

Luca Massimo Barbero  
Of night and day

Jason Martin's work shifts across the dialectics of tension and calm. His art simultaneously gives substance to the gestural and dynamism of the image; his unerring quality lies in perpetual movement, in the artist's constant need to call into question both himself and the infinite possibilities of paint.

Each work holds within itself a certain unfailing vitality, energy and tension. His ability to root his work firmly in the theory and practice of a current concept of futurist avant-garde may be seen in the dynamism and resonance which inspire and make up the space of each painting. The upward, engaging progression of line, the study of the perceptual and symbolic possibilities of colour, the movement of reflected light shifting with the material are at the basis of this approach: Martin appears to observe not so much the mechanicism of Balla—focused on the reproduction of human movement—as the naturally philosophical feelings of Boccioni, for whom art is the living, moving, vibrant possibility of understanding what is real. From the act of painting to the formal progression of his work, and the movement of the perceiving eye, all recalling the visual dynamism bound to the construction of Boccioni's "frames of mind"—constantly calling into question the state of paint and painting.

Scrolling through the ages and the history of the image, Martin's work is closely bound to action painting. But it is not so much the fragmentary, sudden and naturalistic nature of the act that interests Martin but the quality of the execution, which runs through all his works from their conception to their enjoyment. Artist and viewer are thus involved in the dynamics of a 'single act' which brings together creation and viewing, gestation and observation: a theatre of visual action effected within the elastic space of the work itself, which is thus capable of going beyond its physical confines to reach the solidness of the real. Thus nature in Martin's work is revealed not as a realistic fact, but what Rousseau defined as the "constant flow of the earth", cosmic infinity, a constantly shifting body.

The hypothetical geographies of Jason Martin are a sensitive, telluric diagram of painting as body, landscape and geography. They do not refer to any specific place or person but restore a "living soul" to the eye. The phenomenon is seen from within, matter is the fruits of an immersion in the nature of a deeply romantic vein, capable of seizing the Sublime and of translating it into the overwhelming quality of the act and the constantly active, magmatic and vital matter within the "painting".

**I would like to start this conversation talking about your beginning, as an artist. What was your biographical situation at that time? Was there a relationship between your situation and what became the development of your peculiar visual language at the time?**

I was born on a very small island. Up until I was in my late teens I never saw a horizon that wasn't the meeting of sea and sky. I was exposed to the drama of an environment that always fell influence to the elements. My exposure to an everchanging environment gave me a strong feeling of movement and light. Later on at Art school I explored different approaches and strategies to making work, responding in particular to various paths of Modernism. Landscape and abstraction played heavy in my concerns. I was very keen on

post-war American abstract expressionism, Kline, Pollock, de Kooning, and the later high modernist concerns of Ryman and Judd. To possibly further the reductionism of Pollock was, I believed, the most challenging prospect facing painting. Pollock had, and still has claim to the last radical statement in painting.

Ryman also held quite a unique position for me. After I went to the 1993 retrospective at the Tate a work approximately 200 cm<sup>2</sup> titled 'Mayco' made a strong impression on me. This white oil comprised bands of 5- or 6-inch horizontal brushmarks almost seamlessly held together with a series of steady singular movements all just about meeting. I wanted to make the step of bridging the time delays between each stroke. In effect I wanted to make a work in a single uninterrupted sweep. A brushstroke that you could fall into, tracing the passage of time recording its making. I started to widen the possible reach of an oversized brush. My 'peculiar visual language' was born out of these specific concerns.

What I hadn't expected was the pictorial depth or space that opened up in front of me. The results were very much a testimony to the movement of my body and hence I found a distance from the arm-led gesture that I was so keen to get away from. I recognised the reductionism I sought coupled with a physical and more self-referential 'expressionism'. I felt an antipathy towards the attitudes of the generation preceeding me at Goldsmiths. Housepaint, colourcharts, assistants, flat colour were not for me. I was very much of the mindset of how to paint not what to paint.

**Your discourse, since then, has taken a parallel path in respect to the YBA school (Young British Artists). I would like to investigate briefly with you how this connection partially affected your initial vision, and more at length what kind of different approaches you choose in the following years, to arrive where you are now.**

The YBA movement differs from previous groups of artists throughout history as the factors bringing these artists together are not theoretical but generational. I found myself loosely of that generation, albeit a bit younger and with no common ground for discussion. Inevitably I wasn't included in the many survey exhibitions that followed. I was a painter with more quiet concerns. I was and still remain engaged with the ongoing challenges of developing a studio practice.

The attitude towards that generation has mellowed over time. To begin with artists associated with them were stereotyped with 'one-liner' critiques. I was also 'pegged'. My answer was and has always been to develop as rich a pictorial language or vocabulary as possible. My language may be described as a mono-language; however, developing a more singular idea has for centuries been what artists do.

I have always wanted to develop the more sculptural aspects of my work and have made some journeys that have failed. I will continue to explore this regardless. My work is reliant on recognising failure. Positive results have always been arrived at through a temperance of deliberation and abandon.

