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Portrait

Orion Martin by Alex Bennett

Writing

Alex Bennett

Artwork

Orion Martin

Spunky Flourish

In the immaculate paintings of Orion Martin, excess is focal. Camp tchotchke, peculiar wonders, superfluous paraphernalia, and kinky fixtures become dominant subjects. It is similar to the attention the bartender grants the garnish - that charismatic, theatrical amplification of the final accessory. In Martin's painting, the flourish of minutia is essential material, just like the salted edge, caramelised fruit, pinched mint, or punctured olive.

This attention can slope into distraction; inspection softening into unlatched fantasy. Martin employs both with technical acuity, from this fascination of microscopy his paintings behave strangely, growing and convoluting. Decipherment becomes a slippery activity. Shrimp Pastel No.88 (2016), for instance, is deliberately irresolute. Glassy and centrifugal, fuchsia ripples develop a featureless portrait of sorts, only a pair of cherries hanging in the centre to consolidate a face. Despite the wet-pink abstraction, the frame winks to utility in the attachment of a shell-pink doorknob. Flesh is dissolved in an anaesthetised solution, but the painting demonstrates his attraction to the minuscule, generating here, a foray into figuration. On this, Martin notes: 'I've always been trying to make paintings of people without painting people. I'm attracted to things that look figurative, a bookshelf, for example, or to endow a butterfly with some human proportion.'

Formally, the initial thrust for Martin is, he explains, 'symmetry, shiny tubes, circles, framing structure - stuff like that are mostly just a formal jump-off point.' He continues: 'Then I end up re-drafting everything on the canvas and moving things around, so there is an appropriate amount of interaction happening across the canvas. Once I add colour and volume, I usually have to make some kind of change to deal with the balance of the painting. It all happens on the canvas, in very thin layers, and I end up spending a lot of time covering up what was there.'

Martin's style recalls Pop practitioners such as James Rosenquist or Michel Majerus and Chicago Imagist Barbara Rossi, only with less slinky swagger or, in the former, smearing commotion. Considering Martin's patience and precision, Jim Nutt also comes to mind, who, incidentally, tutored Martin. Nutt balances the cartoony, frazzled, threadbare charm of the Chicago Imagists and Hairy Who alongside his electrically smart, radiantly lonesome square female portraits; graphics, illustration and strictness cohere. If Nutt's early work is the lava lamp goo - floating, globular, phosphorous, aloof, - then Martin is the icing knife - ironed, distilled, sleek, incandescent.

Derosia

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The uncommon, illusionist atmosphere of this beauty is a compelling temper in Martin's oeuvre. With his unusual scrutiny reinforcing detail, the effect is delicate, sartorial and properly bizarre. Tight trellis wavers to a nimble petal, a unicycle morphs into a flamingo, a pistol splurges a thick, cherubic cobalt knot. Fictitious patterns follow their own logic, and the persuasion of any visual interplay depends on objective skill to rig panache with legitimate conviction. Grids, grilles, eyelets and piping, biomorphic in tone, often constitute this pliant engineering. 'I think of them more as frameworks, or lattice that elements can interact with, where objects can exist and be built on,' Martin explains, 'I think of it in light of Memphis design, where proportions and materials are varied, the more extreme the better, but it still has to have the guise of function. So it's like building, where the steel pipe goes into this dog (because it's a painting), but the shadows still have to work to make it a functioning thing. Which gets me into the drop shadows and trompe l'oeil effects.'

Automaton, Fabulous Muscles (2016) executes the aforementioned technique. A greyhound is laterally tangled with a giant, fiercely polished trumpet, with part of the brass tubing drifting off out of view. The greyhound's sinuous translucency appeals to Martin, 'you can see the whole skeleton in a way that is frail but they're very strong in a certain way.' Teal drop shadows and a turquoise soft-blur are deft hints of depth. They open the door to fathoming the integration, but the slotting of greyhound and trumpet is inherently flat and banal. In this way, oneiric inventions come supple and frontal in a similar set-up to Urs Fischer's Horse/Bed (2013), that Martin cites as an influence for the painting, 'it's a really epic silver 3D sculpture, he drops this horse and this hospital bed together, and there's no attempt to intermingle them, they're just on top of each other.'

