

## Jason Martin and the Abstract Idea of Landscape

Demetrio Paparoni

What allows us to recognize a work of art, and to accept its status as such when approaching its inherent meaning – regardless of its characteristics or the way it is presented – is the ability to elaborate considerations connected to theories and reflections which developed around works that were either created previously or around the same time. The role that theory plays in the definition of an artwork is, of course, important, particularly in the Modern and Post-Modern context, but it's obviously not enough to define its quality, or its power of attraction or repulsion – the latter is a component of aesthetics due to its connection to the concept of beauty, albeit by contrast. The question is complex, demonstrated by the fact that every object, not necessarily one with artistic purposes, can elicit feelings of attraction or repulsion. But the fascination exerted by an object does not alone suffice to define its status as an artwork.

I believe this introduction is necessary because, under the assumption that art is always born from art, and that each artwork is always a consequence of the seeds previously sown, it allows me to clarify that the reason why Jason Martin is one of the main players of the contemporary artistic scene is indeed his ability to create iconic works, which at the same time encompass significant experiences of Modernism and Postmodernism, without the urgency to quote them. In fact, Martin follows the example of Modern and Post-Modern painting tradition, refusing any notion of quotation or appropriation.

A step back in time and a few examples will help me clarifying what I mean. When in 1965 Roy Lichtenstein revisited de Kooning's brushstroke in a cartoon-like style, creating the subject of his series *Brushstroke*, it became immediately evident that we were witnessing the linguistic translation of a *gesture* that belonged to a different artist. Looking at his graphic translation of de Kooning's brushstroke, which flattens the pictorial matter and at the same time freezes the rapid gesture of a hand that holds a brush soaked in paint, our mind goes to the aforementioned Master of Abstract Expressionism. However, Lichtenstein's Pop spirit firmly stands out. We recognize the origin of the image but we are far from asserting that Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* are, in their originality, none but a quote of de Kooning's gesture. They are art born from art in a game of references that follow one another like links in a chain. Lichtenstein himself admitted that the idea behind his *Brushstrokes* came whilst looking at works by Mondrian and Picasso, "inevitably leading to the idea of a de Kooning<sup>1</sup>".

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Lichtenstein in conversation with John Coplans, *Artforum*, 5, n. 9, May 1967.

I write this because as I stood in front of several of Jason Martin's works (not all of them, I do not mean his variegated artistic output as a whole) I couldn't help but think of de Kooning who, in turn, in a game of references, brought to mind Liechtenstein. In the works by Martin in which the pictorial matter protrudes and gives the sense of the gesture's speed fail to find the translation of de Kooning's brushstroke; rather, I see original paintings which encompass the three-dimensionality of a sculpture, whilst remaining paintings—in other words, works that I wouldn't know if to define as sculptures or paintings. But in this game of references, the dual nature of Martin's works recalls the wooden and bronze sculptures that Lichtenstein himself created out of his *Brushstrokes*, in direct opposition to the graphic sign on the canvas. The subject of the work is still the same, but the nature between painting and sculpture remains very distinct—a distinction that is not always so clear in Martin's works. When faced with his works (and here I'm referring to his entire production) it becomes evident how the process requires a gesture that engages the artist's every last muscle. Yet this hand-to-hand with the painting does not recall the gesture of the Abstract Expressionists. In this case, once again, it is the differences, both conceptual and formal, that allow us to understand how Martin naturally avoids what's already been said and done. Martin's works originate from his sentimental relationship with nature, which in his works becomes abstraction, a *surface* or *body* able to evoke landscapes, figures and shadows. At times the pictorial spaces of his paintings contain the idea of a landscape, the reference of an illusion of a figurative pictorial space that doesn't lack in elemental references, such as earth turning into mud, fire bringing magma to a boil, water turning into ice, mist blurring shadows, wind shaping and moving them, evoking sea waves or sand dunes. His painting turns into a living body, and preserves the energy that is transferred from the artist's action to the pictorial matter.

The never-ending challenge that brings together many painters is the ability to create the illusion that light comes from within the painting itself. Martin's pictorial surfaces actually catch and retain light, allowing them to change depending on the different light source and the point of view of the observer. A similar effect can be found in Michelangelo Pistoletto's mirror works or in Robert Rauschenberg's mirror installations. The works of these two artists, however, are not paintings and the material they use, the mirror, has nothing to do with Martin's reflective high-relief casts, which are created from molds of thick *brushstrokes* and scratches, or textural impasto. Despite the conceptual nature they assigned to the mirror, for Pistoletto or Rauschenberg this medium is linked to a life-like dynamic, insofar as it returns a realistic picture. Martin's reflective casts instead turn the reflections of reality into abstraction.

