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JASON MARTIN

THE ROARING FORTIES

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FAS

15 SEPTEMBER-
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THE ROARING FORTIES
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» Over the last five years Jason Martin's paintings have undergone a transition from focusing on the internal spatial relationships in the material structure towards centering on the poetic resonances evoked from them, applying thematic titles to his exhibitions which have alluded to subjects external to the pure process of painting on which his work had relied previously. Within this there has been a movement away from a figurative interpretation of the illusory space opened up through the mark and its reflective qualities, instead relying on the physical substantive nature of the materials employed to invoke connotations referencing subjects outside what exists on the surface.

» In the exhibition *Nudes* (2006), in which the work was focused on the body, the physical manipulation of the paint across the support rendered a figurative reading of the illusory space opened up in the dispersal of reflected light within it. The works could be read both as a material action; the body of the artist in engagement with the paint, and as a spatial allusion to interacting figures in the marks and their relative reflections. It was possible to trace the passage of the mark as it was acted, allowing us a direct "reading" of the work in terms of its temporal flow. From the territorial somatic premise of *Nudes*, Martin's work has evolved to employ themes increasingly connected to notions of distance and time. One only has to look at the titles of subsequent exhibitions – *Arcadia*, *Atlas*, *Nomad*, *Rock* – to see that the concept of the body has given way to that of human affiliations with landscape and the remote, with the epic sweeps of the earlier work gradually moving away from the opening up of an illusory space towards a material realism.

» The paintings in *The Roaring Forties* are an advancement of the pictorial vocabulary employed in the exhibition *Rock* (2008), in which Martin focused less on figurative connotations, prioritising an associative interpretation with regard to the material employed. The surfaces, made up of coagulations of mineral-based media and acrylic paint, went beyond a pictorial rendition of landscape, resembling matter itself – "a life-size macro study"¹. Where the work in *Rock* suggested a cauterised, exhausted terrain, in *The Roaring Forties* Martin invokes the passage of the resources removed from that stricken ground and hauled across the ocean.

» *The Roaring Forties* was the name given to the latitudes between 40°S and 50°S, particularly in the South Indian Ocean because of the strong westerly winds, which were employed in the conveyance of trade goods by sail from the seventeenth century until the invention of steamships rendered the route obsolete. The works presented here are evocative of this

¹ Chris Hawtin, *Jason Martin: A Necessary Death*, Edifício Cultura Inglesa – Centro Brasileiro Britânico, 2008



traversal both in their material nature, the intense dusty pigments suggestive of spices, dyes, or precious metals, and in the furious movement of the marks, reminiscent of Turner's most storm-blasted oceans. The advancements in Martin's practice in these works are contradictory in nature. The reflective aspect of the work is gone; they have a physical entity, and are thus more violent manifestations of Martin's strikes, yet the marks and violations seem frozen, as if they had been subject to other laws than just that of the artist's set of pre-conditions.

»

The dialogue between the painterly and the sculptural has been a constant concern in Martin's oeuvre. Previously, the heavy industrial supports comprised the sculptural aspect, counterpoint to the illusory space unveiled in the painted marks. In *The Roaring Forties*, the paint itself, embodying a sense of weight and density, attains a sculptural quality, with the support, acting as a boundary for the active surface, referring the works back to the fact of their being paintings.

»

The singular gesture present in previous incarnations has been fractured by new rules of engagement; where earlier movements were flowing arcs, a striation of the medium across the support, the actions within these works are a more disjointed molestation of the surface; an almost obscene intervention upon its integrity. Jason Martin has compared this to a swordfight, stating it is "like some duel where the objective is to place your opposition between the sword and the wall; a resting arrived at after a tumultuous and frenzied sequence of cuts and twists and turns"². Here we could draw a lineage to Fontana's slicing of the canvas to open up a new dimension of space, though the purity of Fontana's penetration is more of a molestation, a mauling, in Martin's work. Although similar tools are used in the creation of these paintings as the earlier works, the strategy of this engagement means that the marks can no longer be subject to the same kind of "reading" as they were. The gestures which constitute the surface are frozen fragments of the past to which the pathology we are familiar with in Martin's work cannot be applied. The mineral consistency of the pigmented medium causes the marks to appear fossilised, or perhaps cast, rendering them distant; an archaeological fragment of a lost civilisation. This remoteness of gesture imbues these works with a remarkable stillness, which seems paradoxical to the violent attack of their inception.

