

Wolkoff, Julia, "Chris Martin on Breaking the Rules of Painting in the 1980s," *Artsy.net*, April 12, 2019



## Chris Martin on Breaking the Rules of Painting in the 1980s

By Julia Wolkoff | April 12, 2019



Portrait of Chris Martin. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Of all the celestial bodies in our Milky Way, Chris Martin loves Saturn best. Staring down at the floor of his Williamsburg studio—a former florist’s freezer that he’s occupied since the mid-1980s—we inspected the computer printouts of the planet that he’d glued onto an unfinished painting before us. Sure, he admires its spectral rings, but Martin’s fascination with Saturn can be, like many other things, traced back to the death of his musical obsession, Amy Winehouse.

Martin recalled the series of paintings he began in 2007 featuring images of the late pop star superimposed with talismanic signs from various cultures. Her induction, by overdose, into the dreaded 27 Club in 2011 left Martin with a twinge of superstitious resignation: “Obviously my paintings didn’t protect her,” he sighed.

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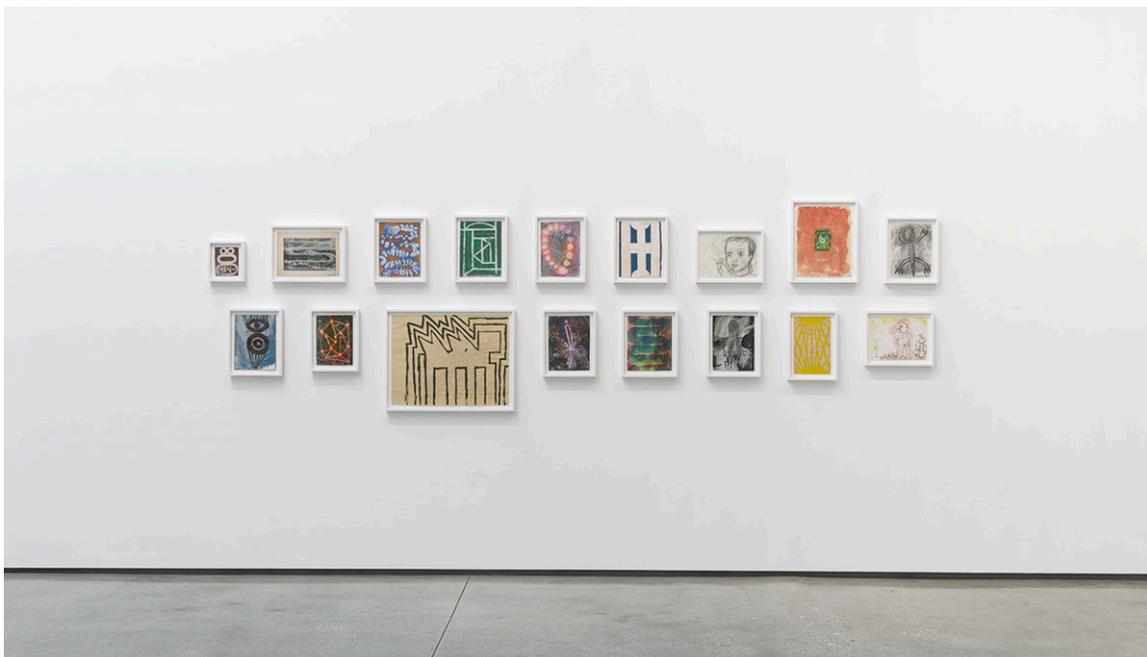


Chris Martin, *Musicians in the Landscape*, 2012-2015. Photo by Thomas Müller, Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Chris Martin, *Seven latex colors*, 1989. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Winehouse's tragic death led Martin to fixate on the number 27. Horoscope readers (including the artist) recognize a moment astrologers call the "Saturn return"—when the planet, during its orbit around the sun, comes back to meet one's natal Saturn, a process that traditionally starts at, yes, age 27. The Saturn return is, for many, considered a moment of reckoning—or in this case, a neat syllogism for the fated, cyclical tide of youthful promise cut short.



