

Orion Martin at Bodega



Traditional Grip, 2021. Oil on linen, aluminum frame.

Smoothness, in several respects, seems to be the single, abiding concern uniting the five paintings in Orion Martin's latest solo show, *Pressure Head*, at Bodega. This may be another articulation of a trite statement about stylistic polyvalence in "recent" painting. Or a sidelong reference to "space" defined as a depthless arena which can readily abide a seemingly endless array of visual systems and cultural references simultaneously. "Depthlessness" with regards to painting invokes a "secession from a genuine history or dialectic of its styles and the content of its forms," as Fredric Jameson's wrote in "Utopianism After the End of Utopia," where he registered a set of constituent material and cultural conditions (aka late capitalism) in then-contemporary art—the art of a still-unresolved period termed "postmodernism" (though Jameson's analysis refers to the art of the 1980s, mostly, as he was writing at the very end of that decade). Characterized by a general privileging of space over depth, cultural continuity over social and historical progression or telos, painting displays, according to Jameson, a kind of "surrealism without the Unconscious," wherein:

the most uncontrolled kinds of figuration emerge with a depthlessness that is not even hallucinatory, like the free association of an impersonal collective subject, without the charge and investment either of a personal Unconscious or of a group one: Chagall's folk iconography without Judaism or the peasants, Klee's stick drawings without his peculiar personal project, schizophrenic art without schizophrenia, "surrealism" without its manifesto or its avant-garde.¹

The seeming paradox—that a moment of absolute heterogeneity would beget the total absence of antagonism or substance in art—can be briskly resolved through an appeal to the philosophical commonplace that anything that purports to say everything in fact says nothing at all.

Derosia

Nathaniel Lee, Turning Point, April 23, 2021

Martin's paintings are smooth in the most immediate and basic sense: they are flat and their surfaces have been meticulously and carefully purged of any impasto. They are finely and carefully crafted—traditionally crafted, that is—with clear reverence for, and deference to, painting's pictorial conventions. The all-abiding heterogeneous space does not necessarily exclude tradition based on mere appearances; one must distinguish the visage of convention or “the traditional” from its historical origins—tradition, as such—in contemporary painting. Following Jameson on to his next line:

neofigurative painting today is very much that extraordinary space through which all the images and icons of the culture spill and float, haphazard, like a logjam of the visual, bearing off with them everything from the past under the name of “tradition” that arrived in the present time to be reified visually, broken into pieces, and swept away with the rest.

Martin's figures are faithfully and skillfully modeled, at times in deference to local color, at others indulging in the tinting power of heavy-hitting synthetic-organic pigments and supranatural hot-cool color contrasts. This realist fidelity extends only to individual figures or components and not to each painting's overall composition. The result is a seamless mise en scène populated by disjointed elements where space becomes an amalgam of culture's bits and pieces, set in diagrammatic relief rather than projecting a familiar Cartesian image of “the world.” Each painting offers a rich, realist cosmology of its own.



Soft Machine, 2021. Oil on canvas.

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Soft Machine (2021) presents a quasi-mechanized cross section of the human reproductive juncture in profile: the pregnant female on the left takes on a cosmic stature via the Orion constellation set to the far left, the celestial hunter's "bow" coinciding with the curve of the figure's vertebral column, while the male to the right, with his schematized genitals, carries an unreal yet legible machine. A detachable showerhead with knobs and associated plumbing appears to the right of the male "machine." Martin's palate is perfectly keyed to capture the seductive qualities of brushed nickel: pink and blue inflect grey like a sensate code that recalls the mass-produced ornamental finish. One artificial reality constructs another.



Habitrail, 2021. Oil on linen, aluminum frame.

Habitrail (2021), shows a couple in profile seated opposite each other, peering out the window of what appears to be a train-car: outside is an ambiguous "futuristic" scenery, a landscape of pure culture à la Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*. The figures are actually borrowed, or quoted, from Jim Jarmusch's 1989 film *Mystery Train*, part of which follows two Japanese hipsters obsessed with American blues and early rock and roll as they travel to Memphis, Tennessee in search of an authentic interaction with the object of their infatuations.

Accompanying the show is a short story by Naoki Sutter Shudo titled "The Tailor," based on a plot provided by Martin. The story is set in a material utopia which takes the optimistic rhetoric of our consumer technocapitalism at face value, and projects it into an undefined future in which Amazon.co's corporate promises—to deliver total fulfillment, total happiness—when fully realized, are experienced as a kind of pathos. In this hypothetical perfect society, individuals are freed from want and strife, and a total lack of social antagonism registers, again, as a lack of telos. As for present reality, the allegory is simple:

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Nathaniel Lee, Turning Point, April 23, 2021

ideology “flattens” history, becomes an envelope in which change—escape—becomes impossible, inconceivable. This is, paradoxically perhaps, Jameson’s “end” of utopia, the end of the great political and social enmity of the twentieth century—the end of Marxism, that is—and an aspect of the postmodern period which is simultaneously heralded as the so-called “end of ideologies.”²



The Tailor, 2021. Oil on canvas.

Martin has produced his own *The Tailor*, the largest canvas exhibited here. The painting offers three futuristic figures: two identical androgynous automatons—one facing forward, the other rearward—to the left of a male who appears as just head and torso. The front-facing automaton’s expression is cool and blank and both sport black satin dome caps. The man appears in profile with his cranium spilt open in diagram. All three figures are decoratively “dressed”: the man in a dapper coat and tie, the automatons in yellow coats, blue gloves, and mismatched, thigh-high femme boots. The painting does not quite illustrate the story, nor does the story script the painting. Instead, the disjointed contents of Martin’s paintings all form their own self-contained narratives within each image.

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Nathaniel Lee, Turning Point, April 23, 2021

Compare Martin's assemblages of disparate cultural bric-a-brac to a brand of postmodernist painting that could only exist after the fall of the Berlin Wall (the forgone conclusion-cum-synthesis maintained by the "end of ideologies" crowd): Neo Rauch's go-nowhere narratives culled from the flotsam and jetsam of failed twentieth-century socialism, as represented by remnants of its enforced, official style of realism. There, the disjoined matter from an actual utopian project is reassembled into pathetic, frustrated nonsense scenery where figures—often painters, artists, or writers—simply toil. The allegory at large here might signal that utopia leads nowhere: the failed twentieth-century socialist and avant-garde utopias are pillaged to package Rauch's entire kitsch project.

Jameson's "Utopianism," which, as he asserts, exists in spite of the conceptual decline of "Utopia" in culture (a loss which Rauch exploits), is offered up as something like an "underground" cultic tendency rather than a properly manifested avant-garde.³ Possible paths of escape from the tyranny of total heterogeneity register quietly. A Robert Gober installation assembled from works by other artists—a Meg Webster earth mound, a Bierstadt landscape, a Richard Prince text piece, and a door frame and the unhinged door itself (Gober's own contribution)—offers hope in its "spatial" staging of internal differentiation. Jameson suggests that these works together—each with their own distinct periodicity—inflect and activate each other in new ways, necessitating new modes of reading. They chart "the idea of a concept that does not yet exist."⁴ Or, perhaps, the installation offers the insight that something—anything—new can be constructed from the "logjam" of the perpetual present.

