Raymond Foye

Chris Martin’s Long Strange Trip

Every form is an image of an original form.
—Rig Veda, VI.47.18

An artist may be ready but the world might not be, or the world might be ready but the artist is not. The work may be right but the time may be wrong—or vice versa. The hard-won means of execution that worked last year may not work this year, and the image dies in the mind’s eye. Throughout the 1980s Chris Martin worked with a value system both public (the art world) and private (style, aesthetics)—terms which the artist shapes, and is shaped by. It was a circuitous and labyrinthine journey, a process of becoming visible while not being understood or accepted by the culture, of saying what isn’t yet true.

Chris Martin’s career is a testament to perseverance, which in theological terms is defined as ‘continuance in a state of grace.’ This is particularly true of the period covered by this book. Armed with humility and determination, he worked his way through a bewildering succession of intimations and influences, with creation and destruction encircling each other like yin and yang. Whole systems would continually rise and fall, and a year’s work might be destroyed in an afternoon. It seemed almost a form of madness, even to the artist himself, but he also understood he must accept and even embrace his obsessions, to keep self-doubt from gaining the upper hand.

During these years there was also a lot of joy and exploration, a remarkable amount of production and invention, and a sense that perhaps it was better to remain obscure for a few more years to gather knowledge. As he encountered and passed through the many styles and influences, there was the desire to leave nothing behind, to somehow bring it all with him. His bible in these years was Harold Rosenberg’s book on Willem de Kooning:[1]

> *I basically memorized that book. What I loved about de Kooning was he didn’t want to leave anything behind. He loved Ingres’s line drawings and he wasn’t about to say, “I’ve got to move on from this, I’ve got to be modern.” And if you think about what de Kooning was dealing with in the 1930s and early 40s, he and Gorky were working their way through Cubism, surrealism, Fauvism, German Expressionism, Orphism, the Bauhaus, precisionism, constructivism . . . The list is almost endless. And that’s why it took de Kooning so many years to develop a mature style. Also, there was nobody there saying, “We want to give you a one-man show at Gagosian Gallery, you’re thirty-five years old already.” Which was a blessing for him in some ways.*[2]

The process being enacted daily on the canvas was really taking place in his psyche. “Why is this struggle significant to anyone?” it is fair to ask. Because the artist is not just working out these issues for the individual, but for society and the culture, and that is why, forty years later, we are still looking. What made Chris Martin’s work compelling from the first moment I saw it was the sense that he was (and is) making paintings *for the future*.

The story more or less begins in 1974, when, as a Yale undergraduate aged twenty, Chris Martin saw the Al Held retrospective organized by Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum. He was stunned by the gigantic scale of the paintings, and their intrinsic relationship to architecture and the ancient body of knowledge of construction and proportion that lay behind that practice. He was also attracted by the process of painting and repainting:

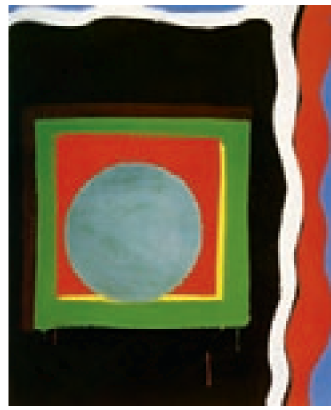
> *Held was the polar opposite of someone like Stella, who drew out the diagram on the canvas and then painted it in. That to me was always more like a graphic design situation, whereas Held was more involved with creating a tension and a personal space, adjusting things by hand the way Mondrian did. I valued that evidence of hands-on physical creation, losing yourself in the painting, something very much akin to de Kooning and the Ab Ex ethos.*

The following year Martin met with Held himself, and it was this combination of encountering both the work and its creator that provided the catalyst between studying to be an artist to actually *being* one:

> *I saw the Al Held retrospective at the Whitney and was blown away, especially by the 1964–66 paintings—huge, simple slabs of color. At the beginning of my junior year at Yale, I met with Al and showed him my work, which he kindly agreed to look at, as he taught in the grad school and I was an undergrad. His comments and his unpretentious but serious presence put in sharp relief the terrible professorial attitude of the Yale art teachers. I said, “I’m out of here. I’m a painter, why waste my time when all the grad students and serious art major friends like George Negroponte and Frank Moore are all headed to the city.” I thought, “Why wait?”*

In 1976, Martin moved to New York and settled into a small tenement apartment on Mott Street. His friends were mostly painters from Yale, including his closest friend to this day, Peter Acheson. Despite a decade of Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual art, the tradition of the New York School was enduring, pervasive, and various. In the works of Brice Marden and David Novros, Martin found a quality of poetry and light distilled from the fresco traditions of Italy and Greece. In the work of Bill Jensen, he encountered a more fraught exploration of abstraction, closer to the psychic/Jungian roots he had first recognized in the early work of Jackson Pollock. On a different trajectory, Elizabeth Murray’s take on abstraction was already tending towards the quirky and humorous, and Martin’s encounter with her painting *Beginner* (1976) jolted: a dark biomorphic shape on a mottled, gray field, with an umbilical-like violet cord connecting figure and ground. The painting was a talisman for Martin, an escape hatch out of a place that had begun to feel impossibly rigid and absolute. It would percolate in his mind for years to come, and eventually provide a model for the ways imagery would creep into his work.

Instilled in Martin during his time at Yale was the idea of treating the canvas as an excavation site of the self—the notion that the artist uncovered increasingly deeper levels of meaning by painting and repainting the canvas continuously. (The ideal in this regard was the example of Alberto Giacometti as described in essays by sitters such as Jean Genet or James Lord.) It became an existentialist badge of honor to have one hundred layers lying beneath the surface you were looking at. This approach was often found in another dominant school of painting at that time, known as the Heroic Sublime and best exemplified by Jake Berthot, whose austere paintings attracted the younger artist, but ultimately came to represent a Beckett-like dead end. Berthot was a powerful presence at a time when ideas about painting still commanded the scene in a way that today would be unimaginable. The arch-enemy for Berthot and company was



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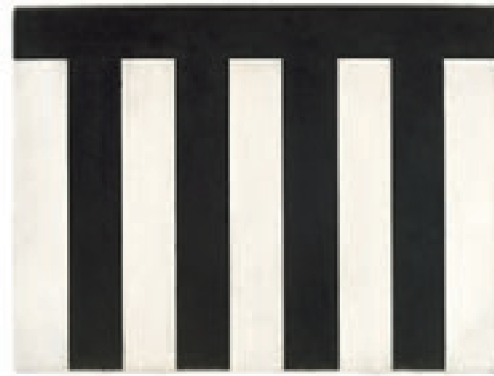

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1
Al Held, *Untitled A*, 1961, acrylic on canvas, 50½ × 41¾ inches (128.3 × 106 cm)
Photo credit: © 2021 Al Held Foundation, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

2
Peter Acheson, *Whale Eye Uroboros*, 1986, oil on wood, 9 × 16 inches (22.9 × 40.6 cm)
Private collection

3
Bill Jensen, *The Black Madonna*, 1978, oil on linen, 23 × 17 inches (58.4 × 43.2 cm)
Photo credit: Courtesy of the artist

4
Brice Marden, *Post and Lintel 7*, 1984/2019, graphite and wax on paper, 22½ × 30 inches (57.2 × 76.2 cm)
Collection of the artist
Photo credit: © 2021 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian

5
Forrest Bess, *Sticks*, ca. 1950, oil on canvas in artist-made frame, 6¹¹⁄₁₆ × 7¾ in. (17 × 19.7 cm)
The Menil Collection, Houston

the man who ruined art, Andy Warhol. Mostly they agreed to not talk about him.

