

JASON MARTIN

Reminiscence

Galleria Christian Stein
Corso Monforte 23, Milano

25 May - 30 September 2023

The Galleria Christian Stein is presenting for the first time the works of Jason Martin (1970), a British artist known to the public for his pictures laden with pigment, created in a head-on, physical and emotional encounter with the paint. Martin executes his extraordinary works through actions that modify the surface of the painting. While such a thick coat of pigment turns these pictures into sculptures, almost in high relief, the action carried out on the surface takes us into the field of performance. Each of these works is the result of a clash between two dimensions, one characterized by the choreography of the artist's gestures and movements, the other by the nature, density and color of the pigment. The surface also has a role to play because it influences the end result, at the level both of the reflection of light and of the thickness, the physical consistency of the paint. Under the force of gravity, this tends inexorably to move, to sag, to fall from the top to the bottom, sliding vertically or resisting, dragging ample horizontal patches with it and solidifying them. The interdependence of action and material generates an image of a nonfigurative nature that expresses itself through a formless language, in an eloquent stratification of prearranged and fortuitous gestures, of control and spontaneity. An image that looks finished and at the same time dynamic, as if it were in the process of evolving and changing. The operation is a perfect and always unexpected combination of elements conceptually arranged in advance and psychologically liberated forces, the result of actions and reactions between language and impulse.

The title given by the artist to the exhibition, *Reminiscence*, alludes to the fact that his work is imbued with memories, and so can also tell us something about what happened during its birth, or even before that. The work is what we see, the sensual surface that makes us want to touch it, but at the same time it is something else, a layering and mixing of reminiscences, more or less remote, distant in time and space, in which we recognize what emerges from our unconscious.

Reminiscence refers to the possibility of discovering something that pertains to the nature of the world, to the resurfaced depths, to the most sublime things of the imagination, in a coming and going of sensations and perceptions that one moment reveal, the next delude, one moment illuminate, the next cloud. Plato spoke of reminiscence (a term corresponding to the Greek ἀνάμνησις, which is different from μνήμη, "memory"), referring to the moment at which ideas, present in the memory because the spirit has known them before descending into the body, can emerge and be reawakened, in a process of purification by sensibility. In other words, the recollection of a preceding life. And so in the case of this exhibition *Reminiscence* signifies the resurfacing of vague and distant memories of earlier moments and situations, as well as of real and imaginary landscapes and places, traversed or contemplated at certain hours of the day, in the light and colors of a season. And with the reminiscences special frames of mind seem to come up again, moods that we discover to be unforgettable, places associated with the presence of someone or something that has been important in our life. Thus Martin's series of new pictures—some of them monochrome while others are based on a mixture of different colors, beautiful shades of blue, purple and moss green—is charged with these sensations, which the thick, overflowing paint seems to have memorized and caught in its substantial density. Out of this come landscapes that, far

from being representations in a figurative sense, produce natural forms, events that can evoke sea floors or mudflats, walls of rock or stone surfaces that we can describe as geological and chemical in nature.

For many years monochrome was the main focus of Jason Martin's interest. Today, however, the sum of several colors enriches the surface of his paintings with a different and new expressivity. For Martin the picture is a specific object, in line with a modernist tradition that has characterized it since the beginning of the 20th century. So the reminiscences to which he alludes are also formal ones, harking back to earlier works of his own as well as by other artists. Jason Martin experiments with oil paint, constructing each picture with dense layers of pigment, which is worked with special implements to create lines and circular movements, ripples and wrinkles, sometimes sliding over the surface, at others sinking into it, almost raking it, so that at one moment it looks tidily combed, at another ruffled. Worked in this way, the paint presents an ever shifting series of images, abstract and at the same time evoking natural landscapes. Looking at the works in the exhibition the frothy and morose landscapes of Courbet, the turbulent and stormy skies of Turner and the windswept meadows and woods of Constable spring to mind, as if we had found new delight in recognizing something already seen and contemplated, while we are carried away by the Dionysian energy of this formless painting born once again out of the experience of the sublime.

On display in the gallery on Corso Monforte are works with the rippling and choppy surface of a rough sea, to such an extent that the painting spills over its two-dimensional limits and presents itself to the world in a way that can recall Gothic works in high-relief like those of Giovanni Pisano, where the movement of masses and the dramatic contrast of light and shade result in dissolution of the figurative composition, giving way to an autonomous eloquence of the sculptural relief, transformed by its own, disruptive expressive energy. The picture does not represent but lives, and holds a dialogue with the world through its own language. For a century and more it has been painting that makes the world, roaming beyond the visible, liberating color and material, patterns and textures in a stubborn and unsatisfied aspiration to overcome limits, to explore new and unprecedented working possibilities. "In my works color is essentially structure and not decoration, the material becomes visceral, erotic, experimental [...]. The balanced and measured transparency is essentially consumed by the saturation of spinel black, the only transparent black pigment. It is the chiaroscuro of contemporary art."

At the same time Martin's works have a vigorous geometric construction, a conceptual rigor that lays down the rules of a hand-to-hand combat between the artist and his material; a combat on whose outcome depends the success of the work. If the image is sustained by horizontal and vertical grids, by circular and spiral courses, by stratified but controlled planes, something else occurs in the paint. The work expresses a dynamic vitality, an energy, that bursts out and stirs the surface. The artist's action—a sort of dance and struggle for life—excites and animates the impasto with sensuality and uncontrollable pathos, so that here it spreads out in placid undulations, there seems to yield to gravity, slipping and sliding, or seething, erupting, fermenting like a primordial expanse of land or sea in the process of giving birth to new life, new landscapes and horizons. In the last analysis we are still caught up in and swept away by the mystery of the painting in an alternation of sensations and ideas, of memories and suggestions, of vague and colored forms and impressions thanks to which we are able to immerse ourselves again in nature, in order to find some kind of empathy with the world outside us and far away from society.

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