Jameson is clear that this is not a version of Le Corbusier's urban fantasyscapes, which seek "to spring the representation of some new kind of dwelling onto the Utopian screen of the mind's eye," or the "production of some form of Utopian space," but instead exists "as the production of the concept of such space."⁵ The Prince text serves a special function in Gober's arrangement by punctuating the ensemble with its presence as the present—a contaminant—in the present. Objects from the past are broken free from the "past" as cultural monolith and brought into congress with the present that must now actively contend with its counterparts; they are no longer mere antecedents glossed only via nostalgia. Martin's painting gives us all of the heterogeneity—the dissonant chorus of voices from the monolithic "past", i.e., "culture"—we are by now accustomed to and lost without as denizens of the twenty-first century, but it is a staged encounter. Each painting's individual elements may have been found floating in a de facto "forest of signs", but their essence has, through careful and attentive rendering, been brought forth front-and-center and harmonized—smoothed—into an intelligible, homogenized, whole. It is a gesture which, alone, suggests possibility, a covert and clandestine return of the author: the world's tailor.

1. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 174-75.

2. Jameson, 159-60.

3. *Ibid.*, 180.

4. *Ibid.*, 163.

5. *Ibid.*, 165.

Frieze

The Best Shows in Los Angeles Right Now

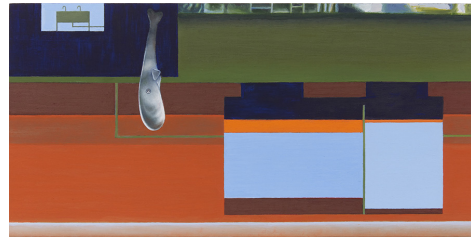
A guide to the city's autumn exhibitions

Orion Martin & Alexandra Noel, 'Bolthole'

Potts

29 September – 17 November

Potts, an artist-run space in a former plumbing-parts store in Alhambra, in the San Gabriel Valley, will be missed by the L.A. art community when it ends its three-year run early next year. 'Bolthole', a two-person show by Los Angeles-based painter Orion Martin and New Yorker Alexandra Noel (stablemates at Bodega, in New York), is less a conversation between the pair than a comfortable hangout couched in mutual admiration. Noel contributes small, floor-based abstract sculptures, though the highlights for me are her tiny, ratchet-tight paintings. Her technical precision is shared by Martin, whose three large, semi-abstract painted reliefs dominate the room in terms of size, ambition and strangeness.



Alexandra Noel, *Grease Trap*, 2019, oil and enamel on panel, 15 x 30 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Potts, Los Angeles



Orion Martin, *Green glass garage*, 2019, oil on panel, 61 x 173 x 3 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Potts, Los Angeles

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Alexandra Noel, *Grease Trap*, 2019, oil and enamel on panel, 15 x 30 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Potts, Los Angeles



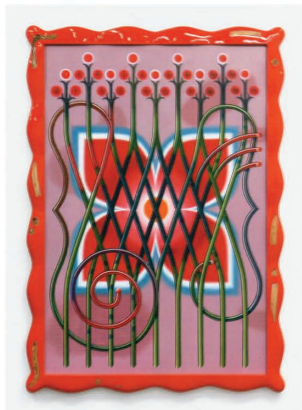
Orion Martin, *Green glass garage*, 2019, oil on panel, 61 x 173 x 3 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Potts, Los Angeles

EDITORIAL
MAGAZINE

ORION MARTIN

If you were to glimpse one of Orion Martin's pieces in your periphery, you might nearly dismiss it as an impressive printed poster. This is not to suggest there's a ubiquity to the subject matter—it is instead a marvel at his technique, and the scarce evidence of a clumsy human hand. Martin's mark-making is nearly indiscernible. The precision with which he works seems uncharacteristic of our time—in favour of digital finesse, the act of pushing the limits of the human anatomy for the sake of art seems to have grown obsolete. Martin favors intricate, maze-like designs; painted in unprecedented detail, they reflect the patterns hidden in quotidian objects we've come to take for granted—the backs of playing cards, flashy pre-millennium bus seat upholstery. Echoing medical textbook illustrations of the 19th century, or billboards from a faraway future, Martin's works possess a quality of temporal un-belonging, seeming at once ancient and ultramodern. Recognizable forms in unrecognizable places, his paintings see-saw between hyper-real and hallucination. It is the language of photo-realism that is perhaps best suited to elucidating his world of labyrinthine fantasy.

- Rebecca Storm



IMAGES COURTESY OF BODEGA. In order:
1. *Nombreflad Quint en Rouge*, Oil on canvas, MDF with inlaid driftwood and drumsticks, automotive paint. 2. *Nombreflad Grand*, Oil on canvas, MDF, automotive paint. 3. *Lucy Teacher Tether Whip*, Oil on canvas, walnut with mother of pearl inlay frame. 4. *Eczema Song II*, Oil on linen, bronze frame 5. *Bakers Steak*, Oil on canvas.



Derosia

Mona Varichon, Artforum, October 4, 2018

ARTFORUM



View of “Bloom,” 2018.

LOS ANGELES

“Bloom”

BEL AMI

709 N. Hill St. #105

September 20 - October 27

Homages and kinships run through “Bloom,” an exhibition curated in collaboration with painter Orion Martin. Looming large is the specter of the late Michel Majerus—the curators translated four of his large-scale paintings into murals, stretching them, Louise Lawler–style, to fit the gallery’s walls. Majerus sampled profusely from other sources, and the press release’s mention of his death in a plane crash reminds

us that collisions can consist of momentary impacts as much as they can form lasting influences. While the works in this show are formally disparate, most function as tributes to artists or works that have shaped the organizers’ practices.

The titular work, *Bloom*, 2003–2004, is a larger-than-life portrait by Martin’s undergraduate mentor, Caitlin Mitchell-Dayton. The young student’s unapologetic aura, exalted by the scale of the painting, symbolizes the impact that students and teachers can have on one another. Nearby, a circular painting on Plexiglas by Sean Kennedy, *Untitled*, 2016–18, packs Nascar decals into a composition of concentric rings (the commercial language echoes that in Majerus’s work). The once legible logo of BASF appears to have disintegrated due to repeated circular motion, as if the image had been spun at an unmanageable speed until it was brought to a deadly halt. In the next room, in a series of works employing the ink and screen tone used in Manga drawings, Matthieu Manche—a childhood mentor of one of Bel Ami’s codirectors—illustrates his travels, grafting characters from Japanese popular culture onto various locales, from Antwerp to Tokyo, via superimpositions and connected limbs.