Installation view of Chris Martin, "The Eighties," at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2019. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtest of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

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Chris Martin, *Untitled*, 1988. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Chris Martin, *Untitled*, 1988–89. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Martin's current show of old work, "The Eighties," at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles through April 27th, prompted the prolific—and, today, commercially and critically successful—artist to reflect on his own Halcyon days in Brooklyn during that decade. Then in his twenties and early thirties, he was scrapping around the same neighborhood, still figuring himself out.

Preparing for the show—which presents rarely (if ever) exhibited works Martin created years before his first art-world accolades—had its emotional pitfalls. "I guess I'm a middle-aged artist now," he bemoaned. "The difficult part of looking at the '80s and the old work is that it's old, apparently, which must mean that I am old."

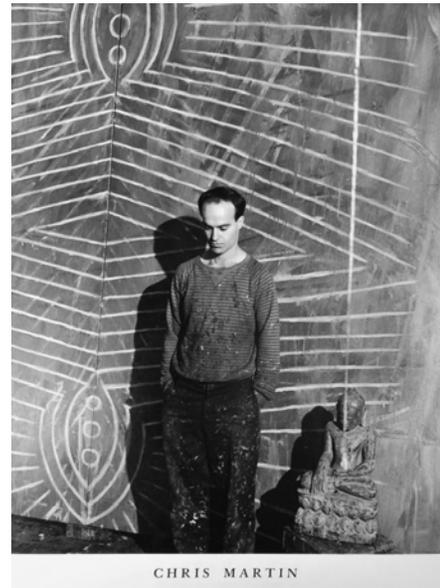
Martin is 65 now. Yet in personality and verve, he's a young man, an exceptionally unfenced person who continues to thrive and find inspiration in the stimulating artist communities in Brooklyn and the vivacity of younger peers in the area, some of whom work in his studio as assistants.

"Excavating" these long-lost experiments from the crowded storage racks in his studio prompted Martin to confront the difficult-to-pin-down ethos of what makes a "Chris Martin painting." This was a particularly complicated task, considering the breadth of his largely abstract work, which references spiritual influences like Buddhism and the cosmos, as well as pop culture and music. He also incorporates an unusual range of materials (glitter, spray paint, newspapers) into his paintings, including whatever he finds around his workspace.

Contemplating these older works, some of which are characteristically monumental in size, others uncharacteristically tiny, clarified an arc of his career, and conjured for Martin the obsessions and interests that consumed him then (street art, prophetic dreams, performance) and those that have carried on through the years (spiritualism, the Catskills, music).



Image of Chris Martin's studio that appeared in a catalogue for his show at John Good Gallery April 6–28, 1990. Photo by Peter Muscato. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Chris Martin in front of his painting from "The Artist Project: Portraits of the Real Art World/New York Artists 1981–1990" by Peter Bellamy, published in 1991. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

It was in the 1980s, however, that many—if not the most essential—aspects of his current approach were born. Forced to contend with the rigid, dominant modes of art at the time (namely Conceptualism and Minimalism), Martin emerged on the opposite end of the '80s as an open-minded maximalist. In the previous decade, purists like Donald Judd and Richard Serra had declared painting flat dead, and had "this kind of railroad track idea that they had made the work that needed to be made, according to some art-historical inevitability."

Many painters of Martin's generation "made the same painting over and over again," he said. "The feeling was that if you believed in painting a circle, that you would paint circles, because you knew what you believed in. If you made good paintings of circles, how could you paint a duck? If you believed in circles, you wouldn't believe in ducks." After some trial and error, the inquisitive-minded young Martin, of course, pursued his own route entirely.

In his early years, Martin explained, he was heavily invested in a kind of "masterpiece syndrome." He wanted to make great works of art, but "the thing about wanting to make a masterpiece is that you're very conscious of wanting to put everything into one painting," he said. He certainly tried—several works from the late 1970s and early '80s are caked in inches of paint.

Yet he also dabbled in painting as performance art, with works that seem truly cringeworthy today. For an initiative called Hit and Run Theater, audiences were asked to meet Martin and his cohort of collaborators on a subway platform or in an abandoned lot. Martin would make paintings in front of the crowds, and, despite being a "terrible singer," croon and recite poetry. The transient nature of these works—and the intensity of their preparation—led Martin to realize that he was meant to focus only on painting.

