

Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

APRIL 2018

JASON MARTIN

Lisson

With richly tactile surfaces embellished with undulating pigmented mounds that sometimes protrude more than a foot from metal panels, Jason Martin's paintings can resemble sculptural reliefs. His first New York solo exhibition in twenty years featured sumptuous monochromes. The compositions appeared to have resulted from a short sequence of visceral, spontaneous gestures with huge brushes or comblike trowels. Yet Martin's process is always carefully planned and calibrated, as he aims to create a primal image emblematic of the act of painting itself.

Born in Jersey, in the Channel Islands, Martin currently works in London and Portugal. His early works, from the 1990s, are seductive icons rather than the psychologically resonant expressions historically associated with gestural abstraction. They seem to engage with a visual language akin to Color Field painting, and to relate to Bram Bogart's excessive impasto reliefs or some of Jules Olitski's overloaded late works. Opulent, ornate, and at times a bit outré, the paintings are nevertheless too aggressive in their implementation and emphatic in their comportment to be merely decorative, as some of his detractors have claimed over the years.

Representing a dramatic and welcome new development in Martin's art, the works in the recent show (all 2017) bear subtle compositions of neutral-hued oil on medium-size or large-scale aluminum panels, with incidents here and there of modulated color. A wide range of luminous grays predominates. For some pieces, Martin has modified black or white pigment with just the barest touches of pink, green, or blue.

In one of the most striking pieces, *Untitled (Davy's Grey Deep / Graphite Grey / Titanium White)*, 2017, Martin slathered thick layers of pigment in irregular horizontal striations spanning the width of the panel. He used trowels to apply the underpainting, and brushes for the top layers. The deep gray of a band at the upper portion of the work blends gracefully with lighter grays at the center and bottom. A number of blobby splatters disrupt the stripe pattern and help activate the surface. In its insistent horizontality, the composition faintly suggests land- or seascape imagery—a dynamic view of surging ocean waves, perhaps—but Martin eschews any sort of representational detail.

Another outstanding work, *Untitled (Titanium White / Raw Umber / Payne's Grey Deep)*, at first appears to be a white monochrome. As one's eyes adjust to the dense, blaring surface, a delicate composition of horizontal bands several inches wide becomes apparent. Defined by gentle shifts of hue—aided by the addition of minute amounts of gray and raw umber to the white paint—the bands slowly appear in miragelike fashion. Due to the static positions of the gallery's light sources, some details of the composition could be



Jason Martin: *Untitled (Davy's Grey Deep / Graphite Grey / Titanium White)*, 2017, oil on aluminum, 86 by 70 inches; at Lisson.

perceived only as the viewer moved in relation to the panel, thus suggesting a temporal aspect to the work.

The slick, semi-reflective surfaces as well as the seemingly effortless fluidity of these works recalls Martin's early style. Yet the pieces suggest a direct engagement with Minimalist painting, particularly that of seminal figures such as Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin. The elegant show conveyed a rather melancholy mood, perhaps; and, to this viewer at least, offered a sense of introspective solace.

—David Ebony