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The Spaces
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How I work: artist Jason Martin

We visit the British painter's extraordinary studios in the Portuguese countryside



Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

British artist Jason Martin has embarked on a 20-year exploration into painting, creating abstract works whose surfaces ripple, rise and fall like undulating terrain. Creating these thickly laden pieces is a highly personal and meditative act, so it's no surprise to find him hiding away in Portugal's bucolic Alentejo region to make them.

'Alentejo is a place to retreat, away from the distractions of London - the cars, sirens, and aeroplanes,' he says. 'I crave neutral spaces amid the landscape.'



Martin's Comporta studio. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

Though London remains a base, Martin spends much of his time in Portugal, where he has two art studios: a vast former nightclub in the village of Melides, in which he creates his mixed media works, and a white hut within a nature reserve near Comporta that he dedicates to painting in oils.

'It's a simple, origami-like shape within the landscape,' Martin explains. 'It's almost surreal.'



Jason Martin at work. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

The artist has returned to oils after a three-year hiatus working in mixed media. Although painting is still a highly physical process for him – a drama, involving pushing and dragging sticky globules across panels – he’s reduced the act to the minimum.

‘I’ve stripped away the baroque, balletic gestures of before, going back to something more fundamental and essential,’ he says.



Inside the Comporta studio. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

Jason Martin’s monochrome new works, on show at London’s Lisson Gallery until 7 January, might seem austere in their tones and linearity, but there’s a vigour to their furrows and folds – or a ‘guilelessness’, as he puts.

He showed us around the paint-splattered spaces where they were created, as well as his home in Melides, where he’s busy concocting a very different breed of project: his first vintage of wine, harvested from the surrounding vineyard.



A 2016 work by Jason Martin. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

How does new your new space in Comporta lend itself to oils?

Jason Martin: I feel like I can't make any errors here because I'm in this neutral space, surrounded by nature. And with oils, you need to be able to step back from the works, see them from above, and have light coming in from skylights. The ceiling height of the Melides nightclub is too low for oil painting, but it has a warren of spaces that I've converted into metal workshops and spray rooms.



A decked area at Martin's home. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

Why Portugal?

The landscape is extraordinary and verdant, even in the dry months. You've got four different shades of evergreen - olive, pine, eucalyptus and cork - all year round. And when the rain comes in autumn, you get this huge flood of colour coming through, like a second spring.

Of course price is a factor too. The nightclub is about the size of Marks & Spencers and it's costing me the same as studio space in London in 1993, when I left Goldsmiths.

The ribbed surfaces of your works suggest waves, ridges, valleys and outcrops. Do you take literal reference from the Portuguese landscape or is this outcome accidental?

I've always viewed myself as a landscape painter dressed up as an abstractionist. I respond to nature and makes studies on the sly which I've never shown. And when you look at my works, you gaze into this imaginary space beyond and project associations from your own mental landscape on it. To me figuration and abstraction are beautifully intertwined.



A detail of 'Untitled (Davy's Grey / Ivory Black),' 2016, by Jason Martin - one of the works on show at the Lisson Gallery.
Photography: courtesy of Lisson Gallery

There's a huge sense of energy to the sweeps of paint in your latest works, but also of control. Is that duality important to you?

I've reduced the methodology of how I make oils. If you don't confine yourself to a set of rules, you can't make value judgements about the direction of your work. I've stripped out the self-conscious movement of the body. I'm burning a much cooler flame than the more heated posturing of abstract expressionism. Instead I'm using tools to facilitate a way in which the material can allow itself to become something contemporary, that hasn't been seen before. I set up a controlled situation that allows for chance, which leads to exciting results. It's very rudimentary, uncomplicated and reductive.

Does your minimalist approach extend to the way you live?

No. I don't think minimal living fits with the complexity of life - unless you live like a monk.



An apron given to Martin by an artist from Mazatlán, Mexico. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

Describe your home in Portugal.

It's up on a hill above Melides, looking out towards the coast. I built an organic pool as a focal point away from the house. My home is a place to retreat and reflect.



Martin, beside the pool. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

You've created your own vineyard and are about to start selling the first vintage (2013) next spring. What spurred this very alternative creative venture?

It all stems from the fact that I can't build a studio where I live unless I'm a farmer and have an agricultural licence. The reason Alentejo is such a beautiful region is because it has the strictest planning laws in Europe. Eduardo Souto de Moura has designed my future studio, which will double as a cellar. The only way I'll get permission is for it to have legitimate agricultural use, so I need to start making and selling wine.



A terrace outside his home. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

It's a very elaborate way of getting planning permission...

Yes, but it's the only way around it. I planted the first vines seven or eight years ago and I'm working with award-winning winemaker, José da Mota Capitão [of Herdade do Portocarro], whose facilities we currently use. We'll bottle around 250 magnums a year.



A prototype of the wine bottle. Photography: Rodrigo Cardoso

The wine is a Monti Sol Project uniquely bottled to my own design. There is no label as such, only a brush mark trace that is cast as a whole. Details of the wine are sandblasted on the reverse. Each bottle will have a lacquered seal with the edition number and will come with a small booklet explaining the story of my 'impossible' vine. Most winemakers would dismiss the conditions in which the vines were planted as unfeasible for cultivation, because the access is very difficult and the well to draw water is 103 metres deep!

Our first harvest will be bottled in January. But my studio is the dream project that I have to make happen.



Martin at home. Photography: Jason Martin

The Jason Martin exhibition at the Lisson Gallery runs until 7 January. 27 Bell Street, London NW1 5BU