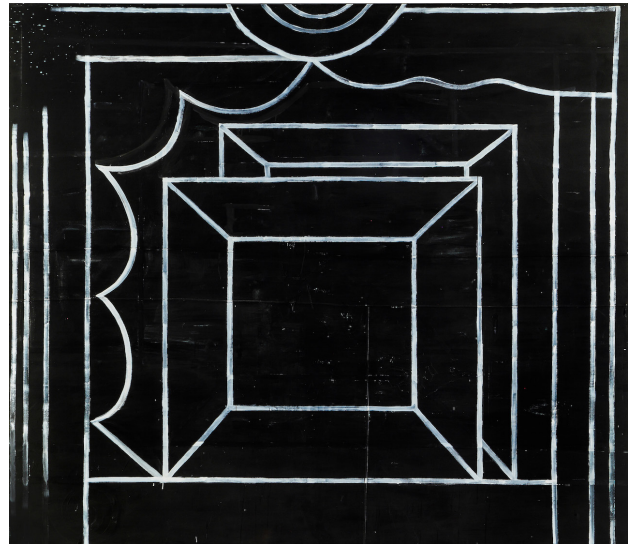
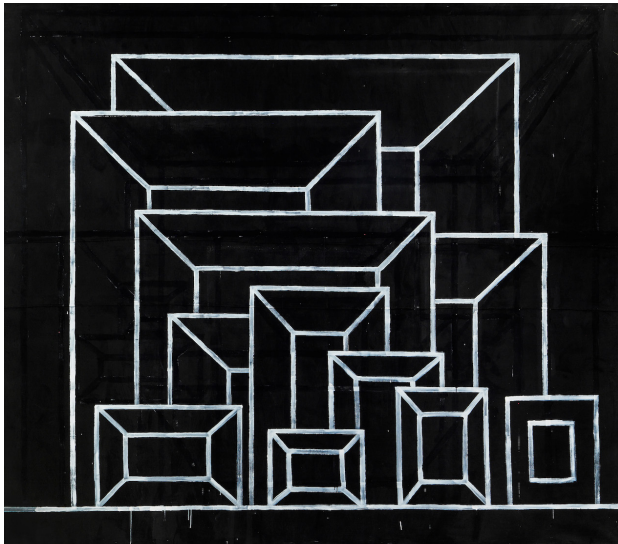


HYPERALLERGIC

Two Ways of Making a Painting in the 21st Century

by John Yau on July 19, 2015



Chris Martin, "11" (1996), oil on canvas, 129 x 143 inches, and "Untitled" (1995), oil on canvas, 129 x 143 inches (courtesy Anton Kern Gallery)

An exhibition that unexpectedly connected with Root's was Chris Martin: Three Black Paintings (1992-1996) at Anton Kern (July 9 – August 7, 2015). Although their work seems to have little in common, both Root and Martin drew inspiration from Guston and Feeley. Neither was satisfied with copying, citing or parodying, all of which have become institutionally sanctioned moves. Perhaps the lesson to be learned from models like Guston and Feeley is to not do what is expected of you.

For his "black" paintings, Martin channeled the empty frame of Guston's painting, "Frame" (1976). Instead of trying to ape or parody Guston's luscious painterly surfaces, Martin depicted the frames graphically in white lines against a black ground. In "11" (1996), they are stacked, as if on a shelf, overlaying each other, silently waiting to be filled. Instead of suppressing his anxiety about filling a canvas, Martin faced it head on.

The large, oversize empty frame at the center of "Untitled" (1995) becomes an empty shadow box or theater. We see the bottom of a circle echoed by two concentric lines extending down from the middle of the painting's top edge. A scalloped line extends in either direction from the circle, demarcating the frame on the left side, like the edge of curtain. Is the whole painting a theater or is that circle the lower half of a black sun? In his suggestion of multiple readings, Martin has started gaining control over the vocabulary he derived from Guston, started making it his own.

Martin's "black" paintings are large, more than ten feet high and nearly twelve feet wide. They were done on canvas tarps, which were sewn together so that one sees the seams. Martin used the tarps because they were affordable, not because they were arty. The inspiration to work big was likely Julian Schnabel, whose behemoth-scale paintings were celebrated by many in the mid-1980s. However, Martin, to his credit, never became bombastic and didn't devolve into a caricature. Instead of claiming, as Schnabel has, that he was a genius, he took images and forms from Guston, Feeley and other artists – essentially his heroes – and kept working and reworking them until they became his.