During the early part of the 1980s, it was his discovery of German conceptual artists—especially the abject humor and wild reference points of Sigmar Polke—that liberated Martin to abandon this

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Installation view of Chris Martin, "The Eighties," at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2019. Photo by Jeff McLane, 2019. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

syndrome and "open myself to where the painting would go, and also open myself to a different identity," he said. Distinctions between abstraction and figuration, high and low, became increasingly meaningless. "The temple of art has to be ironic if you have something popular that comes into it," he railed, "and I hate that. That's such a terrible lack of spirit."

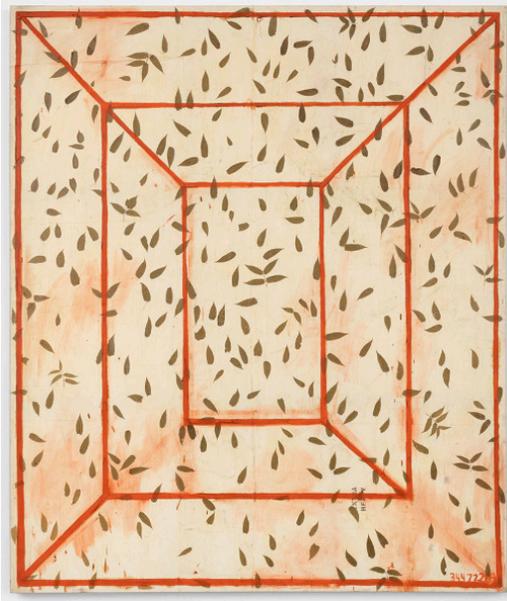
Gradually, Martin's high-minded separation between "art" and "not-art" started thinning. He took in the explosion of street art and came to admire Jean-Michel Basquiat (another member of the 27 Club). He envied Basquiat's ability to take whatever he was interested in and incorporate it straight into his work.

Martin began to see everything around him as fair game for his art. His studio floor was covered with newspapers he used to sop up paint, and aluminum foil he used to cover buckets. "It was covered with all this junk," he recalled, "and I started thinking, well, 'Why does this go in the trash and it doesn't go on a painting?'"

In the later part of the decade, Martin made several oil and acrylic paintings on tin foil. "The actual act of spreading oil paint on this smooth metal surface was thrilling and different," he remembered fondly. "I could wipe it off. It was really fun and also a little bit scary, but very exciting." To hear Martin discuss the excitement of trying out a new material, a new technique, even 40 years later, is to listen to someone who still believes in play.

When he first began to approach his works with this kind of openness, Martin explained, it allowed him to accept "things that don't make any sense." Perhaps he was looking for orange paint but couldn't find it; he simply used red instead. He began to allow what others might have considered mistakes to be a vital part of his art. If unwanted paint accidentally dripped on his canvas, the work was not ruined—it was just different. "You give yourself over to the process," he said. "Then if

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Chris Martin, *Untitled*, 1989. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Chris Martin, *Griffin*, 1987–88. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

you can suspend the judgment and say, 'I don't know what I just did,' you can go somewhere new." It was precisely his location in the outer reaches of Brooklyn, away from the commercial art world, that enabled Martin to take this experimental approach. The 1980s Brooklyn scene seems to have been the perfect playground for the artist. "I had a lot of people in and out of the studio, and I went to their studios, and we went to weird clubs, and we hung up paintings on the street," he remembered. "There's a certain freedom when your audience is your peers," he added.

One peer whose influence on Martin is perhaps still underrecognized is the painter Katherine Bradford, a fellow mad colorist with whom he rented—for a mere \$650 a month—a loft building in Williamsburg between 1980 and 1984. During their time working side-by-side, they served as sounding boards for each other's work, even stepping in to finish the other's painting at times. "If either one of us had a painting that was going badly," Martin said, "we would leave it outside the other person's studio door" to work on. The pair are still friends, and though they no longer collaborate, they continue to hold studio visits.

