

Olsen, Craig, "In Conversation: Chris Martin with Craig Olsen," *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2008



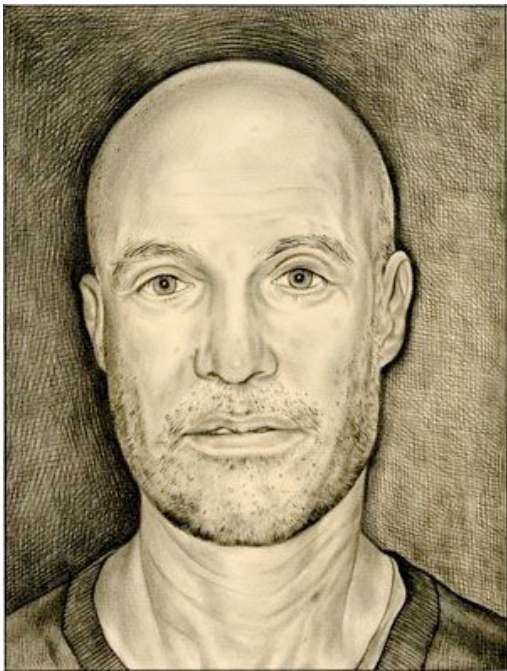
February 2008

IN CONVERSATION

Chris Martin with Craig Olson

by Craig Olson

In the midst of preparations for his current exhibition at Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery in Chelsea (January 26th–March 1, 2008) Chris Martin welcomed painter and Rail contributing writer Craig Olson to his Williamsburg studio to discuss his life and work.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui

Craig Olson (Rail): What's the first work of art you can remember seeing?

Chris Martin: I grew up in a great old house in Washington DC that actually was filled with paintings and old family portraits. I particularly loved this life sized Sir Thomas Lawrence portrait my mother had inherited with an elaborate carved wooden frame. And my grandmother was a gifted landscape painter. My most vivid memory as a kid happened at Beauvoir School. We made a giant mural of dinosaurs in the refectory. Every year the third graders would repaint this wall and we did dinosaurs. I was thrilled.

Rail: Very early on you were painting mural-sized images.

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Martin: (laughs) Yes—I always loved giant size. I started painting in high school when I was thirteen and right away I wanted to make the paintings bigger. And by the time I got to college I was interested in making the biggest things I could.

Rail: Did you go to art school?

Martin: I went to Yale as an undergraduate and studied painting and touch football basically. I stayed for two and a half years, dropped out, and came to New York.

Rail: Al Held was teaching there at that time, right?

Martin: Yes, he had a big impact on me. His retrospective at the Whitney Museum opened in 1974. I saw that show several times, and it just blew me away, particularly the paintings from the 1960s like "Ivan the Terrible" and the later black and white "Black Nile" paintings. I thought they were wonderful paintings. He was teaching in the graduate school and I was able to talk to him several times. I think that fired me up to come to the city and be an artist.

Rail: What was New York City like then?

Martin: I came to Houston Street in 1976. Downtown was empty at night and dangerous and very cheap. Some Yale grad students were living in a building at 302 Mott Street. I got an apartment for \$125 a month. There was no lock on the front door and all kinds of drug dealers and vagrants came in and out to sleep on the roof... I got a studio in Williamsburg in 1980.

Rail: What was Williamsburg like in 1980?

Martin: The north side was a sleepy, working-class neighborhood and the south side was a deserted very dangerous neighborhood. I was looking for a studio—and Bill Jensen said take the "L" train. I remember asking him what's the "L" train? I rented a whole building at Driggs Avenue and north 9th Street which I shared with Kathy Bradford. There were like two restaurants in northside. One was a pizza parlor, and the other was a very sleepy Polish diner.

Rail: Was there a community of artists around here then?

Martin: Bill had his studio on S. 4th St. with Jim Clark and Robert Grovner. Tom Bills, David Kapp, and Judy Pfaff were over in Greenpoint. Fred Valentine was on Lorimer, Joyce Pensato lived around the corner. I met the painter Jim Harrison in 1982 on North 6th street. He became a mentor to me and several other artists.

Rail: What was your work like in those days?