Throughout the 1980s, Martin was most enamored of the work of Brice Marden. The two were casual friends and Martin made several studio visits. For Martin, Marden represented the tail end of the European tradition, the craft of painting. "In 1980 I went to Brice Marden's show at Pace Gallery and sat in front of his large painting *Thira* for endless hours: a captivating aura," Martin recalls. He was also intrigued by Marden's postcard collages *Souvenir de Grèce*, a series begun in 1974, in which Marden pairs images of classical Greek sculptures with purely abstract black and white passages. From today's perspective these drawings are much more consequential than they may have seemed at the time; they seem to predict a major device in Martin's later work, the incorporation of photographs into abstract paintings.

In these early New York years, from 1976 to 1980, this type of formalism—"repainting painting" or "the serious painting thing," as Martin alternately calls it in conversation—was gradually becoming, like Yale, another snare of rigidly self-imposed concepts. Despite the discoveries that were taking place daily in the studio, the artistic milieu outside was increasingly repressive, and Martin was forced to be a kind of double agent, upholding an aesthetic that he was increasingly unsure about. "It's hard to believe now, when I talk to younger painters, trying to explain to them how rigid it was," Martin reflects. "Brice Marden would tell me, 'You've got to respect the plane.' What the hell does that mean?"

Tortured outsiders like Marsden Hartley and Forrest Bess beckoned, as did folk art; but mostly the routine was a frustrating cycle of painting, scraping away, repainting, and scraping away again. The cycle repeated itself dozens, then hundreds of times. It took many years for Martin to come to the realization that the Protestant work ethic actually has little place in art: whether a painting took five minutes or five years to make has absolutely nothing to do with whether it is any good or not.

For a long time Martin was haunted by a question: Was he merely playing with form, or were the forms he was working with solidly rooted in the bedrock of his aesthetic DNA? And how would he find this out? The first crack in the formalist facade came from an unlikely place:

> *I had a dream I went to Al Held's studio and he was making a welded steel sculpture (which of course he never did). I was in his studio talking to him; in the dream he was saying to me, "Yes, I am making these griffins." It was a very interesting dream and it also predicted my travels to India and a lot of other stuff. I woke up and went downstairs to my friend Mark Potter, and I said, "What's a griffin?" So we looked it up in a dictionary and I found out it was a winged mythological creature. I thought, "This is a really spooky, intense dream." A week later I'm working on an abstract painting that I'd had underway in the studio for the past month or so. And I suddenly see, "Oh, those are legs and there's the head and the wings." I had made a griffin, and that was a moment where I felt triumphant. This dream imagery was something that was given to me personally and I can paint it with great emotion and seriousness because it is coming out of my inner life.*

Many creative discoveries have come by way of dreams, from Jasper Johns's American flag painting, to Francis Crick's visualization of the double helix structure of the DNA molecule. It was a source that Martin trusted, precisely because it was not rational. The griffin dream brought about the realization that the abstract forms he was preoccupied with were in large part engendered by images embedded in his psyche. The dream as conduit between the conscious and subconscious mind is what André Breton meant by his book title *The Communicating Vessels* (1932), and what C. G. Jung meant by his phrase "the active imagination." Both writers were clear that the dream must be put into action, must be integrated into 'real' life. Leaving the oneiric experience behind when you wake up is a wasted opportunity.

In 1980, Martin exhibited his monumental, heavily impastoed paintings at the American Thread Building in Tribeca. Although only his first solo show, the exhibition became something of an aesthetic reckoning for him. Standing in a gallery filled with his own paintings, he experienced valedictory feelings of disaffection and disengagement with his chosen aesthetic path. He had learned to make paintings, but they were not his own paintings. Yet this was the lineage he was invested in: throwing it off was no simple matter. It was like leaving the faith you've been brought up in—when you abandon the belief system you also abandon your family.

Friends from Yale were becoming successful in movements like Conceptual Abstraction and Appropriation. Martin was experiencing what in behavioral science is known as social proof: in an ambiguous situation, the individual looks to the peer group and conforms to the normative behavior found there. It's a kind of delusion where, everywhere you look, what you see is telling you the same thing—a perfect metaphor for the art world. There seemed no exit. In desperation, there was an appeal to ancestral spirits:

> *My heroes were Clyfford Still, de Kooning, Rothko. I was constantly thinking about them. And I was reading the Beats—Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Bob Kaufman. By now I was surrounded by a group of people, and they were all friends, but I no longer felt close to their work—David Row, Jacqueline Humphries, Peter Halley, James Hyde, David Reed. I was wanting to foreground the content, to make the painting about the woods, or sex, or wind, whatever . . . rather than a painting about painting. I always had a horror of that kind of painting, and it was very much the talk of the day, all that Baudrillard stuff, which I never really read, but I read paragraphs about, and felt completely estranged from. The lesson with the Beat writers was how to get back to an authentic body, a passionate engagement with one's life and one's art. And that seemed to be something very different to what was happening in the art world—the idea that you could even have an authentic relationship with reality. That's why the whole semiotics position at that time really grated on me: that painting was exhausted, and we were all just using the dry husk of the form.*

For Martin it was complications that attracted, not reductions. Gradually, a new order emerged where the certainties of accumulated experience no longer held. After his discovery of Ajit Mookerjee's book *Tantra Art in Philosophy and Physics* (1971), a book that was filled with stunning

examples of abstract visual art dating back centuries, Martin's sense of a lack of inner significance motivating his formalist abstractions became more than a creeping suspicion. He remembers his first encounter with *Tantra Art*: "People at the time thought Mookerjee was making this stuff up, but he wasn't. I had not seen abstract art that was this formally exciting before. Iconography was determining decisions, not beauty. If a circle was blue, it was because it symbolized Krishna, it wasn't just a pretty color." This led him to an investigation of the foundational works of Theosophy, Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater's *Thought-Forms* (1901), which contains some of the earliest abstract images outside of the East. Maurice Tuchman's revelatory *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* likewise became an artistic bible. What all of these books document is the visual manifestation of energy, mental and spiritual, and they opened up for Martin a new dimension of abstraction, a new path forward. And strangely, they pointed back to Martin's first love, Abstract Expressionism, and its Jungian roots: "I had to create the image in a way that was a symbolic, mystical abstraction generated from the inside," Martin reflects. "I wanted the form to come out of an inner process." And so began the task.