Framing devices buttress this functional posture, alluding to Martin's intent for each painting's eventual domestication, a living room, say, replete with 'cheetah print and something next to it, other bad decisions' as Martin suggests. Intrigued by situating 'cartoon objects in the real world,' Martin's creation of mirrors and custom framing devices soon incorporated the paintings, handling them more like furniture. Math meets flair, as Martin expresses: 'The attention to dotting all the I's and crossing all the T's is like my desire to finish everything as the way that it's supposed to look; it's not ambiguous, there's a solid list to check and cross off.' In these fames, compressed Sottsass squiggles expose driftwood inlays, square hollows exist in the canvas' centre, acrylic doorknobs ornament like epaulets. Craft informs Martin's relation to painting and its 'liveability'. 'You can paint something so much that it feels physical, as though you can put your arm behind it or something,' he explains, 'and to me that is like turning a painting on, that you painted it so much it became physical and then I feel there is this liveability.'

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Vulpine charade is savoured in Martin's style like a tongue describes a bonbon. Elaboration woos the eye; soft composure mellows the painting's strange fluency, nothing is prickly, it is silken, metallic, seductive in shade, scope and relation. In general, everything is conclusively manicured, like an equine mane.

Yet the approach, as Martin describes it, is less like persuasion and more like lusty masquerade. Fraudulence is domesticated. Taste, or impressions of the real, seems beside the point. Like a ploy to suppress confliction, Martin explains, 'how can I be a bunch of things at once, but never have to commit? Can I be the kind of person who wears a bullet belt, a velvet hat with a feather, a very formal blazer and clown shoes all at once without having to commit to being a punk, or a clown. I get to be a lil nasty boy covered in cake but then dressed up real nice to be presented to the public, while I still have cake all over my body.'

Bombast is disciplined by Martin's attention, and this microscopic perspective remedies his greedy, nasty boy friction. Foregrounding small obsessions dovetails with his control of surface mimesis, slowly brutalising optical reason with fascination, like the irresistible crush of glass or hoarfrost underfoot. The approach recalls Elizabeth Hardwick's style, whose sentences often pile impression upon impression, analogy against analogy, until conceits burnout and she gives it to the reader relatively straight. Her metaphors are wilfully weird. For example, recalling Billie Holiday's coiffure, she writes: 'And always the lascivious gardenia, worn like a large, white, beautiful ear ... Sometimes she died her hair red and the curls lay flat against her skull, like dried blood.' Her tensile expression and gentle quirk of repetition addresses the strain between attention and distraction that reads analogous to Martin's own oscillation.

Martin's unusual use of dimension, whether vertical or horizontal, enhances the microscopy of his sensitivity. Compositions are rarely cryptic; with only two to three features intertwining - the impact is spacey, laced in few strokes. Subtle cartooning, billboard-esque, and illustrative techniques render objects, angles, and volume to the fore. Sourcing is often, though not always, online, and appears dependent on detail whether in movement, decoration, signage, or light, whatever appeals. Features are thus blown-out, blurred in scale to then been perfectly optimised on canvas. 'The smaller and more specific the better' Martin says. 'I just look for potential for a painting in things in the same way that, say, a skateboarder looks for potential in the architecture for a trick.'

Wilfredo's Tale (2016) demonstrates this process to optimise and the opportunity of structure, which entails a strange excursion to Martin's own invented form. Zooming into a detail of a jester's hat, a ballooned green curl occupies half the canvas, with blurred foliage decorating the hat's base. While the jester remains mostly out of focus, an ice-blue eyelet rests atop like a peerless void, while the blurred curl slowly refines itself to the centre of the painting in a finely pronged tip - a mermaid's tail.

