

ArtSeen

Chris Martin

By **William Corwin**

The shimmer of bright sunlight on wine-dark water, endless swirled striations of minerals in a Catskill outcrop, blurred light beams through dust: Chris Martin presents one-to-one dialogues—examinations of the minutiae of ineffability. In this newest cycle of paintings, Martin toys with aesthetic details in nature that have their correlatives in his arsenal of surfaces, textures, and non-repeating but predictable patterns. They can lull, and eventually instill in the viewer a certain trance-like ecstasy born of quiet observation. He charts the many kinds of material-induced ecstatic experience, from the flickering sparkle of a glitter-covered surface in *Untitled* (2019–21), as the viewer orbits the work, to the endless and labyrinthine interweavings of opaque and transparent skeins of paint in the flowing canvas *Jupiter Landscape* (2021) and *Untitled* (2021); or the diffuse trails of the spray-painted mark in *Seven Pointed Star* (2018–20)—simultaneously present but shifting and undefined as well. This is not to say his work is minimal or abstract—Martin’s work in this exhibition is imagistic, yet he eschews narrative. There are specific images as well, cutouts from books or magazines, but he deploys them in much the same way that he uses painted signs—the photos, sometimes merely logos on stickers, are triggers rather than plot lines—to be registered by the viewer rather than incorporated into any wider gesture.

It would seem that part of the enjoyment of this ecstasy is the acknowledgment of its transience. Whether an exploration of the velvety blackness of a void—a sky with stars, underwater, or even simply the inside of our eyelids, Martin toys with details to provide an underlying metric that sets dimensions and parameters that are secondary to the primary textures. The seams of the canvas interrupt the surface of the flat expanses of matte black and ultramarine in *Big Midnight* (2021) and disturb our meditation on the emanating oval and semi-oval forms. Martin employs several techniques like this; the weight of occasional brushstrokes, ghostly over-painted forms—there is a notion in his works of rejecting the idea of repeating anything identically, but still somehow creating a pattern with all its imperfections. The artist loves forms that fall into these categories of similar, but not the same: fish scales, colonies of fungi, planets, constellations—an obsession with the foreignness amongst similar objects. The simple geometric and organic forms, and even the photographs he pastes to the canvas surface, are repetitive enough to supply the painting with the AbEx trope of all-over-ness—these are fields, not so much compositions.



Installation view: *Chris Martin*, Anton Kern, New York. © Chris Martin. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

ON VIEW

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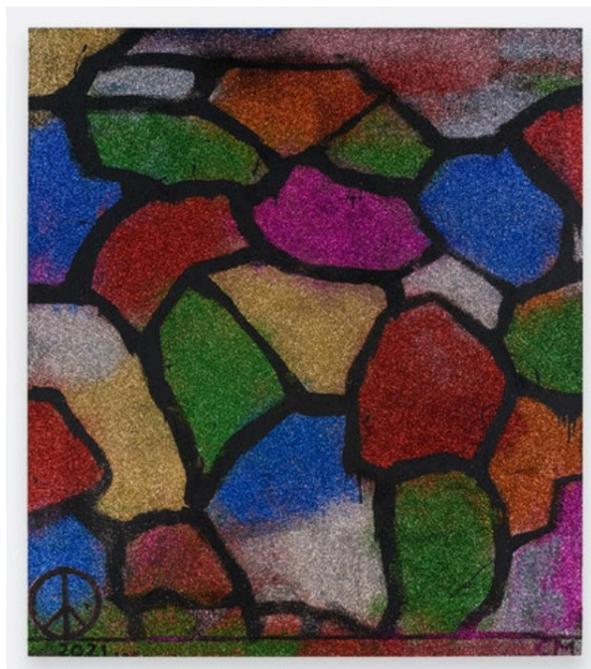
Martin is not ambiguous about his ambiguity—the paintings are about formlessness, constant change, and resolutely refraining from narrative. There is one exception, a memento mori: *Gold Teeth for Lance De Los Reyes* (2021), a skull with a cigarette clenched in its golden grid à la van Gogh. Martin takes joy in being playfully ambiguous about his iconography. He hints at a sort of hippie spiritualism, but while adhering images of King Tut’s throne, the pyramids, and the planets to one picture in *Telescope Sphinx in Outer Space* (2019–21) his selection also includes a black-and-white image of Greta Garbo’s face Photoshopped onto the sphinx at Giza—there are no Rosicrucian conspiracies here. In the same piece, he places a decal of the classic seven-pointed cannabis leaf in the upper right-hand quadrant, but the evergreen of a cardboard air freshener balances it out on the lower left, making it hard to discern a statement. The stars in *Telescope Sphinx*, *Big Midnight*, and *Seven Pointed Star* are all non-specific, but two paintings depict the Gemini constellation. Highlighting the stellar Castor and Pollux, Martin lends them an immediacy and movement by isolating them in the night sky, but it is impossible to tell if this is a figurative depiction or simply a star map. If one could find a criticism, it is that Martin is too playful; we could use a bit more anchoring in the midst of all this sensuality and circulating signs.

Coming back to ecstasy, it is not only the beginning and ends of things that emphasize their specialness, but a distinct delineation of what we cannot have. In *Untitled* (2021), a monumental, murky, and indistinct painting, a series of gold filigrees (fragments of golden lace) are buried under a thin coat of paint. While some materials are allowed to glitter, others are forced to be dull, but the brief passages of gold that emerge from under their blanket of paint indicate that our longing for the satisfaction of glitter is a much more exciting experience than actually getting to see what appears to be cheap polyester lace. The bottom left-hand corner of *Untitled* (2019–21), an expanse of glitter, over-painted collage images, and pot leaf decals, has a small and rough cutout at the bottom left. Into this little opening a mysterious object has been inserted—painted, repainted, and encrusted in glitter to such an extent that its form is largely lost, like a relic from a sunken ship at the bottom of the sea. Its presence is fascinating but irksome—like almost hearing something important that someone is saying to you—here there is both the ecstasy of fulfillment and of transient and unattainable meaning.

Contributor

William Corwin

William Corwin is a sculptor and journalist from New York. He has exhibited at The Clocktower, LaMama and Geary galleries in New York, as well as galleries in London, Hamburg, Beijing, and Taipei. He has written regularly for the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Artpapers*, *Bomb*, *Artcritical*, *Raintaxi*, and *Canvas*, and formerly for *Frieze*.



Chris Martin, *Untitled*, 2019–21. Acrylic, oil, and glitter on canvas, 88 x 77 inches. © Chris Martin. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.



Chris Martin, *Gold Teeth for Lance De Los Reyes*, 2021. Acrylic, spraypaint, and collage on canvas, 40 x 34 1/2 inches. © Chris Martin. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.