

# frieze

## Exercises in Style

BY ELI DINER

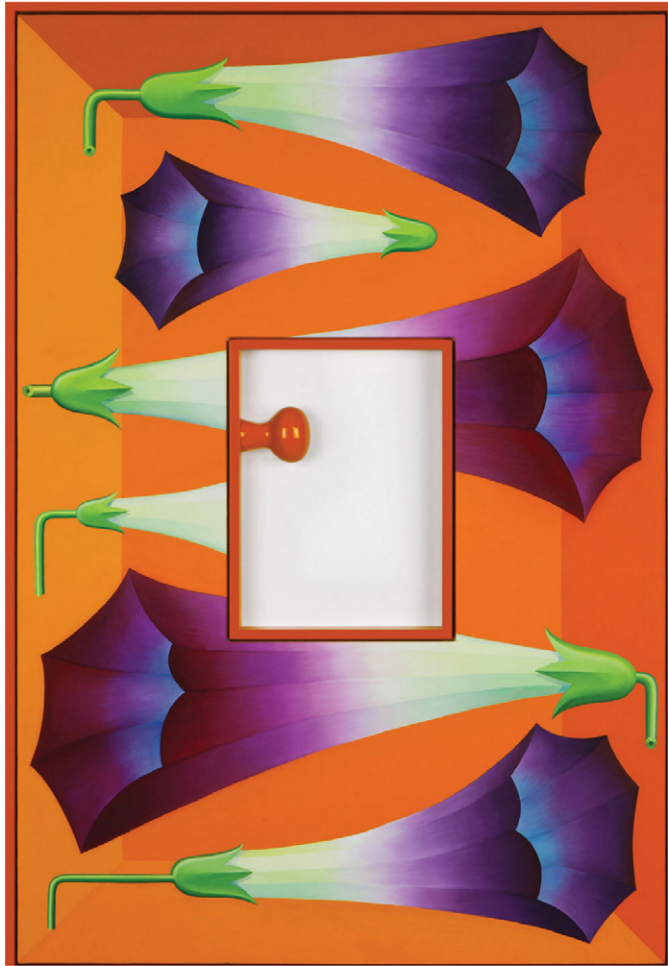
### Painting and the question of taste in the work of Orion Martin

Bad taste lives! Deep into the doldrums of postmodernity, we're told, old hierarchies of high and low, or avant-garde and kitsch have long since collapsed. And yet, there it is. Easily identifiable, bad taste operates in the work of any number of contemporary artists. Of course, it's not what it used to be. It has been reclassified, moved from the realm of connotation to denotation, from characteristic to category, subject or theme. You would never hear someone say any more that a work of art was *in* bad taste, that it demonstrated a failure to comply with established norms. But you could certainly imagine hearing that an artist works *with* – or *on* – bad taste. It's not a style per se, but a matter of style, a category of style.

Orion Martin works with bad taste. His paintings bring a fascinated scrutiny to commonplace objects and kitsch imagery. Flat, tight and crisp, the works entail an eager but controlled play of surface mimeses, employing the languages of photorealism, cartoons and *trompe l'oeil*, as well as those of illustration and graphic design. Martin returns repeatedly to certain objects, some assuming the appearance of oneiric obsession: flowers, footwear, piping and metal grates among them. There are eccentric pairings – a tangled-up greyhound and trumpet in *Automaton, Fabulous Muscles* (2016) – and his things behave strangely, growing, convoluting and metamorphosing in ways that suggest an affinity with surrealism. While the artist's non sequiturs and transmogrifications do distantly recall, for example, some of René Magritte's still lifes, they have less to do with surrealism as such, and more with the generalized meaning that term has assumed in contemporary discourse – the willfully weird – or, perhaps, they more closely align with the caricature of surrealism found in mid-century formalist orthodoxy: perverse, the height of bad taste. More pronounced antecedents would include the cartoon debasements of the now-canonical Chicago imagists as well as the colours and commodities of pop. Tom Wesselmann and James Rosenquist come to mind, as does Michel Majerus. But, perhaps, the pop practitioner he most clearly evokes is the less authoritatively sanctioned Mel Ramos, the nudes here morphed into boots and bicycle wheels.

