

LISSON GALLERY

Article
July 2019

ARTICLE

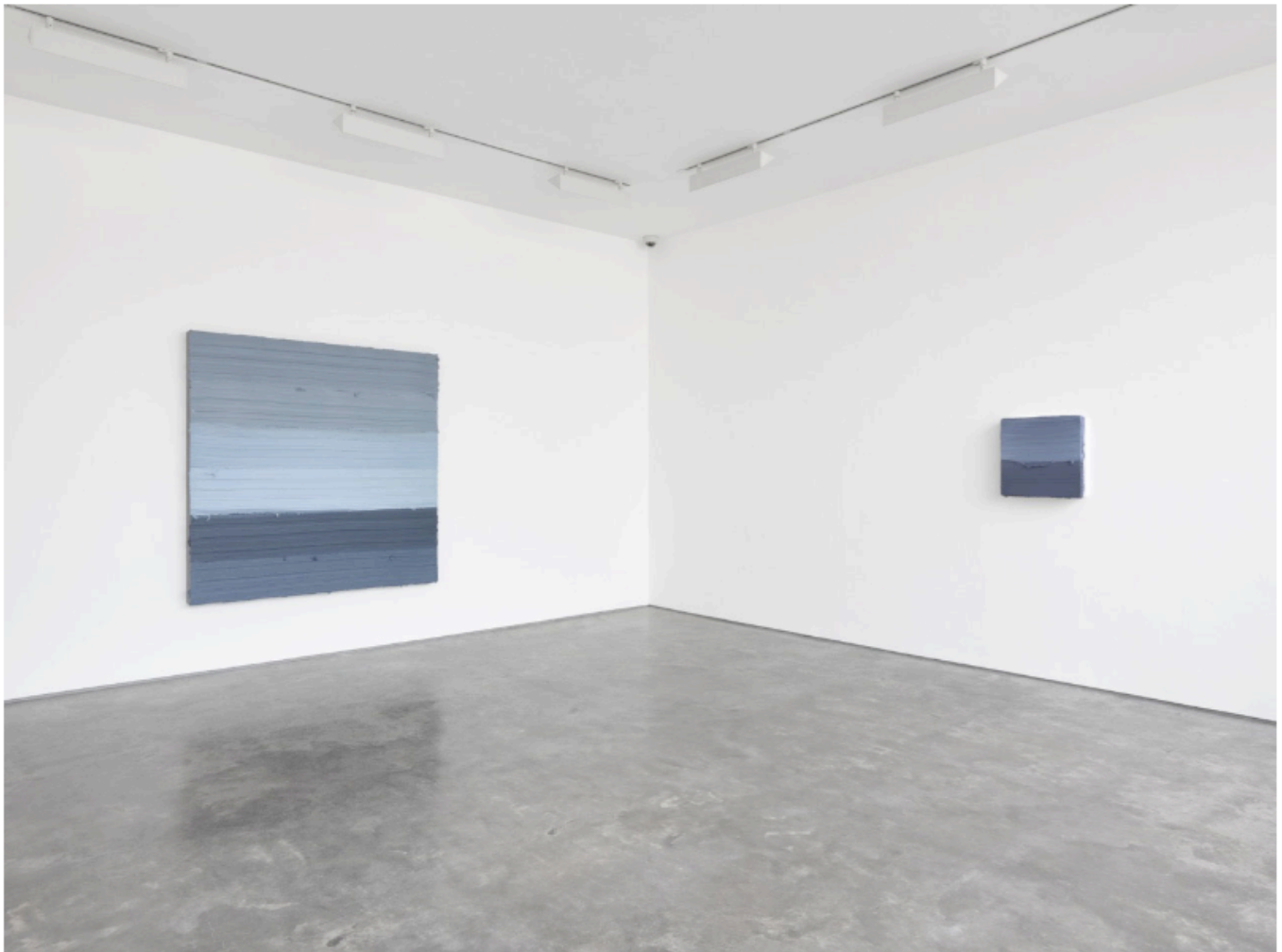
PROCESS

Oil On Canvas

Long Way Home, Jason Martin's most recent show, filled the rooms of London's Lisson Gallery with the kind of paintings he's become internationally known for: minimal in approach, textured, expansive in their use of colour, deceptively simple yet subtly drawing you in.



