

It is all a moment (but forever)

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“I wish to create the new signs of my inner movement, for the way of the world is in me”

Kazimir Malevich, 1919

For a long time, Jason Martin’s research has been characterized by a personal and original focus on the whirlwind of painting; the way that it builds a visually and literally ‘fluctuating’ world through gesture and matter. The swirling paint and the way it disperses on a flat surface create an exceptional relationship between the painting and the viewer. There is a kind of *image* in the paint’s placement, which the viewer recognizes (our retina detects it by perceptual associations). This is our reaction to the flux of painting, to Martin’s control of the oil’s glossy matter and, it must be said, to his compelling ability to evoke the expanse of a landscape, the alluring carnality of a body, the silkiness of flowing hair.

In time, painting acquires its own visual life through the way it is conceptualized and realized. This is typical of Martin, an artist who never ceases to aspire to new worlds to achieve the act of painting, to form its ‘body’, to captivate the eye. The secret tools used in the studio have their own movement. They represent the rhythms and gestures of the artist’s body and its extension; they are prostheses that can be used to reach out in the medium, deploying it like a spell on the two-dimensional surface. They evoke the torment of deep space, of a majestic vortex, of sensuality made to be ‘touched’ by the eyes.

In 2007, in a conversation with Martin, I mentioned and quoted from the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*ⁱ to define both his possible cultural and conceptual roots and the exceptional “continuous physical and visual movement” of his paintings. However, in that conversation, the constant relation between “tension” and “stillness” emerged as a theme of his research. The tension is linked to the very way he paints, thinks, and acts. It is also associated with the physical act of flooding the surface with the glossiness of the colour/medium, sometimes spilling it beyond the surface’s borders, like a jarring noise in contemporary music. The tension is also due to the way force and gesture are measured out in the clash between his medium and the surface of the work (which is often metallic): in the shine and resilience of aluminium. Aluminium is the metal that is the ‘counterpart’ to his painting, its two-dimensional, physical body.

Futurists write that “a profile is never motionless before our eyes, but it constantly appears and disappears”. For a long time, this rejection of visual immobility has been a theme of Martin’s painting, of his visions. These visions (echoing once more the great avant-gardes and their utopias) are “states of mind” (following Boccioni), and as such they tend to appear and disappear forever in their “rapidity”. Remaining physically the same, they change due to the action of several elements—from light to gaze.

Conversely, the element of stillness belongs to the work in a more secret manner; a way that is no less radical than what the maelstrom of the gesture conceals. In Jason Martin’s paintings, stillness emerges like the shift of light between night and day; it is an aspiration rather than a concept of pictorial research. Stillness is to be read with a willingness to go beyond the gesture itself; one must move past the literary technique of abstract expressionist avant-gardes, or the technical reconceptualization of painting that the *Art Informel* brought about in European history (and which plays a strong role in Martin’s memory of his training, and in the exceptional continuity that painting always implies). One must move past—or rather, bring together—the vehemence of his gesture and the immobility of the medium.

In some works, the medium has 'spilled' beyond the borders and become an existential, anomalous lump that surpasses the legitimate limits of the surface. It has become exuberant, 'geological', and almost sumptuous; it expands by yearning for, and desiring, the third dimension. In some works, the paint itself physically juts out. Gesture and immobile medium thus blend in a series of works that is parallel to the oil paintings. These works are created with thick, vibrant pastes that Dubuffet, even at his most astral point, would have found volcanic, explosive, constructed with a rough medium that goes beyond what is earthly: the sands of plague-ridden deserts and the secret layout of ocean floors. If it is true, as Rousseau writes, that "*Tout est dans un flux continu sur la terre*"ⁱⁱⁱ, in time Jason Martin has managed to blend poetic torment, static ecstasy, passion's errancy and the always mysterious, fascinating, and changing heaviness of the dense, substantial, and magmatic medium that is pigment. Pigments appropriate the surface; they expand on it, fulfilling the desire for stillness and movement. The fluctuating and suggestive world meets the heaviness of the sands, the shifting luminosity of pigments, the shine and dullness of crystals. This generates works in which tension and stillness leave the physical and conceptual space to the dialectic clash between overcoming simple genres and interrogating the limits between painting and plasticity (which echoes sculpture). To clarify, the notion of being sculptural is not a simple change in one's path.