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Oftentimes, the negotiation is purely surface-to-surface, all delivered with pristine exactitude. Strawberry (2015), for instance, demonstrates this microscopy, where plays of hyperreality merge with flawless surface. A large, glistening strawberry, suitably pimped in texture, is embossed with a centaur sporting a proud erection, blowing a shofar, all against a flat red background with a lusciously varnished red frame. 'The idea for the strawberry was like how you see Jesus Christ in like a slice of bread of something,' Martin says, 'my idea was this totally perfect strawberry but with this minotaur.' If these paintings hinge commonplace objects and kitsch imagery to hallucinogenic interludes and glazed perversity, Strawberry recalls the thrill behind magnification, where inspection bends to simulacra.

The singular focus of Strawberry indicates Martin's interest in technology not as an activated influence but a hive of detail, with 3D technologies enhancing his relation to bleak, vacuous kinds of flatness. The most basic 3D rendering tools are exercises in plain shape, line, and vectors. Like many, Martin experimented with these early software: 'It was really simple, me and my cousin used to make wrestlers using these globes,' he explains, 'you could wrap any texture around this globe, giving this snowman a lizard skin, we would put tattoos on it and when you're done it's all grey in one building, like Tron or something, spaced and dry. When you wrap it, it renders and drops it in a space so the shadows don't seem insane; it becomes justified by adding this horizon line. It's so basic but it looks so weird, so bleak.'

The similarity is striking and partly explains his inclusion in Flatlands, an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which examined new representational painting conditioned by virtuality. Martin continues, 'it feels like what I'm doing to objects, selecting and stacking cylinders, and when I'm painting dogs or the lamp, I'm painting pictures. Images are used like a backdrop. The things that pierce it, the rivets, are built into the picture and ultra-fabricated in my environment, but ultra-false in a way that becomes very bleak. I like that feeling, and the single light source that 3D programmes operate.'

The bareness of these immaculate images is the staging of their own inherent frank attraction. Depth is mocked; clarity chooses its revelation; experiential seduction is deployed as a banality. Triple, Nickel, Tull (2015) for instance, is clearly evocative of this, and was included in Flatlands. Complete signification without the real, a mid-calf woman's boot rests atop a mirrored surface, various amber-orange vectors dissipate in a brothel-like gloaming. Silver rivets are strung with tight coral lacing; the luminosity of Christina Ramberg lingers in the boot's fine segments, each an electrified autumnal tone.

In Triple, Nickel, Tull, prosthesis appeals, lending Martin's style a willowy darkness that is not just seductive, but sly and plainly vacuous.

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Martin clarifies this tone: 'Dead inside, monotone, a kind of sadness that is bleak and it's slightly numb, empty, shiny. Body and bags of flesh in this world, in these elements. I don't think you're wrong about the darkness. I am trying to achieve that kind of empty plasticity with elements happening around you. The mood, the emptiness of Christina Ramberg, is really perfect.' The ploy comes back to the nasty boy attitude, of cake beneath the suit, 'How do I get the heaviness of those paintings and let funky, Memphis, jazzy-funk-weird-bending- guitars exist but in this bleak, grey sadness. Have your cake and eat it too.'

While Martin's work includes the versatile operations of style with dry execution, along with the accessibility of images in the digital age, erotics are always nearby. Double entendre is organised with eyelets and sharpened flowers, dotted with dewdrops. Metallic rims interrupt throbbing proportions, while corset ligation continues to loop, skirt, glisten and lick. Intense definition and lax arousal are part of the juggle. A jovial smokescreen, these are paintings eager to transmogrify, like a rampant hormone titillates the attention. If scrutiny crystallises these details, then lust intensifies volume.



'Birdie' by Orion Martin, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Bodega, New York.