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Chris Martin

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Chris Martin, an American, and Michael Krebber, a German, were both born in 1954. Krebber has suggested that he might be a failed actor who is seen by others as a Conceptual artist, one who finds ways to paint, because it's a good idea, often by various kinds of not-painting (using stretched gingham or horse blankets instead of oil on canvas). Martin is quite different, and not only because he lacks Krebber's notoriety. Rather than not-painting or overpainting, Martin paints by painting-over, sometimes spending years on single works (two of his most recent are dated 1983–2005 and 1973–2005). These disparities figure, almost metonymically, the supposed difference between German and American painting, the former taken to be much more hot-wired to "Conceptual" practices.

Critical mapping of the antipodal artists' parallel attributes—both paint as a way to test painting's limits—has produced, like a Mercator projection, distortions of significance while continuing to confuse and degrade the meanings and utility of the terms *conceptual* and *theoretical*—terms rarely applied to Martin's practice. The vaunted products of abstract thinking usually remain only those most tractable, beholden to language and/or rationality. Isn't it possible that the most conceptual of Conceptual art would produce intractability because it attempts to trace unnamable emotional shifts, things instantiated only by moot opticality, not language, and presence beyond the visible? I'm not suggesting that Krebber avoids such matters, but Martin's engagement with them is clear, explaining in part his status as a cult favorite working beneath the radar.

Martin confronts what it would mean, after Pop, "Pictures," and postmodernism, to return to painting and abstraction which, as he writes in an essay on Alfred Jensen, "blaze[s] with the light of a living investigation," a quest associated with what Martin calls the "heroic generation" of Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Myron Stout, and Forrest Bess. How to answer to history in a moment when "anything goes" remains a fundamental question, but it's the somewhat unexpected, unsentimental, and non-nostalgic "return" to those heroics that makes Martin's own investigation prepossessing, especially freshened with the bracing antiheroic potential of Agnes Martin, Ree Morton, and Mary Heilmann, and with the grubby energy of the street.

An almost melancholy line of tinsel sparkles along the sides of the canvas of *Untitled (Mexican Painting)*, 2005, framing swirling columns of yellow, green, and orange paint polka-dotted, here and there, with painted discs collaged on to the surface of the canvas, like lids trapping forces within the painting. However densely worked his canvases are, there is a lightness to Martin's proceedings, a relishing of the "wrong" or "ugly" that becomes a dare: Why not? In *Picasso Painting*, 2005, for example, the canvas is built up with bosomy/ballsy lumps and bumps, a seemingly unlikely field for a painting in which pinks and creams are used to locate a poise and ease in abstract shapes (teardrops, lines, dots) that pay homage to the Spaniard without mere reiteration.

None of Martin's Melvillean epic canvases were on view here, but these smaller works—some thick and impastoed, others painted over and over in the service of a spare, graphic economy (*End of the Movie . . . Beginning of This Moment . . .*, 1983–2005), still others painted with Tantric restraint—conjured all of their sweep and majesty in another guise. His painting bristles with the immediate while never losing sight of the timeless. Essentially an Emersonian, he's "under the necessity of using the Actual order of things, in order to disuse it; to live by it, whilst [he] wish[es] to take away its life."

—Bruce Hainley

