

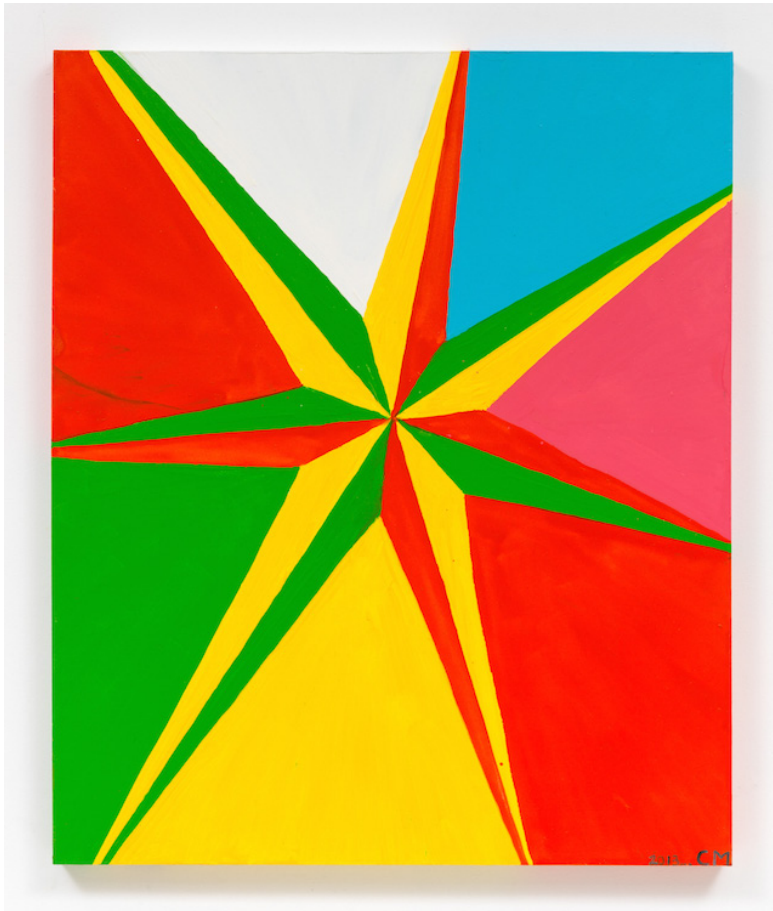
Samet, Jennifer, "Beer with a Painter: Chris Martin," *Hyperallergic.com*, March 22, 2014

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Beer with a Painter: Chris Martin

by Jennifer Samet on March 22, 2014



7 Pointed Star #2 (2013), oil on canvas, 54 x 54 in (all images courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash)

A couple of years ago, I heard Chris Martin give a talk to Columbia MFA students. Rather than the standard artist's slide lecture, Martin brought along his conga drums and a small band, a girl wearing a metallic dress and carrying a boom box, and a couple of people who tore sheets from a book of Italian Renaissance drawings and handed them to audience members. He asked people to shout out questions and alternated between zany sound effects and empathic responses to students' concerns. I remember giggling nervously: not sure what to make of it, but knowing it was raw and exposed and real.

A youthful, feminine energy also permeated his studio when I visited. Studio assistants and family members were talking, working, and yes, giggling around a Mexican-blanket covered sofa and bamboo coffee table. They shared their coconut water with me and gradually left the room so Martin and I could talk. Joy and play are harnessed in Martin's

work into a serious investigation. What happens when we don't self-censor, when instinct guides creativity, when we disrupt the normal means of distribution and display?

Martin was born in Washington, DC, in 1954, and has lived and worked in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, since the 1980s. His work incorporates all kinds of material: glitter, newspaper, carpet scraps, macramé and vinyl LPs. He has spray-painted on bread and snow. He is known for his interest

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in "outsider" art, children's art, pop music, and vernacular forms of visual expression, and he has occasionally shown his work on the sides of buildings and on the street.

He is represented by Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York City. In his 2012 exhibition there, he displayed one painting in the center of the gallery on concrete blocks, and placed a gnome figurine in the corner. For a 2011 solo exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Martin installed three 26-foot-high paintings in the atrium. He was also the subject of a 2011 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf, and he participated in the three-person exhibition XXXL Painting at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 2013.

