

CHRIS MARTIN

COOL DRINK ON A HOT DAY



KOW presents its third solo exhibition of Chris Martin, born in 1954 in Washington, DC. Martin's monographic exhibition at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2011) and a monumental presentation at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen's Submarine Wharf in Rotterdam (2013) put the New York-based artist on the European map. Since the early 1980s, his oeuvre has built new bridges across the rift between American and European modernist and postmodernist painting, and his art has been wide open to other cultural influences. Taking up the traditions of German Romanticism and Abstract Expressionism, Martin has drawn inspiration from indigenous, far Eastern, and African-American cultures, especially from soul and funk. He has abandoned notions of imperative purity in Color Field painting and reconciled their aesthetic with the popular culture, street art, and eclecticism of our time.

Working against the fantasy of a world founded on and controlled by reason, the Romantics offered the insight that the human spirit's poetic power paints reality in its own colors. The unconscious and the irrational, the spiritual and the mystical defined a branch of modernism that relativized the Enlightenment, dared to break through the confines of rational knowledge, and doubted the categorical division between subject and object, animate and inanimate. Martin has taken up this idea and given it new twists. He makes art's transcendental and animist ambitions profane. The presence of landscape, good music and good sex, a starry night and a person's death, colors and shapes on a surface – all of these are aspects of this painting, and experiences of boundlessness, that we can't put a finger on and that are yet as tangible as our breakfast every morning: the casual sublime.

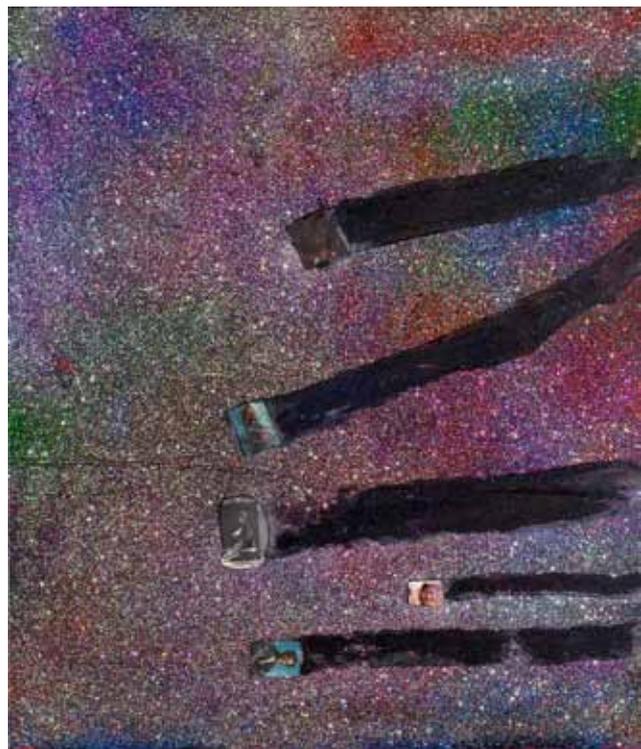
Chris Martin strips a classic category of Western aesthetics, the sublime, of all idealization, pathos, and exclusivity. Martin's work emerges from an awareness of the evanescence of all definite form, the vanity of material existence, and man's profound connectedness to others, to nature, and to that which binds and transcends both. The universe? Martin puts what we are and think, what we see and do into an overriding structural form. His holistic, integrating perspective does not hew to the physically real; it is also free from assumptions, and jettisons every belief system. Nothing is sacred. It conducts a dialogue with the material and sees its intellectual and emotional transformation from one moment to the next. Beyond reason it continues, avoiding metaphysical and esoteric ghettos and situating the perception of the immeasurable and incomprehensible within the ordinary world.

The more this work matures, the more open and free it becomes. The ephemeral moment, the moment of existence on the brink of death, seems to be Martin's point of departure – while his punchline consists in affirming the ephemeral rather than fighting it. He sticks to nothing. Not to styles, not to genres, not to the physical and its meaning. Especially in the pictures of the past few years, which our exhibition brings together, there's a strong sense of equanimity. "Once you realize if you can't do the right thing, you can't do the wrong thing, either," Martin once said in a conversation with curator Elodie Evers. The result is undogmatic painting that opens rather than closes down; which does not judge, but rather remains in the flow of the river, carried along by acceptance. If you treasure such a perception in art as well as life, then Chris Martin's work is for you.