Immediately following Martin's solo exhibition at the American Thread Building, the painter Bill Jensen suggested that he take the L train a few stops into Brooklyn and look around. He had never heard of the L train. A few days later he was renting a studio in Williamsburg.

In the industrial areas by the Brooklyn waterfront, a Wild West atmosphere prevailed: the streets were deserted after dark, and the city refused to provide utilities to what they saw as illegal dwellings. (Jensen actually dug a hole in the street in the middle of the night to tap into a gas line). It would be more than a dozen years before any Manhattan dealer could be persuaded to pay a studio visit. The only people who were looking were other artists. The new Williamsburg location allowed Martin greater financial freedom to work, and moving from small tenement rooms to a warehouse-sized studio radically changed the scale of the paintings, and their inner space. Although no one really knew what it was, a new aesthetic was afoot, an alternative to the Manhattan agenda of buy/sell. "When I first came out to Brooklyn the few friends who visited would say, 'This looks like the Polish neighborhood in Detroit, or, this looks like the Italian neighborhood in Philly.' What they meant was, it looked like the rest of America." Martin's wife, the painter Tamara Gonzales, expressed it more bluntly, "Moving to Brooklyn felt like giving up."

In truth it was not much different from the Soho of the previous decade, where artists broke up the wooden shipping pallets they found on the empty streets to burn them for heat in woodstoves in illegal lofts. There were many evenings in the 1980s when Martin's station at Bedford Avenue would not have a single person on the subway platform at 10:30 p.m. The isolation was profound, but affordable: a 1200-square-foot studio space, on a floor shared with the painter Katherine Bradford, cost five hundred dollars a month. Martin and Bradford (at the time in a relationship) became each other's primary audience, even painting each other's canvases occasionally if one got stuck.

The L train became the link between the deserted Brooklyn waterfronts and Manhattan, where a libidinous creative drive played out nightly in the performance clubs and music venues. Although clubs like CBGB were strictly punk or No Wave, many of the others, like Club 57, the Red Bar, or the Pyramid, were an eclectic combination of performance art, drag shows, artist bands, free jazz, and one-night-only art exhibitions. The Mudd Club became a favorite hangout for Martin: "The Mudd Club was really interesting because there was crazy New Wave stuff, but then they would play James Brown, then they would play African music, then they would play rap, which was a new thing. DJs from the Bronx were coming down with their turntables to mix with people who were also playing punk stuff. It was an interesting clash. I was into jazz and came out of Motown, Miles, and Fela Kuti, you know, funky stuff."

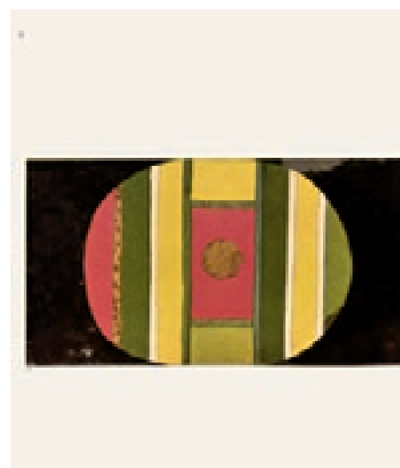
Evenings at the Mudd Club rekindled a reciprocal relationship between music and painting that had always been at the core of Martin's sensibility. The first large oil painting he ever made (while still in high school) was his own version of Wifredo Lam's *The Jungle* (1943), a masterpiece of Afro-Cuban art that he spent hours with at the Museum of Modern Art. Rhythms, intervals, tone colors—all of these attributes were adapted from the aural world to the visual.

In addition to the performance clubs, Martin and Peter Acheson were regulars at the Wednesday night poetry readings at St. Mark's Church in the East Village. They also attended Anthology Film Archives and the Millennium Film Workshop, taking in the films of Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Harry Smith, and Michael Snow. Compared to the aesthetics postulated in the art world, these venues offered a compelling alternative narrative that was ecstatic, personal, and confessional—qualities far more in keeping with Martin's still-sublimated intuitions. Allen Ginsberg's uncynical sense of community—the tribe—was a relief from the competitive scene of the painters. But the true catalyst was a twenty-year-old shaman who had just arrived on the scene:

> *Jean-Michel Basquiat had a tremendous influence on me, so much so that it took me a long while to sort it out. I have a sketchbook from the early 80s, from when I first saw his drawings at Glenn O'Brien's apartment. The sketchbook begins with my drawings and then for twenty pages I'm drawing Basquiat. It was then I realized how great he was, and that freaked me out because he was so young. He was ten years younger than me, and that kind of lit a fire under me to get going with my work, to push it, to find myself. It wasn't that I hadn't been working hard, but my focus was on some narrow corner.*

The hard energy of the streets, charged with urgency and immediacy, unlocked a side of Martin's personality that he had been suppressing in the name of 'serious' art. This was the end of the unsmiling artistic persona. The trickster god had been awakened and Basquiat was the spirit guide. Those who knew Basquiat often compared his omniscient receptiveness to a radio antenna, constantly pulling in ideas and influences from the atmosphere around him. Martin quickly zeroed in on this:

> *The thing about Basquiat that just blew my mind was he could read a book about Egyptian history or jazz history and an hour later he could put it into a painting. I was going to all these poetry readings and clubs and having all these great experiences, but there was a gulf between what I was experiencing and what I was making. It was then I began using collage, putting things directly into my paintings. And when I started doing that, the pure painters*



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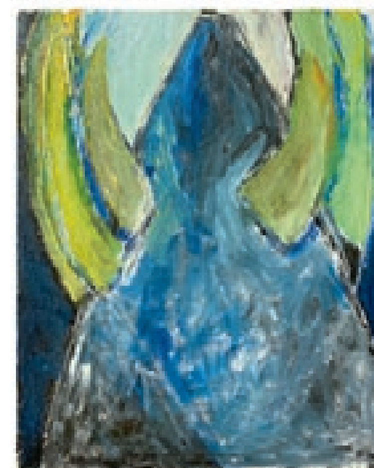

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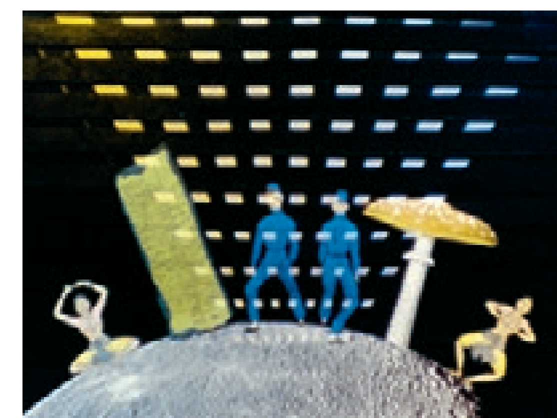

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Artist unknown, *Goloka: Sound and Light*, c.18th century, pigment on paper. Tantra drawing depicting the Earth-Globe with Strata of Nine Fields. Private collection, reproduced in Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art: Its Philosophy and Physics*, 1971

