

NEW WORKS BY JASON MARTIN

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It has been a favourite game of many disciplines, including art criticism, to wonder about the mythical origins of the things within their purview. What is the essence of society, and where are its simplest expressions to be found? What was the most primal form of religion, the first work of architecture, or the purpose of the paintings at Lascaux? Such questions go back to the beginning of things, imaginatively and philosophically, to search for the rich potential hidden within a first principle. They are a way of starting again on perennial problems.

The new work created by Jason Martin for this exhibition is the fruit of just such an imaginative and critical engagement with fundamental principles. Returning to oil after more than three years of working in mixed media, Martin has once again renewed the terms of his engagement with painting. The fresh technical approach on display here is indicative of newly focussed priorities and objectives. In these works, his long and complex encounter with the painterly tradition has shifted into a new key. Both the baroque sweeps of his last series of paintings, and the swirling rococo reliefs of more recent mixed media work, have been overtaken by a return to oil that aims for a more direct and essential encounter with painterly first causes. Titling these works austere with the names of paints used in their creation – Davy's Grey, Titanium White, Raw Umber – points toward his current preoccupations.

Though Martin has not worked in oils since the end of 2012, these new paintings should not be seen as a major rupture with what has come before, whether in oil or other media. They are better understood as a new phase in the evolution of a broader project, for Martin's work has always remained remarkably consistent in its concerns. He is a painter whose oeuvre constitutes an extended meditation on the deep structure of the painter's art, and with the principles and materials of that art. It is work that concerns itself with the bases of painting, the generative substrates on which the art is predicated: tools, gestures, substances, and the grammar of their interrelationships.

This new series of paintings finds him apprehending his subject afresh. To see how these works develop and transform his practice, we too might usefully return to one of the many transformative origin points within the history of oil painting. The beginning we

seek concerns not painting as an action, or practice, or set of theories, styles or subjects. For one way of approaching Jason Martin's new paintings (and indeed his previous work) is through a consideration of starting points in the historical life of paint itself.

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Throughout the history of painting, the materials of the art have always held a certain independent value, one that registers above and beyond the forms they represent. The gold leaf that gilds the haloes of saints and the grounds of altarpieces in Medieval and early Renaissance art is not simply visually descriptive of holy radiance, a brilliant representation of sacred brilliance. It is also a precious substance in its own right, whose refulgent splendour embodies the divine light – a material whose presence is illuminating in its very essence, as well as being both symbolic and representational. True ultramarine pigment, laboriously prepared from lapis lazuli mined in the Hindu Kush and more costly than gold, was also the bearer of particular values, even beyond its enormous cost: for Cennino Cennini, *azzurro oltre marino* was 'a colour noble, beautiful, and perfect beyond all other colours, and there is nothing that could be said of it but it will still exceed this (praise).'¹ It was a material occupying the pinnacles of expense and rarity, and it required the most alchemically complex and patient preparation. In exchange, it produced the most sumptuous effects a painter could aspire to.

Such materials were bearers of meaning both in substance and in essence. The beauty and nobility they brought to art went beyond both representational symbolism (for instance, in ideas regarding the symbolic value of blue as the colouration for the garments of the Virgin) and monetary value (though ultramarine in particular was 'in a class with gold as a symbol of luxury and it was frequently specified by the rich in contracts and commissions').² Their worth inhered within them, and so they partake in a long history of significance attached to the materials of art in and of themselves.

But we have a particular painter's material in mind here: oil paint. And what we are searching for is the point at which the particular properties of oil paint *qua* oil paint begin to take on a special, material value for painting. When does oil paint itself, as a substance, start to take on a direct role in the meaningfulness of painting, beyond the forms it describes? When and how does the materiality of oil paint – viscous, opaque, rich in density and lustre – begin to take on value?

Though the use of oil for various purposes connected to painting seems to go back to antiquity, the dominance of oil paints in the field of painting begins in the 15th century; as is universally accepted, the master of the era is Jan van Eyck. But as Anita Albus has demonstrated so eloquently, the work of van Eyck is notable above all for an invisible fineness of technique, and for effects of infinitesimal detail and vertiginous space that are achieved through a mastery of his art – including the art of preparing paints – that was so absolute as to remain profoundly mysterious.³ There is no doubt the paint here carries special values, for van Eyck marshalled those material properties of oil paint that would generate majestic, infinitely expanding worlds. His paint was the perfected complement to a perfected perspective, and in its very composition and application allows us to move beyond and into his pictures. But this peerless material modulation of deep space is not the mythic origin we are searching for.

