

Chris Martin

By Howard Halle March 13, 2018

Chris Martin really likes to paint. I mean really likes to paint. That much is made clear by his latest canvases some of which soar to 11 feet and more. Layered compositions pulsating with exuberant brushwork, decorative patterns, bold hues, glitter and collaged swaths of imagery, fabric and paper, Martin's works frolic across two floors of the gallery like revelers during Mardi Gras. These paintings know how to party.

Born in 1954, Martin has been around for a while. He came to New York in the mid-1970s, when a Minimalism-dominated art world limited the possibilities for painting—that is, when it wasn't pronouncing the medium dead altogether. Things were better during the 1980s, when the furies of Neo-Expressionism were unleashed, but Martin's approach wasn't easily pigeonholed. In fact, it was only five or ten years ago that he achieved art-world acclaim, which makes sense: By then, the rule book had been tossed out, clearing a space for stylistically eclectic painters like him.

Which isn't to say that Martin throws everything at the wall to see what sticks. He has a connoisseur's eye for art history's deep cuts, citing as formative influences such artists as Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley. Pop-cultural references, and an abiding interest in folk art, add to the mix, with the latter accounting for the tightrope Martin walks between sophistication and naiveté. The tremendous size he favors is borrowed from Abstract Expressionism, or more precisely, from what Europeans used to call "American scale" painting during the Postwar years. Allusions to nature also abound, put in the service of representing the mind as a landscape that is at once chaotic and coherent.

This show, for instant, seems to center around the idea of altered states of consciousness, whether by drugs or by New Age philosophy. Planetary orbs—Jupiter, Saturn, the Moon—jostle with pot leaf symbols and pictures of old boxy computers. In one painting, the image of Lenny Bruce crops up, while in another composition (dominated by a scarlet cardinal turned upside down), magic mushrooms sprout in the lower right-hand corner. In most of Martin's canvases, the busyness of the surface is held in check by broad bands of color.

It's easy to assume the Martin is parodying the Counterculture's "wow, man" attitude and there may be some of that going on here, but also something more sincere: An appreciation for painting's power to liberate us all, if just for a moment, from the everyday.



Chris Martin, *Saturn x 5*, 2017
Oil, acrylic and collage on
canvas, 88 x 77 inches