7
Katherine Bradford, *The Mountain Spirit*, 1983, 15 × 12 inches (38.1 × 30.5 cm). Private collection, New York

8
Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *The Gamblers*, from *Thought Forms*, London & Benares: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905, p. 61, plate 32
Photo credit: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16269/16269-h/16269-h.htm

9
Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle*, 1943, Gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 94¼ × 90½ inches (239.4 × 229.9 cm)
Inter-American Fund. The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Photo credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, New York

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Harry Smith, film still from *No. 10: Mirror Animations* (1956–57), 16 mm, color
Photo credit: Courtesy of and copyright Anthology Film Archives

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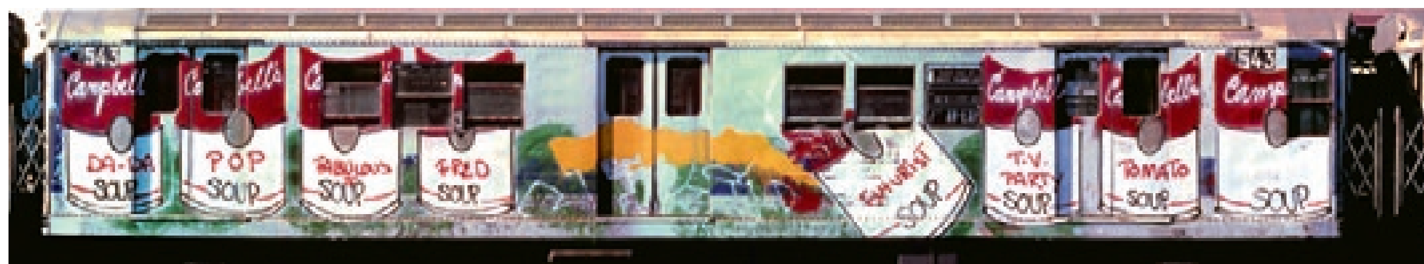

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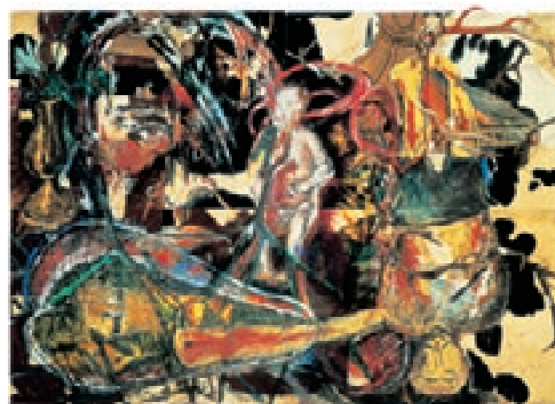

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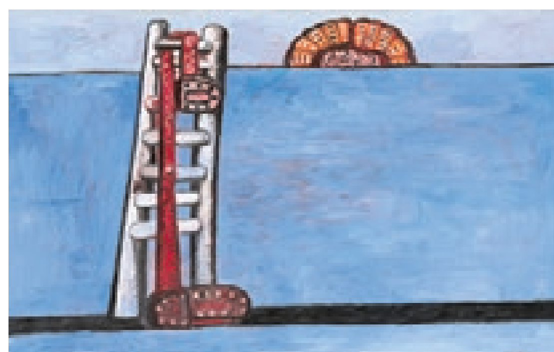

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Futura 2000 (Leonard McGurr), 1983
Photo credit: Copyright Ivan Dalla Tana. Courtesy Maggie Dalla Tana

12
Keith Haring, 2008 recreation of mural at Houston Street, New York
Photo credit: Photo by Ed Rooney / Alamy Stock Photo

13
Fab 5 Freddy, subway car graffiti, 1980
Photo credit: Photo by Henry Chalfant

14
Julian Schnabel, *Prehistory: Glory, Honor, Privilege and Poverty*, 1981, oil, cowhide, antlers, modeling paste on wood, 132 × 180 inches (335.3 × 457.2 cm)
Photo credit: Courtesy of the artist. Photography by Phillips/Schwab. Copyright Julian Schnabel Studio

15
Philip Guston, *The Ladder*, 1978, oil on canvas, 70 × 108 inches (177.8 × 274.3 cm) National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Edward R. Broida, 2005.142.17
©The Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy Hauser & Wirth

> *were offended, and they told me, "This is bad, we don't do this." Which made me feel like I was on the right track—I must be doing something right.*

The proliferating graffiti movement in New York was not lost on him either. The work of Futura 2000, Rammellzee, DONDI, Blade, Fab 5 Freddy, and Lee Quiñones were on daily display as subway cars rolled into the station or crossed the East River. Both the scale of the cars and their surfaces—half metal, half glass—gripped his imagination. It was a "raw Clyfford Still energy," in the artist's words.

Another example of the new energy came from Keith Haring's 1982 Houston Street mural. Over the course of two days, with one assistant, Haring made a painting approximately twenty feet high by eighty feet long. Martin lived a few blocks away, so he passed the site numerous times a day. For an artist who would easily spend a year on a painting, seeing one made in two days was a revelation—Haring just plunged in. Yet it was not simply a matter of dispatch or expediency: Martin recognized a spirit and a life force in this mural that was missing in his own work. The beauty of Haring's physical movements as he painted resembled those of a great dancer. He worked with sureness, in the moment. The painting was about presentation, not reference. And it was obvious to Martin that Haring's finished work was far better than anything he himself was struggling to make. "I remember thinking as I watched him paint that mural, 'This is exactly what New York looks like in this moment, right here in the sunshine.' All the serious painters I knew were fighting it, they were still looking at the world through the monastery of Art, saying, 'Where's the suffering? Where's the ten years of work?' But to me, Haring was profound."

Once again New York painting was transformed by a group of muralists. Just as the Mexican muralists in the 1930s alchemized New York easel painting, so too did the subway writers capture the imagination of receptive painters, and through the very same methods: scaling up drawing, executing with speed, and charging the work with a social conscience that insisted art was for everyone, not just the few.

> *Those graffiti artists were highly skilled painters. They knew how big the subway cars were—fifty-two feet long by twelve feet high. That's important so you don't run out of paint. They had to know how long the layover was in the trainyard so they would know how much time they had to complete the work. On top of this they had to make sure they didn't get arrested by security. They had to have all that information at hand before they undertook the painting. The economy of time and materials was fantastic.*

The graffiti artists also precipitated a change in Martin's materials. From thick paint applied directly from the tube with a palette knife, Martin switched to thin oil paint mixed with turpentine and alkyd medium, which gave the consistency and gloss of enamel. It also dried in a day. At this time Martin also began using acrylic paints, something Marden, Novros, and Berthot would never have touched. The paintings became more spontaneous as the technique became less laborious. Martin uses the word "flow" to describe this new approach:

> *It didn't change my mission in any way. My heroes are Rothko, de Kooning, Clyfford Still; that's my ancestry. But I realized it had somehow all gone wrong in various ways in terms of abstraction, and I thought, "Here is this great Futura 2000, with an energy much closer to what those older painters represent for me—the big body thing." You get energy from your physical body and you get energy from your surface, and when the two meet it's a flow. With the spray can you don't have to go back and fill up the brush with more paint. The painting might now be on a brick wall with posters and a boarded-up window, so you get this instant collage. I remember thinking, "A lot of these kids are way ahead of me. So how do I open up my materials and get this energy in my own work?" But I'm a painting nerd, so I was intent on doing it in a fine art context.*

This issue of openness went both ways: openness to imagery and openness to materials. Just as the imagery could be abstract, or realistic, or appropriated, the materials could be oils, acrylic, spray paint, collage, etc. Soon Martin was collaging leaves on the canvas, painting on aluminum foil, and painting with the asphalt he had used to patch his roof (a failure because it never dried). Formal innovation and imagistic innovation went hand in hand.