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Sweet Dreams (2nd Pillow Painting) (2009), oil, spray paint, and collage on canvas, 52 x 43 x 8 in

Jennifer Samet: *I know you grew up going to the Catskills. How does the landscape play a role in your paintings?*

Chris Martin: Since I was a baby, I went to one valley in the Catskills. I still go there when I can. It is an ecosystem I love, and was a formative place when I dropped out of school. On some level, I am always a landscape painter. Even when I make what other people see as more severe abstract paintings, for me, the presence of a horizon line or line at the bottom establishes a ground and basic landscape orientation.

I think there are people who are more figurative painters, and people who are landscape painters. De Kooning is someone who paints figures and landscapes, and a lot of his work is a figure in a landscape. For me, the landscape usually doesn't contain figures. I think of Thomas Noskowski as a landscape painter, rooted in the Shawangunk Mountains: the landscape just south of the Catskills.

My formative influences as an artist were people like Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley. There is a whole tradition of American transcendental or sublime landscape back to Ralph A. Blakelock and George Inness. I spent a lot of time as a teenager and young adult in the Phillips collection, which has Dove paintings, Hartleys, and great Albert Pinkham Ryders.

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The other big influence for me is the New York School of Abstract Expressionist painters. And my heroes, like Pollock, use a very large size. For me, making work of this size is also a way of investigating the idea of being in a landscape, where there is a constant shift in one's attention between the larger vista of the distant mountains or forest, and the tiny mushroom at your feet.

I am interested in accessing a scale that can encompass the shift between large image and small detail. Julian Schnabel does that, with his plate paintings, where you have a large image, which is only understood at ten feet away, but when you come closer, you see a piece of Mexican design on a plate. That kind of painting experience is very exciting to me. There is an engagement over time, a sense of discovery that is up to the viewer.



Yellow, red, green (and blue) (2013), velour fabric, acrylic gel medium, and acrylic on canvas, 135 x 235 1/4 in

JS: *Although you spent time in the Catskills, you also grew up in Washington, DC. The city and urban vernacular plays an equally large part in your work. Do the landscape and the urban represent two different poles in your work, or do they come together?*

CM: I am drawn in different ways when I'm in the country versus in the city. My great inspiration from Washington, D.C. was African-American music. That whole scene, and the civil rights movement, has had a lasting impact on me. I arrived with my friend, the artist Peter Acheson, in New York in 1976. Graffiti was really exploding then.

New York City is an amazingly beautiful, lively, crazy place, and it was perhaps crazier when it was half-ruined. It is not just the street art, but the side of any bodega, and the way the weird photo-

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The Sun Needs the Moon (2012). acrylic, collage, alkyd and oil on canvas, 48 x 39 in

graphs are slapped on top of each other. Now there is sticker art. I am influenced by all of that.

JS: *There is an undulating vertical form that appears in many of your recent paintings. How did this form develop in your work?*

CM: That is everybody's form, or anybody's form. I certainly saw it in the paintings and sculptures of Paul Feeley, and in ancient Greek art. There are trucker decals of flames. When it is going horizontal, one reads it more as a feminine, watery form. When it is vertical, one sees it as more figurative.

On some level my practice is based on unconscious drawing, doodling. There are times when you doodle spirals a lot, other times when you make jagged things, and other times you make things out of dots. There are conscious or unconscious associations one could put on them. You could say, you're thinking about snails or galaxies. Or, maybe, you're not thinking at all, and you just like making spirals.

There is a lot of pleasure in making that wavy form. And you ask, "Why is this fun, why am I doing this over and over?" Sometimes forms recur and they may accrue meanings: certain desires and certain pleasures. In an abstract form like that, it is important to realize that it's not a sign, in the way that you see a stop sign and know what it means. An artist doesn't always know what it means.

JS: *In addition to traversing boundaries between the city and country, your work also traverses different categories: unusual installation practices, collage, the use of different materials, text, and public or performative aspects.*

CM: When I was a young painter, there was a severe orthodoxy about painting, about what one could and could not do. It was very hard to find any room in that world. To be new or on the track it was about minimalism. I made very severe paintings in the 1970s. In the 1980s, things broke apart, and people like Schnabel and Sigmar Polke, who is a hero of mine, opened up great worlds. For a long time I used to paint odd, eccentric things, but I destroyed them or didn't show them. Gradually I allowed myself to paint paintings that didn't all look like one another, to mix photographic images with invented abstract images, to use materials that weren't necessarily "art materials."

