

of which Bacon spoke. This synthetic capacity, between the figurative and the abstract, is precisely what interested Jason Martin in Friedrich's works, which, in some way, can be said to have influenced his own creative output. If we analyse the work of Jason Martin beyond the initial monochromatic effect, we note that, in general, there is always a central axis point around which the movement expanding out towards the borders of the painting is articulated.

In this way, almost nothing is left to chance in the composition. Themasses of paint and awavy strata of movement construct ascents or descents, such as in *Root* (2007): unleashing horizontal flows which, despite their density, reveal a disconcerting profundity suggesting a certain hint of infinity, of cosmic vacuum, such as in *Feral or Pantheist* (both from 2007); or establish outbursts that emerge from some low point in the painting to fan out towards the high points, as in *Lebanon* (2007) where the shapes evoke the opening out of the branches of a tree (we might remember here how important the symbol of the cedar is for Lebanon), *Spring* (2005) where the highlights of the painting effectively gush forth into a spring, or *Dutch* (2006). Jason Martin is not untouched by a certain spirituality or contemplative mysticism, which, while remaining aware of the cultural and epochal differences, surfaced in Friedrich's life and work. The identification that Friedrich established between the landscape and a vivid allegory of the conditions of life and death; the transience of every one of life's fundamental experiences; hope or unease, or a vision of divinity inspired by the contemplation of nature; is imprinted in the romantic impulse in order to recuperate, in someway, the religious spirit;which should be understood or intimated through a pantheist notion of the world. His connection with these forms of religious thought were, initially, not directly linked to his thoughts on the nature of Schelling, but rather developed through contact with the pietistic movements rooted in Pomerania and especially through his close relationshipwith Ludwig Theobul Kosegarten,[11] poet and protestant pastor, a friend of his teachers and his family, and also the tutor of the painter Otto Runge. Indeed it is believed that it was Kosegarten who introduced Friedrich to pantheist ideas about nature, and the pastor certainly became one of the first loyal collectors of the painter's work. Kosegarten became the parish minister for Rügen and entertained the painter there onmany of his frequent visits to the island. In his diary, Friedrich confirmed the need for an inner vision:

«Close your physical eyes, so that youmight see the whole painting through the eye of the spirit. Then, spread out into the daylight what you have seen in your own night, so that your actions also influence others from their exterior to their interior. A painter should not just paint what he sees before him, but what he sees in the sight before him. If he sees nothing in it, he should give up painting the externals. If not, his paintings would be like those folding screens behind which we find nothing but illness or death.»[12]

If we are seeking a permanent tension between what we can see from the inside andwhat appears on the outside, then we need look no further than thework of Jason Martin; the activity of this «inner eye» is an essential instrument in his painting. The structure of his works customarily constructs a space below the outline of a scene which is both empty and full at the same time; a placewhere, through contemplation, it is possible for those viewing thework to project their own inner being. In this operation of contemplation and projection, can be perceived an oscillation between the subtle degree of differential existing between the abstract and the figurative.

Jason Martin, in one of his most recent projects, has created a pictorial piece for the altar of the Church of the Apostles in Gutersloh (Germany). The piece has a rhomboid shapewith its sides slightly curved, and the effect is that of a very stylised cross like that seen in a star in ascension and expansion. The paint applied to a mirrored surface allows flashes to materialise and glimmerings that highlight and model ascending forms over the crimson surface. Against the background of the church, Martin's painting essentially constructs a space and time formeditation. The rhomboidal shape of the painting is sufficiently generic not to be tied to any particular Christian iconography, but, at the same time and through a chromatic modulation of nuances, it is able to evoke, ameditative unease that is common to all religions. This is also the peculiar vibration established today between the abstract and the figurative.

1 Quoted by: Hinz, Caspar David Friedrich in *Briefen und Bekenntnissen*, Berlin, 1968. William Vaughan, German Romantic Painting, Yale University Press – New Haven and London, 1980, p. 76

2 In the critical reviewof JasonMartin's exhibition in the Robert Miller Gallery in New York, Roberta Smith, writing in the *New York Times* (25-9-1998) stated that these painters are cited as precedents or parallel examples of away ofworking.

3 Louisa Buck, *Moving Targets 2*, Tate Publishing, London, 2000, p. 121

4 David Silvestre, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1975. Spanish edition: Entrevista con Francis Bacon, RandomHouseMondadori, Barcelona, 2003.

5 DanielAbadie, *Jason Martin et le corps de la peinture*, in *Jason Martin – Nudes*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, 2006.

6 *View of Arkona with Rising Moon*, 1806, paintbrush and sepia, 60.9 X 100 cm, Albertina of Vienna.

7 William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting*, Yale University Press – New Haven and London, 1980, p. 80.

8 *View over Arkona at Dawn*, *c.* 1803, paintbrush and sepia, 65 x 98 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle.

9 *Women beside the Sea*, around 1818, oil on canvas, 21 x 29.5 cm;Winterthur, Museum Stiftung Oskar Reinhart.

10 Quoted by Gottfried Riemann in a comment on *View over Arkona at Dawn*, in the exhibition catalogue: *Caspar David Friedrich, paintings & drawings*, the Prado Museum, Madrid, 1992, p.106

11 In 1815, Franz Schubert composed a cycle of 20 lieder based on the poems of Kosegarten.

12 *In Enthusiasm and Quietude*, An *Anthology of German Romanticism*, Antoni Marí edition, Tusquets publishers, Barcelona, 1979, p. 312.

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