Los Angeles

Chris Martin
Daniel Weinberg Gallery
7 January – 6 February

Chris Martin burst back on the scene last September with a triumphant show at a Brooklyn gallery brilliantly named Sideshow. Also, I missed it, but lucky for me, Los Angeles is now securely on the map for the hardcore Brooklyn abstract painters, most of whom, when I was living in New York 15 years ago, never made it west of the Hudson River. Martin’s work made an impression on me in 1990, largely because of its gregarious manner. I now recognize that his approach to abstraction alone had more than enough to rejoin the current of the endgame strategies still being propped up in the early 90s. What it had then it has big time today: an apologetically personal, spiritual and witty take on the anonymity of geometry of the kind also found in the beloved work of Mary Heilmann, or in the ready-to-be-rediscovred paintings of Marilyn Larner, as well as a probing relationship to such greats as Alfred Jensen, Philip Guston, and even Picasso.

From all accounts, Martin’s Sideshow exhibition was unmissable: prone to making supersized paintings, he hung some of them outside or in the windows of facing buildings. A twenty-footer did it into the gallery, along with a back room crowded with art by his friends, postcards and a seemingly infinite range of inspirational paraphernalia. So, given Weinberg’s small upscale space, could Martin’s decision to show eight small-to-midsize paintings possibly be enough? Of course it was, particularly because of the wide range of work he managed to squeeze in, as well as the small, easily missed ninth painting that he hung out by the street at the top of a palm tree.

The paintings have pennies glued on it, so they might catch the sunlight and our attention.

Back in the first room, a small painting with a big idea, High Noon at Dashashamshedik Cher Norore (2004), could be used as a primer for the entire exhibition. In it, a sequence of orange rounded shapes are stacked on top of each other and surrounded by a baby blue ground (sky?) that seems to be resting on a thin strip of purple. The remaining feature, a simple yellow network of straight yet curving lines, provides a kind of scaffolding to the entire production, supporting a wide range of possible associations provoked by the title: from Cary Cooper to the river Ganges.

In the second room, my favourite painting, End of the Movie... (1963–2003), and my local favourite, Dedicated to Bevly Pheroma (1973–2003), share the kind of wide time span of production that could come across as affected. The former escapes that trap with its goofy clarity (a black-and-white canvas whose sunken appearance is caused, it would seem, by the visual POM of its semaphore explosion), while the latter is mortally wounded by a clumsy dedication written on its surface. But with all of this joyous energy, I’ll even take that.