

# Art in America

## WAKE UP CALL

by Nancy Princenthal



PHOTO: Works by Ellen Berkenblit and Theo A. Rosenblum, on view at the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The three new paintings Chris Martin has installed in an atrium of the Corcoran Gallery are big, and seem bigger. At 26 feet tall, they all reach past the balustrade on the mezzanine above and directly engage the columns that extend upward beyond its railing. These canvases, the most monumental among the nearly 60 works in Martin's terrific survey here, play bold, read-from-a-distance pattern and color against elements visible only at intimate range, drawing us perilously close to the towering expanses of canvas.

*Light Brahma Stomp*, the central work, deploys a motif Martin has used for 20 years: a broad, wavy, peristaltic stripe that tapers to a point at the top and is generally, as here, punctuated with white dots. This painting is black and white, but the white is dirty, scuffed brown in places, and crisscrossed with three-pronged glyphs—the footprints of a chicken that trod on the canvas, tracking black paint into white. (Martin lives in Brooklyn but also has a home in rural upstate New York; the chicken is part of the upstate household. All of the very big paintings were executed outdoors.) *Birds Sing in the Morning (Homage to Purvis Young)* is a windowpane-patterned field of sky blue framed in yellow, the colors sharp but impure, a little polluted. As with all of Martin's big paintings, the canvas is made from remnants sewn together, and the visible seams, combined with happily tolerated wrinkles and sags, lend further urban grit to the sunny atmosphere. Perching along the bottom edge of *Birds Sing* and ascending its sides are collaged illustrations of various avians, including a cardinal and a hummingbird. There is also a *New York Times* obituary for the self-taught painter Purvis Young.

Are these immersive fields of pure visual sensation, or narrative works meant to be considered, like conceptual art, at reading distance? Abstraction or figuration? Handmade originals or pastiches of photo-based imagery? Martin prefers both/and to either/or, an inclination that governs everything he does. *Radio Sunset*, the third

atrium painting, is (literally) the most dazzling, and the funkiest. A roiling swamp of glitter—gallons and gallons, surely—it is sparkly, tawny, smoky, filthy. Here and there are single cut-glass crystals from a chandelier supplier, and a couple of glass-bead necklaces; they practically disappear in the dizzying haze. The grandeur of the northern lights and a mica-flecked New York sidewalk both come to mind. (So does Jules Olitski.) Painted on the Brooklyn studio's roof, this work had its surface repeatedly washed away by heavy rains; the blazing oranges promised by its title have become a smoggy memory. As is true in many of Martin's paintings, handwritten words name tutelary spirits. Here, placed along the bottom edge, they include WOL and WOOK, the D.C. radio stations that Martin, who was born in Washington in 1954, listened to in adolescence, developing a lifelong love of Motown and jazz. Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Marvin Gaye and Curtis Mayfield are all present in newsprint photos of varying legibility. Mozart is there, too; in an opening day walk-through, Martin called him the Michael Jackson of his day, a precocious star who was ruthlessly exploited. Way at the top of the painting, Amy Winehouse makes a tiny appearance, in one of several cameos of the singer among the works in this show. Martin explained, only half jokingly, that he was devoting some spiritual energy to keeping her alive. (Sadly, it did not work.)

Among the photos in *Radio Sunset* is one featuring Ron Bladen's massive sculpture *The X* (1967) under construction in the atrium where Martin's paintings now hang. *The X* formed part of the legendary 1967 "Scale as Content" exhibition, in which Tony Smith's *Cigarette* (1961) occupied a mirroring first-floor atrium. These daunting neoclassical galleries, at the heart of the museum and of the nation's capital, have often seen provocation. When a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition came to the Corcoran in 1989, congressional opposition forced its closure, launching the culture wars of the following decade. Such hometown histories matter greatly to Martin, who, for a painter committed to formal issues, is deeply engaged with extra-visual politics. After attending Yale for a couple of years, he dropped out and moved to New York in 1976, and although he painted continuously, his professional path was circuitous. He traveled, notably to India, and took typical early-art-career odd jobs (museum guard, art mover). Less typically, he completed a BFA in art therapy at New York's School of Visual Arts in 1992, and for roughly 15 years worked at an AIDS day treatment program based in Chelsea, which took him to clinics in Harlem, the Lower East Side and Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood.