As we have generally seen so far, Martin as an artist never ceases to question himself and push the physical notion of painting beyond its obsolete limits; yet he continues to interrogate the 'origins', the seeds of the definition and practice of painting. This imperative to interact with the space beyond the two dimensions is charged with the irrepressible and vital nature of Jason Martin's work. Technique, materials, and the search for unknown reactions inspired by painting and creating are, for him, a fertile field where he fights, encounters difficulties, pushes himself to search for new borders to transgress, conquer and deliver to the audience's gaze. His painting is 'modelled' by hand, plunging his body once more into the medium to create the work. And while in two-dimensional paintings Martin constructs a fully-evoked, extraordinary and mysterious world, in the new cast metal works he shapes a moment, a lump, a 'thrust' of the paint, almost immortalizing the gesture. Paint and its elements become the evident subject. The medium is deployed in the cast works, brushstrokes, clots, and these become pure subjects in their manifestation, approaching the status of symbols. In an almost paradoxical way, Jason Martin creates the spontaneity of the gesture; he slowly creates the immediacy of a moment viewed as instinctual, serendipitous and irrational through a well thought out process and procedure. It is not surprising then to hear him say that "the casting of a brushmark literalized as 'subject' is a source of investigative and exploratory practice always challenged and redefined by a collective dialogue".

His brushstrokes shine with the preciousness of an ancient Dutch and Flemish painting tradition (which Martin so often evokes) where light, gold and air emerge from a brilliant lump, a particle of material so precious that it seems free and accidental—the preciousness of painting that arouses desire. I would say (or rather, write) that surprisingly, and bravely, Jason Martin continues on in this nearly-resolved debate between the ostensible casualness of the gesture and the preciousness of the medium. In these works, the materials' 'sound' dominates space (an element that has always fascinated Martin, and which he has always wanted to include): the sombre mystery of bronze, the alchemic gleam of copper, or the seductive, impertinent hardness of glinting nickel.

Martin leads us into a world of splendour and new visual desires. We, as the audience, are asked to maintain the same mobile gaze and multiple points of view that the artist has asked of us for a long time; we are asked to never slow down, to let his paintings live with full energy, in continuous movement. The immobile, almost frozen, pictorial gesture of these casts contains (like the plant in the seeds) the world of painting, its evolution, its highest concept—but also a self-aware irony, a fight between the elements. We look at it and we read it without being able to categorize,

determine its limits, or label it. This inability to 'freeze' Martin's painting captivates us and is part of its joyful vitality, as if all these reflections, the medium's metallic projections, wanted to enter our eyes, saying: "It is all a moment, but...forever."

For these reasons, we are taking a "moment" to converse with the artist. We'll proceed in an orderly fashion and talk first about the origins of this new series of works.

LMB: In my 2007 text on your work, reproduced in the catalogue for *Atlas*, I write about the exceptional but natural fascination aroused by your works. The "constant flux on this Earth" of your painting that would awaken Rousseauian *réveries*, inducing in the viewer of your worlds a sense of a natural, phenomenological and evocative narrative; that is, a narrative that would call upon the senses, movement, and our capacity for seduction. The sense of the light through the dense dialectic of your painting, induced by the medium and the sequence of gestures, is also produced by a "poetic excitement" (yours and your way of painting) of impressive duration, which, as I suggested, Edgar Allan Poe has described. In 2012 you painted *Crime* and, notably, *Rousseau's Nightmare*, whose titles evoke Poe's gothic atmospheres and the French philosopher himself. Can you talk about these two paintings and their titles, which are so deep, so evocative—and basically literary and narrative? Are they an evolution of your work, of 'literary tropes' and the echoes of passion? What is the *crime* concealed in the painting of Rousseau's nightmare?

JM: The possible narratives in my paintings have not been contrived, rather uncovered. This approach to the development of my work is empirical and allows the discovery of new worlds: spaces that hold the viewer's gaze, enriching suggestion and encouraging contemplation. I am not a topographical painter and am not concerned with depicting an illusory window on to perspective. Rather, I aim to intimate a genre of landscape with an unmediated sensory stimulation. There is an excitement that I arrive at most often through unprecedented situations and circumstances beyond my control. *Rousseau's Nightmare* was an intense and claustrophobic exercise. The sense of turmoil and turbid rhythm found in the composition of this panoramic oil demanded a conviction of pure resolve to surmount the violent and oppressive demands of its making. The result is an abyss of fauna, a jungle never to be given light, a hinterland void of shadow, a no-man's-land where existence is questioned. The gesture, furious and yet precise, proffers a legitimate and necessary savagery that underpins an endless space at once infinite and horrific. Perhaps the transgression is this entrapment of a rhythmic gesture - a movement of potential grace and belonging, delivered with the menace and butchery of a slashing machete. *Crime* was equally exhaustive. The canvas steals truth from the abandon and release of gestures left unruly and wild: beauty is perceived in a muted world of tropical thuggery, as ruthless and as dark as a lion's pit.