Text: Alexander Koch



The Red Chicken, 2010/2012, 149 x 129 cm



Jam Session, 2013, 147,3 x 124,5 cm



„PORTRAIT OF AMY WINEHOUSE“, 2011/2012

Oil and collage on canvas, 147 x 125 cm

This picture is disturbing at first glance, and the sense that something's awry never fades. Black paint applied in fierce gestural brushstrokes to a ground of red, yellow, and green rectangles—the colors of Rastafarianism and an emblem of pot culture. At the center, bottom up, cropped to an organic shape, fringed by a luminous white edge, a black-and-white photograph of a forest. The title identifies the picture as a portrait of Amy Winehouse, and lines near the bottom right corner hint at lips and a chin. The English soul singer with the trademark beehive hairdo died of alcohol poisoning in 2011. It looks like Martin made short work of a failed attempt to portray her, pasting the forest picture over it to efface both her likeness and the heart of his own work. Where Winehouse's forehead should have been, our gaze is drawn into the deep dark between the trees. Their crowns dangle down into an overexposed white sky we hardly dare read as paradise. The world is upside down, and we would like to set it back on its feet, but death brooks no revision. After James Brown died in 2006, Martin painted a number of pictures in his memory—he says he realized how much the “Godfather of Soul” had meant to him and to an entire generation. In 2008, Martin, who knew of Winehouse's drug issues and the pressure under which the constant public spotlight and the demands of the music industry put her, painted a picture “For the Protection of Amy Winehouse.” After her death, he dedicated a series of homage paintings to her as well.



Double Frog Midnight, 2010, 223,5 x 195,6 cm



Untitled, 2011, 174,3 x 124,5 cm

„PERFECT JANUARY MORNING (A REMARK YOU MADE)“, 2012/2014

Acrylic, glitter, collage on canvas, 122 x 99 cm

The entire painting is covered with tiny glitter particles of the sort sold for a few cents in art supply stores. Applied to a wrinkled ground that lends the painting a gruff and rumpled relief, the particles reflect and refract the light, sparkling in all colors of the rainbow. Like a snow-covered landscape, as the title suggests. Or like a starry sky. Like a sandy beach in a fairy tale. Like pixie dust (a term party supply stores actually use). The silvery surface also recalls the silver walls in Andy Warhol's Factory, where the dream machine met the underground; where stars met the avant-garde. What's certain is that this glittering surface is far from smooth and perfect. It's rough and lined by deep creases, suggesting a melancholy landscape rather than a sky hung with a million disco balls.

„FOUR TWENTY...“, 2012/2013

Oil and glitter on canvas, 147 x 125 cm

Martin has been creating glitter paintings for a long while. This one bears a black inscription; the number 420. In the subculture of cannabis, "four-twenty" is code. In 1971, a group of teenage stoners in California used it to refer to their meetings, which they always scheduled for 4:20 pm. The shorthand took on a life of its own and became an all-purpose keyword for cannabis consumption. At some point, April 20 was declared smoke-a-joint day, and some people say that 420 is also the police code for illegal possession of marijuana, but that's an urban legend.





