

THE MATTER IN HAND (THE ART OF JASON MARTIN)

A personal dialectic between matter and intuitive consciousness forms the necessary basis of the painted works of Jason Martin.

But then what can a painter use, save for the intuitions and insights of the conscious mind and the material sources of the surrounding world? To understand painting is therefore to experience a sentient mind applied to matter with a sense of its prescient immediateness, while at the same time utilising what is materially available in the world. Yet in so speaking of the materials at hand, however, there has over the last fifty years been much by way of processed innovation and extended material availability. And from the outset, the painter Martin has utilised these material innovations to his own uniquely creative advantage.ⁱ

In works that find their origins in informal abstraction and monochrome painting, he has created a highly personal and discerning vocabulary of expression. While tied to earlier aspects of action painting and new abstract and subjective modernist-minimal tendencies, he was among a challenging generation of British artists that returned to material *informel* and process-based painting in the late 1980s to early-to-mid 1990s.ⁱⁱ

The revived tendencies towards monochrome, or, less polemically put, monochroic (single colour) painting, was also evident in the period historicity at that time.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet the history of the monochrome, from its anarchic origins and fictive strategies in the nineteenth century, its role in the spiritual and/or purported metaphysics of Suprematist abstraction, through to its performance-related autonomy in the post-war, became rife with the polemics of fragmentation.^{iv} It was against this background and a desire to surmount reductionist tendencies in minimal art that the new Martin painting emerged.^v

Lines, Marks, Supports and Surface Structure

The content of abstract art is abstraction itself – something processed and perceived through the transformation of matter into a subsequent form of aesthetic materialisation.

Its associative relation to the world is otherwise argued as either immanent or transcendent, and therefore imbued with an indiscernible supplementary to what is materially present. An abstract painter develops a personal and identifiable language engaged with extended possibilities that aesthetically accrue to the materials of the world. Starting from a material viewpoint, for the last twenty-five years Jason Martin has infused every aspect of Mallarmé's so-called blank sheet of paper.^{vi}

When the painter begins, there is the initial support, the malleable materials, and the possibilities of use and application. In the context of this publication, emblematic of a discrete and unique body of STPI residential practice developed in Singapore, it is necessary nonetheless to explain the wider saturated involvement and address the consistent role and psychological sense of physical presence in the artist's works.

For nothing beneficial or of value to the artist is ever dispensed with, but has been elsewhere incorporated and honed for its potentiality. Much has been made of Martin's use of line and gesture, yet in reality it is not seen on the surface of his material supports, only its consequence or residue. You see the sweeping marks, expressive vocabulary and textured presence, that are the outcome of a gesture or series of gestures, since the performed gestural action is only ever inferred. Yet I do not argue that Martin's paintings are performances or visual records as such, unlike those of Georges Mathieu^{vii}; simply that the bodily involvement in the process is integrated into the language of making, within the working environment that surrounds the artist. If this may be less evident in the STPI works currently exhibited, it is nonetheless still redolent within the executed paper works.

In a technical sense, as works on paper they stand out as prints and drawings, but retain the continuous, creative mark-to-surface preoccupations of the artist. The stained drypoint plate etchings, while following the informal use of line in *tachisme* and encompassing Klee's famous dictum of taking a line for a walk, are a natural extension of his earlier larger scale use of the different metal surfaces of aluminium and polished stainless steel.^{viii}

Yet a new distinction is made in this instance by the use of paper supports and the impregnation process, whereby the material ink is substantially integrated in the work, rather than simply resting atop the surface.^{ix} In fact, Martin's printmaking has become an added dynamic to his work through his concentrated investigation in this area.