LMB: In the works for *Atlas*, it was surprising to witness the emergence of transparent medium; it was a non-material that shaped (or rather fought, almost climbed up) the metallic surface of the painting. The painting, being both seduced and possessed, shone with that luminous transparency and became a pictorial hymn made of light and material that was ostensibly non-existent and ethereal. At the Peggy Guggenheim Collection exhibition, you presented a transparent, mystical work *Cry* (2009). A short while after, your works started showing signs of a dull, sandy medium, such as the white painting *Salt* (2008). This medium is more strained, volcanic; it is immersed in a geological, crystal world, a mysteriously captivating mineral universe. Then,

throughout your painting career, the crystals and the coloured sands of your paintings acquired more and more other mediums, until they were possessed by them, constructed by them, and finally became as earthy as they are extraordinarily ‘infernal’ and magmatic. What was (or is) your relationship with transparency, the luminescence of the medium, the way it reflects the light—from oil, to acrylic, to the mysterious gel? Conversely, what is the meaning inherent in the sandy and mineral medium of some of your works from the end of last decade?

JM: The gel works are fraught with technical challenges and often yield less successful results than any other medium I have explored. However, when successful, the allure and mystery of this most artificial of working medium can be ethereal and otherworldly. To look through, as well as to look at, is an ongoing concern and, if suspended over a reflective ground, the gel behaves much like crystal or glass. The work *Cry* is a meditation on divine sorrow, a hymn of pity and sadness. Its surface is replete with reflection and refraction. Light and life are juxtaposed with the symbolism of the crucifix, itself the embodiment of life and death.

‘Sandy’ and ‘mineral’ works such as *Salt or Gold* (2008) are journeys into the inanimate and frozen. They represent earlier attempts to expand and develop a different vocabulary from my oils. The inner life of these works further evidences my exploration of landscape and exemplifies my relationship to the earthy and the archaeological. The inherent characteristics of both gel and course paste mediums are distinct and different and yet they both recall elements found in our natural world. Familiar yet exceptional, the recollections of those who encounter these works are more often than not descriptions of natural phenomena: feathers, shells, hair etc., literary and descriptive interpretations that I enjoy and understand as affirming a belated naturalism that these contemporary yet timeless relics embody.

LMB: The struggle between transparency and opacity—between being traversed by light and its luminous impact on the base and taking light from dullness and reflecting it deeply through the crystals and asperities of the medium—seems to be dialectically represented in two cast works. One is *Paeon*, a 2012 cast bronze, the other (richly evocative of painting) is *Rijks*, a 2013 nickel cast work. The ‘sound’ of bronze—sombre, monumental, often defined as ‘dull’—and the symbolically exceptional nickel mass—with its loud ‘sound’, vibrant with reflections—confirm your statement - “I identify with each work as a development from the last”. That is, this is the way your research has evolved, the way it is rooted in the world of painting. What were the first attempts that led you to the cast works? What is the ‘sound’ of the metal base? What is your intention concerning its reflection? Tell us about how these works were born, about your curiosity in making them and your need to produce works such as these.

JM: The beginnings of my cast works can be traced to the mixed media works I made for *Atlas* in 2007, a group of works that particularly explore dry material. These led to the use of paste-like mediums that resulted in a more concrete, granular, rough and muted surface, void of reflection. The development of the pictorial language, now visible in the cast works, was born from a grip on a new material ultimately modelled by my hands. I work on the flat, nurturing a simultaneous utopian / dystopian series of gestural movements. My aim, and this remains true of all my explorations, is to arrive at an image that remains mutable. I ultimately attempt to harness a rhythm born of a reverberating core. This core echoes, explodes, collides, collapses and unfolds to release a series of moments – constant and infinite.

Slowing down what would otherwise be fleeting, my strategies of making involve a constant change

of pace from rapid and frenetic to very slow and almost mannered. Adopting practices familiar with sculpture and using them to subvert traditional modes of painting ultimately refreshes old ideas and reclaims reflection as the domain of the story of Western painting: 17th century Dutch still-life revisited post-Kapoor / Koons. When the topography of these gritty works gets transformed into a reflective surface, new beguiling possibilities emerge.