FROM THE START OF his practice—which coincided with the rise of the superheated market for Neo-Expressionist painting in the 1980s—Martin's relationship to the commercial art world was wary. He had a handful of solo New York gallery exhibitions in the late 1980s and early '90s, then a half-a-dozen quiet years. He has described a crisis of belief that occurred during his early work with AIDS patients.<sup>1</sup> Some big, black paintings came out of this time. So did other, more unorthodox experiments, including making paintings with fire, or in front of an audience, sometimes with dancers

and a group of Nigerian drummers, or "while making love with paint on top of canvases—I thought I could make 'passionate' paintings," he said laughingly in a 2008 *Brooklyn Rail* interview, "but it wasn't such a good idea."<sup>2</sup> He has placed work in bus shelters and on the sides of buildings, and has taken his big paintings for walks around the block, inviting feedback from neighbors in and out of the art world. Though painting is generally a solitary activity, collaboration—of a kind not terribly conducive to the production of salable artworks—is Martin's natural state. His first big Manhattan gallery show was at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, in 2008.

He had been long celebrated nonetheless. The poet Ann Lauterbach wrote a poetic encomium in 1990.<sup>3</sup> Peter Halley, a classmate at Yale, called him a "cultural guide" in a 1997 essay, saying Martin had "molded for himself an exemplary career in which art is made and life is lived uncompromisingly."<sup>4</sup> A decade later, critic Bruce Hainley praised what he saw as heroic apostasy in Martin's work, and urged young artists to submit to its "corrupting" influence.<sup>5</sup> The writer David Levi-Strauss, labeling Martin an "American Brahmin/Bohemian," hailed his "public service, compassion, spiritual search."<sup>6</sup>

For his part, Martin generally speaks like a working stiff—or a union organizer—as in, from a 2003 essay, "The new abstract painting says 'Fuck you we will not stand guard at the tomb of modernism but neither do we feel pressed to deliver the latest titillation.'"<sup>7</sup> He concedes that minds can sometimes be profitably altered by passive things—smoking pot, say—as well as by strenuous or virtuous ones (risky travel to distant places, spiritual discipline). The list of artists whose influence—and, often, friendship—he credits, sometimes by naming them on his canvases, is long. It includes Mondrian, whom he calls a "gestural painter—he's always moving, testing"—and Al Held, who was Martin's teacher at Yale. He relates, without embarrassment, a very funny dream about Rothko, whom Martin encounters at a big cocktail party in his parents' elegant drawing room. Rothko looks vaguely like an old friend and more clearly like a homeless drunk, and is armed with an antique revolver. Hardly daunted, Martin wields "a shiny new pump-action 20-gauge shotgun," and kills his melancholy rival with three blasts that leave the younger artist "euphoric."<sup>8</sup> But Martin also acknowledges, in all seriousness, his own old-fashioned ambitions for painting, as when, identifying himself with beleaguered abstractionists of every stripe, he says, "We are searching for this state of utter conviction."

IN THE 50 SMALL paintings ranging from 1980 to the present that are hung irregularly on the curving walls of the Corcoran's second-floor rotunda gallery—a difficult space put to good use—the prodigious scope of Martin's fellowship is made clear. Painted on every conceivable kind of surface, from aluminum foil and corrugated cardboard boxes to cotton batting and artichoke leaves, these small works honor artists ranging from Alfred Jensen, who shares Martin's interest in numerology ("Good Morning Alfred Jensen, Good Morning," reads a 2005-07 painting whose rainbow of stripes frames, in Jensen-esque colors, a bikini-clad calendar model) to Dash Snow (a messy little canvas of 2006-07 titled *Dash Snow Bombing*, in which the late enfant terrible appears in a tiny blurry photo by Ryan McGinley, spray-painting a wall).

Though not named, other connections are suggested: to Robert Ryman, in an all-white painting executed on slices of Wonder Bread; to Eva Hesse's 1966 *Hang Up*, in a painting from which a loop of stiffened string extends; and to Bruce Nauman's 1967 neon spiral proclaiming "the true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths," in a canvas called *Grandiosity and Depression* (1988-90)

that bears, in snaking letters, a quote from Alice Miller. (It reads, "Grandiosity is the defense against depression which masks the deep pain over loss of self"; as is often the case with Martin's references to cultural icons, one senses a perfect balance between respect and irony.) There is a small 2003-04 painting on stilts, which seems ready for a religious procession, although its vaguely flagstone patterning—another recurring motif—evokes Jasper Johns more strongly than a paraded saint. High up on the wall and rather alone is a grinning death's head (1988), painted on greasy, soiled newspaper. Even more alone is another practically invisible Amy Winehouse collage (2007-08), hanging above the doorway. For all the conviviality of this busy installation—and a joyful buzz of conversation is its dominant tone—mortality is abroad among these paintings, too.