Not mentioned in the press release is the gallery’s decision to include a small painting by Martin in the back of the show, a work which reveals the curators’ driving force. The painting depicts a leather shoe whose sole is geometrically fragmented like shrapnel flying toward the viewer and the rest of the works in the show, leaving behind a red pool of blood.

—Mona Varichon

novembre magazine

Portrait

Orion Martin by Alex Bennett

Writing

Alex Bennett

Artwork

Orion Martin

Spunky Flourish

In the immaculate paintings of Orion Martin, excess is focal. Camp tchotchke, peculiar wonders, superfluous paraphernalia, and kinky fixtures become dominant subjects. It is similar to the attention the bartender grants the garnish - that charismatic, theatrical amplification of the final accessory. In Martin's painting, the flourish of minutia is essential material, just like the salted edge, caramelised fruit, pinched mint, or punctured olive.

This attention can slope into distraction; inspection softening into unlatched fantasy. Martin employs both with technical acuity, from this fascination of microscopy his paintings behave strangely, growing and convoluting. Decipherment becomes a slippery activity. Shrimp Pastel No.88 (2016), for instance, is deliberately irresolute. Glassy and centrifugal, fuchsia ripples develop a featureless portrait of sorts, only a pair of cherries hanging in the centre to consolidate a face. Despite the wet-pink abstraction, the frame winks to utility in the attachment of a shell-pink doorknob. Flesh is dissolved in an anaesthetised solution, but the painting demonstrates his attraction to the minuscule, generating here, a foray into figuration. On this, Martin notes: 'I've always been trying to make paintings of people without painting people. I'm attracted to things that look figurative, a bookshelf, for example, or to endow a butterfly with some human proportion.'

Formally, the initial thrust for Martin is, he explains, 'symmetry, shiny tubes, circles, framing structure - stuff like that are mostly just a formal jump-off point.' He continues: 'Then I end up re-drafting everything on the canvas and moving things around, so there is an appropriate amount of interaction happening across the canvas. Once I add colour and volume, I usually have to make some kind of change to deal with the balance of the painting. It all happens on the canvas, in very thin layers, and I end up spending a lot of time covering up what was there.'

Martin's style recalls Pop practitioners such as James Rosenquist or Michel Majerus and Chicago Imagist Barbara Rossi, only with less slinky swagger or, in the former, smearing commotion. Considering Martin's patience and precision, Jim Nutt also comes to mind, who, incidentally, tutored Martin. Nutt balances the cartoony, frazzled, threadbare charm of the Chicago Imagists and Hairy Who alongside his electrically smart, radiantly lonesome square female portraits; graphics, illustration and strictness cohere. If Nutt's early work is the lava lamp goo - floating, globular, phosphorous, aloof, - then Martin is the icing knife - ironed, distilled, sleek, incandescent.

Derosia

Alex Bennett, Novembre Magazine, May 2017

The uncommon, illusionist atmosphere of this beauty is a compelling temper in Martin's oeuvre. With his unusual scrutiny reinforcing detail, the effect is delicate, sartorial and properly bizarre. Tight trellis wavers to a nimble petal, a unicycle morphs into a flamingo, a pistol splurges a thick, cherubic cobalt knot. Fictitious patterns follow their own logic, and the persuasion of any visual interplay depends on objective skill to rig panache with legitimate conviction. Grids, grilles, eyelets and piping, biomorphic in tone, often constitute this pliant engineering. 'I think of them more as frameworks, or lattice that elements can interact with, where objects can exist and be built on,' Martin explains, 'I think of it in light of Memphis design, where proportions and materials are varied, the more extreme the better, but it still has to have the guise of function. So it's like building, where the steel pipe goes into this dog (because it's a painting), but the shadows still have to work to make it a functioning thing. Which gets me into the drop shadows and trompe l'oeil effects.'

Automaton, Fabulous Muscles (2016) executes the aforementioned technique. A greyhound is laterally tangled with a giant, fiercely polished trumpet, with part of the brass tubing drifting off out of view. The greyhound's sinuous translucency appeals to Martin, 'you can see the whole skeleton in a way that is frail but they're very strong in a certain way.' Teal drop shadows and a turquoise soft-blur are deft hints of depth. They open the door to fathoming the integration, but the slotting of greyhound and trumpet is inherently flat and banal. In this way, oneiric inventions come supple and frontal in a similar set-up to Urs Fischer's Horse/Bed (2013), that Martin cites as an influence for the painting, 'it's a really epic silver 3D sculpture, he drops this horse and this hospital bed together, and there's no attempt to intermingle them, they're just on top of each other.'

Framing devices buttress this functional posture, alluding to Martin's intent for each painting's eventual domestication, a living room, say, replete with 'cheetah print and something next to it, other bad decisions' as Martin suggests. Intrigued by situating 'cartoon objects in the real world,' Martin's creation of mirrors and custom framing devices soon incorporated the paintings, handling them more like furniture. Math meets flair, as Martin expresses: 'The attention to dotting all the I's and crossing all the T's is like my desire to finish everything as the way that it's supposed to look; it's not ambiguous, there's a solid list to check and cross off.' In these fames, compressed Sottsass squiggles expose driftwood inlays, square hollows exist in the canvas' centre, acrylic doorknobs ornament like epaulets. Craft informs Martin's relation to painting and its 'liveability'. 'You can paint something so much that it feels physical, as though you can put your arm behind it or something,' he explains, 'and to me that is like turning a painting on, that you painted it so much it became physical and then I feel there is this liveability.'

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Alex Bennett, Novembre Magazine, May 2017

Vulpine charade is savoured in Martin's style like a tongue describes a bonbon. Elaboration woos the eye; soft composure mellows the painting's strange fluency, nothing is prickly, it is silken, metallic, seductive in shade, scope and relation. In general, everything is conclusively manicured, like an equine mane.

Yet the approach, as Martin describes it, is less like persuasion and more like lusty masquerade. Fraudulence is domesticated. Taste, or impressions of the real, seems beside the point. Like a ploy to suppress confliction, Martin explains, 'how can I be a bunch of things at once, but never have to commit? Can I be the kind of person who wears a bullet belt, a velvet hat with a feather, a very formal blazer and clown shoes all at once without having to commit to being a punk, or a clown. I get to be a lil nasty boy covered in cake but then dressed up real nice to be presented to the public, while I still have cake all over my body.'

