

Chris Martin

by Alan Gilbert

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Allen Ginsberg might be famous for his poetry, but he took his photographic practice seriously, especially in his later years, when he imagined himself as a bit of an artist. It was helpful that he had some very famous friends to photograph, including Bob Dylan and Jack Kerouac. In fact, nearly all of Ginsberg's images are portraits, and a half-dozen reproductions of them—each of the eccentric filmmaker and archivist Harry Smith—are embedded in two canvases on display at Chris Martin's Anton Kern Gallery exhibition. Smith is probably best known as the compiler of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* recordings that helped ignite the fifties folk music revival in the United States, which in turn played a role in the next decade's counterculture and alternative politics. Smith was also an experimental filmmaker who made elaborate collage films featuring cut-out animated figures, the most ambitious of which is entitled *Heaven and Earth Magic*. Smith understood his combinations of filmic images to be an almost alchemical process.

It's not a coincidence, then, that Ginsberg captioned a portrait of Smith pouring milk from a carton into a jar with the phrase "transforming milk into milk." And it's not a coincidence that Martin collaged this photograph (sans caption and upside down) into the painting *Egyptian Bodega* (2018), because there's a similar alchemical process at work in the fifteen large—some very large (i.e., 135 × 118 inches)—canvases exhibited at Anton Kern (six of which seem to have been produced, or at least completed, in the first two months of this year alone). Martin's inclusion of glitter in a number of these works is one such example of this attempt to transform materials. It's not used to make the paintings look decorative or in any way glamorous, but to convert their surfaces into something more magical. The first painting visitors see upon entering the gallery is the darkly verdant *Double Frog Afternoon* (2017). Martin has encrusted green glitter so thickly that it almost appears to be mixed into the abundantly applied paint, which turns the collaged reproductions of frogs, trees, a pond, and a bird into something more incantatory.

A ritual is dependent as much on the physical gesture as the belief, perhaps more so in a secular context. *Double Frog Afternoon* is a galvanized landscape that doesn't seek serene contemplation; it doesn't even necessarily want to be admired. Martin is interested in altered states of consciousness (the collaged set of marijuana leaves in *Golden Age #2* [2018] is the clearest sign of that), which in this particular instance means a form of environmentalism that prods the viewer to become activated, more alive. At the same time, the heavy green glitter in *Double Frog Afternoon* almost looks like artificial grass stained with gorgeous drips of purple and yellow paint. Slyly incorporated images of a computer and a lawn chair gesture at how even the most direct experience of nature has become mediated—although it probably always was, as Paul Cézanne's landscapes aimed to demonstrate.

This dynamic between a grand vision and its subtle undercutting appears throughout Martin's show. Even though he is working as large as ever—both literally and metaphorically—Martin's work remains playful and personable, just as in a couple paintings glitter is used more for fun and pizzazz. *Double Frog Afternoon* is among the most textured pieces on display, but the surfaces of other works are done much more quickly. *Golden Age (for Harry Smith)* (2018), the companion painting that contains more of Ginsberg's photographs of Smith, is covered in a thin, dulled gold paint—the alchemical process as partial success or failure? (*Egyptian Bodega* also uses this gold.) It features big collage images of Saturn and Jupiter, as well as—according to the exhibition checklist's work descriptions—marijuana stuck to the canvas. Stimulants may have helped induce a few of the visions



Chris Martin, *Egyptian Bodega*, 2018. Oil, acrylic and collage on canvas, 85 × 74 inches.
© Chris Martin. Courtesy Anton Kern, New York.

Martin depicts (and Smith too), but for Martin (and Smith) art is the fundamental consciousness-transforming act.

It does so via associative procedures, and each of Martin's fifteen canvases contains a set of images and painterly techniques with its own internal logic, which are also shared across the exhibition: planets (especially), computers, birds; the colors yellow, green, and red (echoing Pan-African and Rastafarian ones, it might be noted); and paint applied in thick bands and smears. Martin is sometimes described as an abstract painter, and he has written insightfully and humorously about abstraction here in the Brooklyn Rail, in particular "Everything is Finished Nothing is Dead: An Article About Abstract Painting." Yet at Anton Kern, the more one looks at Martin's canvases, the more they reveal, mostly in terms of their iconography, although their material surfaces offer this too. The interlocked hermetic imagery of *Commander Salamander* (2017) includes a collaged reproduction of the titular character (an important alchemical figure) combined with a piece of fabric printed with wavy mushrooms (more psychedelic than edible), an inverted color reproduction of two robed medieval Christian elders in a boat, and a separately painted and affixed upside-down vibrant red cardinal (perhaps punning on the Pope's henchmen)—all of them scattered across a canvas painted with some of the loopy brushstrokes in the show.

Moving through the two-floor exhibition, one has the sense that Martin is simultaneously staring into a landscape or night sky and having an internal vision. Yet it's important not to read anything too literally or treat the paintings as codes or puzzles to be unlocked and solved. In the end, alchemy is a metaphoric and spiritual process, not a physical one. What Martin's exhibition most reveals is the freedom to imagine and create—a resource that seems to be in increasingly shorter supply in an age of incessant digital notifications and reactive politics on all sides. Martin's work refuses to be locked in place. Each painting tries something a bit different, while developing a set of thematic and stylistic concerns (as does the accompanying small show of Martin's drawings on the gallery's third floor). Both whimsical and very serious, Martin's art peers across time, space, and culture to refresh an impoverished present.



Chris Martin, *Double Frog Afternoon*, 2017. Oil, acrylic, collage and glitter on canvas, 135 x 118 inches. © Chris Martin. Courtesy Anton Kern, New York.