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JASON MARTIN

THE ROARING FORTIES

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Over the last five years Jason Martin's paintings have undergone a transition from focusing on the internal spatial relationships in the material structure towards centering on the poetic resonances evoked from them, applying thematic titles to his exhibitions which have alluded to subjects external to the pure process of painting on which his work had relied previously. Within this there has been a movement away from a figurative interpretation of the illusory space opened up through the mark and its reflective qualities, instead relying on the physical substantive nature of the materials employed to invoke connotations referencing subjects outside what exists on the surface.

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In the exhibition *Nudes* (2006), in which the work was focused on the body, the physical manipulation of the paint across the support rendered a figurative reading of the illusory space opened up in the dispersal of reflected light within it. The works could be read both as a material action; the body of the artist in engagement with the paint, and as a spatial allusion to interacting figures in the marks and their relative reflections. It was possible to trace the passage of the mark as it was acted, allowing us a direct "reading" of the work in terms of its temporal flow. From the territorial somatic premise of *Nudes*, Martin's work has evolved to employ themes increasingly connected to notions of distance and time. One only has to look at the titles of subsequent exhibitions – *Arcadia*, *Atlas*, *Nomad*, *Rock* – to see that the concept of the body has given way to that of human affiliations with landscape and the remote, with the epic sweeps of the earlier work gradually moving away from the opening up of an illusory space towards a material realism.

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The paintings in *The Roaring Forties* are an advancement of the pictorial vocabulary employed in the exhibition *Rock* (2008), in which Martin focused less on figurative connotations, prioritising an associative interpretation with regard to the material employed. The surfaces, made up of coagulations of mineral-based media and acrylic paint, went beyond a pictorial rendition of landscape, resembling matter itself – "a life-size macro study"¹. Where the work in *Rock* suggested a cauterised, exhausted terrain, in *The Roaring Forties* Martin invokes the passage of the resources removed from that stricken ground and hauled across the ocean.

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The Roaring Forties was the name given to the latitudes between 40°S and 50°S, particularly in the South Indian Ocean because of the strong westerly winds, which were employed in the conveyance of trade goods by sail from the seventeenth century until the invention of steamships rendered the route obsolete. The works presented here are evocative of this

traversal both in their material nature, the intense dusty pigments suggestive of spices, dyes, or precious metals, and in the furious movement of the marks, reminiscent of Turner's most storm-blasted oceans. The advancements in Martin's practice in these works are contradictory in nature. The reflective aspect of the work is gone; they have a physical entity, and are thus more violent manifestations of Martin's strikes, yet the marks and violations seem frozen, as if they had been subject to other laws than just that of the artist's set of pre-conditions.

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The dialogue between the painterly and the sculptural has been a constant concern in Martin's oeuvre. Previously, the heavy industrial supports comprised the sculptural aspect, counterpoint to the illusory space unveiled in the painted marks. In *The Roaring Forties*, the paint itself, embodying a sense of weight and density, attains a sculptural quality, with the support, acting as a boundary for the active surface, referring the works back to the fact of their being paintings.

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The singular gesture present in previous incarnations has been fractured by new rules of engagement; where earlier movements were flowing arcs, a striation of the medium across the support, the actions within these works are a more disjointed molestation of the surface; an almost obscene intervention upon its integrity. Jason Martin has compared this to a swordfight, stating it is "like some duel where the objective is to place your opposition between the sword and the wall; a resting arrived at after a tumultuous and frenzied sequence of cuts and twists and turns"². Here we could draw a lineage to Fontana's slicing of the canvas to open up a new dimension of space, though the purity of Fontana's penetration is more of a molestation, a mauling, in Martin's work. Although similar tools are used in the creation of these paintings as the earlier works, the strategy of this engagement means that the marks can no longer be subject to the same kind of "reading" as they were. The gestures which constitute the surface are frozen fragments of the past to which the pathology we are familiar with in Martin's work cannot be applied. The mineral consistency of the pigmented medium causes the marks to appear fossilised, or perhaps cast, rendering them distant; an archaeological fragment of a lost civilisation. This remoteness of gesture imbues these works with a remarkable stillness, which seems paradoxical to the violent attack of their inception.

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This subversion of the gesture is imparted partly through Martin's use of colour, which marks another important evolution. The structure and form of the work, which have always been at the heart of Martin's practice, seem to be subordinate to the authority of the ardent colour of the pigments used. It is as if Martin is enacting his personal version of the Renaissance debate between the primacy of *colore* and *disegno* which, continued for centuries, and in these works, to quote Philip Ball describing J.M.W. Turner's impact on the conservatism of his predecessors, "his use of *colore* seems intent on dispensing with *disegno* altogether"³.

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This isolation and supremacy of colour is reminiscent, not of what one may expect in a painted image, so much as that of digital or photographic representation, which in turn leads the viewer to read them as a surface which is rendered instantaneously. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has called this "intensification as a condition of simultaneity in the colour photograph - chromatic intensity as a condition of freezing"⁴, and we can relate this to the work presented here. The intense pigments seem more akin to the chromatic scale in a photograph or on a screen than something readily found in reality (a fact which has often made certain pigments prohibitively expensive) endowing Martin's work with this "condition of simultaneity".

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In making reference to the past age of shipping in relation to these intense colours, Martin is exploring the question of what meanings or correlations are thrown up around colour in an historical context. Victoria Finlay has observed when considering the cultural implications of blue:

"It is curious that in English the word 'blue' should represent depressing as well as transcendent things; that it should be the most holy hue and the colour of pornography. Perhaps this is because blue recedes into the distance – artists use it to create space in their paintings; TV stations use it as a background on which they can superimpose other footage – so it represents the place that is outside normal life, beyond not only the seas but the horizon itself."⁵

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Martin asks us to draw a direct analogy between the pure pigments used in the work and the trade goods shipped across the globe in the age of clippers and colonialism (in fact the East India Companies brought back with them artists' pigments including Indian Yellow which turned out to be made from the urine of cows fed solely on mango leaves; the pigment soon met its demise when it was discovered that the cows were fed no other nutrients for fear of it compromising production and were consequently in a poor state)⁶. The pigments in these paintings are to be viewed in the same manner as dyes or spices; materials employed as additives changing the nature of a certain compound, altering colour or taste and enhancing intensity, texture or flavour. He asks us to consider what their origins are; are they mined from the earth, or concocted in a chemistry lab? What kinds of process must they be subjected to before they can be mashed in with the medium and scraped on to the support? How far, and from where, must they travel in order to arrive in an artist's studio in London or Lisbon?

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Martin presents us with a paradox. The marks, the gestures, present themselves as quick, furious events, and synchronously as remote relics of some past occurrence. The paintings are dense material objects, with the simultaneity of a photograph, yet through the associations read into the colour and nature of the pigments, Martin alludes to the sweep of historical trans-global venturing. It is as if, on looking at these paintings, we are compelled to switch between viewing them as instantaneous and historical, representational and non-representational; abstract paintings in an historical context, and history paintings in the context of abstraction.

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⁵ Victoria Finlay, *Colour*,
Hodder and Stoughton,

⁶ Philip Ball, *Bright Earth –
The Invention of Colour*,