LMB: In regard to your work, people have written about the gesture, about the way it is almost immediately equated with your being a painter, a great dialectician of painting, a challenger and lover of painting as movement and as pervasive, totalizing space. In our critical conversation I used a quote from the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* to describe and summarize your evolutionary sense of movement and gesture in the space of painting, that is, within the painting domain. As the quote put it: “Moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations, in their mad career”. Some of your works consisted in ‘being’ the movement. What happens with the cast works, where everything is ostensibly still, immortalized in an instant? What is their relationship with the painting gesture, the painting sign? How do you construct their slow emergence, the process by which they become ready for the viewer, and would you also describe this from a technical perspective?

JM: The casting of a 'brushmark' or a 'trace' subverts the act of its making to become instead a subject to be explored, like the generic traits within strands of DNA isolated by biologists. These forays into the grammar of painting become, through this process, monuments charting the legitimacy of an investigative mark. A mark, otherwise possibly abandoned and dismissed, instead flourishes unashamedly as a record of an emboldened, tougher accent. What might be no more than searching, tentatively modest and playful becomes, through such an invested process, a testament to a less conceited gesture. Whimsical marks become noble, empowered by their rejection of mere artifice and generalised cliché. Painting as sculpture, whilst losing a temporal virginity, gains ground in terms of surface identity and furthers the 'story so far' of high Modernism and painting's relationship to sculpture.

The gesture of painting within the cast works might be frozen and inanimate but this cryogenic stillness belies an inherent truth and integrity akin to, if not greater than, that of the raw gesture, left naked and free of encapsulation. In conceiving a process that involves such technical challenges, I am forced to revise my approach as to how to construct gesture. This highlights very real issues surrounding the time prior to and immediately after the 'found' moments I seek, during the resolution of a panel in readiness for casting.

The literal demands of the physical process - moulding, casting, plating, polishing – are echoed in the literalness of one's imagination, necessary in order to understand the next move. How to construct gestures that might run the course and end in positive and exceptional results is a concern loaded with significance and occupying thought prior to those more heavy-duty procedures. The approach to the live studio relationship between painter and surface or thought and act gets radically altered. The anticipation of how the live moment might translate within the work informs the development of one gesture to the next. There is a slowing of pace that encourages a meditative and contemplative process that in turn instills an awareness not to overwork, overburden or exhaust the work and to instead maintain a live, dynamic and palpable energy.

ⁱ Kazimir Malevich, “Nuovi sistemi nell’arte”, in Kazimir S. Malevich, *Scritti*, ed. by Andrei B. Nakov, 245—273, Feltrinelli (Milano, 1977). English quote from Rainer Crone & David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich: The climax of disclosure*, Reaktion Books (London, 1991), 35.

ⁱⁱ In *Jason Martin: Atlas*, ed. by Luca Massimo Barbero, Mimmo Scognamiglio Artecontemporanea (Napoli, 2007): “Tutto si muove, tutto corre, tutto volge rapido. Una figura non è mai stabile davanti a noi, ma appare e scompare incessantemente. Per la persistenza dell’immagine nella retina, le cose in movimento si moltiplicano, si deformano, susseguendosi come vibrazioni, nello spazio che percorrono” [“All things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing. A profile is never motionless before our eyes, but it constantly appears and disappears. On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations, in their mad career”]; *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*, available at <http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/techpaint.html>]

ⁱⁱⁱ In *Jason Martin: Atlas*, ed. by Luca Massimo Barbero, Mimmo Scognamiglio Artecontemporanea (Napoli, 2007). “Tout est dans un flux continuel sur la terre. Rien n’y garde une forme constante et arrêtée, et nos affections qui s’attachent aux choses extérieures passent et changent nécessairement come elles. Toujours en avant ou en arrière de nous, elles rappellent le passé qui n’est plus ou préviennent l’avenir qui souvent ne doit point Etre; il n’y a rien de solide à quoi le coeur se puisse attacher” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Réveries du promeneur solitaire*) [Everything on earth is in a state of constant flux. Nothing keeps the same, fixed shape, and our affections, which are attached to external things, like them necessarily pass away and change. Always beyond or behind us, they remind us of the past which is no longer or anticipate the future which is often not to be: there is nothing solid in them for the heart to become attached to” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Russell Goulbourne, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 2011), 55.