The New York art world was also facing a full-frontal assault from Julian Schnabel, who would become another important influence for Martin in the 1980s. In the late 1970s, Martin's Yale classmate George Negroponte ran into him on the street and directed him to Mary Boone's tiny gallery on the ground floor of 420 West Broadway. Little more than an office space, the gallery was dominated by an enormous plate painting. "Julian Schnabel was channeling so much at the time: Blinky Palermo, Sigmar Polke, Joseph Beuys, William Burroughs. In 1981 I encountered a painting by him that changed everything for me. It was called *Prehistory: Glory, Honor, Privilege and Poverty.* It had cowhide, antlers, modeling paste—it was a whole new type of space and light in painting, a psychic space. I had a mystical experience with that painting. There was scale and audacity, and it was clear he loved Giotto every bit as much as Jake Berthot." In fact, Martin's aesthetics were not so far away from Schnabel's: except for their intimate scale, many of Martin's small oil paintings from the 1980s share a close aesthetic rapport with and even resemblance to Schnabel's work.

This affinity led Martin to Francesco Clemente, Georg Baselitz, and others. Suddenly, the narrowest of programs in painting (no illusion, no depth, no reference, no drawing) gave way to the widest angle. Rather than trying to find a tiny space somewhere between Rothko and Newman, Martin was now in an exploded space where anything was possible. In a single exhibition Schnabel, for instance, would show an abstract painting, next to a portrait of William Burroughs, next to a still life of flowers. "Suddenly that whole art historical railroad track was torn up, that whole historical narrative set up by the Museum of Modern Art," Martin observes. Tearing down the edifice of Modernism while remaining true to the cause of pure painting was now the objective.

> *I went from a very narrow program of what I could and could not paint, to a position that said, I can paint anything. Openness meant not just formal openness, but openness to imagery, to humor, to the absurd. Meaning, I can make a foolish painting just as easily as I can make a serious painting. So the discipline now becomes to never close down.*

And this becomes another kind of madness, like painting and repainting. Certainly with the radically open stance it takes longer for things to come into focus, for other people and oneself. There's also a responsibility that comes along with this freedom that I'm only now fully realizing and dealing with.

Hierarchies were being shattered, including divisions as fundamental as realism vs. abstraction. But Martin knew (from reading Harold Rosenberg) that this was not a unique moment: there were years in the 1930s and 40s when Gorky and de Kooning were painting fully abstract works and realistic portraits of Ingres-like precision *at the same time*. Then there was the living example of Philip Guston—another artist who didn't want to discard anything. Like the titular figure in Wallace Stevens's poem "The Man on the Dump" (1923), Guston sat atop a pile of objects of every conceivable sort—newspapers, bouquets, canned fruit, and tea chests, all lit by a creeping moon. Martin spent hours at McKee Gallery in Manhattan studying the humor and detritus in Guston's late work, as well as his embrace of poets and their words. He obsessively visited Guston retrospective that traveled from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to the Whitney Museum in 1981: "Guston was the hero of all the young painters, a great example of someone who broke open abstraction and realism—his engagement was with the whole world. All those weird unconscious dreams. I think of him and Philip Roth driving around Woodstock visiting yard sales—'American crapola,' as Roth called it." In Martin's 1980s world of kaleidoscopic creative energy, uninhibited relationships, and frenetic inspiration, Guston was the painter of modern life.

Throughout all of this travail one constant endured: the aesthetic imprint in early youth of the Catskill Mountains of New York. It is a gloriously wild and jagged terrain, crowded with streams, waterfalls, rock ledges, and ancient hemlock stands with mushrooms. Dark and primordial, Catskill folklore is populated by ghosts and witches in enchanted forests. This landscape is *the* primary influence on the artist, a source he has returned to repeatedly in times of crisis, or simply at moments when he seeks renewal. In the 1980s, immersing himself in the Catskills represented a further step away from the academy, and another way to make abstraction personal rather than formal.

For Martin, the Catskills are more than just a landscape—they constitute a metaphysics, a form of being, of knowing, a different configuration of time and space. Superimposed on this landscape, in the mind's eye, are the luminous canvases of the Hudson River School artists, and even more crucially, the shadowy paintings of the American Tenebrists Ralph Blakelock and Albert Pinkham Ryder. In Martin's Brooklyn studio hangs a small study by Blakelock: the sun's light reflects off the moon and bounces back to earth in an eerie glow that drives home the fact that ours is a small planet suspended in infinite darkness. The splendor of the night sky is something one only truly experiences firsthand in the country, and maps of constellations are one of the many inspirations behind Martin's abstractions of the 1980s.

Throughout the 80s, Martin was regularly painting on canvas tarps in the open fields; upon returning to the city, he stretched the tarps. Many of his large abstractions are landscapes, and these works constitute another exploration of the gigantic scale that has come to typify an important strain of work:

The biggest thing about painting out of doors is that right away you have an enormous studio. When you're outdoors and fifty feet away from the canvas, that's nothing—you're still in the orchard or just at the edge of the field. So you can look at things from a great distance away. I would choose a beautiful day to go up to the ridge, make a fire, have sandwiches, make some tea, and then work and just sit around for the whole day. Of course, it's harder to deal with the light because it's shifting all the time, but you also have this fabulous universe all around you. It also gave me a specific color palette, which included pthalo green, a dark emerald with blue undertones—that was hemlock. As soon as I use pthalo green, it's a Catskill painting.

The Catskills are the origin of many of the artist's motifs: the growth patterns of ferns, for example, or circles formed by insects on the surface of a pond. Observing a single specimen change through birth, flowering, and decay over the course of the seasons was a lesson in the mutability of natural forms. For Martin, the Catskills have been a frequent antidote to the art world itself, a place where every artistic principle—form, color, harmony, structure, even strangeness—exists in a state of perfection. If nature is the ultimate teacher, its finest apostle is Paul Klee, and the pedagogic sketchbooks he produced over his lifetime such as *The Thinking Eye* and *The Nature of Nature*, have always had a privileged place in Chris Martin's studio.