Bombast is disciplined by Martin's attention, and this microscopic perspective remedies his greedy, nasty boy friction. Foregrounding small obsessions dovetails with his control of surface mimesis, slowly brutalising optical reason with fascination, like the irresistible crush of glass or hoarfrost underfoot. The approach recalls Elizabeth Hardwick's style, whose sentences often pile impression upon impression, analogy against analogy, until conceits burnout and she gives it to the reader relatively straight. Her metaphors are wilfully weird. For example, recalling Billie Holiday's coiffure, she writes: 'And always the lascivious gardenia, worn like a large, white, beautiful ear ... Sometimes she died her hair red and the curls lay flat against her skull, like dried blood.' Her tensile expression and gentle quirk of repetition addresses the strain between attention and distraction that reads analogous to Martin's own oscillation.

Martin's unusual use of dimension, whether vertical or horizontal, enhances the microscopy of his sensitivity. Compositions are rarely cryptic; with only two to three features intertwining - the impact is spacey, laced in few strokes. Subtle cartooning, billboard-esque, and illustrative techniques render objects, angles, and volume to the fore. Sourcing is often, though not always, online, and appears dependent on detail whether in movement, decoration, signage, or light, whatever appeals. Features are thus blown-out, blurred in scale to then been perfectly optimised on canvas. 'The smaller and more specific the better' Martin says. 'I just look for potential for a painting in things in the same way that, say, a skateboarder looks for potential in the architecture for a trick.'

Wilfredo's Tale (2016) demonstrates this process to optimise and the opportunity of structure, which entails a strange excursion to Martin's own invented form. Zooming into a detail of a jester's hat, a ballooned green curl occupies half the canvas, with blurred foliage decorating the hat's base. While the jester remains mostly out of focus, an ice-blue eyelet rests atop like a peerless void, while the blurred curl slowly refines itself to the centre of the painting in a finely pronged tip - a mermaid's tail.

Derosia

Alex Bennett, Novembre Magazine, May 2017

Oftentimes, the negotiation is purely surface-to-surface, all delivered with pristine exactitude. Strawberry (2015), for instance, demonstrates this microscopy, where plays of hyperreality merge with flawless surface. A large, glistening strawberry, suitably pimped in texture, is embossed with a centaur sporting a proud erection, blowing a shofar, all against a flat red background with a lusciously varnished red frame. 'The idea for the strawberry was like how you see Jesus Christ in like a slice of bread of something,' Martin says, 'my idea was this totally perfect strawberry but with this minotaur.' If these paintings hinge commonplace objects and kitsch imagery to hallucinogenic interludes and glazed perversity, Strawberry recalls the thrill behind magnification, where inspection bends to simulacra.

The singular focus of Strawberry indicates Martin's interest in technology not as an activated influence but a hive of detail, with 3D technologies enhancing his relation to bleak, vacuous kinds of flatness. The most basic 3D rendering tools are exercises in plain shape, line, and vectors. Like many, Martin experimented with these early software: 'It was really simple, me and my cousin used to make wrestlers using these globes,' he explains, 'you could wrap any texture around this globe, giving this snowman a lizard skin, we would put tattoos on it and when you're done it's all grey in one building, like Tron or something, spaced and dry. When you wrap it, it renders and drops it in a space so the shadows don't seem insane; it becomes justified by adding this horizon line. It's so basic but it looks so weird, so bleak.'

The similarity is striking and partly explains his inclusion in Flatlands, an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which examined new representational painting conditioned by virtuality. Martin continues, 'it feels like what I'm doing to objects, selecting and stacking cylinders, and when I'm painting dogs or the lamp, I'm painting pictures. Images are used like a backdrop. The things that pierce it, the rivets, are built into the picture and ultra-fabricated in my environment, but ultra-false in a way that becomes very bleak. I like that feeling, and the single light source that 3D programmes operate.'

The bareness of these immaculate images is the staging of their own inherent frank attraction. Depth is mocked; clarity chooses its revelation; experiential seduction is deployed as a banality. Triple, Nickel, Tull (2015) for instance, is clearly evocative of this, and was included in Flatlands. Complete signification without the real, a mid-calf woman's boot rests atop a mirrored surface, various amber-orange vectors dissipate in a brothel-like gloaming. Silver rivets are strung with tight coral lacing; the luminosity of Christina Ramberg lingers in the boot's fine segments, each an electrified autumnal tone.

In Triple, Nickel, Tull, prosthesis appeals, lending Martin's style a willowy darkness that is not just seductive, but sly and plainly vacuous.

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Alex Bennett, Novembre Magazine, May 2017

Martin clarifies this tone: 'Dead inside, monotone, a kind of sadness that is bleak and it's slightly numb, empty, shiny. Body and bags of flesh in this world, in these elements. I don't think you're wrong about the darkness. I am trying to achieve that kind of empty plasticity with elements happening around you. The mood, the emptiness of Christina Ramberg, is really perfect.' The ploy comes back to the nasty boy attitude, of cake beneath the suit, 'How do I get the heaviness of those paintings and let funky, Memphis, jazzy-funk-weird-bending- guitars exist but in this bleak, grey sadness. Have your cake and eat it too.'

While Martin's work includes the versatile operations of style with dry execution, along with the accessibility of images in the digital age, erotics are always nearby. Double entendre is organised with eyelets and sharpened flowers, dotted with dewdrops. Metallic rims interrupt throbbing proportions, while corset ligation continues to loop, skirt, glisten and lick. Intense definition and lax arousal are part of the juggle. A jovial smokescreen, these are paintings eager to transmogrify, like a rampant hormone titillates the attention. If scrutiny crystallises these details, then lust intensifies volume.



'Birdie' by Orion Martin, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Bodega, New York.

KALEIDOSCOPE

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INTERVIEW BY CHRISTOPHER SCHRECK

Recent exhibitions have seen you branch out from your signature object-based oils to explore new mediums and modes, most notably (self-) portraiture. Will your show at Bodega follow in turn?

Yeah, I feel like it's the logical next step. The show is based around two large figurative paintings: one is myself as a drummer boy with a pink face, the other is a woman as a nurse, both in uniform. Then there's another set of paintings, decidedly not-figurative, more in the vein of those earlier object-based pieces, but much smaller and more dense. Then, framing the figurative works, there's a collection of small wooden sculptures shaped like pinwheels, which will line the top of the gallery. With my last group of paintings, I'd been exploring this idea of animating between works; I was originally going to aim for that effect with the smaller paintings, breaking the motion down canvas by canvas, but the idea gradually evolved into these literally kinetic sculptures.

These two characters, the drummer boy and the nurse—where did they come from?

They're based on drawings I'd done as a kid, but updated more in the style of Wayne Thiebaud's figurative paintings: analytical, fully fleshed out, with a flat background and an emphasis on the outfits. To me, the drawings seemed to depict what you're taught as a kid—all of these absurd delineations around gender, with grossly simplified roles and narratives. So in making the paintings, I approached the uniforms more like costumes, suggesting something fabricated or invented, almost vaudeville.

How do the compositions come together? Are you still combining found elements from online and IRL sources? Do you mock up the arrangements beforehand?