»

This subversion of the gesture is imparted partly through Martin's use of colour, which marks another important evolution. The structure and form of the work, which have always been at the heart of Martin's practice, seem to be subordinate to the authority of the ardent colour of the pigments used. It is as if Martin is enacting his personal version of the Renaissance debate between the primacy of *colore* and *disegno* which, continued for centuries, and in these works, to quote Philip Ball describing J.M.W. Turner's impact on the conservatism of his predecessors, "his use of *colore* seems intent on dispensing with *disegno* altogether"³.

»

This isolation and supremacy of colour is reminiscent, not of what one may expect in a painted image, so much as that of digital or photographic representation, which in turn leads the viewer to read them as a surface which is rendered instantaneously. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has called this "intensification as a condition of simultaneity in the colour photograph – chromatic intensity as a condition of freezing"⁴, and we can relate this to the work presented here. The intense pigments seem more akin to the chromatic scale in a photograph or on a screen than something readily found in reality (a fact which has often made certain pigments prohibitively expensive) endowing Martin's work with this "condition of simultaneity".

² Conversation with the artist, 29 July 2010

³ Philip Ball, *Bright Earth – The Invention of Colour*, Vintage, 2008

⁴ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety – Critical Essays on the Visual Arts 1986–1993*, Cambridge University Press, 1995

»

In making reference to the past age of shipping in relation to these intense colours, Martin is exploring the question of what meanings or correlations are thrown up around colour in an historical context. Victoria Finlay has observed when considering the cultural implications of blue:

“It is curious that in English the word ‘blue’ should represent depressing as well as transcendent things; that it should be the most holy hue and the colour of pornography. Perhaps this is because blue recedes into the distance – artists use it to create space in their paintings; TV stations use it as a background on which they can superimpose other footage – so it represents the place that is outside normal life, beyond not only the seas but the horizon itself.”⁵

»

Martin asks us to draw a direct analogy between the pure pigments used in the work and the trade goods shipped across the globe in the age of clippers and colonialism (in fact the East India Companies brought back with them artists’ pigments including Indian Yellow which turned out to be made from the urine of cows fed solely on mango leaves; the pigment soon met its demise when it was discovered that the cows were fed no other nutrients for fear of it compromising production and were consequently in a poor state)⁶. The pigments in these paintings are to be viewed in the same manner as dyes or spices; materials employed as additives changing the nature of a certain compound, altering colour or taste and enhancing intensity, texture or flavour. He asks us to consider what their origins are; are they mined from the earth, or concocted in a chemistry lab? What kinds of process must they be subjected to before they can be mashed in with the medium and scraped on to the support? How far, and from where, must they travel in order to arrive in an artist’s studio in London or Lisbon?

»

Martin presents us with a paradox. The marks, the gestures, present themselves as quick, furious events, and synchronously as remote relics of some past occurrence. The paintings are dense material objects, with the simultaneity of a photograph, yet through the associations read into the colour and nature of the pigments, Martin alludes to the sweep of historical trans-global venturing. It is as if, on looking at these paintings, we are compelled to switch between viewing them as instantaneous and historical, representational and non-representational; abstract paintings in an historical context, and history paintings in the context of abstraction.

*

CHRIS HAWTIN

08/2010

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⁵ Victoria Finlay, *Colour*,
Hodder and Stoughton,
2001

⁶ Philip Ball, *Bright Earth –
The Invention of Colour*,
Vintage, 2008



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JASON MARTIN

THE ROARING FORTIES
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» The Roaring Forties is a name given by sailors to the latitudes between 40°S and 50°S, because of the powerful prevailing westerly winds that dominate them. With less landmass to slow them down, the winds are especially strong in the Southern Hemisphere, notably in the South Indian Ocean. The winds of the Roaring Forties played a significant part in the route sailed by clipper ships between Europe, the Far East and Australasia.

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TEXTS

NICK HACKWORTH
*

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SOLFIA

»

Malacca Straits
2°21'36.82"N /101°21'58.76"E

»

It begins with pressure that grows, imperceptibly at first, hidden in the heat and the stillness, but escalates... relentlessly / with overwhelming power / All the vast sky becomes an oppressive weight, pushing you down / foreboding fills the air / a general but implacable threat of limitless scale... storm clouds gather in the distance, extinguishing the horizon / wind rises, gathering force / waves grow // the surface of the water is no longer a surface but chaos / the darkness closes in and become total // and then the full force storm breaks upon you // wind and wave rise up and crash down / hammer blows / unceasing / relentless...