Balance, contrast, proportion: one only need look in nature to find perfect examples of everything that defines a great work of art. The challenge in painting nature was to find means and subjects that were consonant but not descriptive. Martin quickly realized that his nature paintings did not look very good in nature: it was the abstractions that held their own when propped up against a tree or a rock. Terry Winters was an artist who seemed to penetrate the hidden order of the natural world and convincingly use it as an animating force for abstraction. Martin spent a great deal of time at Winters's early shows at Sonnabend Gallery, and he and Kathy Bradford would devote much time to discussing the work back at their studios.

For Martin color is structural, as it was for Al Held and Myron Stout; graphic simplicity and potency prevail. I have always found Martin to be a compelling colorist, something he tries his best to deny when I raise the topic, ever-cautious as he is about the pitfalls of overrefinement. His palette in the early 1980s was nature-based: dark pthalo greens and blues predominate, as do heavy black outlines—a residual influence of Marsden Hartley and Max Beckmann. Late in the the decade, there emerges what I sometimes call his "electric" palette, which has always been connected in my mind with the jarring chromatics of the electric albums of Miles Davis, which he would listen to obsessively while painting, a potent example of synesthetic migration from sound to image. Mostly Martin sees the subject of color from a utilitarian standpoint. "My palette, my sense of color, it's extremely crude, maybe more Pop, like the way they paint stripes on bridges upstate in New York. Or maybe more like early Al Held, early Elizabeth Murray, where you take the color straight out of the tube, and you get the light through the drawing of the forms. I shared a studio with Kathy Bradford from 1980–84, and she was always mixing up colors. I never mixed a color in my life unless the colors out of the tube got mixed together by being next to each other on the canvas."

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Ralph Albert Blakelock, *Morning Light*, 1902, oil on canvas, 25 × 30¼ inches (63.5 × 76.8 cm)
In the collection of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Gift in memory of John P. Frenzel, Sr., by his heirs

17
Albert Pinkham Ryder, *Moonlit Cove*, 1880s, oil on canvas, 14⅛ × 17⅛ inches (35.9 × 43.5 cm)
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. Acquired 1924

18
Terry Winters, *Morula III*, 1983–1984, lithograph, 42 × 32½ inches (image and sheet), (106.7 × 82.6 cm)
Photo credit: Courtesy of Terry Winters and ULAE

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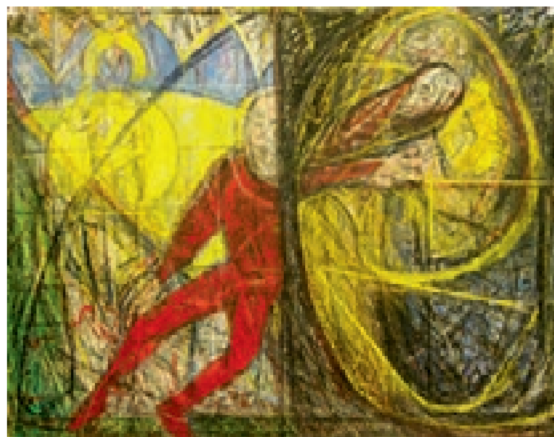

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19
Chris Martin, *Kali (Calcutta)*, 1983, mixed media on paper, 9 × 12 inches (22.9 × 30.5 cm)
Collection of the artist

20
Chris Martin, *Manikarnika Ghat*, 1983, mixed media on paper, 9 × 12 inches (22.9 × 30.5 cm)
Collection of the artist

21
Francesco Clemente, *Untitled*, 1977, ink on paper, 6½ × 7 inches (16.5 × 17.8 cm)
Collection of the artist

22
James Harrison, *Reaching into Dream*, 1986/88, pastel on paper, 19 × 24 inches (48.3 × 61 cm)
Photo credit: Courtesy Schmidt Antiques, Inc.

In 1983, Martin traveled in India with his future wife, Karin Gustafson, a lawyer who had been living in Ahmedabad studying Indian labor practices. There were very few foreigners in India at that time. Martin seldom ran into any tourists. As one might expect, the experience proved to be a revelation. "The first day in India I remember thinking, 'Oh my god, this actually exists?' I remember weeping over things I saw. Making drawings all day was the only way I could process it all." The combination of image and symbol in India was a language in itself, a part of daily life that the artist struggled to process in dozens of sketchbooks. Martin was exploring a body-centered awareness of space and diagramming energies and forces he had only encountered in the pages of Mookerjee's *Tantra Art* and Leadbeater and Besant's *Thought-Forms*. Over thousands of drawings, he built a vocabulary of personal symbols that he would return to in the coming years. "I'm going to do this big one day, more fluidly, with paint," he told himself at the time. He also began to develop methodologies for transmuting smells, sounds, and other nonvisual sensations into his art, likewise an important area of investigation in later years.

India became another corrective to the Western canon. "From day one, the whole H. W. Janson *History of Art* narrative went right out the window—where everything was about the glory of Rome," Martin recalls. In Varanasi, the sheer sweep of time was staggering: four thousand years of tradition, biblical clothing, the intensity of light, the celebration of color, chanting, incense, and smoke everywhere. It is fair to say to say that, to the extent that he is one, Martin became a colorist in India; the gloominess that dominated his palette at the time was quickly dispelled. From India, they traveled on to Burma, where they managed to slip away from government minders and explore remote mountain villages. "In many ways Burma hit me the most—these giant temple paintings that seemed to go on forever. They were great religious artworks, the scale was immense, and every single one was telling a profound story." From Burma they traveled to Thailand, where Martin studied Vipassana meditation, which would become an important part of his life in the coming years.

Another important connection to India also emerged at this time. Francesco Clemente had been showing in New York at Sperone Westwater since 1980, and Martin was an enthusiastic fan, especially of the India works. This was an inspiration, but also proved an obstacle, so definitive was Clemente's treatment of the subject. At one point in India, Martin employed sign painters to interpret his ideas, but the results were far too professional and he abandoned the works on the side of the road. "I came back from India and I spent three months trying to paint all of the scenes and subjects I saw there—the burning ghats, giant skulls. I thought, 'This is really pathetic, I am not Clemente, I cannot approach it this way.' So I painted my way through that, and as the paintings got bigger and simpler, they got better."

Even aside from India, it is interesting to consider how many parallels there are between Martin and Clemente in the 1980s: both built their careers on foundational bodies of works on paper, enigmatic and fragmentary, and both skillfully reinvented the visual image via the poetic image, as defined by Ginsberg in Buddhist terms of ordinary mind:

> Ordinary mind includes eternal perceptions.
> Observe what's vivid.
> Notice what you notice.
> Catch yourself thinking.
> Vividness is self-selecting.
> The universe is subjective.
> Inside skull is vast as outside skull.
> What's in between thoughts?
> Mind is outer space.[3]

One can think of these as rules for the imagination, the point being that before the image is committed to paper or canvas it originates in the mind. It is therefore primarily a matter of mental orientation (preparedness, discipline), because ultimately the poem or painting is a picture of the mind. It's a psychic struggle, not a stylistic one. As Ginsberg's teacher Chögyam Trungpa put it, "It's a question of writing your own mind on a piece of paper. Through poetry you could find your own state of mind. That's precisely the concept of *haiku*: writing your mind."[4]

"This is the kind of stuff I wanted to get into my paintings," Martin says, reflecting on Ginsberg's mind slogans. "This is the kind of thing that nobody talks about in relation to Frank Stella. This is the kind of stuff that MoMA won't talk about in relation to Cezanne. But this is life, this is what life is all about. They were all too busy talking about refined painting. What a disaster it was to be so separated from these things, I thought." Reductionism had an essentializing effect on painting, but it left too much out. It was time to include the pleasure principle.

