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# Chris Martin Works on Paper

*by John Yau*

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Chris Martin is not afraid to make art that openly alludes to the work of Paul Feeley, Alfred Jensen, Philip Guston, Forrest Bess, Blinky Palermo, and Frank Stella, but in a way that is sophisticated and innocent. The fact that his show of works on paper opened two days before Valentine's Day is particularly appropriate, because for years he has been sending valentines brimming with love and irreverence to known and little-known artists. There is nothing sentimental or nostalgic in what he does, just the opposite. He infuses his work with a playfulness, humor and modesty that are rarely encountered in abstract painting. The reason it doesn't feel contrived or ironic is because there is tenderness to everything he does. If Martin is mocking anyone, it is himself.

For those who have followed his work, as I have since I met him in 1976, shortly after he moved to New York City, Martin is the exemplar of an artist who is driven to draw on whatever is at hand (napkins and banana peels), use any and every kind of material (Styrofoam and fiberglass roofing), medium (spray paint and ballpoint pen) and take on whatever strikes his fancy. Martin doesn't censor himself, which in most cases would lead to a mind numbing combination of narcissism and embarrassingly banal confessions, but in his case expresses the desire that signs and symbols can mean something larger than the human ego, the "I."

Instead of pointing to empty signifiers and the simulacrum, Martin believes the everyday world is full of signs, even if what they tell him is that he is a speck of inconsequential dust passing through this stretch of infinity. At his best, he embraces the overwhelming vastness of existence without blinking. Part José Guadalupe Posada and part late Pablo Picasso, Martin's comically grotesque linear portrait, *40 Años of Experiencia*, which was done on a bill of lading, is fairly explicit about the transitory and fragile nature of our existence. I am reminded of a tiny poem (really a valentine) Robert Creeley dedicated to his fellow poet and friend, Ted Berrigan: "Turning-/One wants it all-No/Defenses."

The more than thirty works in the exhibition were selected from the past twenty years, with the earliest example, *Family Dinner*, dated 1988. Done in acrylic, pen and pencil on a sheet of lined notebook paper, the drawing is a seating plan for a large family get-together over which the artist, using it as a found surface, drew a series of enclosing vertical rectangles in predominantly reds and blues, echoing the table. This is Martin's special province—he can be simultaneously precise and offhanded, cosmopolitan and

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artless.

Stepping off the elevator, the gallery goer first sees a red, yellow, and green seven-pointed star, which is a sacred symbol in many occult traditions. Next to that is a small acrylic of an *Amanita Muscaria* (2008), a psychotropic mushroom that the amateur ethnomycologist R. Gordon Wasson advanced as the Soma talked about in both Vedic and Zoroastrian traditions. Used by Siberian shamans, its distinctive features of a red cap with white spots has led to speculation that it is one source of Santa Claus and his sleigh pulled by flying reindeer. Wasson's essay, "Seeking The Magic Mushroom," which appeared in *Life* (1957), is a touchstone for a number of other artists, including Fred Tomaselli, Philip Taaffe, and Steve DiBenedetto.

Martin has steeped himself in various strains of occult thinking. He has spent considerable time in India, as well as familiarized himself with the writings of Terrence McKenna, Daniel Pinchbeck, Carlos Castaneda, and others interested in altered states in which heightened perceptions occur. The work ranges from the purely abstract, as in a series of spray painted orangish-pink dots on handmade paper that is nearly the same color, to a cartoony drawing of a dog in black marker on the back of an album cover. Other works are diagrammatic, so that one senses that Martin has deliberately refused to settle into, or develop, one language or style of painting.

By not being afraid to incorporate the vocabulary of others into his own work, and always willing to risk the possibility that he might be seen as derivative, Martin has managed to stand the opticality of hard-edged formalism on its head. Frank Stella's well-known dictum, "What you see is what you see" has, in Martin's work, become "What you see is what you dream? Or perhaps it is the other way around?"

Martin's determination to push against the logical, the literal, and the rational is a welcome relief. His bringing together of seeming opposites—naivety and worldliness—should be celebrated because he has returned something to painting that many feel has been lost; the belief that painting and drawing could embrace any subject without depending on the mass media and pop culture for its source material. For Martin, who supported himself for years by working in a hospice that took care of people with AIDS, the delight of making art, and the feeling that he is lucky and blessed to be doing so, is evident. For all their humor and irreverence, the works are never entertaining. They are celebrations in the face of oblivion, and, in that regard, brave.