This show is a little different, as all of the works are based on photographs I took myself. The smaller pieces started with shots I took while walking around, but for the figurative paintings, I actually did in-studio setups, with lighting and costumes.

Why the change?

Well, the drummer boy character was originally an outtake from a series of photographs I produced last year. So I already had that image, and then when I found the kid's drawings, I knew he could "become" the soldier. From there, I did a similar revision of the nurse character, putting together an outfit and taking shots in the studio. But beyond that, it's still been the same basic process. The source material is still just a jumping-off point for further invention, and I'm still not mocking it up before I start—it all happens on the canvas. I'll put an object down, but maybe it's not right for the space; maybe it needs some lighting effect or surface treatment, or some added shadow to get the weight right. So I'll adjust lines, add and subtract objects, or whatever else until it feels right. It's very intuitive.

Would you say there's a cohering theme or tone to the exhibition?

I don't think about it in a linear or literal way, but there's usually an internal logic happening between the pieces, whether it's obvious or not. With this show, the work has something to do with optimism—or at least the appearance of optimism. It all started with a photo I took of a house with all of these pinwheels out front. It struck me as an alternative to having an American flag on your porch; it was saying something different, almost political. There are also a lot of underlying references to '60s pop, where you had these absurd pleasantries masking a deep social unrest, which obviously seems appropriate for today.

sex life

ORION MARTIN INTERVIEWED BY CHRISTOPHER SCHRECK

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Portrait by Logan White

Of the works on view in the Whitney's much-discussed "Flatlands" exhibition this past spring, none were more seductive—or more slippery—than those of Orion Martin. Painted nose-close in his Los Angeles studio, Martin's canvases are beguiling constructions: layered arrangements of commonplace objects, cleanly rendered with vivid palettes, shifting perspectives, and narratives left willfully open-ended. Dense with references ranging from Art Nouveau and the Hairy Who to commercial illustration and '70s funk, Martin's images are strange but stylized, polished to the point of making others' work seem casual by comparison. Following a year hectic with new work and exhibitions, Martin's first published interview finds the artist in transition mode, as he offers his thoughts on fashion cycles, embracing bad taste, and why he was never really a "technical" painter to begin with.

Prior to these last two New York shows, I'd only seen your work as digital reproductions. Presented that way, the surfaces read as flat and uniform, almost like prints. Viewing them in person, though, I was surprised by the range of treatments you're using. There's real textural variance happening in each canvas. Yeah, the surfaces are clean, but they're never seamless. The way I think about it, every painting combines these various objects, and my application is meant to translate the material side of each of them. So, for example, you look at this one [Bakers Steak (2015)]. The base of the lamp is taken from a photo I found online. With low-resolution shots taken from the Internet, I do this kind of stipple painting—I've found it's an easy way to make gradients of color in multiple directions, and it creates a soft, blurring effect, almost like pixelation. Then there's the top of

the lamp, which is from a 3D rendering of glass, so that needed a smoother application. The fabric is semi-transparent and totally invented, so it falls somewhere in-between, and the flowers come from this wood frame I own, with a simplified gradient on the petals. Last, there are the grommets, which are overlaid to give a sort of trompe l'oeil effect. All of the paintings are like that. Each one ends up being this puddle of references and applications mixed together into its own thing.



Right: Baker's Steak, 2015; Left: Sir Michaels, All Wash, 2015

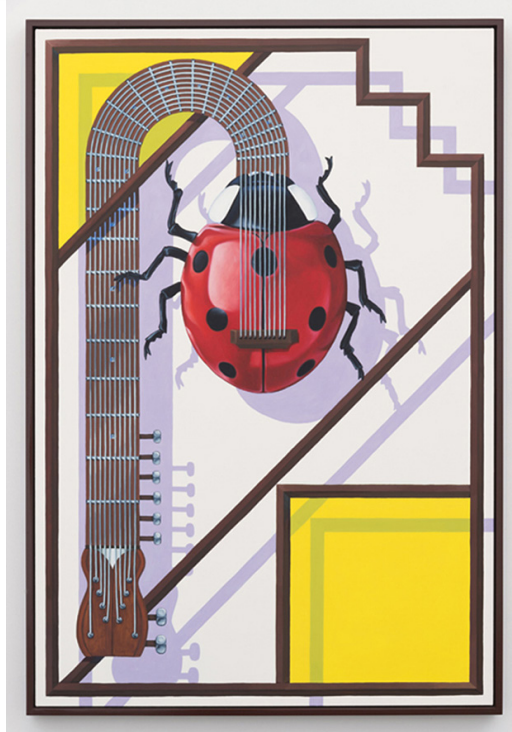
In collecting imagery, have you found yourself leaning towards particular sources or subjects?

It's different from painting to painting. I used to start with the objects themselves—some found elements to use as a jumping-off point: album covers, other paintings, a shower door. Lately, though, I feel like I'm making paintings backwards, where first I'll have a color scheme I'm excited about, or maybe some formal framing element, and then I have to figure out which objects might occupy that frame and fulfill those color requirements. From there, it becomes a process of adding and removing pieces until everything interweaves in an interesting way and the image feels balanced.

It sounds like a fairly intuitive process—which is funny, considering the terms in which your work's usually discussed. For example, your style is regularly described as being "informed by classical technique." Is that a misconception?

"Informed," sure—but really, it's more like the work's informed by other painters whose work's informed by classical technique. It's a step removed. I am interested in things like form and balance, playing with how your eye moves around a canvas, making your vision vibrate through color choices. I think those "classic" painting concerns can still be tackled in interesting ways. But I never know how to respond when people bring up classical technique, or photorealism, just because it feels so far from where I'm coming from. "Informed by classical technique" makes it seem like I know what I'm doing, whereas I really feel like I'm making it up as I go. I do try to think about each painting as a designed object, with a logic and structural integrity of its own. But every canvas still has a "How do I do this?" period.

That lasts maybe a week, at which point I can say, "OK, so that's how to paint a strawberry seed in the flesh. Carry on." So it's really more of an interpretive process. It's not about making things look "realistic"—it's about making them look right, the way I imagined them.



Honeysuckle Rose, 2016

Does it concern you, then, that your technical precision so often becomes part of the work's perceived content? What do you think it is about these images that called for such a meticulous treatment?

Part of it's just about being into the craft of painting. Obviously, I'm very particular about the surface, which has a lot to do with the artists I admire—like, the precision of a Karl Wirsum painting is so cool to me, his ability to create these perfect surfaces, to the point where you walk up to it and think, "How can a human even do that!?" I like the allure of a refined surface, the same way you want the finish for a table to be well-oiled and smooth. At the same time, though, I'm really not as interested in realistic rendering as it might seem. I'm usually attracted to a clunkier, more awkward style of imagery, which is probably apparent if you look at my drawings—they're a lot more cartoony and stylized. I tried for years to paint like I draw, with an active, brush-heavy application, but I could never translate it right, so I ended up going the other direction. I got it to where the strokes were small and seamless enough to eliminate any sense of my own hand, which was a big shift—it really affects how the image lays and the surface reads. It became this almost self-deprecating train of thought, where I figured if I removed myself from the drawing (à la projector or transfer), I'd be distanced enough from the image to like it. So I developed this new technique, combining found images and more stylized objects, and it became a kind of style.

