



“Odd Artist Out”

By Jerry Saltz

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Chris Martin, "Paintings," Sept. 16-Oct. 24, 2005, at Sideshow, 319 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Chris Martin is a perennial member of the large, by nature neglected, nonetheless crucial and treasured confederacy known as "artist's artists." He's one of the dark horses and workers-at-the-edge respected by their peers who never quite get their due. Probably most artists feel like members of this tribe to one degree or another. I don't know if there's a correlation between Martin's generous-to-a-fault, almost shoot-yourself-in-the-foot selflessness and his reputation as one of the better underappreciated painters around, but his current all-over-the-place not-really-a-one-man show draws attention to his dilemma.

Picasso said, "A painter's studio should be a laboratory." Martin's show is that, a living room, an ashram and an opium den. As is some of the surrounding neighborhood. On the front of an abandoned building across the street from the gallery hang several of Martin's brightly colored geometric abstract paintings. A huge 9 x 11 foot black-and-red painting of a circuit configuration hangs on the side of the gallery building itself. Not only is it great to see an artist employ modern paintings as urban frescoes, it's nice to know that people don't deface them -- a few of these have been here for years.

Martin's giving spirit continues inside the gallery, where a cushy couch, conga drums, Persian rugs and pillows are scattered about. A soundtrack of classic rock plays (compiled by the artist's 15-year-old daughter); the smell of incense and roses wafts through the air. Adding to the hippie flavor are nearly 200 keepsakes or power objects hanging cheek by jowl, floor to ceiling, in the rear room. Here, there's art by Martin's friends, his influences and inspirations, as well as paintings by fellow underknowns like Don Voisine, Glenn Goldberg and Joyce Pensato. There are postcards, newspaper clippings, obituaries of famous artists, pictures of his high school art teacher, a samba drum, Indian miniatures and who-knows-what. It's his own private Salon des Refusés or a walk-in wonder cabinet. There are also works by Martin himself. All are abstract and have the feel of sacred diagrams by way of pop art and Minimalism. Some are done on paper towel, stilts and banana peels. His psychedelic and mystic leanings surface in titles like Epiphany and Mushroom People.

The poster for the show says as much about Martin being an artist's artist as it does about this clan and its future. A large color photo depicts more than 60 people among a half-dozen of Martin's works on the Williamsburg waterfront with Manhattan as backdrop. Among sundry dogs, drummers and guitarists are fellow artist's artists like Mike Ballou, Win Knowlton, and Dan Walsh. In effect, Martin is saying one of two things: either "When Williamsburg is developed, real estate prices will skyrocket, and all this will be lost forever"; or "Come hell or high rents the Williamsburg spirit will change but live on." I believe the latter.

Some might claim the furniture, music, incense and ephemera are a distraction and that Martin's show is too hammy and New Agey. I wouldn't entirely disagree. It is hard to concentrate or get around the down-homeyness. Others might say that the immense scale of his work makes Martin, 50, a throwback to Schnabel-esque gigantism. Martin's work is huge and the show is hectic. But size isn't the main quality of his art, nor

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is immediacy. In addition, there's nothing wrong with being spiritual or New Age if you do it in a new way. As painter Alexander Ross says of Martin, "He re-injects all this with an unexpected, original twist."

This twist is delivered most effectively in the form of three enormous abstract paintings. One 20-foot-long giant in glowing thalo green and bone white is composed of repeating gate-shapes. These figures echo one another and create a rippling horizon effect as if this were some vast celestial lake. This canvas is more like a shield or the wall of a Northwest coast Indian lodge than a painting. You walk past it and almost feel like you're seeing the curvature of the earth and the distortion of peripheral vision. It immerses you in some other rhythm of the world.

This summer, when three of Martin's battleship-scaled beauties at Feature Gallery looked great, I thought he was finally ready for prime time and that this show would put Martin on a bigger stage. I was wrong. Instead, this is more of a studio visit or a confession. It's too scruffy and old-school to register with anyone who doesn't already know and respect him. For all its bigheartedness and spirituality; tantalizing connections to fringy artists like Forrest Bess, Al Held and Alfred Jensen; bumpy surfaces and vibrant color; and sources including Tibetan mandalas, magic carpets and psychedelia, Martin's show is like an anti-war leaflet: It's vital, but the only people who pay attention to it are those who already agree with it.

I often complain about slickness in today's art world. In this case, I wish some slicker gallery would give Martin a shot, present his work coherently and not let him shoot himself in the foot. Until then, there's joie de vivre and delight at Sideshow.