Martin's use of the trace, of arabesque-like marks and linear expressive ink drawing, is not actually a completely new undertaking. In many respects, it marks a return to his earlier investigative preoccupations and processed development –^x ones that recall the aesthetics of the "trace", remnant, residue, and aftermath; aesthetic issues that underpin many aspects and precocious contents of the *l'informe*.^{xi}

In the varied material pulp images exhibited we touch upon another consideration, namely that of intense material facture and the resulting surface structure. The artist has long been concerned with mediating the space between pictorial painting and the spatial aspects of sculpture. The largest of the artist's works in recent years suggest a noticeable sense of "objectness" through the variable depths in their frames and surfaces.

This question of colour, frame, expanded applications of material edges, breadth and depth of support facture and pictorial object in Martin's work, has become increasingly pronounced in recent years.^{xii} Consequently, "thingliness" is visually strengthened and grounded, shaping and extending the phenomenal logic of a given perception.^{xiii}

The Body and Movement

In abstract art the relation of the body to the support takes on a particularly unique consideration. Unlike figurative art where there is always a sense of the narrative and/or referential representational moment, abstraction in art uses inference and emotive inflection. Across the greater scope of Jason Martin's work, whether speaking of his large scale paintings or the smaller works of pulp and modelling paste, the artist's connectedness to movement and to surface mark and medium is a physical imperative. Whether the gesture is of sweep, drag, spread, splodge, drip or flick of paint, the outcome is necessarily defined by the psychophysiology of bodily presence.^{xiv}

Nonetheless, the nature of that astute presence in Martin's paintings results in certain different expressions of surface texture: each instance influences a sense of tone, and tone is distinct from colour, for sentient colour creates an optical effect while the tone of a painting creates its emotive affect. While a colour is a cognitive hue, tonal value creates and modulates through the means of light, a feeling of sensory extension.

But consciousness inhabits the world from within a body, and it is through the body that experience is ineluctably defined; what Merleau-Ponty calls the "flesh is the body inasmuch as it is the visible seer, the audible hearer, the tangible touch—the sensitive sensible: inasmuch as in it is accomplished an equivalence of sensibility and sensible thing....between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea."^{xv}

Just as each work is enacted through the body of each maker, each painting is assimilated and shaped by the experience of its viewer. In the current exhibition, the green stained cel-vinyl images, *Selvagem I* and *Selvagem II*, are examples that differ in weight and configuration of coloured pulp

application and surface modelling, yet they still create quite distinct aesthetic experiences. For just as there are creative equivocations made present through the creative choices of the maker, a similar aspect of differential choice resides in the selective and variable responses of the viewer.

Many associative ideas are implied by these black carborandum, white titanium, and cel-vinyl blue pulp-based paintings on various paper supports: an aerial viewpoint of a planet, the waves of the sea, the abraded or excoriated earth, the actual interpretation remains to be apprehended in the cognizance of the viewer. This said there is often in the experience of abstract art a failure to notice that the body has an extended accumulation of senses.

The tyranny of modernism was to privilege the visual and aural above all else, to displace the value of the haptic, olfactory and gustatory. But these demoted senses are no less active in bodily movement and are of course fully engaged in all creative outward forms or expressions.

Haptic extensions of the sensory

Jason Martin's frequent attention towards a mediating anxiety between two-dimensional painting and wall relief sculpture, foregrounds the vital role and interplay of haptic presence in his art-making.

While the artist's hand is clearly an omnipresent aspect in his relief sculpture and painting – and we may want to emphasise the dexterous power of its material manipulation – it sometimes ignores a far wider scope and use expressed by the sense of touch through haptic activities.