Derosia

Christopher Schreck, Sex Magazine, January 2017

It's interesting to think that an artist's approach might be so removed from his own inclinations.

It's not really removed—it's just folded into a more elaborate dish. The clunky bends of a flower stem might satisfy one stylistic leaning, while the rigid drafting of some framing element satisfies another. It's all these disparate ideas, playing off each other in a single canvas.

To that end, a number of people have compared your paintings to those of the Chicago Imagists, which seems fair. Personally, when I first saw your work, my mind went to Konrad Klapheck—there seemed to be some common ground in your recasting of pedestrian items, the surface highlights, the pristine finish, the illustrative quality. Do references like these resonate with you?

Oh yeah, I love Klapheck. I actually found out about him more recently, since I moved to L.A., but I've been into the Chicago artists for a while. I first heard about Jim Nutt while I was at SFAI [San Francisco Art Institute]. When I saw his stuff, I went totally cuckoo birdbrain. Before I started school, I was really into Barry McGee, that kind of graffiti thing. Then, once I got to SFAI, people were all about Phillip Guston and Dana Schutz, so I tried to paint like that. But then I found out about Nutt's work, which changed everything. It was the perfect combination of everything I liked, executed in a way I could relate to: radical figurative painting that was about sex and skin and discomfort, all rendered in this clean, poppy, perfectly seamless style. It was R. Crumb plus Picasso plus Miró, plus cool ads and fonts, plus interesting shapes and crazy palettes. It was everything.

You eventually ended up working with Nutt, didn't you?

Yeah. So after two years, I dropped out of SFAI and moved to Chicago—which was great, since Imagist art is so accessible there, with the Roger Brown house, Corbet vs. Dempsey, all of that. I knew he still lived there, so I figured I'd find him through Blick Art Materials, where I worked—just look him up in the system or something. But then one day Robert Lostutter came into the store and we started talking. After a while, he said, "Why don't you go to the Art Institute? All the Imagists teach there." For some reason, that had never occurred to me. So I signed up, and my first class was with Jim Nutt, which was really intense. At one point, he essentially told me to stop copying him—which was fair, because I was so obsessed with all of them, the Hairy Who and everyone grouped into the Imagist name. There was actually a period where I figured if I couldn't be a painter, I could be some kind of expert on Imagist art.

Spread from *Fashioned* by Lynda Marie Designs, 2016. Editioned booklet, Bodega Gallery

I wanted to ask you about *Fashioned* by Lynda Marie Designs, a self-produced look book featuring clothing designed by your mom. How did that come about?

When I started talking with Bodega about doing a solo show, Eric [Veit, co-director] proposed making an edition as a companion piece. We considered doing a set of drawings, but then I started thinking of what else I had enough of to fill a book. My mom's always made clothes; when I was growing up, she had these boxes filled with them, which she'd pull out to show me and my other friends who were into sewing. So the book ended up becoming this collection of pieces she made from the early '70s, during her time in San Francisco, through the '90s, when she was making clothes for my sister and me. The models are all friends of mine, I styled and did the makeup (which was essentially just face paint and baby oil), Rob Kulisek took the photos, and Sam Davis wrote an accompanying text. Then there are my mom's written descriptions of the clothes and how she wore them at the time.

Derosia

Christopher Schreck, Sex Magazine, January 2017

That seems to be an ongoing motif in your practice—this connection to fashion, particularly from earlier generations.

It all goes back to this idea of filtered references. My mom is a hairdresser and I have an older sister, so between the two of them, I spent a lot of time as a kid looking at fashion magazines in a salon and getting dressed up. I also went to the Oregon country fair every summer—a kind of hippie festival with circus



entertainment and live music. So the book is an extension of those things, but I also think it relates to my paintings—to my conflicting sense of taste, and the trickle-down way that I translate and misinterpret things. For example, the book's laid out to look like a Delia's catalogue. Delia's is sort of the '90s version of '70s post-hippie style, and now here I am, translating it further—but like I was saying about classical technique, my reading's a step removed, watered down into something different. Making the photo book really made me aware of this sense of distancing, and the role it plays in everything I do, for better or worse.

In a way, the book seemed to anticipate the work you've done since the Bodega show, in which you've visibly turned away from strategies favored in the "object" paintings. Formally, the compositions are becoming less dense, the layering now obstructive rather than integrated; you've also started to incorporate portraiture while introducing a new range of mediums to the mix. After the show in February, I had a lot of new ideas I wanted to try out. First I spent a month making collage works on paper, which was really about changing up the speed and materials. I just wanted to get away from painting crisp shapes with a small brush for a minute and make work that was a little looser. After that came the Heino paintings, which I'd been planning for a while. I've always made art about people, and it's always been clear to me that figures would return to the paintings at some point. So I started with Heino, who's sort of the albino Elvis of Germany. With those, I was trying to treat the figure like a painting of a picture rather than a painting of a head, kind of like what I'd done with the lamp painting. From there, the next few pieces were much more photo collage—which I soon realized was probably the least interesting part of the paintings I'd been making before, but at least it got me away from the "objects on a flat-color ground" thing.

Derosia

Christopher Schreck, Sex Magazine, January 2017



Left: Heino (tiddle bunk of todger), 2016; Right: Asleep in a Tin Can, 2016

It seems like those pieces also gave you the chance to experiment with some interesting framing methods—which isn't necessarily a new development, but is something that's often left unmentioned in discussing your work. Personally, my favorite pieces in the Bodega show were the ones that integrated the support as part of the image—the protruding knobs, the framed holes within the canvases and so on—so it's been fun to see you extend those ideas in this more recent work.

The framing's always been an important part of it. It started when I was making frames for some smaller paintings—sculpted wood with glossy colors—and at some point, I realized I was getting more into the woodworking than the paintings themselves. From there, the process switched for a while: I started making mirrors and photos with elaborate frames, and then, with the Bodega pieces, began physically incorporating those elements into the image itself. With these newer paintings, though, I've been using inlay frames. I had the first ones made by a guitar inlay artist, but then I wanted to do it myself, so I got into this kind of literal collage mode, where I was setting driftwood or pieces of drum sticks into these hand-carved frames. At that point, I started to reconsider my approach with the paintings. With the work I showed at NADA, for example, I was looking at the "red head" character as a construction as opposed to a collage, which is how I'd thought about the pieces at Bodega. Now it was more about building the image with painted materials. And again, I was going back to portraiture, but unlike the Heino paintings, where the work was small and dealt with a specific person, here I went big and created what was meant to be a kind of "everyhead," some all-inclusive head without a particular identity.