Martin: When I first came to New York I was making heavily painted minimal things. I was thinking about Held and Elizabeth Murray, and sculpture by Serra and Heizer. In those days a lot of abstract painters were making one image. It was a hold over from that abstract expressionist ideal that a 'serious' painter found an image - like Rothko's bands or Newman's zips - and they stuck with it. Sean Scully did stripes, Thornton Willis made wedge paintings, Ron Gorchov made these great shield paintings with two marks on a field. I met Tom Nozkowski at his first show at 55 Mercer. His work was quirky and very open—he became a friend and influence. In 1979 I met Bill Jensen. His studio was filled with intense small paintings that just radiated light. Some of them seemed so weird and ugly to me that I knew I had a lot to learn. Glenn O'Brien lived down the hall at 302 Mott Street, and he showed me this little painting of a car crash he had by a kid named Basquiat.

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Then Julian Schnabel came along and the whole painting world blew open... For several years I made abstract paintings, figurative paintings, installation and performance things, all kinds of shit—most of it I destroyed. I had a very close dialogue with my friends Peter Acheson and Mark Potter who came to the city in 1977. They took me to see Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakage movies, and we went to a lot of poetry at St. Marks. And of course there was the whole music scene at CBGB's and the Mudd Club.

Rail: How did you pay rent?

Martin: I was a guard at the Guggenheim, I unloaded trucks, worked for art movers, did part-time jobs through the '80's. In 1983 I took a trip to Asia and married Karin Gustafson in Thailand. India had a huge influence on me. We came back and bought a building in Brooklyn in 1984. Our daughters were born in 1986 and 1989. I started selling paintings but then the art world crashed in the early 1990's. I went back to the School of Visual Arts and got a college degree in art therapy. I got a job at an AIDS day treatment program in Chelsea—and I did that work for about fifteen years—in Harlem, Red Hook, and at Rivington House on the Lower East Side.



Chris Martin, "Samuel Palmer" (2007).
Oil, spray paint, gel medium, collage on canvas.
54 by 45 inches.

Rail: I had heard you did that. There was a lot of art about politics and culture wars at the time. You were working hands on with people.

Martin: It was a terrible time for the gay community. The politics of the government were horrible. The attitude of the Catholic Church was just horrible. People died so fast - three of the painters that I had shared a studio with at Yale died within a few years. I was friends with Frank Moore since college—you know he was the person that invented the AIDS ribbon—and he made very moving paintings about living with AIDS. They were all protesting and desperately fighting for information, and for their lives. David Wojnarowicz was inspiring. He made art that had tremendous passion and rage—I really admired him...

Rail: In what way did these experiences affect your work?

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Martin: Working as an art therapist in Harlem and Red Hook Brooklyn just turned me around. It stripped away any illusions I might have had about poverty, politics and racism. And I got to know these amazing nurses, social workers, and therapists—some of whom were practically saints. The experience of working with men and women living with AIDS, with mental illness, with addiction, was intense. They could be the most extraordinary artists. They were so intelligent and creative and so brave that it certainly gave me a perspective on what I thought were my problems. I had all this education, I knew all this stuff about painting. I began to question whether any of that was really so important.

Rail: Is this when you started the black paintings?

Martin: Yes—I had a crisis of belief, and for several years began working only with white lines on a black ground. I found myself painting these simple open geometries. Some of them had little phrases written in them and quotes from Thomas Merton. There was a lot of personal grieving going on.

Rail: Let me ask you about your show at Sideshow Gallery in 2005. In the one room, you had a 25-foot painting and the next room was filled with all sorts of junk. I remember a stuffed monkey, rugs, works by other artists, statues, letters, and photos. It seems that your art is a real collaboration with the things in and of your life.

Martin: That show was an attempt to just throw everything from my life into the gallery. It was exhilarating to do that. I wanted to bring in all of the different artists, images, objects, photos, and junk that inspired me...to break down the boundaries between high art, kids art, sidewalk art, folk art, or just a scrap of newspaper I found on the sidewalk...



Chris Martin, "Untitled" (2007).
Spray paint and oil on canvas. 43 by 30 inches.

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Rail: There were a lot of images of mushrooms in that room. That's a recurring image in your painting.

Martin: I first made paintings of psilocybin mushrooms in the 1970's when I was exploring psychedelics. And then I stopped all that for many years. My mother had taught us a bit about wild mushrooms and which ones to eat, and which ones to avoid. After she died in 2004, I found myself interested in mushrooms again—and they came back into the paintings. I was uncomfortable at first—I was supposed to be an abstract painter—so how can I paint mushrooms?

Rail: So is there a constant questioning of yourself and of boundaries in your work?