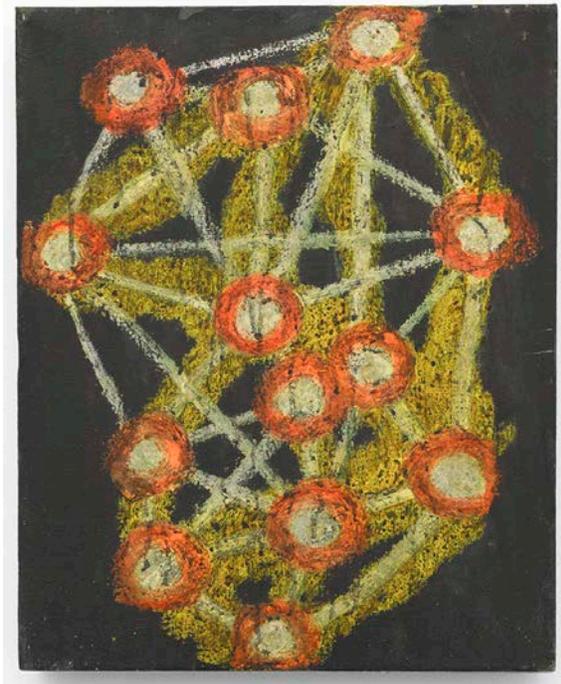
The fraternal nature of this nascent artist community fueled Martin's creative ambition in a neighborhood that was not too long ago considered peripheral to the mainstream New York art world. It was also this early group of "settlers" in the historically working-class Polish, Italian, and Hispanic area of Williamsburg that helped transform the area into the vital—and deeply gentrified—art hub that it is today. "I remember when Kasia's, the local restaurant on Bedford Avenue, got a salad," Martin said. There were so many artists requesting a salad on the menu, that when the restaurant finally added one, "it was called the 'art salad,' just lettuce and tomatoes, probably," he laughed.

Yet some of his exploits back then resonate with the DIY approach and unconventional exhibitions that still characterize the neighborhood. In one very 21st-century anecdote, Martin recalled curating an exhibition in a local pizza shop, with works by friends like Fred Tomaselli, Thomas Nozkowski, Bill Jensen, Bradford, Peter Acheson, Phong Bui, Rick Briggs, and Joyce Pensato. He remembers it fondly: "It was a great show, I've got to say."

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Katherine Bradford, *Spring Green*, 1988. Rago



Chris Martin, *Untitled*, 1987. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

By the late 1980s, at the height of the AIDS crisis, Martin developed an interest in “outsider” art. He pursued a career in art therapy, in part to meet people without formal artistic training, but who, nevertheless, “were able to make paintings—great paintings—that were very direct,” he said. The experience was “a wake-up call.” Martin realized that what his work needed “was openness and a belief in doing the thing.”

During his art therapy sessions, Martin discovered the myriad joys of glitter—a material that enlivens many of his most recent paintings. He loves “everything that everybody likes about” glitter, especially that “it’s a great mess.” (His studio is a beautiful, splintering color field of lost glitter shards—in the paintings; in rugs on the floor—on every surface.) Being an art therapist also led Martin to recognize that everyone, artists and non-artists alike, faces the same fear when approaching a work. “They don’t want to embarrass themselves by making a bad painting,” he realized. Ultimately, he said, “one finds courage by acknowledging exactly all those fears.”

Martin always enters his studio without preconception, and with a mission to enjoy himself. If he finds himself not having fun in the studio, feeling bored, or struggling with a physical task, he steps back and asks himself: “Okay, Chris, what is going to be more fun? What’s going to be more exciting? What gives me joy to do?” Doing this, he explained, is an important way to gauge “whether you can be paying attention and be really there, really alive.”

This process of self-discovery has never left Martin, and is perhaps the key ingredient to his success—commercially, but more importantly, as an artist continually engaged with and committed to pushing his work forward. Asked what advice he’d offer to the younger, 1980s version of Chris Martin, he replied: “I guess if I went back to my old self, I’d just give myself a hug and say, ‘Relax, kid, it’s gonna be alright.’”