

Art in America

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EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Chris Martin

Mitchell-Innes & Nash

According to Irving Sandler's 1984 monograph, the late Al Held, while still a student, had the extravagant ambition to "synthesize the 'total objectivity' of Piet Mondrian with the 'total subjectivity' of Jackson Pollock." As an undergraduate at Yale, Chris Martin got to know Held, who was then teaching in the graduate program, and, feeling he had gotten the essential lowdown on being an artist, dropped out and moved to New York to pursue his calling. His work, like the young Held's, displays antithetical affinities: for the inspired loner Forrest Bess on the one hand, and for Held himself on the other. Bess, as though unconcerned with historical circumstances, drawing only from his deepest primordial resources, produced small, astonishing abstract paintings. Held, to the contrary, was an ambitious and sophisticated New York artist of the "second generation," vying with the authority of art history and the claims of his contemporaries, producing enormous, increasingly refined and complex paintings.

Martin's works attain their visionary, Bess-like impact in much the same way as most spiritually inclined folk art does: by eschewing technical refinement and trusting instead in the work's rough facture to broadcast an ecstatic revelation. In the 54-by-45-inch *Seven Pointed Star* (2007), the points of the emblematic blast referred to in the title run all the way out to (and implicitly even a little beyond) the edges of the canvas, traversing five randomly placed, raised disks of Styrofoam—all against a



Chris Martin: *Seven Pointed Star*, 2007, mixed mediums on canvas, 54 by 45 inches; at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

background of thick, black, tarlike paint. The 20-by-16-inch *Glitter Painting* (2006), with the hallucinatory atmospheric effects of its spray-paint-and-glitter-covered surfaces, suggests a sort of thrift-shop mysticism.

How these and other works manage to be so convincing is an interesting question. Martin is neither slumming nor trafficking in clichés; neither is he being coyly ironic. There is, however, much humor to be found here, as in his offerings of collaged pinups to a personal artistic hero—an homage flanked by the greeting "GOOD MORNING ALFRED JENSEN GOOD MORNING." Martin's tribute to James Brown, meanwhile, features a funky photo of the Godfather of Soul, and we might well say that Martin's forthright attack, like Mr. Brown's, also stresses the *one* beat.

The buoyant, rough-hewn, curvilinear geometry of several large, untitled paintings with vertical columns composed of repeated arcs and bright, flat colors calls to mind the Held of the early '60s, as well as Matisse's cut paper pieces, Brancusi's architectural combinations, and county fairs everywhere. *August Afternoon 11 Munn Street Walton N.Y.* celebrates the moment and site of its completion in a boldface inscription that lends a down-home casualness to the work. However, the visual counterpoint of its abstract components becomes ever more intricate and engaging as

one looks. There is something Held-like in the deployment of what reads as autonomous visual elements: a modular structure, a not-quite-gridded arrangement of white dots, more raised disks heedlessly painted over, a bouncy figure/ground ambiguity, the disturbance caused by what might be crumpled newspaper laid beneath the collaged surface. For all its punch and heraldic immediacy, *August Afternoon* repays sustained viewing.

Amid the self-consciously high production values, digital complexities and knowingly ironic posture of so much current painting, Martin's work shouts out that art can be playful, fun, visionary and, ultimately, mysterious.

—Robert Berling