For when looking at Martin's work, we are encountering a painter whose work has been a steady investigation of the basic terms of all painting: the artist's manipulation of material substances, and the nature of the interventions through which they are manipulated. The matter of how pictorial space comes into being is rarely eliminated from any investigation of how painting does its work, but it is not the issue here. Martin's focus is at a more fundamental level, for his work has consistently looked to examine the painter's gesture as it intersects with the materiality of paint or other cognate mediums, such as the thick modelling paste that is the underlying base for his works in relief.

And perhaps, despite appearances, he is not closely concerned with the gesture as evidence, in the manner that animated the action painters. These new paintings, like those that preceded them, do not intend to stand as records of physical events that took place in the arena of painterly action (though, like all paintings, they do that too). For Martin is much more interested in the nature of the basic contract between artist and material, where the very essence of painting is at stake: his twin areas of investigation are the material itself, and the meaning given to it by the intervening mark of the painter. This interest is of course deeply concerned with gesture, but only insofar as gesture is the breath of life that art grants to gross matter. The gestural mark is significant, not the gestural act.

In order to find points of origin similar to those that Martin himself hopes to interrogate through this work, we seek the signs of two interconnected phenomena in oil painting.

First, the moment that oil paint interrupts spatial effects and comes forward from the picture surface, asserting itself as a material presence in front of the picture plane; and second, the presence of a painterly mark that understands its value as such, and its relation to the paint – a brushstroke that speaks for itself, and places value on the gesture of the brush in the paint.

The material valence of oil paint is caught up with the way that a painter uses it. It can be viewed as a problem of technique and handling, and the artist most commonly associated with the early use of thick impasto handling in oil is Rembrandt. In his *Discourses on Art*, Sir Joshua Reynolds observes that the painter often appeared to have applied his paint with a palette knife;⁴ and while close issues of modern paint handling are generally paid little historical attention, in books on technique where impasto is mentioned as a way to create reflective highlights ('load the high lights, and keep the shadows thin'),⁵ Rembrandt's name is consistently prominent. As with the apocryphal attribution of the invention of oil paint to van Eyck, the claims for Rembrandt's primacy in the technique are more a matter of convention than historical fact, but the association persists for a good reason: in some of Rembrandt's work, the material qualities of oil paint can be seen unmistakably to take on bold and new signifying functions.

In *Belshazzars' Feast* (c. 1636) the clasp and golden brocade of Belshazzar's cloak is defined by an astonishingly thick build-up of paint. This particular passage of paint, in which 'the thickest highlights...are of pure lead-tin yellow...worked wet-into-wet over applications of pure yellow ochre..., earth pigments, chalk and lead white',⁶ presents itself as a critical moment for our thought experiment. For here, the richness of the Babylonian king's heavy cloak – its golden thread, its shining lustre, its weight – is signalled not only by the representational value of the forms into which Rembrandt has worked the paint and the golden colour effects of the pigments, but also by the paint itself, as a material substance. It is true that he is loading the highlights, and that the textured, bright paint picks up the light, as it should; but the painter has also placed much of the burden of representation on the materiality of the paint. This paint, this gold, is the token of Belshazzar's wealth and idolatry, and that of his city, as he sits down to his banquet while Cyrus is at the gates.

Unlike the paintings of an earlier time, there is no real gold here; and yet there is more than just the painted visual representation of gold. It is the very materiality of the paint

that stands in for the precious metal: in the yellow- white clots and smears, the viscidly stirred texture, the knobbed encrustation of pigment standing out in coarse relief from the canvas. In *Belshazzar's Feast* Rembrandt unmistakably advertises the concrete value of oil paint, a substance whose material qualities can be enlisted to render it as rough and as heavy as the substance it represents, and as precious too. (Rembrandt knew his worth; and once the artist's preliminary alchemy is complete, does not the trade in art set about figuratively turning paint to gold?). He substitutes one valuable substance for another; he will vouch for the paint *itself* as suitable to represent gold, beyond pictorial form. It is an act of transubstantiation, one that ushers oil paint into a new kind of being, ennobling its most base, formless properties, and signalling that a new field of painterly investigation was open.