Words_Trisha D'Hoker



Installation view of Jason Martin: 'Long Way Home' at Lisson Gallery, London, 15 May – 22 June 2019

(Opening image) "Untitled (Zinc white / Royal blue light / French graphite grey)", 2019
Oil on aluminium, 175 x 175 cm or 68 7/8 x 68 7/8 inch

© Jason Martin, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

I know Martin, and I've seen how he works; the *'Breaking Bad'* rooms (spray-painted, plastic-sheeted), the giant handmade brushes, the detritus of a visceral, energetic, restless artist. I want to ask him about his process: how he structures his day, how he keeps going, what drives him. So, one rainy day in June, I visit him at his studio. And we dive straight in, discussing his view of the world — and how the need for it to come up against something other than the confines of the artist's mind brings him out of self-imposed exile.

Martin's studio is in a leafy corner of southwest London, close to the river. The project has stalled of late but will one day house his complete collection of work. He works less here these days — spending more time in Portugal instead, where he has created his own unique space to live and create. With Martin, you have the feeling he never completely separates the two anyway; he is the embodiment of an artist who lives in his head, and in his art. But no matter how considered and expanded that mind is, it needs the other.

Trisha D'Hoker: What have you been up to the past few years?

Jason Martin: I go through my whole working routine — which goes from when I'm in the right condition to work, when I can be very prolific, to other times when I can get distracted, and I don't feel so good. Here, there are some changes I've been making to the building which have been on hold for some years. So I don't really feel here, now, is the best working space.

Whereas in Portugal, I feel much more motivated to work. I have more space. Here, I feel like I'm boxed in. In Portugal, when I work, I have much more of a rigorous routine. And I do feel more relaxed and comfortable when I'm there. I have space. I'm in the middle of nowhere. So I tend to be more prolific. In the last few years I've been kind of regrouping — doing a lot of experimentation, challenging the whole working process, the methodology. There's always a sense of urgency to develop new approaches, and that takes time to evolve. The result of this last show in London is something I've been developing over the past 2-3 years; I also did a show in New York for Lisson last year. It was these works (from *Long Way Home*), but they weren't as reduced. These works are much more silent, and under a certain controlled methodology. The pieces in the New York show were more spontaneous, less structured.

TDH: These works did feel more structured than in the past.

JM: Yes, very much so. More so than any I've made since I was younger. Each of these works is broken down into six different spaces, and the process of introducing different tonalities was slowed down. The tonality shifts in the graphite works are very subtle, so you're reading it more as a whole; you're not reading each section as if it is slightly in front or beyond. There is a sense of horizon — landscapes, but reduced; a more fundamental sense of abstraction, a series of uninterrupted movements within. They are a step away from previous works. But painting comes slowly.

TDH: And in one of the show's three rooms you used graphite, which you hadn't worked with before?

JM: Without getting into the boring bit about how the paint is made, and without going into the whole pyrotechnics of how it's done, it feels, the graphite, quite earthy and mineral, not what you would expect. It's not very smooth. There are these particles in it, which give it more a sense of sculpture. Which room was your favourite?

TDH: I thought it would be the darks or blues, but it was the room with the white paintings that held me the longest.

JM: I think a lot of people responded to that. But you know, the quiet concerns of painting; I'm not trying to make any great big claims, this is me working through the practice I've been exploring for the past 25 years or so, within the constraints I have chosen. How can I explore, and make a territory? So in a way, they're very much like earlier works. They have been kind of shifting, but in some ways, it goes back to some of my earlier approaches, how I started.

And I think that is interesting, kind of poetic – hence the name, *Long Way Home*. It's like I've made a full circle. Some of those works reference earlier works, but in a different light. But that was that show. When I do another exhibition, it'll be a whole different set of works.

TDH: How do you know when you're ready to do a show?

JM: When you're working in some new territory and there's something to be explored, and you're enjoying it. Hopefully, you've established some connection with a gallery and they say, 'OK, *this time we're going to target this*.' So that keeps you focused.

TDH: Otherwise you could just keep working away...

JM: Once you get a certain space to hang your work in, it does focus you in a good way. You know you live in your head so much of the time. I do...

TDH: So the chance to connect with people is important.

JM: Absolutely. And you hang on to comments, that gives you confidence. You can't live in your head all of the time, continuously, trying to assess your work, create a dialogue without introducing it to a wider public – something that also has risks, but is necessary to the whole development of your work. Otherwise, I don't know how to gauge whether what I have done is successful. This is me. And I feel more defined by what I do, my work, than by anything else. So it's a chance for me to define myself by what I do, by how I approach the work. Everything I do is all in there.