All the senses, including vision, are but extensions of the tactile sense; the senses are specialisations of skin tissue, and all sensory experiences are modes of touching, related to tactility.^{xvi} Hence this haptic dimension may become all the more relevant in the research situation of an artist residency, for in the manipulation and enquiry into new media and materials the hands are the sculptor-painter's eyes, for "...the skin reads the texture, weight, density and temperature of matter."^{xvii}

If we translate this to the greater body of Martin's prolific creations over the last two decades, the sheer magnitude of haptic experiences realised through his use of touch and skin sensitivity is almost overwhelming. As the internal processor and maker, the common use of touch becomes embedded in memorial consciousness, demonstrating what is meant by "differentiated into the others" – an expression of synaesthesia.^{xviii}

This informs what is often understood as the relationship between matter and memory, and they constitute the grounds for involuntary evocations, implicit unconscious, and explicit forms of intentional memory.^{xix} Seen in the context of the pulp and Lascaux structurala paste painting reliefs, the facture expresses tactile presence at every turn. While the rich blue Lascaux structurala ultramarine paper works such as *Oriental Blue I* may be the artist's indirect homage to the famed monochrome artist Yves Klein, it does not diminish their sense of haptic-optical palpability.^{xx}

The participatory use of touch and the hand is the absent presence throughout all of Jason Martin's artistic developments, and remains the case notwithstanding the casting of some works in recent years. A cast is merely a displaced hand-originated model expressed through another process, no different from the role of a camera as a displaced mechanism for recording events. The use of tools for the spreading of his materials functions similarly, whether the combing effect seen in earlier works, or dragged paint, or Martin's recent powder pigment surfaces; the implications of touch remain the same.

This said chance also plays a part in the paintings' determined completion through the drying processes of a work. The artist may have some predictable foreknowledge, but the outcome is never totally stable; as Martin has acknowledged, many of his spread and saturated surfaces are

either subject to destruction or he simply scrapes them off and begins again.^{xxi} The material investigations and realised achievements of creating a discernible personal language of expression in abstract art is Martin's salutary achievement over the last quarter-century. Jason Martin and his practice continue to fulfil the famous dictum that abstract art remains prescient as "energy and motion made visible—memories arrested in space." (Jackson Pollock)

Mark Gisbourne

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Martin has used gels, acrylics, oil, inks, sand and various mixed media, and recently metal casting. Also he has utilised an enormous diversity of symmetrical and asymmetrical painting supports systems such as aluminium, Plexiglas, MDF, Melamine, polished stainless steel, fibreglass, and recently nickel, as well as traditional historical supports such as copper and canvas. For the recent series of cast works see Ossian Ward "Opposites Attract" and Luca Massimo Barbero "It is all a moment (but forever)" in *Jason Martin: Painting as Sculpture*, Lisson Gallery, Milan, 2013, pp. 7-15.

ⁱⁱ These included British artists like Ian Davenport who left Goldsmiths and part of the Freeze generation and exhibition, 1988, see Martin Filler, Michael Bracewell and Damian Hirst, *Ian Davenport: Twenty Five Years of Painting*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2014. Also Alexis Harding who left Goldsmiths in 1995, see Mark Gisbourne, *Alexis Harding*, Andrew Mummery Gallery, London, 1998 And a number abstract process painters like Estelle Thompson, among others, see monograph by Tony Godfrey and Deborah Robinson, *Estelle Thompson*, London, Merrill Publisher, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1993, as Martin was finishing his studies at Goldsmiths, a retrospective of *Robert Ryman* took place at the Tate Gallery (February 17—April 25), travelling to Madrid, New York, San Francisco and Minneapolis, see *Robert Ryman*, MOMA, 1993. Also an Yves Klein retrospective took place similarly at the Hayward Gallery, in 1994, see Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein*, Hayward Gallery, 1994.

^{iv} As cultural strategy, see Mark Gisbourne, In "Einem Streich: Von der Parodie zur Zeitlosigkeit darüber hinaus," *Jason Martin*, Städtische Galerie, Nordhorn, 1998, p. 35 (+ notes). For a detailed history on the monochrome, Denys Riout, *La Peinture Monochrome: histoire et archéologie d'un genre*, Nîmes, Editons Jacqueline Chambon, 1996.

^v For the different aspects of its development in the work of Jason Martin, see the textual paragraphs in Andrew Renton, *Jason Martin*, Milan, Charta, 2004.