Clemente once said that painting is the last oral tradition—a brilliant remark and quite true. Implied is the painter's dialogue with the history of painting (lineage), as well as the mentoring relationship of the elder (guru). Inclined in this direction by nature, Chris Martin was especially prepared by his travels in India for just such an experience. His "guru" was a now mostly forgotten painter, James Harrison. Martin describes Harrison's work as "a combination of Cy Twombly and William Blake"—granted, terms not easy to visualize. (Harrison had been a lover of Twombly's in his youth and owned a good number of his drawings.) In 1983, Harrison exhibited at A Place Apart, a Williamsburg gallery where he sometimes worked. Acheson, Bradford, and Martin all attended the opening and welcomed Harrison into their circle of friendship. Soon he became a mentor.

A great intellect, Harrison passed along his vast knowledge of the esoteric tradition to Martin in late-night, hashish-fueled sessions. "For many years, throughout the 1980s, I used to go to his house twice a week, and he would just discourse. He was living on welfare in a little storefront piled high with books, cobwebs, disheveled piles of drawings and paintings. The ancient library smell." Harrison would hold forth on Saint John of the Cross, William Blake, Krishnamurti, Jung, the I Ching, Joseph Beuys, and Ram Dass while showing his latest paintings, ceramics, and constructions. Martin's sketchbooks from the time are filled with symbolic drawings and scribbled notes, as he attempted to keep up with Harrison's inspired flow:

> To be one's self:
> conscious but not self-conscious
> alert fresh electric charge of discovery
> when one discovers what one has always known.
> Neither a painting nor a sign. Trying to find some place in between.
> Take a loaded brush, write your name.
> Can you stop abstracting yourself? To what degree?[5]

Harrison's visionary-outsider persona was precisely what Martin was searching for. A subtle knowledge was passed on, the type that can only be transferred through personal

osmosis. In those fervent late-night sessions, Harrison shared his understanding of how painting can be an instrument for examining dreams, symbols, and the unconscious. "Harrison was an example of knowledge in every direction," Martin recalls. "At any point in his thought you could go up, down, sideways. Poetry, painting, philosophy, botany—it all connected, there were no limits." Harrison encouraged the same Taoist sense of free play that Martin saw in Haring and the graffiti artists: stay out of the way of the natural flow and allow things to happen.

An extremely personal method based on Jung's theory of the archetype, Harrison's approach encouraged a constant playing with forms, followed afterwards by careful analysis. Suddenly Martin realized he was continually shifting back and forth in his work between realism and abstraction, but these were simply names—they had no real meaning in his inner life. Previously, if something looked like an hourglass, or a drum, or a symbol from the Kabbalah, he would paint it out. Now when these forms and images appeared, he welcomed them. This resulted in a covalent shifting between internal states, which led to many more directions in the work, and less suffering, because he wasn't trying to repress anything. Images became like palindromes, or reflections, or wormholes. Trying to keep influences out, or finding one "true" form, or not having a signature style, were no longer issues. In these open and unguarded late-night sessions with James Harrison, the self-critical impulse that had so often seized him up was exorcized.

At this point sketchbooks became crucial again, as they had been in India. They functioned like laboratory notebooks, in which the artist was carefully watching and analyzing the experiments that were taking place within his psyche. Martin noticed which forms kept arising, and what sort of energy they contained, and this is what he carried back into the studio: "I learned that whatever form you're using that contains the energy and gets you excited, that's the form for the moment." The large paintings became like walls of energy. For the first time, Martin began to feel that he was touching on something that had a wider audience.

Perhaps the greatest gift he received from Harrison was a reconciliation with his own spontaneity. "Previously it was a badge of honor that I was working so hard. So if I did something that happened right away, I'd be very suspicious of it. How can this be good, because I didn't work on it? When in fact sometimes you just do great things spontaneously. I try to communicate this to students, always." When Harrison died in 1990, after years of alcohol and drug use, Martin inherited his library. Fortunately, many of the artworks survived.

One of the main challenges that Chris Martin grappled with throughout the 1980s was that of size: the paintings he made were either very small or very large, with almost nothing in between. He actually considered the small paintings to be monumental in scale, and he saw the large paintings as necessary to experiential engagement, where painting and viewer occupy the same space. Numerous photographs of the time show these large canvases (usually painted on tarps) displayed on tenement rooftops, shot from a building or two away—a perspective that was necessary simply to *see* them. The lack of middle-sized works made it very difficult for his dealers to place his work in collections. The ideal "above-the-sofa" or living room size was not a scale he wished to engage, precisely because of the associations with domesticity—and therefore domestication.

An ally in this regard was Martin's friend and mentor Thomas Nozkowski, whose leftist politics led him to mistrust the economic manipulations of the auction market by avaricious collectors, and the Greenbergian school of art criticism that supported the power dynamic embodied in monumental scale. After an early phase of painting big, Nozkowski deliberately chose a small format (sixteen by twenty inches at first, twenty-two by twenty-eight inches later on) and a unique combination of constraint, potency, and graphic refinement. The small scale was a deliberate rebuke to the heroic stance, and a statement of economic self-effacement. As a communist with a small 'c,' he wanted his paintings in his friends' living rooms, and not in banks. Nozkowski had spent formative years in the Catskills, kept a studio there, and knew the terrain intimately. Although a purely abstract painter, the landscape was sublimated and transmuted everywhere in his work. He was also a contrarian in a way that Martin could embrace. As Nozkowski told an interviewer in 2007, "De Kooning famously said when somebody tells him there's something he can't make a painting of, it's all that he wants to make a painting of. And I think this is an ongoing temptation for all artists: What can't you do? What's against the rules?"[6]

What was against the rules for Martin at this stage was making medium-sized paintings. "You don't see too many four-foot Clyfford Stills," Martin reflects.