With the paint, its inseparable means of expression: the brushstroke. A few steps from *Belshazzar's Feast* in the National Gallery hangs Rubens' somewhat earlier *Samson and Delilah* (c. 1609). Though the later Rubens would use quite thick impasto at times, *Samson and Delilah* is mostly painted with transparent, uniform handling, but for just one area of thick, gleaming impasto on the slumbering Samson's hair. Near his ear, Rubens has applied a glistening black lick, a curling lustrous lock, thicker even than the rest of Samson's shaggy head, which can be seen in clear relief against the otherwise even treatment. A parallel is thus deftly drawn between the Biblical hero's strength and the skill of the painter, whose own particular strength is found in his brushes and his paints. The arabesque curl of Ruben's brush in the thick, seemingly unmixed black paint that shapes the twist of hair draws us at once to Samson's shining strength (and its loss, as the barber snips); to the prestige of the painter, his brushes also tipped with hairs, whose power is in his art; and to the wet slick of black paint itself, stirred by a single curved stroke of a loaded brush. Leaving his hand on the work for all to see, Rubens compresses representation, indexical braggadocio and material reality into a single outrageously confident gesture. It looks like it was done yesterday.

Two definitive moments of origin in the history of oil paint: Rembrandt's animation and mobilisation of paint itself, as a material substance, to move beyond a simply visual metaphor and into a play of textural substitutions; and Rubens' deliberate articulation of meaning and message through the visible, living gesture of the brush in the paint. No doubt there are earlier examples; there always are. But together they point to a departure in the first half of the 17th century from the prior history of oil painting, toward a future in which paint as material substance would henceforth be able to rise

from the painting surface to play its own role, both in representation and beyond representation.

From here we can imagine the unwritten history of impasto, a story that might chase an irregular, paint-spattered line running from Belshazzar's oil- glommed cloak and Samson's brush-curled lock toward the incandescent palette-knife excesses of Turner, his paint a solar chymical, calcinating in the rosy crucible of a canvas sky. From there we might follow it to Manet, insouciantly daubing a final glob of pinkish cream onto the flowers on the barmaid's breast at the Folies-Bergère; and further, to the rough *taches* that Monet employed to make light tangible at Argenteuil, and to Van Gogh's vermicular, furrowed attempts to communicate the overwhelming intensity of a vibrating universe. Thence to abstraction and the direct if belated assertion of a concrete art: something that was latent all along, its embryo visibly declared in Rembrandt's Babylonian brocade, and which, for the avoidance of doubt, is not the same thing as the elimination of pictorial space.

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It is this line of painterly thought that Jason Martin's work has always sought to examine, and it is a way of thinking about the value of materials that proliferates with great variety in the twentieth century. In diverse forms, it can be seen as a presence in the work of artists as different as Kossoff and De Kooning, Auerbach and Ayres, in the 1980s acrylic paste works of Frank Bowling, and in all those artists who have made the *matière* of painting their concern. The polychrome concretions of Bram Bogart and the slab thick, faceted *outrénoir* paintings of the later Soulages are important signposts.

In several earlier series of works, Martin has worked through the link between paint and gesture by developing techniques that could be seen as extreme extensions of the painter's brushstroke. In the works from the 1990s and 2000s, the paint was combed into raked, modulated textural surfaces that change as

the light upon them changes (and is there not an echo here of the old painterly injunction to 'load the high lights', to make the paint catch light, to let it shine as material?). More recently, his works in oil experimented with a textural language of flowing arabesques that telescoped the dynamics of pictorial composition into the presence of the painterly mark (it is not surprising that works of this last oil series occasionally looked to Rubens, master of the arabesque; for instance, among the

antecedents and influences on his large canvas *Heroes and Villains* [2012], Martin cites Rubens' *St George Battles the Dragon*, of 1606-8).

In his pure pigment and mixed media works of the last few years, Martin turned toward a high-resolution examination of texture and mark. In these works, Martin both provokes and thwarts links with gestural abstraction by covering the modelling paste substrates with coatings of pure pigment. The painter's intention was in part to force into partial retreat the discourse of action and gesture that could so easily be applied to his work; he wanted to manufacture works that did not betray how they had been made.

Having produced deeply gestural structures in modelling paste, using his hands, the pigment coating served to conceal the activity of creation, to mask the process – an end completely opposed to the typical notion of the expressionist mark as an indexical expression of will or energy. The works can be as tempestuous as the waves of Turner's 1803 *Calais Pier*, and yet they are uncannily pacific, for the pigment coating stills movement and distances the viewer from the action of the artist. They demand engagement with the deeper subject that is in play: not gesture as such, but the transformative effect of gesture on matter. Make no mistake, the gesture is absolutely necessary – it is the subject, for it produces effects in matter, and this is the crux. But it does not dwell at the scene or make the empty demand that everything be referred back to an original dramatic act.