Martin: Constant questioning, yes. I'm giving myself permission to try stuff. I've gotten more accepting of the things that I can't do—and hopefully more accepting of the things I'm compelled to do over and over.

Rail: It seems that within that process there's a relinquishing of control. You allow so much to just happen, which also allows for failure to happen. Are there any works of yours that you consider as failures?

Martin: (laughs) Constant failures! I think if I accept that it's a kind of hopeless situation then I can let the paintings go in the direction they want. There is a wonderful Julian Schnabel quote where he describes one of his paintings as a "a bouquet of mistakes." I think that Julian's best paintings have that kind of feeling of fearlessly blundering ahead.

Rail: Have you ever made a work that failed so badly you destroyed it?

Martin: Oh yeah! That happens. If they're really embarrassing, I take them down to the cellar and put them in the boiler room. Then I won't have to see them or think about them. A month later, I can maybe continue or just throw them away. Usually I try to repaint and keep an object going. Sometimes they're too horrible and need to go.

Rail: You see paintings as having a life of their own?

Martin: Yes. I've acquired a certain discipline, which consists of putting myself in the studio and moving materials around the surface. I'm quite disciplined and rigorous about getting to work. But I try to let go of the judging that is constantly present. Is this a good painting? Is it horrible? It has to do with allowing a painting to be in an awkward state, where I don't know what it is...

Rail: I once read that Bill Jensen said, "One of my responsibilities is to uncover the energies that materials possess." Your paintings are very physical and use some strange materials, for example you made paintings with bread. Are there any materials that you wouldn't work with?

Martin: Bill Jensen has this amazing and detailed understanding of the craft of painting. My attitude towards materials is kind of childish by comparison. I use stuff that is part of everyday life. I'll try anything once. In the 1980's I made paintings that were made of roof cement. They made me sick, and would never dry, so I stopped. My girlfriend, the artist Tamara Gonzales, and I have a dialogue about new materials. She uses tinsel garlands, plastic flowers, all kinds of stuff. I had been making paintings with bananas and food for awhile. When I first made the paintings on bread I glued the slices on and it looked beautiful. It made me laugh. The act of painting on the bread was weird. It felt like I was a stranger working my own painting. Often collage material carries a whole story or emotional content, and helps me start a painting.

Rail: Many of the surfaces of your paintings look as if they've been worked and reworked. Do you consistently repaint them?

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Martin: I try to finish the paintings right away. I will take a little thumbnail sketch, like the back of a matchbook, and make a painting from that. Occasionally, in an hour or two you make a painting. That's a wonderful feeling. But more often than not the painting is a disaster. (laughter) So I've learned to stay with paintings for long periods of time. Not that I want a merit badge for working a long time, but they irritate me, they bug me, they keep drawing me back. The huge paintings tend to stay around the studio, so they can evolve over years.

Rail: In this new body of work there are no really large paintings. Is there something that drew you away from that size?

Martin: I've always made small paintings—I think of them as having a huge inner scale—and then I actually make huge paintings. The last three or four years I made a conscious attempt to make paintings that were 4 ft. - 6 ft. in dimensions. It was something that I was really afraid of. It had become this blind spot. Tom Nozkowski told me the way to scale-up one's paintings was to add a few inches every year. So initially I took my small paintings and I just grew them 6 inches on either side.

Rail: There are a lot of paintings in your studio. Do you work on all these paintings at once?

Martin: This spring I started eighty paintings. It was exciting to start so many paintings simultaneously. In the past, I would paint and repaint over and over on the same canvases. Now I'm letting myself actually start a hundred paintings. It's not any easier to finish them but I'm starting them. I'm influenced by people like Thornton Dial, Purvis Young and Anselm Kiefer who have this tremendous appetite for work. I mean why not? Morris Louis made 250 large paintings in his living room in a couple of years. Paul Klee made twelve hundred works of art in the last full year of his life. I just got an email from Peter Acheson with photos of 15 paintings he'd made over the weekend. They looked pretty great.

Rail: Do you do a lot of drawing in relation to the paintings? Do you do a sketch for a painting? You mentioned working on a matchbook—

Martin: Drawing is the heart of my work. I have really very primitive ideas about color, but I just love to draw. I fill up notebooks and have piles of stuff on paper. I do make drawings as plans for paintings - but increasingly I try to act in the paintings directly.