> *Tom Nozkowski was a big help in my getting over that hang-up about the middle size. He said, "Just keep adding four inches on every side and before you know it you've tricked yourself into the format." But I also realized I needed enough of something. If I only ordered a couple of four-foot canvases, I would freeze up. It's like when I was young, I would buy fancy drawing paper that was ten dollars a sheet, and you're terrified you're going to ruin the paper. You think, "This has to be a great drawing," and it's a hopeless thing. You need a hundred sheets of cheap paper so you can rip up the first fifty. It was the same thing with the canvases. So I ordered seventy stretchers, from three to six feet, and I had so many paintings going on I just got over the problem.*

By the end of the 1980s, the direction in painting that began to take hold among many of Martin's painter friends convinced him of the need to realign himself, to declare a separation: "There was a whole resurgence of formal abstraction that I hated because I felt it was about formal issues, about objecthood, or semiotics, and one thing I did not want to do was to illustrate a theory. Nor did I want to make beautiful paintings. I wanted the form to come out of an inner process. I was searching for something more visceral." While still devoted to many of the ambitions of formalism (reductivism, monumental scale), Martin intuited a lack of passion. A crucial encounter was Philip Taaffe, who was likewise moving away from formalism and into an abstraction that was almost shamanic in its conjuring of ancestral spirits. "When I encountered Taaffe and I saw how he did the Clyfford Still painting, the Newman painting, the Rothko painting, I couldn't believe how great they were. He was just vaulting into this dialogue with my heroes. And it really shook me up." Martin sensed a hollowed-out center behind the formalist facade, and Taaffe's two-gallery show in 1989, at Pat Hearn and Mary Boone, convinced him that a painter of his generation had finally recovered the fire at the heart of abstraction.

Philip Taaffe later referred to these appropriated paintings as "liturgical re-enactments," invoking ritual practice: "The primitivist aspect of Newman was crucial to me

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Thomas Nozkowski, *Untitled (6-53)*, 1988, oil on canvas board, 16 × 20 inches (40.6 cm × 50.8 cm)
Photo credit: © Estate of Thomas Nozkowski. Photo by Kerry Ryan McFate, courtesy Pace Gallery

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Philip Taaffe, *Old Cairo*, 1989, mixed media on linen, 91 × 67¾ inches (231 × 172 cm)
Photo credit: Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine

25
Joseph Beuys, Dusseldorf Germany, 1971
Photo credit: Photo by Gianfranco Gorgoni, © Maya Gorgoni. Courtesy of The Estate of Gianfranco Gorgoni

when I was starting out. To my mind, what I was doing was releasing the spirit of Newman's intentions. I've said this before: I was bringing in the dimension of liturgy, religious stagecraft, almost treating this arena as sacred theater, or the painting as a sacred object that I sought to internalize.... I didn't make the work as a parody of Newman. It was a very genuine wish to be part of the tradition. Newman uses the title *Onement* to be 'at one' with something. I responded to that religiosity and the sense of wanting a deeper connection to a reality *outside of any formalist considerations*."[7] Reconnecting art with ritual has been a shared ambition for Taaffe and Martin alike.

Martin had been captivated by Joseph Beuys's work for many years; he repeatedly visited the controversial 1979 Beuys survey at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (perhaps the only show at that museum where large numbers of attendees actually demanded their money back). As a student a Cooper Union, Taaffe had attended Beuys's one-week performance (with coyote) at René Block's gallery in 1974, *I Like America and America Likes Me*. Reflecting on this performance three and four decades later, both artists reached remarkably similar conclusions, eschewing the political aspects and cult of personality, and focusing instead on the notion of *healing*. "Beuys is a huge influence: the idea of art as a healing modality that is always there," Martin told me in 2019. "I wanted to get away from the formal abstraction mode, I wanted to do shamanic healing in art. That's what people are supposed to get from the paintings, that's why you go into art in the first place." Taaffe told Brooks Adams something very similar in 2007: "What I look for in a work of art, in painting, is that it offer some healing power which can protect us and strengthen our sense of what we most love about being alive in this world."[8]

In 1986, when he was thirty-two, Martin's eldest daughter Meredith was born, followed by another daughter, Christina, in 1989. Life was suddenly getting very real, and after a decade of toil in the art world, success remained elusive. By the end of the 1980s, AIDS had become the decade's defining factor. The art world was especially devastated, and in particular Martin's generation: nearly half the members of his undergraduate painting studio at Yale became ill and eventually died, including his friends Frank Moore, Gary Falk, and Robert Carvin. In 1990, the art world crashed, and Martin's gallery John Good went out of business in 1992. Martin went through a separation and a divorce, and desperately needed to get a job. A decade that had begun with great promise ended in a shambles. "I also got very, very sick for a year, which was part of the whole collapse of one's life. The girls moved to the West Village with their mom, and we all always stayed close, but my life had truly crashed."

To help in the AIDS crisis, Martin had been doing volunteer work at the support care program at St. Vincent's Hospital in the West Village and at the nearby Village Nursing Home, where the first day-treatment program in Manhattan was established for people with HIV. There he met an art therapist named Tom Martin, who suggested he pursue a career in that field. "At first I had no idea what art therapy was," Martin recalls, "but I saw the phrase and I thought, 'This is Joseph Beuys—the idea of art as a healing modality.' All of a sudden I was working full-time in Harlem and Red Hook [Brooklyn] and various places, with mostly gay men but then more and more with heroin addicts, people with cocaine addiction, doing art therapy and case management." But before he could become a professional art therapist he needed to complete the undergraduate degree that he had abandoned at Yale fifteen years earlier.

I didn't want to continue loading and unloading trucks as an art handler for the rest of my life, so I decided to enroll at the School for Visual Arts and earn a degree in art therapy. It was very humiliating, but also very liberating. My first class at SVA was with Brett De Palma, who had been a close friend for years. He looked at me and said, "Hi Chris, what are you doing here?" And I said, "I'm in your class." The students were a good ten years younger than me. I also had a painting class with Mary Heilmann, who was a friend. They were all very nice to me, although I had one drawing instructor who gave me a very difficult time. It was a strange experience because I had a big show up in Soho at the same time.

As the 1980s came to a close, it was back to square one. It had been a bewildering decade, full of pain and joy, exuberance and despair—everything. In retrospect Martin had created an important and foundational body of work, although it would take another three decades before it would be seen or understood by more than a handful of close friends. For those seeking fame and fortune in the art world this is a cautionary tale, akin to a fable. The next ten years would be about turning inward, working a day job in art therapy, and stealing a few hours in the evening for his own work in the studio. There was a total relinquishing of ambition. Struggles of the past were internalized, then resolved. By the turn of the millennium, the grand synthesis was finally complete. The time, the place, and the work were together. As the poet James Schuyler once said, "Things take the time they take."

Notes

1 Harold Rosenberg, *De Kooning* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1974).

2 All quotes by the artist are from conversations with the author conducted between 2019 and 2021.

3 Allen Ginsberg, *Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems 1986–1992* (New York: Harper Collins), 12.

4 "Pragmatism and Practice—An Interview with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche," *Vajradhatu Sun* (June/July 1985).

5 Chris Martin, sketchbook notes, c. 1986, in the collection the artist.

6 "A short talk with the painter, Thomas Nozkowski, in his studio," film and interview by Casimir Nozkowski, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_Yqta-AUuUo (uploaded July 30, 2007).

7 "Interview with Brooks Adams, New York City, November 26–28, 2007," in *Philip Taaffe: The Life of Forms, Works 1980–2008* (Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and Hatje Cantz, 2008), 212.

8 Ibid, 228. My italics.

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Chris Martin, *Untitled (Benares)*, 1983, mixed media on paper, 12 × 9 inches (30.5 × 22.9 cm)
Collection of the artist