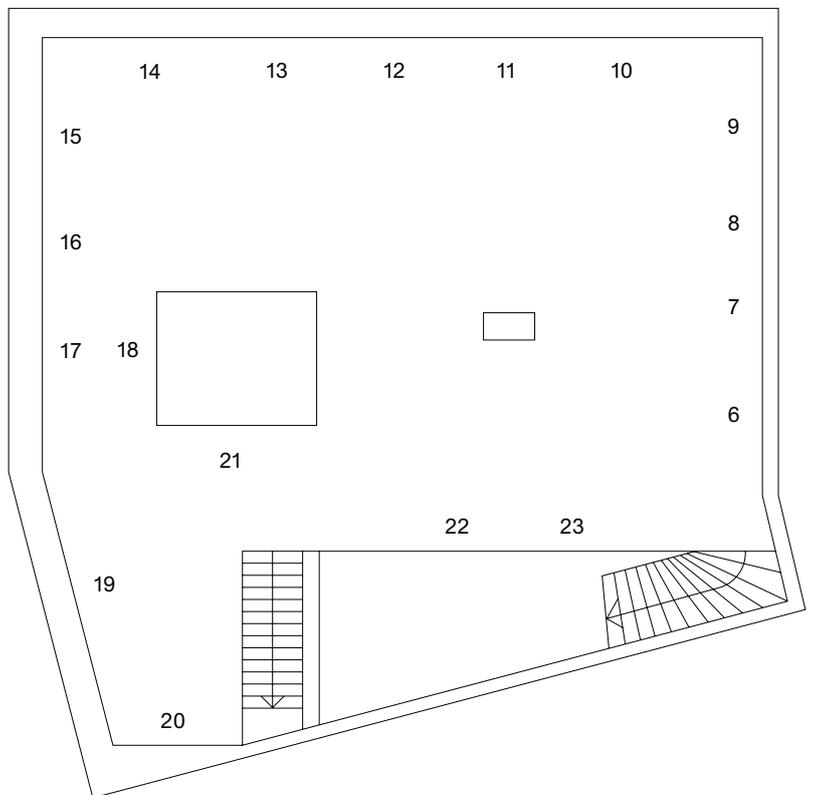
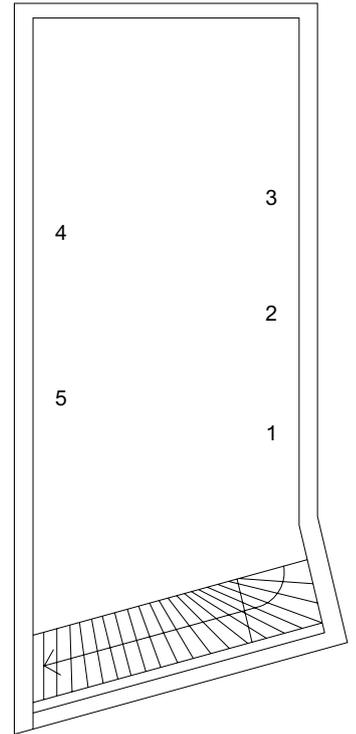
„COOL DRINK ON A HOT DAY“, 2013

Oil on canvas, 137 x 114 cm

Wavy column-like shapes such as these are the most popular motif in Martin's paintings, uniting a broad variety of themes, symbolic meanings, and cultural references. Compositionally, they echo the works of painters on the margins of Abstract Expressionism, who drew on the formal vocabulary of the art of America's First Nations. It's also an energetic composition, which combines impulses from top and bottom, left and right, front and back in a vibrant rhythm. The picture harks back to the serene composure of the late Matisse, and its curves also perhaps hint at dancers' swaying hips and swinging breasts. The monochrome red, yellow, and blue color fields arguably also recall Barnett Newman's iconic question "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?", another spiritually-minded vertical composition, and then you understand the difference between Newman's and Martin's takes on the sublime: Martin isn't invested in aesthetic strategies that leave the viewer trembling in awe. Rising and falling forces intertwine in a harmonious and thoroughly undramatic process, and the title puts a refreshingly mundane spin on it by associating the central interior figure in blue with a sip of cold water trickling down someone's throat on a hot day.

FLOOR PLAN

- 1 Untitled, 2011
- 2 The Red Chicken, 2010 / 2012
- 3 Perfect January Morning (A Remark You Made), 2012 / 2014
- 4 Cool Drink on a Hot Day, 2013
- 5 Double Frog Midnight, 2010
- 6 Jam Session, 2013
- 7 Untitled, 2010 / 2011
- 8 King of Pop, 2004 - 2009
- 9 Four Twenty..., 2012 / 2013
- 10 Untitled, 2008 - 2012
- 11 Upside Down Guitar Solo, 2008 - 2013
- 12 Amy Winehouse at the Grand Canyon, 2011 - 2012
- 13 Portrait of Amy Winehouse, 2011 / 2012
- 14 Sun Energy Lights Up Mother Popcorn, 2009 - 2012
- 15 Untitled, 2007 / 2013
- 16 Dream Buffalo, 2014
- 17 TAZ #12, 2012 /2013
- 18 Untitled, 2007 - 2013
- 19 Big Glitter Painting, 2009 / 2010
- 20 Red Yellow Green, 2012
- 21 Untitled, 2013
- 22 What Sort of Man Reads Playboy?, 2010 - 2012
- 23 Pond, 2009



Chris Martin
Cool Drink on a Hot Day

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