^{vi} "...I'll put this sheet of paper between the two of us. Breaking the spell of your permanent presence, it will at least initiate you into what the invisible do not see, the minute detail of my days: it's thanks to this agreeable compensation that I've reached this decision." (1864) The poet quoted in Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and his Circle*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, (1999) 2005, p. 46.

^{vii} The French lyrical abstraction artist Mathieu made filmed kimo-clad painting performances of his gestural and calligraphy expressive canvases sometimes realised literally in minutes, see Dario Cimorelli, *Georges Mathieu: Retrospective*, Paris, Paris Musées Association, 2003.

^{viii} The term *tachisme* is a painting process as part of the French post-war informal painting tradition, it places an emphasis on gesture and the aesthetic of trace. The concept was first propounded by Michel Tapié; *Un art où il s'agit de nouveaux dérivages du réel*, Paris Gabriel Giraud et fils, 1952.

^{ix} The impregnating of the surface and thereby integrating the material into the material support began with Jackson Pollock's use of raw cotton duck, but is attributed largely to the Washington Color School "stain painters" Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, though they rejected all gestural aspects, see Karen Wilkin and Carl Belz, *Color as Field: 1950-75*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007.

^x Martin c. 1999-2003, also created a series of informal ink-based arabesque drawings, see Renton *op cit.*, pp. 20, 50-53, et al.

^{xi} In its ugly translation into English it is defined as “formlessness”, emerging as a concept conceived by the French Surrealist writer Georges Bataille (Documents, 1929-30), see Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User Guide*, New York, Zone Books, 1997 (published in an extended English following a major exhibition *L’Informe* “Mode d’Emploi”, Georges Pompidou, 1996).

^{xii} It has been evident from the outset as seen in works called *Untitled (Grey Loop Painting #1, 1997)* and *Untitled (Yellow Loop Painting #1, 1998)*, and an important aspect in the artist’s practice, see Jason Martin, *Jason Martin Werke 1997-2017*, The Schaufter Foundation, Schauwerk Sindelfingen, Sindelfingen, 2017.

^{xiii} For phenomenological “thingliness” and Heideggerian aesthetics, Martin Heidegger, “The Thing”, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Eng trans., Albert Hofstadter, New York, Harper & Row, 1971, (pp. 163-180) “What in the thing is thingly? What is the thing in itself? We shall not reach the thing in itself until our thinking has first reached the thing as a thing” p. 165.

^{xiv} The sense of various surface textures is particularly pronounced in a recent series of vertical paintings, see Francis Gooding, “New Works By Jason Martin”, *Jason Martin*, Lisson Gallery, London, 2016.

^{xv} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Eng trans., Alphonse Lingis, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. liv.

^{xvi} Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, New York, Harper & Row, 1986. “The skin is the oldest and most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our efficient protector...Even the transparent cornea of the eye is overlain by a layer of modified skin...Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose and mouth, it is the sense which became differentiated into the others...‘the mother of the senses’.” p. 3.

^{xvii} Juhani Pallasmaa, “The Shape of Touch”, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, Chichester and London, 2010, (pp. 56-59) p. 56.

^{xviii} *op cit.*, p. 3 For neural synaesthesia consult the extensive writings and researches of V.S. Ramachandran, *Phantoms of the Brain: Human Nature and the Architecture of the Mind* (1998), New York, Harper Collins, 2005.

^{xix} For early investigations into matter and memory, see Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory: Essay on the Relation of the Body and Spirit* (1896), New York, Zone Books, 1990.

^{xx} See Sidra Stich, *op cit.*

^{xxi} In this respect there is a striking affinity with the work of the Mexican Bosco Sodi, see Mark Gisbourne, “Matter as Metaphor: The Art of Bosco Sodi”, *Bosco Sodi*, Berlin Braus Verlag, 2015, pp. 88-89.