Rail: In some recent paintings there are collaged photographs from a newspaper. Is this a new development?

Martin: For years I've covered the floor of the studio with newspapers. I'm used to painting all day looking at newspapers. Sometimes I kneel down to do something and end up reading an article. (Laughs) Lately I grab things that catch my eye and stick them onto the paintings. A few times this summer I made portraits of James Brown from photos I found.

Rail: He just passed away—was he important to you?

Martin: I grew up in Washington, D.C. listening to black radio and Motown music. I loved James Brown, Marvin Gaye, Issac Hayes, Curtis Mayfield, The Temptations, all that stuff. I actually decided that I was an artist, at age fourteen, while listening to James Brown. I was drinking Coca-Cola, high on sugar, listening to James Brown's "Mashed Potato Popcorn," and painting these bad Picasso paintings. I remember just knowing—"Oh this is it." When he died last year, I was surprised how emotional it was for me. I began to take my James Brown records and glue them into paintings. I've been taking album covers and using photographs of him in paintings.

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Rail: In one painting here there are photographs of frogs. How did they show up?

Martin: As a kid I always loved catching frogs and playing around the ponds and lakes. I even had a giant stuffed frog in my room. Now I'm reading that the frogs are disappearing. The rainforest is shrinking and they're getting wiped out. We're living in the midst of this global genocide of species. My daughter Meredith is working in environmental biology and working to save turtles, doing research at The Museum of Natural History. I try to follow some of what these people are doing, I feel helpless that here I am making paintings when all this terrible stuff is happening. So I am connecting with frogs again. I started cutting out pictures of frogs, and now I am drawing frogs. I have to say my drawings of frogs are pretty crude looking—pretty funny looking.

Rail: There was a painting of yours in a show at the Uta Scharf Gallery in 2005. It was lumpy insulating foam, with little dots on it. It was up on a pair of stilts, leaned in the corner. I remember going up to this elegant Upper East Side gallery and seeing this thing in the corner. It made me laugh out loud. I thought that was a pretty profound thing for a painting to do that. Is humor something you strive for?

Martin: Well, thank you. I think that's a very high compliment. If I see a New Guinea mask or a great Guston painting and I start laughing I feel that's a sign that something has reached me. The question is what makes us laugh? It's not like Letterman tells a joke. It's different - a laughter of recognition. It's existential laughter like at a Richard Foreman play. Something is absurd and very true at the same time.

Rail: I find myself laughing and then become incredibly self-aware that I've just been laughing. This makes me self-conscious, almost paranoid in a way, which I welcome.

Martin: (laughs)

Rail: It's true, it's true.

Martin: I know what you mean. I feel the air on the back of my neck, I become aware of my blood pressure. I hear the sounds in the room... Years ago Joseph Beuys had a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum. I was obsessed with Beuys, but I didn't understand it. There was a sculpture of about five or six tree branches covered by layers of felt. The branches stuck out at either end. I looked very carefully at this sculpture and I heard a sound. It wasn't a hallucination. I really heard a sound that I knew from my childhood in the Catskill Mountains. It was the sound of a bunch of snow falling off a tree, the heavy thump of snow falling in the forest. I remember looking around to see if something had made this sound. There was a guard. I asked him if he had heard it. I went up to the sculpture and it was called "Snowfall." It filled me with wonder. It had a tremendous impact on me to have that experience. I realized that art could reach deep into one's psyche, deep into one's core, and that this could be communicated through objects. It was a very spooky thing...

Rail: There have been comparisons made between your work and figures like Albert Pinkham Ryder, Forest Bess, and Myron Stout. They are great American outsiders. Do you see yourself in this way?

Martin: It's flattering to think of oneself as being in the company of Ryder or Bess or Stout. They are great visionary artists. It's funny that they have the outsider label. Ryder was a known and successful artist in his time. Myron Stout was at the center of the art world in some ways. He knew everyone and everyone knew him. Forest Bess was a true outsider, but you know, he wrote letters to Jung and corresponded with Meyer Schapiro. People get labels of some kind or other. These artists work from inner necessity. They teach us that we can go inside—that the path leads inside. Bess is a peculiar case, and he's had a big influence on me for years.

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Rail: Yes, he says he receives the images when he closes his eyes.

Martin: Yes! He looks at the inside of his eyelids. The more I think about Bess and examine his work, the greater the mystery. How could anyone make those paintings? They are painted so directly—like he's taking dictation. You get the feeling that he was channeling images from the Neolithic Period.