There are artists who do great when they have a narrow, circumscribed practice. I don't go to a Morandi show and think, "It's too bad the guy didn't branch out or paint more women." You can see that was his natural path. But I am someone whose models are artists like Paul Klee or Polke. I do better when I allow myself to pursue different directions at the same time.

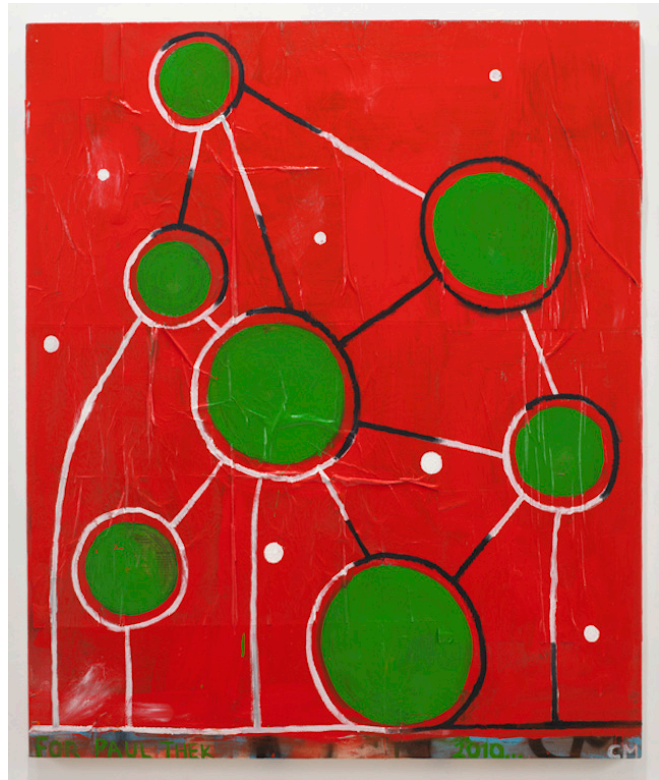
Initially, it was only in my drawings that I let myself explore different things. I have a huge amount of work on paper. On paper you are not so worried if it's good enough. Friends would say my drawings were ahead of my paintings. I came to see that they had more action and energy. I gradually let myself treat paintings the way I treated drawings. One way to do that was to start a lot more paintings.

I was also influenced by my work as an art therapist, which I did for about sixteen years, beginning in 1990. I worked with men and women with AIDS, with drug addiction, with mental illness, and other problems. There was the most fantastic, interesting crew of people. We worked with crazy material: glitter and gold and silver paint, pom-poms, craft projects. Those were gradually fascinating to me, and that's where I discovered glitter as an art material.

The way these adults made art was a big inspiration. They were not trained as artists, but they were fearless. Some of their paintings were so moving, so directly expressive of their situation in life. I would go back to my own studio and see my formal training, and all my intelligence, and art history in college didn't necessarily help me to make paintings as fresh.

Then, there is the idea of making "good" paintings: the degree that one applies an academic or connoisseurship critique to painting, and sees one's job as trying to make the finest, most beautiful, high quality paintings. For me, that was a terrible burden.

I started not worrying about whether it was a good painting, and instead thinking, "This is just a particular painting, it is about this memory, or this woman's song. I don't care if it's a good painting, but it is something that is emotional or important for me to make." You have to work hard to