**It seems to me that your painting is full of references to seminal presences in the history of art—there is a sort of dialogue with artists from different ages, which is part of your choice for painting. What are these passions of yours that you then transform into visions? What are these “masters of the contemporary”, from avant-**

**garde to action panting and beyond, that you include in your painterly reflection, how, and why?**

I have always found warmth by the references I stumble upon whilst painting. I consider painting to be a conversation that relies on previous discussions that I have witnessed or actively participated in or experienced.

The connections or references reached through my approach could easily be overlooked as facile or superficial. I seek these moments of recollection and build content through these 'found' moments—the recollection of a methodical Cezanne brushmark; a luminous dash of white suggestive of Manet; a composition honed from an O'Keefe (flora or gender); a spiral rhythm plotting Boccioni or Balla—bringing into the surface a contemporary chiaroscuro and extending the surface beyond the limits of the field, becoming a guileless Dada edge.

If my work is to have some universal understanding or a common touch, I must reveal something found in the human condition, in our human condition. In being part of the story so far, with the history of art, there is the chance to voice a shared anthropology that started with the caves in Lascaux 10,000 years before we learned the spoken word. My painterly reflection relies on an irrationally-led visual language.

**The gestural element in your painting creates a dynamics that goes beyond perceptual concerns to generate a sort of saturated body that finds its presence in a space which never stands still. It feels like you go from painting one painting to the next—without interruption—in a sort of unavoidable flux of matter through you body, which gets transferred on to the surface. Is there this aspect of identification between you and your images, and in what terms?**

Some works, depending on their composition, become more, or less self-referential. I identify with each work as a development from the last. Each work allows space, movement and form to speak as singular elements. However for a work to succeed none of these elements must bear unequal significance in their totality.

The translation of my body through the brush suggests a multiplicity of association. Of late, the spaces are torqued, spiral, turbulent and abysmal. Like some William Blake ghost figure rising from a central core, a figure or entity purged from the mire. The spaces—however complex or simple—gather light from their source to suggest bodies or natural forms existent in and out of my imagination. Whether seen as reflections on an interior life or the manifestation of a self made elemental force depends on how the surface is seen as illusion or corporeal body. I consider both mystifying—coupled and reliant on each other's presence. There always remains throughout our history of painting the projected space beyond, our looking through. There is also the looking at the skin, the matter, the form.

**Can this same dialectic of your visions between tension and stillness, focus and expansion, be one of the reasons why, in a certain sense, your images can be read both as portraits and as landscapes, human and natural figures? Like emotional waves, shapes of an introjected reality?**

All my private wars are won and lost in a hinterland of projected visions and reflected karma. Painting for me is a stage as well as a space. When I work, my emotional landscape is given the freedom to exorcise a visceral, erotic, irrational and fetishised

sense of self. My introjected reality demands a process of objectification and realisation. My work is body and testament to that will.

Of night and day, through the dream world or waking state, my interior life is full of landscapes, figures, shadows. These all get investigated through the vessel of my painting process.

**Another important element in your painting is the experimental nature of the materials—pigments and surfaces—and their combinations. Colour is its structure, gesture its composition. The density which derives from this experimentation creates these translucent bodies of light, which have a visceral quality to them, as if they were taken out of the core of earth. How would you explain this organic primeval effect through your hyperartificial saturation?**

Materials have always been a fascination. How to understand the mystery of oil or acrylic, or how to harness colour through medium robbed of any viscosity.

I always identify nature as the measure to which painting should aspire—heaven on earth found gazing into the brazen glory of a flower etc. I experiment with nature and I use nature but I do not mimic nature. If I were to copy or describe the wonders of our shared landscape, my visions would be dull. Perhaps I afford myself a belated naturalism with my reflections on matter in and of the landscape. I recreate forms intuitively.

The pictorial arrangements I find are as much a result of the capabilities of the materials I use as the suggested or implied spaces those forms, shapes or planes inhabit.

**In what sense you would say this aspect became part of the meaning of the ‘Vigil’ exhibition, also in its display as a dialogue with the space of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection?**

‘Vigil’ suggests waiting and watching. A ritual where fears and anticipation become the primary emotional focus in a protracted psycho-drama. I first visited Venice at night and found the labyrinth of walkways, connecting bridges and canals a perfect elixir for the unconscious.

There is a consistent, strong surrealist undercurrent running through the Collection. There are many examples where earlier discourses between figuration and abstraction collide beautifully—in particular the works by Gorky, Matta, De Chirico, Ernst and Pollock. I thought I might develop a narrative that demonstrates my own approach to figuration whilst still acknowledging the more elemental side of painting.

‘Vigil’ becomes an embodiment of a more emotive and subjective idea that I hoped would suggest how my emotional landscape drives my imagination. I thought this apt with the roots of Surrealism being found in the deepest recesses of the unconscious.