# Derosia

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Orion Martin, *Don Bellows*, 2016, oil on canvas, frame, 130 x 90 cm. All images courtesy: Bodega, New York

Martin's preferred mode is the close-up: studies of often just one or two objects, presented, at times, in simple, intertwining patterns. His work verges on a kind of microscopy of taste. The unusual dimensions of many of his compositions – long and narrow, whether oriented vertically or horizontally – seem to emphasize this homing in. So, too, do the shallow space and flat, monochrome backgrounds, which recall chapters from the history of advertising, from Lucian Bernhard's bold, reductive *Plakatstil* (poster style) designs of the early 20th century through those ubiquitous Apple ads of a few years back, in which silhouettes of urban types dance with their iPods.

Against this blank ground, Martin meticulously renders the objects at the fore, playing against each other cartooning, illustration and an array of illusionistic strategies, frequently with only subtle distinction. *Bakers Steak* (2015) contains a classic banker's desk lamp, portrayed in a photorealist style and set against a pale-olive background. The lamp even appears slightly out of focus, the brass base and green glass of the shade glinting with ambient light. A semi-translucent green cape descends from the shade and, in a simple optical trick, seems to hang from the back of the lamp on one end, the front on the other, falling behind the pull chain while simultaneously draping over the neck. Further back, a secondary form again comes down from behind the lampshade, identical in hue to the silken fabric but rigid in texture – an abstract shape that plunges straight before curving toward a crescent tip, looking a bit like a pristine glass shiv. Over the top of all of this, at the centre of the canvas, Martin has painted a square of four large metallic eyelets, sharper

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the centre of the canvas, Martin has painted a square of four large metallic eyelets, sharper in focus than the lamp, slightly darker in hue, if still suggestive of brass, and reflecting a different lighting set up. Though a dark emptiness is glimpsed through these four apertures, they disclose a couple of lusty yellow cartoon flowers that hover just above the plane of the lamp and the *trompe l'oeil* eyelets and cast little drop shadows. Moving up from the monochrome ground, each layer in the work entails an increasing degree of 'realistic' representation, until the flowers emerge from the abyss, like something out of a psychedelic animation.



Orion Martin, *Bakers Steak*, 2015, oil on canvas, frame, 130 x 90 cm

This play on varieties of hyperreality is also a play on varieties of surface. With blithe visual superficiality, the works can feel like a race to the front, one that often includes colour-matched frames, painted to a shimmering varnish. In *Strawberry* (2015), for example, a pristine, glistening strawberry – upon which has been embossed a centaur with a proud erection, blowing on a horn – sits against a flat red background, within a matching red frame. Or take *Don Bellows* (2016), in which the frame and background are orange: here the canvas has been shaded and divided by orthogonal and horizontal lines that don't really conjure a sense of space but, rather, point to and, simultaneously, undermine the effects of perspective. Martin has removed a rectangle from the centre of the canvas, interrupting a pattern of purple, bell-shaped flowers that float to the fore, lining the inside of the cavity with another orange frame, from which a doorknob – again, in the same orange – juts into the empty interior space. Repeatedly pointing to it and undermining it, the work seems to mock the idea of depth. It's surface, everywhere.