»

In this blackness, where there is no light and no colour, no stars or sun / you are alone / All reference points are erased / you know, in your gut, that you are not meant to be here... in this hostile place / far from land / beyond hope / the scope of your world is reduced to nothing // you are merely a nervous system, subjected to chaos / and those moments / that seem eternal / are Hell.

*

2010

PURE PIGMENT ON CANVAS

31 X 24 CM

*



*
MARABOU

»
Muscat
23°36'22.55"N / 58°35'03.80"E

»
Raw Umber / the colour of clay /
of civilisation / when humans
shaped earth and, with fire, gave
it fixed form / to create vessels
that would contain and preserve
/ allow transport and storage /
cities and trade / the colour of
economics / of writing / forms
pressed into clay tablets / the
colour of earth / in the end
everything comes from the sun
and the earth...

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON ALUMINIUM
46 X 36 CM
*





*
KINT

»

Cape of Good Hope
34°20'50.49"S / 18°23'49.60"E

»

Gold / chemical symbol Au,
from the Latin *aurum* - 'shining
dawn' / gold, yellow, the colour
of the life-giving sun and the
harvest it nurtures / the softest
of metals, the most malleable
and ductile / Therein its value
lies, the ease with which we
can shape it into the forms that
describes our desires...

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON CANVAS
42 X 31 CM

*



»

Sydney
33°52'01.06"S / 151°11'37.21"E

»

We are loaded with gold and bound for home. Strange, that this cargo of metal, ripped from the ground in pitch-dark, cramped and overheated tunnels is now a timber's width from the cold, deep waters of the ocean. Promethean man, who can tear up the elements of the world and reconfigure them at will...

»

At the dock there were a group of natives who watched us go about our business / silent and attentive / as if waiting for something. In all that time, as we loaded the final provisions, made our goodbyes and cast off / they did not move or talk.

»

As a people they have as dark a skin as I have ever seen, and they decorate themselves with white markings that make startling, staccato monochromatic rhythms on their skin. Their land is made from dust the colour of rust that stains all that it touches. I have a jar full of it here to show you / Just now I took a pinch of it and rubbed it between the tips of my thumb and forefinger and marveled at its richness.

»

As we pulled away in the dusk, I saw them / dark figures silhouetted against the chromatic drama of a setting sun / The huge red sun disappearing / a stain of deep crimson that bled into purple, blue and the blackness of space that hung studded with bright stars.

»

The natives believe that parallel to this waking world, there is another, the Dreaming, where the spirits walk free, amongst the souls of all those who have lived and will live. There's one story they tell of how the birds got their colours, for to begin with all birds were black. It happened when the dove injured herself, getting a thorn stuck in her claw whilst she looked for food. She was lame and her claw grew infected. The other birds all tended to the dove, feeding her and distracting her from the pain, all except for the ill-tempered crow who was jealous of anyone else getting attention. But the infection grew worse till one of the birds pulled the thorn from her foot and all the colours of the world spilled out, covering the birds in beauty - all save the crow, who stood far away and remained black...

»

This earth that I have stained my fingers with is laced with the memories of these people...

»

There's a gold ingot by my desk as I write... What shall I do with it, were I to steal it? Shall I melt it down and fashion precious trinkets to adorn your beauty on my return? Or from the liquid fire, shall I stamp out coins that style me as a new king and count myself rich in their presence? Gold / a soft metal infected with fevered dreams... If we were wise we would turn around now and bury this cargo and hide its luster from the light of day...





*
SUR

»
Batavia
6°12'41.56"S / 106°50'42.63"E

»
A hot day on the edge of summer, in the crowded streets of Batavia,
a great religious ceremony going past... I keep leaning back against the
pressing mass to prevent myself being pushed into the procession. The
air is strange, heavy with heat and moisture and smell / roasting meats /
sweat / incense / spices... a pure note of star anise rising high above the
rest, and with noise... / A phalanx of monks passes... a gap... expectation
and then... carried by four bearers... a golden litter and in it a princess...
/ The litter is a palace unto itself, every inch of its teak frame, decorated
with sweeping geometric patterns, described by inlaid wood and mother
of pearl and top the frame, an onion-shape dome of plated gold that
tapers into a spike of exquisite sharpness...

