



CHRIS MARTIN

Painting Big

NOW AT THE
CORCORAN



CHRIS MARTIN Painting Big

Chris Martin's paintings are big, a fact that is both obvious and essential. It is also inescapable, especially when encountering his 26-foot-tall stretched canvases in the Corcoran Gallery of Art's atrium, and a group of his towering pictures in one of the museum's galleries. Yet their bigness is something that goes beyond their size. Even at six inches square, Martin's paintings have a formal presence and a conceptual reach that allow them to punch well beyond their weight.

Occupying three spaces within the museum, *Painting Big* is about the scale and scope of Martin's work. The Corcoran's central atrium contains a site-specific installation of three monumental paintings; in the rotunda is a survey of the artist's small paintings from the past 30

years; and upstairs, the museum's NOW gallery contains a focused selection of six large-scale paintings on the subject of landscape produced between 2002 and 2010. Taken together, the different parts of the exhibition explore the ways that art and life become shot through with one another in Martin's work.

Martin's paintings are abstract yet their expanse is great. They encompass ideas and events ranging from childhood memories to the songs of James Brown to the personal toll of the AIDS crisis. His work charts a course that brings high and low, personal and public into their colorful geometries and rhythmic patterns. Their route to reality is at once straightforward and dizzyingly twisted.

Cover: Chris Martin, *Here Comes the Sun...* (detail), 2004-2007. Oil on canvas, 143 x 129 in. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella. Left: Chris Martin, *Ganges Sunrise Asi Ghat Varanasi...*, 2002. Oil on canvas, 129 x 143 in. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



In ways both literal and metaphoric, Martin brings bits of the outside world into his paintings, and his paintings into the outside world. He embeds their lush surfaces with pieces of bread, pillows, record albums, and newspaper clippings, transforming everyday items into a personal language of symbols and abstraction. Martin's paintings are also social creatures. He has placed them in bus stops, on the sides of buildings, and in nightclubs, where he fabricated them with phosphorescent paint that glows under black light. He has taken large-scale paintings for "walks" around the block, making his neighbors and local shopkeepers central to their meaning and experience. In more traditional

gallery spaces, Martin has blurred the distinction between his art and everyday life, placing pictures on floors, ceilings, and amongst TVs and Persian carpets. The paintings' bigness is in part a product of the many worlds they traverse.

Yet such scale and breadth is not always easy to synthesize. Dislocated and disguised beneath layers of paint and glitter, the broken LPs and cut-out photographs of frogs collaged onto the surface of Martin's art become cryptic signs subsumed into the works' larger compositions, resisting interpretation as much as inviting it. A painting such as *Staring into the Sun... (4→7→11)*, 2003, literally comes off of the wall and rolls onto the floor like a giant's tongue—a gesture that seems simultaneously friendly and aggressive. Its palette a vibrating sequence of red and blue stripes, *Staring into the Sun* commands attention, but keeps its intentions a mystery. Such bigness demands a response.

