

## Jason Martin: Painter of Other Landscapes

Paul Moorhouse

A century ago Western art embarked on an astonishing new journey of exploration and discovery. For almost six hundred years the observed world had held artists in thrall.

Its emulation was their goal; the capacity to imitate was the evidence of their attainment.

The more compelling the illusion, the more highly prized was its creator. Giotto, and the extraordinary artistic revolution he unleashed, presented art as a wonderful spectacle. Denying the material fact of paint, the artist performed a kind of alchemy, turning dumb matter into the appearance of flesh, sky and earth – the familiar world of beings, objects, textures and colours. The real, it seemed, was ensnared within the embrace of art, subject to the will and desire of a mind. But, as the twentieth century gathered pace, the mirage dissolved. Building on the earlier insights of Kant and Schopenhauer, modern philosophy and science confirmed that the true nature of reality remained elusive. Far from ensnaring the real world, the artist was an onlooker, entranced by appearance. Faced with this predicament, Kandinsky and Malevich forged a new direction. Dispensing with observation and imitation, painting now turned to itself as subject. This is where Jason Martin's art begins.

Among contemporary abstract painters, the intensity of Martin's engagement with his chosen medium is a defining characteristic. In his work the substance of paint is not simply a vehicle for expression. Rather, it becomes an entire world that he inhabits, explores and tests. Its defining features are colour, shape and texture, and while each of these elements is concentrated to maximum pitch they are nevertheless nuanced with extreme sensitivity. His feeling for colour is extraordinary, ranging from super-saturated, pure pigments to delicate inflexions in which different hues are refracted and mixed. Shape is no less a remarkable physical – and not simply optical – presence. Earlier painters such as Franz Kline articulated abstract form as a kind of non-descriptive ideogram surrounded by space. In contrast, in Martin's art shape is inseparable from the movement and texture of paint. Its plasticity is an expressive, physical fact in which event and surface are as one. Indeed, the key to Martin's art is the unique way that all these elements are enmeshed, with none predominating. As in the world we occupy, colour, shape and texture form an integral fabric. Indivisible, these elements are the components of the places he creates - terrains of visual and tactile sensation, experienced directly and essentially.

It is perhaps for this reason that, surprisingly, Martin intimates a relationship between his visual language and the genre of landscape painting. On face value this seems an unlikely connection. The topographical painter depicts a view as if seen through the illusory window of perspective. Defying that convention, Martin's domain, it seems, is that of imagination and unmediated sensory stimulation. No link seems possible. But this would be to underestimate his achievement. The external world of appearances conceals its true nature. Similarly, Martin's world, though abstract, appeals no less to the senses. It too seduces the eye, presenting a mysterious threshold on which to pause.