TDH: Earlier you mentioned Heidegger's concept of Dasein, as a way of thinking about things.

JM: It's very interesting. Because it has to do with how others connect to you, and respond to what you do, giving you a sense of dialogue. It's about how we are defined by those around us, and how the kind of experiences that are meaningful are defined by the responses of those around us.

TDH: So how do you motivate yourself to be creative and productive?

JM: There is a more defined, structured way to work. And I can do that, but then I have to turn it on its head. I kind of terrorise myself, challenge myself, ask lots of questions – maybe too many questions — and then at some point I think, this is boring. So then I make something.

The best results are after I have had this hiatus of reflecting and ruminating. And it always comes from doubt. And the doubt — it either paralyses you, caught in the headlights, or you then define yourself against it. So that's a challenge to overcome. It's all about defining yourself beyond the obstacles in front of you. And then you create new obstacles. It can be a hazard. Because it's very anti-social and you can be your own worst victim, living in your self-appointed exile. At the same time, without that, you don't then answer to what you do. And I do go through periods of complete pathos. I've been doing it a long time, and for me, my worst enemy is inside my head, the way that I make conclusions — and it's probably not the best analytical mind.

TDH: To see things differently or be able to consider the same thing with different perspectives – you need an open, sensitive mind.

JM: I don't know if I have an open sensitive mind — or if it's more like Janus.

TDH: Two-faced?

JM: Or facing two directions. It's like, is my whole life a performance? And if it is, and I'm working through it within my criteria and I succeed in that, then is that an inauthentic life or is that a true life? I feel I need to fight to have a true life, due to conditions beyond my control. But I've made certain conclusions about how I live, based on that sense of authenticity. That's come from the relationship I have with others, and how I understand that. You want to hide within yourself — but at the same time, you feel like you always want to connect. I do feel like I'm being observed, that I am part of some bigger observation, and then effectively, for me to succeed in myself, to be able to live in my head, I have to be both at the same time — like the Janus. So how do you reconcile that? How do you find a sense of self in yourself when you're different people at different times? Can you be different people, wear different hats at different times? And does that mean you are any less authentic? You do have to adapt, but it doesn't mean you have to give up on this core idea of yourself. So over the last few years, I've been trying to reconcile and resolve that.

TDH: What about the idea that art can fill gaps where words or normal communication is difficult?

JM: Look, there's that saying; *"I've got nothing to say and I'm saying it."* And I love that. Because what we do is, we motivate ourselves by doing something creative, not with a sense of conceit, of knowing something; when we have conversations, we don't talk about what we know, we engage in reaching out to vulnerability. Isn't that what is worth talking about? Do we express things that we actually know? Do we execute those ideas and illustrate those ideas? Or do we journey those ideas through the process of working practice and in the making?

I'm more of the later.

TDH: A journeyman!

JM: I'm sure there will be more contextual meat on the bone with other artists as far as writing about it goes, because what I am talking about is not really tangible. Painting is really about the relationship one has with a certain energy that comes from your interior mind. Frank Bowling has this fantastic exhibition at the Tate now. It's taken the retrospective look on his whole life to see how inventive, how extraordinary he's been. He's been living in the shadows, in the margins for many years. He's been recognised by the establishment, but maybe not by as many as he should have been; he's due his recognition. It's good to see that, that the old guys get the recognition in the end.

[Martin, ever restless, begins pacing, picking up my notes.]

JM: Look, what are you going to write about? Nobody wants to write about my paintings. Someone wrote the other day that my paintings were more like dessert than protein. I'm talking about the context, who am I interested in, I don't know how that translates (*laughs*). Or will you just make something up?

At this point, we decide to have a glass of wine and call it a day. But not just any wine. Martin planted a vineyard on his property in Portugal about 10 years ago, and while he leaves the actual winemaking to local partners, he has created beautiful bespoke glass bottles for the wine, where the bottle is cast and the surface relief is not, as it normally would be, attached, but is part of the mold. The details are then sandblasted; there is no paper label.

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Martin believes this may be a first in terms of design for a wine bottle. Each bottle also comes in an exclusively designed box; the one I saw with a beguiling green brushstroke, draped across and around the box, drawing you in, making you want to reach out and touch – a mini-Martin masterpiece, each one.

Jason Martin: *Long Way Home* was at Lisson Gallery, 67 Lisson Street, London NW1 5DA from 15 May – 22 June 2019

For more information about the vineyard or the wine, pegodamoura@gmail.com

Long Way Home