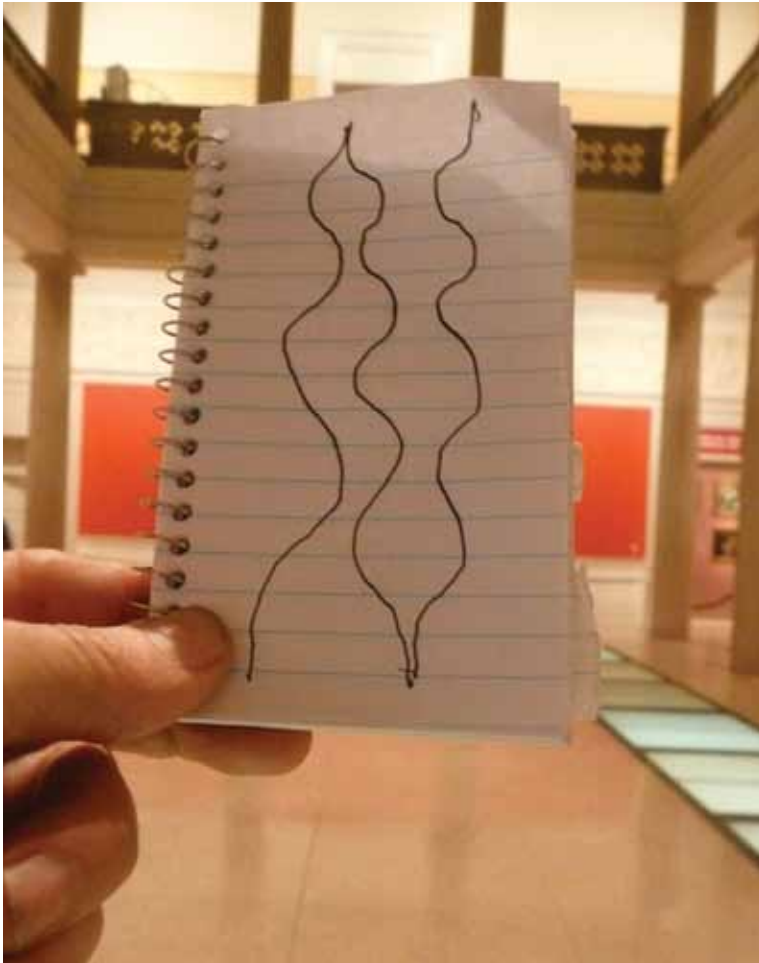
Martin's paintings embody what the critic Roberta Smith has called "mongrel" abstraction, containing various entrance points into some level of reality. Elements of the outside world worm their way into Martin's works and vice-versa, becoming reflected, refracted, and transmuted through paint. Instead of paring down the world, as generations of abstract artists attempted to do, Martin's painting opens itself up to let everything in.

Above: Chris Martin, *Staring into the Sun... (4→7→11)*, 2003. Oil on canvas, three parts, 143 x 129 in. each. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Right: Chris Martin, *White Bread*, 2010–2011. Acrylic and polymer medium on bread on wood, 24 x 20 in. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.





Photo: Chris Martin, *Light Brahma Stomp*, painting in progress, Walton, NY, 2010.



Viewing the three spaces of *Painting Big* in succession is a bit like falling down the rabbit hole. Each grouping of work is radically different in scale, and creates an equivalent physical environment and awareness of space. Moving from the atrium to the rotunda to the NOW gallery, the paintings telescope in size from monumental to little to extra-large, and the sense of one's own bodily relationship to them changes accordingly.

Martin's installation of three paintings in the Corcoran's atrium, each 26 feet high and 17 feet across, forms a vibrant "room" of color and pattern in the museum's central public space. Completed in 1897, the atrium is a grand Beaux-Arts hall, with a procession of limestone columns, broad marble staircase, and soaring glass ceiling. Embodying a nineteenth-century vision of democratic space, it aims to bring people into communion with art and ideas as well as with one another. Dropped into this historic environment, Martin's paintings appear like abstract alien visitors, humming with discordant rhythms and clashing color schemes.

As much as the paintings provide a contrast with the atrium, they engage it in conversation. Their patterns of curving forms echo the rhythm of the atrium's columns, and their height approaches its grandeur. Bridging the past and the present, the paintings insert themselves into the public life of the space, becoming an integral part of what happens in the museum's entryway, café, shop,

Photo: Chris Martin, sketch for Corcoran atrium, 2010.

and admissions desk. They are aggressively not part of the background.

The paintings aim to overwhelm with size and sensation. They operate on the scale of landscape, surrounding viewers with fields of color and evoking the tradition of the sublime. But instead of the sublime purity that writers and critics have traditionally associated with abstraction, Martin's paintings are riddled with detail and incident. Delicate chicken tracks trace their way across two-foot-wide black-and-white wavy lines, the unintended but happy result of painting outside during the summer of 2010 in Walton, New York. A thick layer of glitter coats the surface of one of the vast canvases, forming an ocean of pixelated tawdriness and sparkle. Blues records are encrusted onto its surface, souvenirs of a teenage musical infatuation that reappears in the present.

