

OPPOSITES ATTRACT

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Nothing is sacred in art anymore. This doesn't imply that there are no contemporary equivalents of Byzantine icons or religious statuary – although that is indeed the case in our largely drab, belief-less secular world – rather it signifies that artists no longer see any need to pander to the traditions, hierarchies or techniques of old. Painters make sculpture, sculptors make paintings, while artists are now free to make almost everything else imaginable and anything else besides – proving only that the media they employ is largely irrelevant, while the meaning is increasingly all that matters. Jason Martin has always been a painter, perhaps even a traditionalist in the field, in so far as he has stuck stubbornly and seriously to the business of applying paint, pigment and other malleable materials to flat surfaces for more than twenty years, when all around him have been pronouncing or debating the death-knell of his chosen trade.

Yet even this most painterly of practices has, from its very inception, been engaged with the objecthood of painting – its latent three-dimensionality and its potential to be in the room with us. Martin's latest series of cast works, produced in nickel, copper and bronze to date, extend further into the viewer's object-space than merely projecting outwards from the picture plane or the wall, as many of Martin's paintings have done previously, in their emphasis on their paint-loaded edges. Indeed, every tiny incident in these new cast works constitutes an edge, a ridge, a valley, a crevasse, a slope, a promontory or an outcrop – a topographical contour or even a landscape, as suggested by titles such as *Zocalo* and *Maisuma* – which stands proud of its smooth, horizontal grounding.

Martin's mountainous sweeps of modeller's paste, which he manipulates and drags his fingers through, are adhered to the spectral surface of the polished, mirrored support, after which the casting process fixes the soft protuberances into a solid, shiny state. These 'paintings' toy with our

understanding of two and three dimensions, existing at once as a sign of abstract painting, much like Roy Lichtenstein's flattened, depersonalised Pop versions of painterly gestures (as seen in the *Brushstrokes* series of the mid-1960s) and a hyper-real magnification or exaggeration of an artistic mark, like those of Glenn Brown or Albert Oehlen, for instance. However, in Martin's case, it is as if a singular daub had been removed from the context of a wider painting, before being enlarged and then preserved in memorialising metal. Perhaps painting is being put in its casket after all.

As much as the lustre and luxury of the cast works lures and seduces the viewer, these same qualities also repel and return the gaze – their unyielding substance and self-reflectivity force us to delve internally for possible interpretations. This brief moment of self-awareness, glimpsed as one approaches the cast works, recalls many famous art historical mirrors: the convex all-seeing eye behind the couple in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage* of 1434, that of Velazquez's miniature royal portrait at the back of *Las Meninas* (1656), as well as those that appear in paintings by Johannes Vermeer, Edgar Degas and Francis Bacon. It wasn't until Michelangelo Pistoletto's later painted aluminium and steel works of the 1960s, where figures tremble in between actual real and imagined worlds, that actual reflective surfaces begun to find their way into painting's domain. Martin's mirrored backdrops are not nearly so romantic or conceptual, however, instead employing the high gloss of a Jeff Koons Bunny or the glint of burnished jewellery. And yet these are resolutely not lumps of luxury material or bullion-weight metal but somehow covered or concealed objects, with merely the unifying skin or veneer of copper or nickel plating to hide their naked state of expressionistic creation.

Of course, just as Martin is not alone in employing mirrors in his paintings, so the history of abstract art is also full of artists exploring paint's 'thingness'. Kazimir Malevich reduced the whole business down to a single panel of pure white or black. Daniel Buren began his career trying to discover the 'zero point' of painting and ended up removing it from the gallery altogether. Clement Greenberg advocated the union of

canvas and colour in the work of Morris Louis, while Donald Judd sought similar characteristics in the painters he admired, such as Barnett Newman, Frank Stella and Ad Reinhardt. Many of these artists were seeking painting's lowest common denominator and its fewest constituent parts, whereas Martin now seems to be besmirching the minimalist monochrome with an almost figurative dollop of trompe l'oeil trickery on top.

Added to which is Martin's further sacrilegious mistreatment* of the heroic, unique gesture by having it cast in different materials, as contentious now for the idea of painting as it was for sculpture when Auguste Rodin began populating the world with his bronzes. Much like the heretic Yves Klein and his controversial 1957 Milan exhibition of 11 seemingly identical blue *Monochrome Propositions* – all

priced differently and each subtitled 'Blue Period' after Picasso, just for good measure – Martin is both paying homage to and dishonouring his forebears. Indeed, nothing is sacred any more.

If we have to attempt a categorisation of these cast works, they could be described as hybrids or amalgams. They are at once examples of imprecise painterly gesture and decisive sculptural surety, being both handmade and fabricated; simultaneously rough-hewn and machined; spontaneous/rehearsed; moving/be-stilled; exposed/hidden; perfect/spoilt; maximal/minimal; painting/ sculpture.

These dialectical oppositions suggest a confrontation or a conflict at the heart of Martin's practice, not a compromise. Rather than existing somewhere in between paintings and sculptures, the cast works could be both, neither, either and, or. Martin's latest work tackles this antagonistic position head on: entitled *Anathema* (ppXX), it is resolutely not a painting but a three-dimensional object in space – a full-blown sculpture. Perhaps it is anathema to a lifelong painter to enter this domain, but it is also vital for an artist to create new forms and expand the limits of one's purview. This highly polished floor-bound object, cast from portions of virgin cork found near Martin's Portuguese studio, seems unearthly by comparison with its construction – resembling an alien creation or a

figment of pure fantasy as opposed to an organic mound, moulded by nature and then the artist's hand.

The risk associated with adding a new dimension or a new material to one's artistic repertoire is that it can be like acquiring an extra limb or a third eye – it could expand the practice and its possibilities infinitely, or it could unbalance the equilibrium and impose its will over everything that preceded it. Whether Martin knows it yet or not, whether he paints or sculpts or both, he will continue to put his faith into abstraction while stretching it, perhaps by further mimicking it, gilding it, treasuring or trashing it along the way, only to then rip up the old rulebook and start making anew, again, once more.