It's nice to be able to track these various ideas as they translate across bodies of work—as you were saying earlier about your technique, the process seems linear but still pretty instinctive. It's also instructive, I think, in that it allows the audience to see these newer pieces less as a move away from a signature style than variations on longstanding themes.

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Christopher Schreck, Sex Magazine, January 2017

I don't think the idea of a "signature style" applies to what I do. I've always made different kinds of work that were somehow connected—even while you're working one way, you're imaging how to make something else with a totally different approach. Like, for example, right now I'm making photographs for a group show at Species in Atlanta in March; it's a way of dealing with figures and people in a more straightforward narrative. But then that idea will lead to some new paintings that are even simpler in form, which will then lead to something else. So to me, these "changes" have all been pretty fluid. I'm just kind of moving from one thing to the next and trying to keep it interesting, which to me has always meant switching things up sooner rather than later. 😊

frieze

Exercises in Style

BY ELI DINER

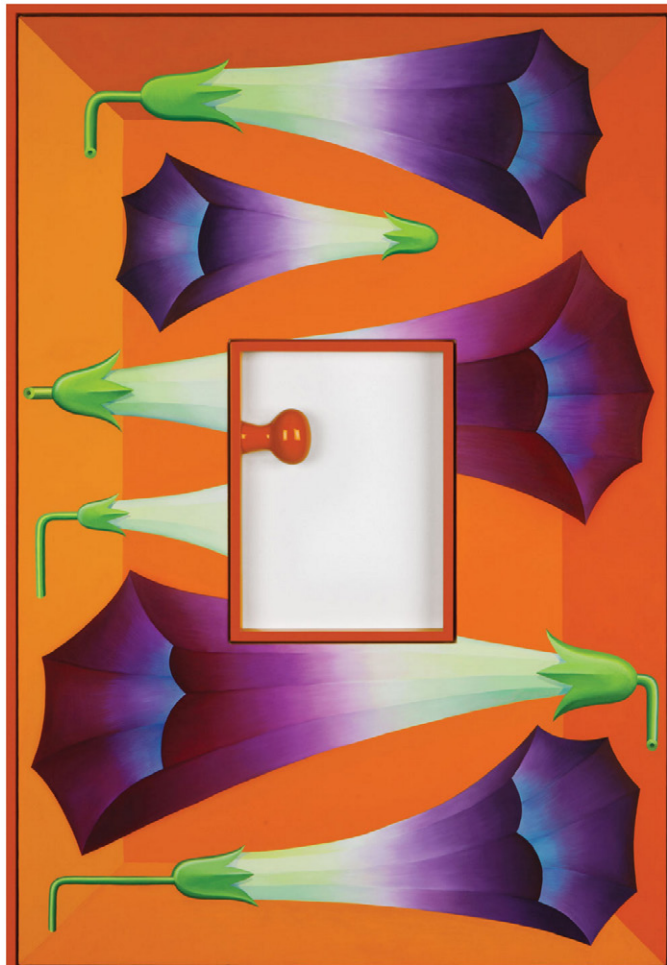
Painting and the question of taste in the work of Orion Martin

Bad taste lives! Deep into the doldrums of postmodernity, we're told, old hierarchies of high and low, or avant-garde and kitsch have long since collapsed. And yet, there it is. Easily identifiable, bad taste operates in the work of any number of contemporary artists. Of course, it's not what it used to be. It has been reclassified, moved from the realm of connotation to denotation, from characteristic to category, subject or theme. You would never hear someone say any more that a work of art was *in* bad taste, that it demonstrated a failure to comply with established norms. But you could certainly imagine hearing that an artist works *with* – or *on* – bad taste. It's not a style per se, but a matter of style, a category of style.

Orion Martin works with bad taste. His paintings bring a fascinated scrutiny to commonplace objects and kitsch imagery. Flat, tight and crisp, the works entail an eager but controlled play of surface mimeses, employing the languages of photorealism, cartoons and *trompe l'oeil*, as well as those of illustration and graphic design. Martin returns repeatedly to certain objects, some assuming the appearance of oneiric obsession: flowers, footwear, piping and metal grates among them. There are eccentric pairings – a tangled-up greyhound and trumpet in *Automaton, Fabulous Muscles* (2016) – and his things behave strangely, growing, convoluting and metamorphosing in ways that suggest an affinity with surrealism. While the artist's non sequiturs and transmogrifications do distantly recall, for example, some of René Magritte's still lifes, they have less to do with surrealism as such, and more with the generalized meaning that term has assumed in contemporary discourse – the willfully weird – or, perhaps, they more closely align with the caricature of surrealism found in mid-century formalist orthodoxy: perverse, the height of bad taste. More pronounced antecedents would include the cartoon debasements of the now-canonical Chicago imagists as well as the colours and commodities of pop. Tom Wesselmann and James Rosenquist come to mind, as does Michel Majerus. But, perhaps, the pop practitioner he most clearly evokes is the less authoritatively sanctioned Mel Ramos, the nudes here morphed into boots and bicycle wheels.

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Eli Diner, Frieze Magazine, Issue 180, June–August 2016



Orion Martin, *Don Bellows*, 2016, oil on canvas, frame, 130 x 90 cm. All images courtesy: Bodega, New York

Martin's preferred mode is the close-up: studies of often just one or two objects, presented, at times, in simple, intertwining patterns. His work verges on a kind of microscopy of taste. The unusual dimensions of many of his compositions – long and narrow, whether oriented vertically or horizontally – seem to emphasize this homing in. So, too, do the shallow space and flat, monochrome backgrounds, which recall chapters from the history of advertising, from Lucian Bernhard's bold, reductive *Plakatstil* (poster style) designs of the early 20th century through those ubiquitous Apple ads of a few years back, in which silhouettes of urban types dance with their iPods.

Against this blank ground, Martin meticulously renders the objects at the fore, playing against each other cartooning, illustration and an array of illusionistic strategies, frequently with only subtle distinction. *Bakers Steak* (2015) contains a classic banker's desk lamp, portrayed in a photorealist style and set against a pale-olive background. The lamp even appears slightly out of focus, the brass base and green glass of the shade glinting with ambient light. A semi-translucent green cape descends from the shade and, in a simple optical trick, seems to hang from the back of the lamp on one end, the front on the other, falling behind the pull chain while simultaneously draping over the neck. Further back, a secondary form again comes down from behind the lampshade, identical in hue to the silken fabric but rigid in texture – an abstract shape that plunges straight before curving toward a crescent tip, looking a bit like a pristine glass shiv. Over the top of all of this, at the centre of the canvas, Martin has painted a square of four large metallic eyelets, sharper

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Eli Diner, Frieze Magazine, Issue 180, June–August 2016

the centre of the canvas, Martin has painted a square of four large metallic eyelets, sharper in focus than the lamp, slightly darker in hue, if still suggestive of brass, and reflecting a different lighting set up. Though a dark emptiness is glimpsed through these four apertures, they disclose a couple of lusty yellow cartoon flowers that hover just above the plane of the lamp and the *trompe l'oeil* eyelets and cast little drop shadows. Moving up from the monochrome ground, each layer in the work entails an increasing degree of 'realistic' representation, until the flowers emerge from the abyss, like something out of a psychedelic animation.