The detail in Martin's atrium paintings brings their overpowering scale into the realm of the human, but it is the human elements within them that lend them their power. Personal symbols and collected memories—bits and pieces of a life—are laid bare and brought into the world. The paintings are monumentally intimate public works.



Moving from the atrium to the rotunda, the scale shrinks from grand to diminutive, with a dense salon-stack of small paintings and collages spanning Martin's career from 1980 to the current day. Placed in rows several paintings high, the works jockey for attention, using color and pattern to elbow each other out of the way. They appear as living creatures, their shaped canvases, papier-mâché protrusions, applied feathers, and pom-poms signs of their quirks and bruises and personal vanities. Some, like *Energy Transfer*, 2006–2010, are mysterious webs of information and smoky obfuscation. Others, like *Stilt Painting*, 2003–2004, are as delicate, ungainly, and improbably humorous as a daddy-longlegs. Still others, like *Landscape (Bumps)*, 2009, are swelling knots of multicolored energy. Made of such materials as corrugated siding, foam insulation, and bread, each seems to be breathing in its own rhythm—wriggling and writhing and asserting its singular presence.

While the paintings make an initial impression of cacophony, seeing them together also gives a sense of the continuities in the artist's concerns and working process. It is possible to see the way Martin repeatedly returns to forms and motifs—schematized griffins, seven-pointed stars, simple perspectival boxes—and turns them about in his mind and hand so that they become jumping-off points for various ideas and formal explorations. In individual works, as well, Martin begins with

a form and shifts course mid-stream, so that its residue remains throughout various destructions and reconstructions over the span of years. As much as the works are individuals, they are part of a family whose traits emerge and evolve over generations.

The landscape has been fundamental to Martin's work throughout his career, both as a subject and a tradition. On a basic level, Martin aims to suggest nature itself; the scale of his big paintings is in part an attempt to surround the viewer with color and sensation. On another level, the history of landscape painting allows him to tap into visual codes that have simple but deep resonance. A mark running across the canvas evokes the horizon, undulating lines may refer to water, the color green suggests leaves, and blue the sky. These visual cues provide an entry point into the works; much like the use of text in some of his paintings or the collaged elements in others, they are an attempt to insert content into a genre in which we have come to expect none.

The six large works on the theme of landscape in this exhibition relate specifically to the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York and the Ganges River in Varanasi, India. Each body of work evokes the colors of the environment to which it refers: brooding phthalo green and white in the upstate New York paintings, and vibrant reds, greens,



1. *Untitled*, 2000–2001. Oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 28 in. Private Collection, NY.
2. *Homage Alfred + Bill #5*, 1982–1995. Oil and felt on canvas, 15 1/8 x 12 3/8 in. Collection Jay Gorney.
3. *Untitled*, 2006–2007. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 53 x 47 in.
4. *I234567...(Ravine)*, 1987–2008. Oil and collage on aluminum foil, mounted on canvas, 25 x 19 in. Private Collection, NY.

5. *Communicating with the Dead...*, 2004–2005. Oil and collage on canvas, 20 x 16 in. Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles. Anthony Cunha Photography.
6. *Energy Transfer*, 2006–2010. Oil and collage on canvas, 20 x 16 in.
7. Chris Martin, *Landscape (Bumps)*, 2009. Oil, spray-paint, polymer medium, and collage on canvas, 26 x 32 in.

8. *= 6 = 7 = 8*, 1987–1995. Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 in. Private Collection, NY.
9. *Artichoke Painting*, 2009. Polymer medium, spray-paint, oil, and collage on canvas, 20 x 16 in.
10. *Untitled (Glitter Painting)*, 2009. Oil, montana spray-paint, gel medium, and glitter on linen, 20 x 16 in. Collection of Scott J. Lorinsky.