»
In the litter sits the princess, amidst a sea of cushions and throws / young,
perfect, imperishable / with a crown the shape of the dome / her delicate
features are formed into a mask of distance / an image of impenetrable
surface beyond human reckoning / an icon of power / the only movement
her jewelry, clinking in rhythm with the footfalls of the bearers //

»
The litter passes right beside me / a bearer loses his footing / the litter
tips down on the side facing me / the princess gasps, her little mouth a
perfect circle of surprise / grips the frame to stop herself tumbling out /
Something falls from the grasp of her hand and lands by my feet / I pick
it up / a ring of gold with a stone of Lapiz Lazuli / pure ultramarine / the
finest I have seen, untainted in its blueness, perfect in its pigmentation /
I rise and see her hand, delicate, imperiously languid, held out to receive
the ring, and her silk sleeve / the colour of saffron / I put the ring into
her palm, and for a moment blue is set against yellow / fingers touch /
I look up and find she is looking right at me, smiling...

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2010

PURE PIGMENT ON ALUMINIUM
97 X 90 CM
*



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AZUR

»

Tahiti
17° 43' 46.49" S / 149° 27' 36.22" W

»

The colour of the sea when the sun shines down on shallow seas and beds of bright, white sand... I remember... soft days, lost in heat on that tiny island adrift in the vast Pacific Ocean... days stretched by sunlight... we'd wade out through the shallows by the shore and bathed by the warm waters and treading soft sand, try, badly, to spear-fish / We'd give up and lie lazily on the tide line, letting the gentle waves caress us as we drifted into sleep / daydreaming that all days and all places could be like this...

»

We pretended to be marooned survivors of a shipwreck / We claimed all the island as our island paradise / We made a shelter out of palm leaves / stockpiled coconuts / caught fish / Climbing the highest hill, we'd look out and as far as our vision would stretch there was only an endless play of light and water / a turquoise sea, shimmering, with myriad burning points of light.

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON CANVAS
41 X 31 CM

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PAUCHUCO

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON ALUMINIUM
120 X 52 CM

*



*
FORTIES

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON PLASTER
25 X 15 CM
*



*
AZAFRAN

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON CANVAS
32 X 26 CM
*





*
MINQUIE

»
Macau
22°17'38.01"N /113°34'07.81"E

»
She burnt bright / Flame-like / Scarlet-clad /
Walking through those streets she seemed
like a vision / a terrible miracle / Moving
with all the poise and purpose of an apex
predator through its hunting ground.

»
In this great den of thieves, hustlers and
losers, this nocturnal city, neon-lit, built
upon the aggregation of quotidian and
impoverished desires // gamblers' vain
hopes / the cheap promise of instant wealth
/ amongst all this mediocrity writ large /
among the camp-followers of desperation...
she was something else / at once wild
and controlled / transcending the tawdry
accommodations of sublimation / she
seemed to embody desire itself / always in
scarlet / promising blood and heat...

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON CANVAS
32 X 26 CM
*



*
KIRI

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON CANVAS
36 X 26 CM
*



*
QUINDO

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON CANVAS
41 X 31 CM
*





*
PULPO

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON CANVAS
42 X 31 CM
*



- » The Southern Ocean, South of the Cape of Good Hope
48°44'12.89"S / 24°43'30.17"E
- » We crossed into the Roaring Forties near the Meridian / hugged
the curving line of latitude, till we passed the Cape of Good Hope
/ We made our descent through the latitudes into the South / We
gathered speed and now we skirt the border of the realm of ice.
- » This year the icebergs have come far north / Today at dawn,
the wind was low and we sailed silently through the frozen sea
/ whispering into the cold air that made of each breath visible
vapour, as we stood on deck, transfixed by the giant forms that
we passed.
- » Sometimes, when the angle is right, a ray of light catches the
face of the ice and shines a light into its very heart / Then, for
a moment, its depths are illuminated by a weird, pale fire / from
out of the whiteness, seemed for long stretches, so impenetrable
and perfect / the suggestion of colour emerges / so subtle and
beautiful that it seems like a mirage / an iridescence of infinite
subtlety / searching for some semblance of order the eye attempts
to define and delimit / tries to fix colour and trace the progression
of shading, discover where the completeness of whiteness gives
out and the first hints of the blue and green begin / and the eye
fails. For these are hues and colour built from density, depth,
opacity and light.
- » These forms with which we share the ocean / with their vast cliffs,
curves and caverns and deeps / come to us as if from another
world / far away and incomprehensible / where time is not
measured in years but eons and each passing summer and winter
is nothing more than an inhalation and exhalation.



*
ZOCALO

*
2010

PURE PIGMENT ON ALUMINIUM
160 CM DIAMETER
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LONDON STUDIO

08/2010
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for the exhibition

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15 SEPTEMBER–
7 OCTOBER 2010

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