

ARTFORUM

Berlin Reviews

Chris Martin

KOW

Chris Martin paints to open up a space of possibility. This was made particularly clear in his recent exhibition at KOW, which consisted of paintings finished in the past five years. Throughout this work, points of reference from various cultural strata intermingle: Glued-on photos or newspaper clippings depict musicians—some better known than others—as well as anonymous figures, animals, and so on. Icons of recreational drug culture also abound, whether in the form of “420” painted in bold strokes across the width of one painting, or psychotropic mushrooms cropping up in collages, or even a tchotchke mounted onto the surface of a work. But the paintings also exhibit an expert awareness of painting itself, its historical deconstruction into color shapes and brushstrokes, and the dissection of its substrate. Martin has been known to carve holes or create small, lengthwise creases in canvases, and sometimes to break stretcher bars. He layers visual information from different registers—cultural references, formal painting tropes—vigorously, instinctively, and sometimes bluntly. Even at their most abstract, his paintings are not reductive but rich with visual incident.

The entire picture plane of the medium-size *Perfect January Morning (A Remark You Made)*, 2012–14, is covered with a layer of glitter stuck to black acrylic paint. In its subtly gradated, all-over texture as well as its spectacular visual appeal, the work is surprisingly similar to a good deal of recent abstract painting by young artists. But Martin—as a seasoned, sixty-year-old painter—uses glitter not only for its visual dynamism, but for its material poverty and lackluster provenance in arts and crafts rather than high art. Thus, the work is a testament to the primacy of context in artistic reception today: Martin’s use of glitter not only signals the collapse of cultural references at play throughout his work but also relates to his personal experience. He has previously explained that he discovered glitter as an art material in the 1990s and early 2000s while working as an art therapist with people afflicted with AIDS, addiction, or mental illness. Martin’s work is conditioned by this escape from formal training as well as by the courage to be direct and unrestrained that he witnessed in his patients.

This sense of freedom has another tie-in as well, as suggested by *TAZ #12*, 2012–13. The work’s title alludes to Hakim Bey’s 1991 treatise *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*. Bey’s philosophy of the TAZ describes a “guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen” in an attempt to avoid suppression or integration by structures of power. Of course, this type of cultural radicalism is often associated with defiance of social norms, as is also true of the drug culture referenced in others of Martin’s paintings. And such radicalism aspires to cut through boundaries, like those defining a hierarchy within culture. As Bey also wrote of the TAZ, it aims to pass from mediated experience to a real, immediate one. This is a paradigm of contemporary experience and visuality that we know well from Sigmar Polke, and a perspective that Martin seems dead set on extending. As far as painting goes, this coupling of legacies is a path worth taking—and worth talking about.

— John Beeson



Chris Martin, *Perfect January Morning (A Remark You Made)*, 2012–14, acrylic, glitter, collage on canvas, 48 × 39”.