For Paul Thek (2010), oil and collage on canvas, 54 1/8 x 45 1/4 in

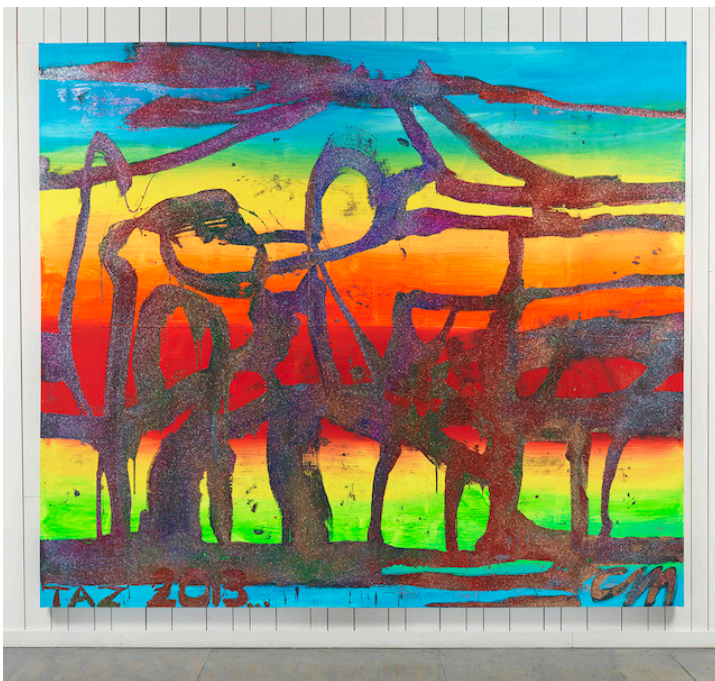
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suspend your judgments, so that you're not thinking, "This isn't good enough" or "I'm going to keep the best one." Instead, you follow where the painting takes you and allow yourself to leave things around in the studio.

Painting is a physical activity. We don't distrust the kind of pleasure we get from cooking or dancing or yoga. In fact, we trust there is great intelligence in the body. But we don't always trust what the body did on a painting, without being able to explain or justify it, without being able to construct an armature of French linguistic theory around it.

It is hard for people to say, "I don't know why I put that blue in the corner," or, "The orange tipped over, and I ended up with this." But that kind of a physical joy is contagious and it communicates. That is why we love painting. In that way, painting can be very naked. If you make a painting and you are bored or constricted, then it's going to be a boring and constricted-looking painting. Other people aren't going to enjoy looking at it either. Consequently, when you look at a seven-year-old's painting of a sun, you get it; that energy is communicated.

JS: *Peter Acheson has talked about a shift from the idea of artist as "hero" to the artist as "trickster." Although I identify you with the "trickster" sensibility, in terms of placing art on the street, and breaking down barriers between high and low, you work on a large scale that we tend to associate with "heroic" art. Is the large scale heroic for you?*



TAZ #13,(2013), acrylic and glitter on canvas, 118 x 135 in

CM: I think that is more of a general perception: that a big painting is a large, heroic, public stance. I have never felt that way. I felt the large paintings had the possibility for intimate engagement, a surround experience for the viewer. At the same time, obviously one takes responsibility for making these large things. What it comes down to is a personal, unexplainable joy that I get from that size.

You also raised the issue of the presentation of painting in the world. Artists suffer from having to fit into the societal mechanics of showing work. We all have so many friends with many wonderful paintings in their studios, but they can't get them out of their studio and into the world.

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Bob Dylan, in a 1960s interview, said, "Great paintings shouldn't be in museums. Paintings should be on the walls of restaurants, in dime stores, in gas stations, in men's rooms. People would really feel great if they could see a Picasso in their daily diner. It's not the bomb that has to go, man, it's the museums."

The situation in the art world is deeply distorted. Museums have less than 1% of the incredibly valuable things that they own on display. It is all locked away. One envies that the work of poets and musicians is out there and accessible. You can't say, "We love this Dylan tune so we're keeping it safe, so nobody can hear it." But with a Rothko, we are saying, "This is so valuable that no one can see it; it is in a climate-controlled environment."



Staring Into the Sun (2011), oil on canvas, 429 x 118 in

When I have put paintings on the street, people think it's crazy. It is not crazy at all. Why shouldn't we all put some paintings on the street and give them to people? When people do dance performances they don't get hung up that it's not going to last for five hundred years. I see no reason not to occasionally go out there and create our own Temporary Autonomous Zones, to put our paintings up on the side of the wall or the tree and enjoy that.

Tribal art is made with perishable materials. It is danced with, seen on the outside of the home. The Westerners get hold of it and see how great it is and consequently wrap it in tissue paper, put it away in a fancy drawer. It is a way of both preserving it and destroying it. I am grateful for the chance I've had over the last few years to show my paintings and to make a living selling paintings. At the same time, one sees that the situation is appalling.