While the cast on the one hand, the copy of something else, for example the body of the work, on the other hand the surface becomes an iridescent skin that can be conditioned by the external world. The

empirical process that leads to the final result and which includes pressing, casting, plating, and polishing is part of the work's integral significance which in Martin never prescind from the method. One of the most significant instances of the translation of images into abstract representation can be found in the numerous depictions of the Rouen Cathedral by Claude Monet. The cathedral in Monet's pictorial representations looks very different from how it actually appears in real life. During the 1960s Lichtenstein radicalized the process of abstractly representing the same subject, starting precisely with Monet's depictions from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Looking at Martin's works, it is evident how the fading form is not alien to reality. Martin further radicalizes the process started by Monet: he depicts natural reality whilst the form fades completely.

Martin's work oscillates between a sort of romantic subjectivity and the objectivity of Analytical Painting that emerged in the '60s, in parallel with Pop Art, with the work of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Agnes Martin, whose artistic production also includes paintings characterized by horizontal backgrounds. Rauschenberg and Agnes Martin considered the work (always square-shaped) as the setting in which they could experiment the language of painting with conceptual logic. They used brushstrokes, lines and grids on different media, so as to investigate the language through which painting manifests itself. Despite the evocative titles of some of their works, in particular those of Agnes Martin, these painters conceived abstraction as in contrast to figuration, and never made any concessions to romantic attitudes. On more than one occasion, Rauschenberg has described the reasons behind his paintings by indicating the number of brushstrokes and the size of the brush. In the series of paintings titled *Winsor* (1966), for example, he aims to "paint painting". He splits the panel in equal parts, and then lays a white-drenched brushstroke so as to obtain slightly detached strips, allowing the gestural interruption to be perceived. His works are cerebral; they call for an intellectual, scientific and objective analysis. Agnes Martin, on the contrary, introjects reality. His works are partly self-referential, and his personal vision of nature violently breaks into the painting, returning the shimmering light or the chiaroscuro determined by the viscosity and the movement of the pictorial matter, which often creates a reflective surface. Other times, it's the density of the pictorial mass on the surface of the painting that *draws* the chiaroscuro in a game of references and connections which include Fontana's holes and cuts, and the physical energy we find in the method of Jackson Pollock or Yves Klein. In Martin's words, "I have always found warmth by the references I stumble upon whilst painting. I consider painting to be a conversation that relies on previous discussions that I have witnessed or actively participated in or experienced. [...] I seek these moments of recollection and build content through these 'found' moments – the recollection of a methodical Cézanne brushmark; a luminous dash of white suggestive of Manet; a composition honed from an O'Keefe (flora or gender); a spiral rhythm plotting Boccioni or Balla – bringing into the surface a contemporary

chiaroscuro and extending the surface beyond the limits of the field, becoming a guileless Dada edge<sup>2</sup>”.

The inevitable gap between the work of Martin and that of previous generations of abstract painters is mainly triggered by the fact that, being born in 1970, he started painting in an atmosphere charged with the awareness of an art free of any ideological and formal constraint, something that the preceding generation had already partially escaped. This freedom is clearly visible in his works, as they don't need to stand in contrast to anything in order to exist. At the same time he deals with painting as a process: he thickens the layer of color onto the surface and spreads it with unusual tools, like a piece of cardboard or irregularly-cut polystyrene, or by using other flexible, smooth or comb-like materials. Within this dynamic, he accepts waste to the extent of preserving excess paint that blatantly overflows off the edges of the medium. He accepts the error and keeps repeating it until he sees it as the only possible solution. He creates a coexistence between what were once considered to be antithetical experiences. This and more makes him one of the most interesting abstract painters of our times, putting his art in felicitous harmony with that of his elder, Sean Scully. It's no coincidence that they both share an interest in geometry, that they both use a dense *brushstroke*, and that they both express a very personal vision of being alive.

The works on display were created during lockdown and - as the artist himself has stated – though they are not conceived as a whole, they share the sense of hollowness that emerged among humans due to the pandemic. In Martin's words, “The spaces explored are thresholds. [...] They suggest not a nostalgia but a current and classic redux”. The chromatic references of the present paintings are inspired by a Brazilian artistic movement called “Trópicalia”, from the '60s, which merged Brazilian and African rhythms with British and American psychedelia. This movement is an example of interaction as it embraces different influences without excluding any linguistic expression. We find the same openness in the works of Martin. The title of the exhibit, “Tropicalissimo”, is a fusion of the term “Trópicalia” with the Italian word “bellissimo”.

## **Demetrio Paparoni**

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Martin in Luca Massimo Barbero's *Of Night and Day*, catalogue of the exhibition *Vigil*, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 2009, in collaboration with Mimmo Scognamiglio Artecontemporanea. Printed in 2011, p. 11.