In the smaller, cast silver relief works, the degree of focus is greater still. The works isolate and immortalise a series of smaller, individuated marks, reminiscent of nothing so much as discrete *taches* of paint, single touches of a brush, stipples and dabs of pigment: the building blocks not just of painting, but of all mark-making. Once again, the dynamism of the material is stilled, with the perfect reflective finish material functioning analogously to the pigment in the larger works, masking process and action in favour of the consideration of the dynamics inherent in the forms themselves.

In these large new oils, Martin has once again approached the problems of paint, gesture and intervention from a new perspective. Moving away from the filamentary turbulence of his last oils, he has returned to a form of intervention in materials that is significantly looser and more intuitive, with more potential for aleatory effects. Unlike the paste reliefs, the new works stand upright during the painting process, producing falls and tumbles of gathered paint down the picture surface. It is worth comparing

these clots of fallen paint to the marks captured in the metal works: the resemblance is striking, and it is not an accident – these are the moments in the life of paint that Martin is especially attuned to. It is no surprise to find him both enshrining them in some works and fostering conditions where they can occur naturally in others.

Paint is applied to the metal supports with a plasterer's trowel. Into this smooth surface, Martin scrapes a band of horizontal strokes using chunks of roughly cut or torn packaging foam as a kind of *ur*-brush: an even further simplification of the saw-toothed combs of earlier works, and a move back toward an even more basic vision of the original painterly mark. One irony of Martin's close attention to painting in itself is that it has drawn him not to work with paint so much as in it, digging down into smoothly applied surfaces with various tools. Again, we can see this as an interrogation of painting, a focus so close that we find the point of both creative and critical engagement located deep within the minutiae of facture: the place where the brush is already within the paint, not the moment of application.

The paint in these works is heavy, thick and viscous. The emphasis on its glutinous materiality is deliberate and, as with the different textures of paste in the reliefs, Martin exploits the interference between different colours for complex effect. In *Untitled (Ivory Black / Indian Yellow)*, the agglomeration of pigments produces a resinous, creosotic gumminess and false translucency. In *Untitled (Burnt Sienna / Graphite Grey)*, it is estuarine, muddy; the upper and lower swatches of unsullied paint, common to all these works, recalling the reflective mud flats and grey skies of Turner's *Evening Star* (1830).

And the horizontal bars of these works cannot but produce echoes of the landscape tradition, as Martin is well aware. Searching back toward a gesture as primary as the tool he has chosen to make it, Martin has fixed upon the horizontal stroke as the means of introducing differentiation into the paint: in terms of the precise gesture under examination here, the works are in effect a series of meditations on the nature of the line as one of the fundamental interventions that can be made in or with material. A simple stroke, a single unidirectional movement, resulting in the bisection of a field: it is impossible to do this simple thing without a horizon appearing, and with it the suggestion of foreground and background. Pictorial space is easily conjured, and cannot easily be dispelled.

Martin himself is sanguine about this effect, where it appears. Like other effects of gesture, the way that the painter's intervention creates these phenomena is part of his

inquiry. He is in some ways a markedly classical painter, whose work is engaged with matters that are at the very root of all painting, searching for and elaborating on essential, foundational features of the art. How does painting do what it does: what are its first terms, its basic lexicon, its syntax? How does the action of the artist turn matter into meaning, and how much is said through the paint itself? What sort of magic is it that can intervene in inert material and transform it into living, moving thought? These are serious matters indeed, concerns that go to the ancient core of the practice. They have been at stake in painting since its very beginnings, and they have also been the subject matter of the great painters. Jason Martin has rigorously examined these serious matters over many years, and his results have consistently made us look again at all painting with a new eye. These latest works are an important extension of his search.

Endnotes

1. *The Book of the Art of Cennino Cennini*, chapter 62 (tr. C. Herringham, George Allen & Unwin, 1922), p.47
2. Rutherford J. Gettens and George L. Stout, *Painting Materials: A Short Encyclopedia*, (D. Van Nostrand Company, 1942), pp.166-7
3. Anita Albus, *The Art of Arts: Rediscovering Painting* (University of California Press, 2001)
4. Sir Joshua Reynolds *Discourses on Arts: Discourse XII*, 1784
5. Charles Moreau-Vauthier, *The Technique of Painting* (Heinemann, 1912), p.106
6. David Bomford, 'The Paint Layers' in *Rembrandt*, David Bomford et al. (National Gallery, 2006), p.115