Rail: Like Bess, some of your new paintings have a horizon line, and a landscape reference. Do you see them this way?

Martin: I think that ever since I was a kid I've been a landscape painter. The horizon line that I have in the paintings comes from drawing as a child. I draw a line at the bottom and then start the image up from the horizon. I love the Catskill Mountain landscape. That ecosystem is the ecosystem I know well. I spent the last six months up in Walton, NY, where Tamara has this beautiful garden. Digging stuff and watering plants kind of infected the paintings. Some of them have this goofy sense of flowers growing up from the ground—emphasis on the word goofy. (laughs)

Rail: There are several paintings from this summer with collage calendar images. Where did these come from?

Martin: I rented a giant old feed store in Walton. I cleaned it out to make a studio and there were these bikini calendars left behind. I kept the calendars up - I felt these ladies were like my muses. At some point I grabbed a photo and glued it onto a painting. The grid of the calendar bled through the photo onto the woman. I painted rainbow colors around her, and I looked at it one day and thought "It's an Alfred Jensen calendar girl!" And so I started making a lot of them, and dedicating them to Jensen.

Rail: Yeah, in the painting you've written "Good Morning Alfred Jensen Good Morning!"

Martin: (laughing), It's a self-portrait as a beautiful black woman, saying hello to my hero Al Jensen.

Rail: You've made a lot of paintings with text—how did that start?

Martin: I was always interested in titles. I would change a painting and write a new title on the back. Sometimes the back of the painting was better than the front. So I started putting some writing on the front. I tried putting long poems and writings into the paintings. The texts snaked all the way across and back over the painting. At that time—in the 1990's, I felt that abstract painting was in a crisis of meaning. It was my kind of clumsy attempt to put the content back into abstract painting.

Rail: You were also doing performances during that time?

Martin: Yes I began to make paintings in front of an audience—I thought if I put myself on the spot the adrenaline could bring out some surprise some authenticity... I did a couple of these with dancers and a group of Nigerian drummers in Soho and Brooklyn. Williamsburg had a lively guerrilla performance scene at the time at The Mustard Factory and later Galapagos. I worked with Dan McKerrigan and his Hit and Run Theatre and made paintings with fire on Metropolitan Avenue. At one point I made a group of sex paintings while making love with paint on top of canvases—I thought I could make 'passionate' paintings but it wasn't such a good idea (laughs). I was desperate to make painting new again—but I guess we're always in crisis.

Rail: What do you see as the crisis? Is painting too much of a product of education and of the market?

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Martin: Oh yes, and the language is always calcifying, getting corrupted, breaking down, it's quite hopeless really...It's a huge struggle to find freedom and make painting real. There is no intrinsic value in painting. It's never valuable because it's well made, or because it's beautiful like fine furniture. The only true value is communication. If it transmits energy then it serves its purpose.

Rail: Your paintings are matter-of-factly painted. They are self-evident yet mysterious. It's this strangeness and clarity that I can never put my finger on...

Martin: Well, I think it's pretty mysterious to me too. (laughter) These forms come from a long process of unconscious drawing. Then there is this desire to see it in paint—a kind of compulsive curiosity that drives me to choose colors, mix up buckets of paint, and prepare a surface. The actual performing of a painting involves giving oneself over to a series of actions and trusting in the body and what the body knows. And when I step back to look at this thing, I'm still trying to figure it out just like everybody else.

Rail: Do you see all this as a process of trying to get outside of yourself in a way?

Martin: Well that phrase is based on the idea that we all have a self. It's a kind of security to walk around thinking that we have this self, and we know what we're doing. The reality that we can touch in painting is that we really don't have a fixed self. The self comes alive moment to moment. When we forget about ourselves it's very exhilarating.

Rail: I agree. In my own studio the most interesting moments result when I'm the least in touch with what I'm doing. Something will happen in a painting and I'll think, "How did that happen?" It's a place where I'm least familiar with myself. It becomes a negotiation between knowing and not knowing what I'm doing.

Martin: Yes, yes. De Kooning talks about that feeling—he describes it as "Being inside and outside at the same time". It's funny - recently I've been asked to teach. When I show up the students think here comes the teacher—he knows what he's doing. The students imagine that some day they'll grow up to be like the teacher and then they will know what they're doing. But I don't know what I'm doing. And I try to communicate that to my students. (laughter)