

DÜSSELDORF

Chris Martin

KUNSTHALLE DÜSSELDORF

Chris Martin is that rare thing: a spiritual painter. In an interview for the catalogue to his exhibition "Staring into the Sun," curated by Elodie Evers and Gregor Jansen, he speaks of early on trying to find a way "to paint the upper rectangle with some deep spiritual certainty." He might sound like he's channeling Malevich, but unlike those of the Russian Suprematist, his spiritual aspirations do not result in pure nonobjective images. His oeuvre includes black paintings with white geometric figures, atmospheric figural works (in his "Catskill Landscape" series, 1990–93), and works with brightly colored geometric forms, texts, and collage. This is not to suggest that Martin is deeply ponderous; a colorful group titled and inscribed "Good Morning Alfred Jensen," 2005–2007, is filled with impastoed starbursts and collaged with bikini-clad calendar girls. Martin finds ways to create a space that has a quality akin to sunshine: It is bright, energetic, colorful, and lively. This is an art to raise the spirit. The thickly painted *Homage to Alfred and Bill #5*, 1982–96, for example, has a blue-to-yellow spectrum in the shape of a starburst with two thick, black vulval shapes crossed on top. While the gradations of color and the title scrawled on the bottom edge bring to mind the paintings of Alfred Jensen, and the biomorphic language those of Bill Jensen, the energetic spirit and expressive energy are all Martin's.

Having dropped out of art school and retrained as an art therapist, Martin worked in programs for AIDS and HIV patients for fourteen years. Art therapy, he has said, emphasizes the creative act rather than the result, and he brings this quality of the performative—and of healing—to his own paintings, some of which were created in public performances. His influences would be immediately obvious, even if their names weren't written or collaged directly onto the paintings. Aside from the two aforementioned (and unrelated) Jensens, Forrest Bess, Al Held, and Paul Feeley feature most prominently in Martin's pantheon, where they are joined by musicians such as James Brown and Amy Winehouse—the latter being the subject of a large memorial painting, *Seven Pointed Star for Amy Winehouse*, 2011, which hung on the outside of the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. As for the Godfather of Soul, his albums are physically glued all over the surface of the aptly titled *Ain't It Funky*, 2003–10. If the two Jensens provide the basis for Martin's formal expressive language, Julian Schnabel and Sigmar Polke seem to have inspired his taste for experimentation.

Divided into three spaces, two given over to several very large paintings and one to a constellation of small works, this first, small, but highly engaging retrospective for Martin demonstrated that his appeal, somewhat like that of Yayoi Kusama, lies in combining an outsiderish intensity within a deep understanding of the idioms of contemporary

abstraction. His work is animated by the tensions created by its dichotomies—between knowingness and innocence, grandeur and intimacy, constructivism and organicism, immediacy and monumentality, neo-expressionism and neo-geo, a traditionalist's love of oil paint with an assemblagist's resort to vernacular materials (bread, foil, glitter). In this plethora of possibilities, he believes, he has found freedom. For Martin, being free is about being able to give in to desire and love, turning inward and listening. In spite—or because—of his apparent eclecticism, he seems to have succeeded.

—Sherman Sam

Chris Martin,
*Homage to Alfred and
Bill #5*, 1982–96, oil
and felt on canvas,
15 x 12 1/4".