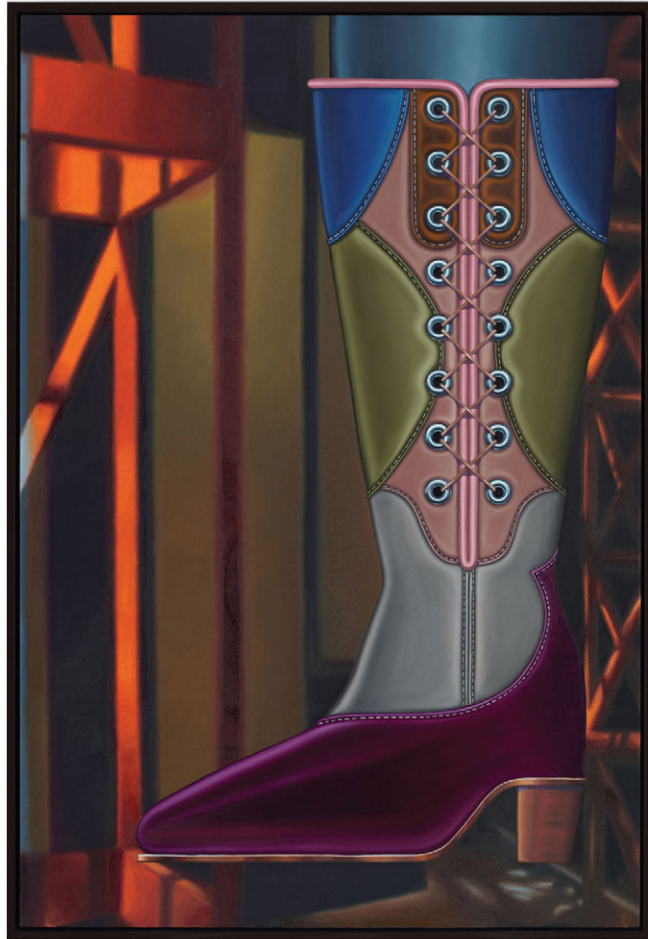
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Of course, the screen and the digital image can't be far away. Martin's work, like much contemporary painting, reflects the technologies that have changed our ways of looking. He was recently included in 'Flatlands', an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, examining new – and flat, of course – modes of 'representational' painting conditioned by digital interconnectivity and virtuality. In an accompanying essay, the show's curators, Laura Phipps and Elisabeth Sherman, argue that, despite their unreal, sometimes fantastical content, the works evince 'a yearning for the tactile' and a 'desire to be tethered to reality at a time when the world around us feels so insecure'. You'll hear no argument from me on the question of the insecurity of the world, but to say something like the real – let alone reality – is at stake in these paintings is rather far-fetched. Consider *Triple Nickel, Tull* (2015), which appeared in the Whitney exhibition – although any of his paintings of footwear would do. It's hard to look at this taut, fetishy, mid-calf woman's boot – reminiscent of something out of a Christina Ramberg painting – and not think of Fredric Jameson's well-known comparison of Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (1887) and Andy Warhol's 'Diamond Dust Shoes' series (1980–81). While the former, he argues, is open to hermeneutical readings 'in the sense in which the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality, which replaces it as its ultimate truth', with Warhol, whose 'depthlessness' Jameson identifies as the definitive formal quality of the postmodern, there is 'no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture and restore to these oddments [the shoes] that whole larger lived context'. If Warholian postmodernism established a *non plus ultra* of representational art – the possibility of signification without the real – the intervening years have seen only a growing familiarity with these procedures. The exhilaration of the early years of postmodernity has faded from memory; we have only the endless free play of styles.

# Derosia

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*Triple Nickel, Tull*,  
2015, oil on canvas,  
frame, 130 x 90 cm

While Martin's works are concerned with – and symptomatic of – the protean operations of style, accelerated by the ubiquity of images in the digital age, they speak as well to the seduction of *things*. This, to be sure, echoes pop's simultaneous fascination with the commodity and subsumption of the object into or by the image. And, yet, to be seduced by an object, Martin seems to suggest, is itself a kind of banality. In Emery's *Cosmic Limo* (2016), a curvaceous pink bicycle – fitted with the type of leather seat preferred by certain retro-oriented, urban creative-class types with a strong preference for craftsmanship – mutates into a flamingo. Still, his objects glisten, strut and throb. An unmistakable eroticism suffuses these things, evident in bondage motifs – straps, ropes and boots – and in the recurring appearance of decorative eyelets and holes penetrated by flowers. It's a buffet of double entendre, of metonymic kitsch. Even sex can be, if not in, then of bad taste.

*Orion Martin is an artist living and working in Los Angeles, USA. This year, his exhibitions have included 'Eczema Song' at Bodega, New York, USA, and 'Flatlands' at the Whitney Museum of American Art, USA.*

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## ELI DINER

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