There are one hundred billion square feet of offices in Manhattan and all these office workers are looking at are poster reproductions of a Monet. Every hospital in New York should have real paintings. When I worked at Rivington House, they were going to hang horrible poster prints in the hallway. I was slowly able to persuade people to hang the patients' art, which we were making. A lot of people thought, "It's very nice of you to put it up, but we know it is just ugly-looking stuff." In fact, it was fantastic. And the patients got up in the morning to go to the nurse's station, and walked by the painting they made. That's the way it should be.

JS: *You have also done work like spray paintings on snow. Is this part of the impulse to make work that is not so sacred, that exists out in the world?*

CM: When you know something is going to be temporary, it is often very freeing. I had a student once who was very negative about her work. The whole semester she was saying she wanted to

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destroy her paintings. I would respond, "No, no, don't do it." Finally, one day, I was sick of it, so I said, "You want to destroy your paintings? Okay, how do you want to destroy them?"

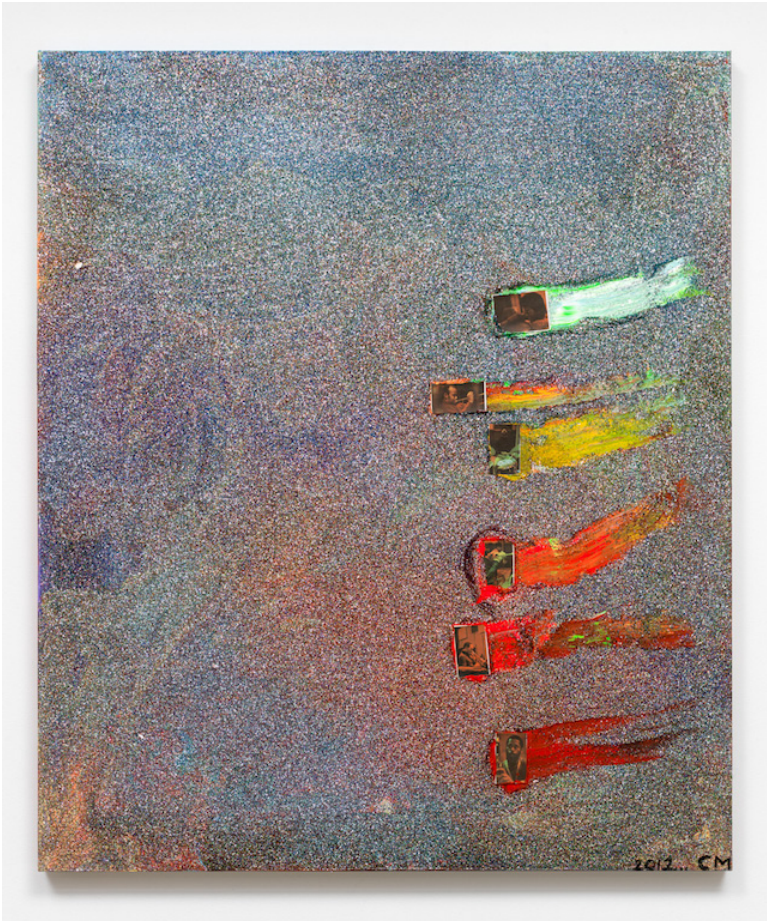
We decided to build a fire in the courtyard and burn some of her paintings. Other students were walking by. They saw what we were doing and wanted to burn paintings too. They started burning paintings, and then they started making paintings, specifically to burn them.

What happened is they made the most fantastic paintings, and then they would say, "Well, I don't want to burn this because it looks really good and fresh." And other people would say, "No, you have to burn it." Then we started burning paintings half-way, taking them out of the fire, and they would look really good.

Everyone had a great time making art that they were going to destroy. There was an energy and hilarity to it. It was one of the best moments for that group, and for myself. It freed everybody to not worry.

If you ask a bunch of college students, "Is anybody here an artist?" most will say, "Oh, I can't paint, I don't know." Everyone is embarrassed. But, if you put on some music, and say, "Anybody want to dance?" well, everybody can dance. No one says, "I haven't really studied dance." People get up and they have a good time. I'm just saying — that's good! In the art world, we could all dance a little. Dancing's fun.

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Mwandishi (2012), acrylic, glitter, and collage on canvas, 58 x 49 in



Hero Lost (2011), oil on collage on canvas, 54 x 45 in