One more flight up is the show's final gallery, where giants roam again. All of the six large and very large paintings in this room refer in some way to landscape, either the Catskills in New York or the Ganges at Varanasi, India. *Hemlock* (2010) features two tall evergreens, painted with brooms and textured with shoeprints, leaning companionably toward each other and rising to the roughly 11-foot-tall painting's top. Pasted along the bottom are small photos of a variety of mushrooms; the word "hemlock" is painted in capital letters. Again, the little images draw us close enough that we can practically smell the damp forest floor and the fragrant pines above. *Lake* (2002-05) is a symmetrical black-and-white painting that is wider—much wider—than it is high, the lake of its title a yawning, tarry ellipse at the center. Three white dots spaced evenly across its darkly gleaming expanse mirror smaller dots in a slender black ellipse above, which enhances the impression of a nocturnal sky receding upward. Horizontal black bands bend up and down at the canvas's sides, in the furthest periphery of vision, framing an image that irresistibly invites a swoon into its formidable depths.

For the ecstatic flipside of this moody image, there is *Ganges Sunrise Asi Ghat Varanasi...* (2002), in which horizontal lozenges set against a black-and-white background step down as they descend the canvas, like the devout entering the holy river to pray. But nothing equates physical and optical experience more powerfully than the triptych *Staring into the Sun . . . (4±7±11)*, 2003, two-thirds of which lies on the floor, a royal road to the upright final panel. The violently opposed blue and red bands that run vertically up each roughly 12-by-10-foot panel are narrowest and most numerous (the title counts them out) in the one nearest an approaching viewer. The progression creates a weird inversion of perspective that helps makes the last panel, against the far wall, loom huge and—just as the title warns—blinding.

In talking about this painting at the opening, Martin was characteristically matter-of-fact, explaining that he was experimenting with very tall canvases, and had originally meant this one to be hung vertically in its 36-foot-high entirety; he also noted his interest in a painting by Ellsworth Kelly that similarly spans wall and floor. The scale shifts that mark so many of Martin's big paintings can be seen as an example of his effort to reach out to viewers, and *Staring into the Sun* makes that gesture almost literal, extending a virtual welcome mat. Historically, landscape and monumental scale have been bound up inextricably with the sublime, with Romantic notions of awe and terror. It is one of Martin's accomplishments to strike that thought, replacing it with the assertion that big, gorgeous landscapes—and drop-

dead abstractions, too—are everyday things. There is nothing more prosaic, his work says, than mountains and woods, sunlight and water. Paying attention, in any case, is what matters. It can be said that he has devoted all his efforts to a single project: figuring out how to make painting that functions, in his words, as “a machine that wakes you up.”

Currently On View “Chris Martin: Painting Big” at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., through Oct. 23.

1 All quotes, unless otherwise noted, from a conversation with the author, May 22, 2011.

2 “In Conversation: Chris Martin with Craig Olsen,” *Brooklyn Rail*, February 2008, p. 25.

3 Ann Lauterbach, “Chris Martin: Nocturnes for the Nineties,” in *Chris Martin*, New York, John Good Gallery, 1990, unpaginated.

4 Peter Halley, “Chris Martin,” in *Chris Martin*, New York, Pierogi 2000, 1997, p. 2.

5 Bruce Hainley, “Open Letter to America (Thank You, Allen Ginsberg),” in *Chris Martin*, New York, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2008.

6 David Levi-Strauss, “Some Young Vines for Chris Martin,” in *Chris Martin*, Hanover, N.H., Jaffe-Friede Gallery, Dartmouth College, 2011, p. 12.

7 Chris Martin, “Everything is Finished Nothing is Dead: An Article About Abstract Painting,” *Brooklyn Rail*, April-May 2003, p. 25.

8 Ibid., p. 24. 9 Ibid.

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