11. *Untitled*, 2000–2008. Oil on canvas, 11 x 14 in.
12. *Sphinx*, 1993–1996. Oil and collage on canvas, 12 x 16 in.
13. Chris Martin, *Good Morning Alfred Jensen*, 2005–2007. Oil and collage on canvas, 24 1/8 x 20 1/8 in. Snyder Family Collection.

All images except No. 5 are courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photography by Jason Mandella.



blues, and yellows in the India works. Martin also plays with various methods of suggesting the landscape at any one time, weaving moments of fairly straightforward representation in with abstraction. *Hemlock*, 2010, is a recognizable picture of an evergreen in the Catskills when seen from afar. Yet upon closer approach, the brushstrokes that make up the tree's branches dissolve into gestural abstraction, and the footprint that marks the painting's surface suggests the flatness of the forest floor rather than its foliage. In *Four Days at Asi Ghat Varanasi Staring into the Sun...*, 2002, an eight-inch strip of realistically painted sky and cloud peeks out above an eleven-foot geometric structure.

The paintings join different styles and modes of representation in a manner that is by turns graceful and unwieldy. Martin has created a scenario which allows painting the ability to operate on different levels, in different ways, at the same time. Wavy lines can signify patterns of light on water, dancing and gyrating bodies, the mystical number seven, Indian textiles, and the internal visual codes that have taken root and burrowed their way through his body of work. The paintings are also powerful evocations of atmosphere and mood, and of the vibrating sensations of sunlight and clammy coolness.

Chris Martin's paintings are at once sharp and slippery, signifying both the particular and the multiple. They refuse to cut off avenues of meaning or strategies of representation, ultimately pointing to the fact that one system is as conventional or as invented as another, neither with a special hold on reality. Yet instead of producing anxiety about their arbitrariness, Martin's paintings create the conditions for their often-contradictory meanings to exist side-by-side. They are big, easy, difficult, awkward, elegant paintings.

Sarah Newman
Curator of Contemporary Art

Left: Chris Martin, *Four Days at Asi Ghat Varanasi Staring into the Sun...*, 2002. Oil on canvas, 143 x 129 in. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Chris Martin was born in Washington D.C. in 1954. From 1972 to 1975 he attended Yale University, and in 1992 earned a BFA, Certificate of Art Therapy from the School of Visual Arts, New York. Martin has lived and worked in New York City since 1976 and has been exhibiting actively in the United States since the early 1980s. Recent projects include a one-artist exhibition of paintings at the Jaffe-Friede Gallery at Dartmouth University, 2011; *Joe Bradley & Chris Martin* at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, 2010; and an exhibition of large-scale paintings and drawings at KOW Berlin, Germany, 2009. Martin's works have also been included in many group exhibitions including *Abstract America* at the Saatchi Gallery, London, 2009; *Shape Shifters* at the University of North Carolina, Pembroke, NC, 2008; *The Painted World* at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, NY, 2005; and *Current Undercurrents: Working in Brooklyn* at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, 1997. Martin has been the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, 2002, and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award, 1999.

Chris Martin: Painting Big

JUNE 18-OCTOBER 23, 2011
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

NOW at the Corcoran is a series of exhibitions that presents new and site-specific work by emerging and mid-career artists. It highlights work that addresses issues central to the local, national, and global communities of Washington, D.C., and that responds to the collections, history, and architecture of the museum.

This exhibition is made possible through the support of the Women's Committee of the Corcoran and Steven M. Sumberg.

Right: Chris Martin, *Hemlock*, 2010. Oil, gel medium, and collage on canvas, 135 x 118 in. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



CORCORAN

GALLERY OF ART • COLLEGE of ART+DESIGN

500 Seventeenth Street NW

Washington, DC 20006

www.corcoran.org, (202) 639-1700