Orion Martin, *Bakers Steak*, 2015, oil on canvas, frame, 130 x 90 cm

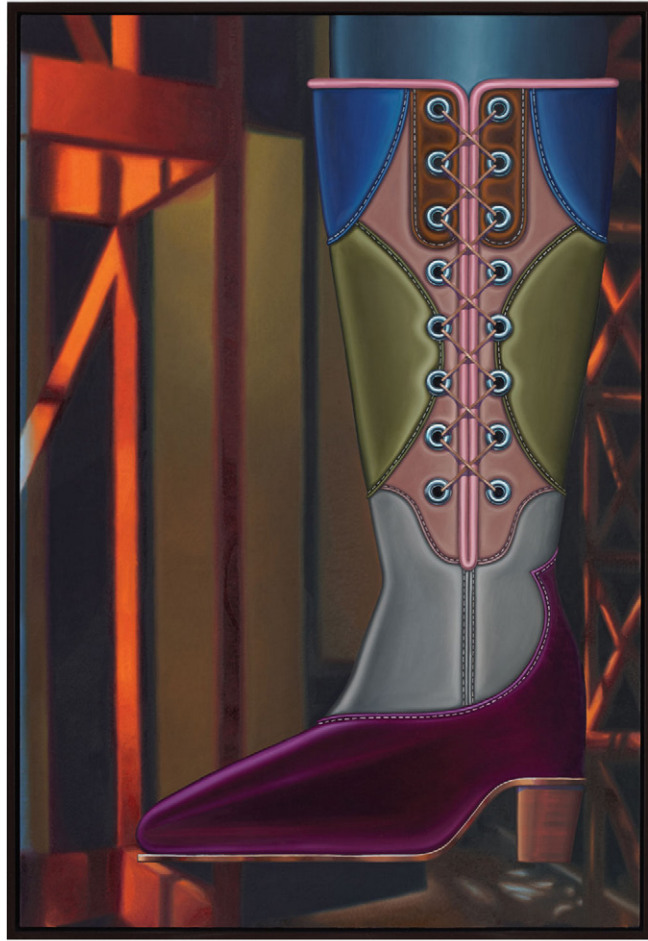
This play on varieties of hyperreality is also a play on varieties of surface. With blithe visual superficiality, the works can feel like a race to the front, one that often includes colour-matched frames, painted to a shimmering varnish. In *Strawberry* (2015), for example, a pristine, glistening strawberry – upon which has been embossed a centaur with a proud erection, blowing on a horn – sits against a flat red background, within a matching red frame. Or take *Don Bellows* (2016), in which the frame and background are orange: here the canvas has been shaded and divided by orthogonal and horizontal lines that don't really conjure a sense of space but, rather, point to and, simultaneously, undermine the effects of perspective. Martin has removed a rectangle from the centre of the canvas, interrupting a pattern of purple, bell-shaped flowers that float to the fore, lining the inside of the cavity with another orange frame, from which a doorknob – again, in the same orange – juts into the empty interior space. Repeatedly pointing to it and undermining it, the work seems to mock the idea of depth. It's surface, everywhere.

Repeatedly pointing to it and undermining it, the work seems to mock the idea of depth. It's surface, everywhere.

Of course, the screen and the digital image can't be far away. Martin's work, like much contemporary painting, reflects the technologies that have changed our ways of looking. He was recently included in 'Flatlands', an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, examining new – and flat, of course – modes of 'representational' painting conditioned by digital interconnectivity and virtuality. In an accompanying essay, the show's curators, Laura Phipps and Elisabeth Sherman, argue that, despite their unreal, sometimes fantastical content, the works evince 'a yearning for the tactile' and a 'desire to be tethered to reality at a time when the world around us feels so insecure'. You'll hear no argument from me on the question of the insecurity of the world, but to say something like the real – let alone reality – is at stake in these paintings is rather far-fetched. Consider *Triple Nickel, Tull* (2015), which appeared in the Whitney exhibition – although any of his paintings of footwear would do. It's hard to look at this taut, fetishy, mid-calf woman's boot – reminiscent of something out of a Christina Ramberg painting – and not think of Fredric Jameson's well-known comparison of Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (1887) and Andy Warhol's 'Diamond Dust Shoes' series (1980–81). While the former, he argues, is open to hermeneutical readings 'in the sense in which the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality, which replaces it as its ultimate truth', with Warhol, whose 'depthlessness' Jameson identifies as the definitive formal quality of the postmodern, there is 'no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture and restore to these oddments [the shoes] that whole larger lived context'. If Warholian postmodernism established a *non plus ultra* of representational art – the possibility of signification without the real – the intervening years have seen only a growing familiarity with these procedures. The exhilaration of the early years of postmodernity has faded from memory; we have only the endless free play of styles.

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Eli Diner, Frieze Magazine, Issue 180, June–August 2016



Triple Nickel, Tull,
2015, oil on canvas,
frame, 130 x 90 cm

While Martin's works are concerned with – and symptomatic of – the protean operations of style, accelerated by the ubiquity of images in the digital age, they speak as well to the seduction of *things*. This, to be sure, echoes pop's simultaneous fascination with the commodity and subsumption of the object into or by the image. And, yet, to be seduced by an object, Martin seems to suggest, is itself a kind of banality. In Emery's *Cosmic Limo* (2016), a curvaceous pink bicycle – fitted with the type of leather seat preferred by certain retro-oriented, urban creative-class types with a strong preference for craftsmanship – mutates into a flamingo. Still, his objects glisten, strut and throb. An unmistakable eroticism suffuses these things, evident in bondage motifs – straps, ropes and boots – and in the recurring appearance of decorative eyelets and holes penetrated by flowers. It's a buffet of double entendre, of metonymic kitsch. Even sex can be, if not in, then of bad taste.

Orion Martin is an artist living and working in Los Angeles, USA. This year, his exhibitions have included 'Eczema Song' at Bodega, New York, USA, and 'Flatlands' at the Whitney Museum of American Art, USA.

ELI DINER

Eli Diner is a writer and curator based in Los Angeles, USA. He is the US editor of *Flash Art* and his writing has also appeared in *Artforum*, *Bookforum* and *Bulletins of the Serving Library*, among others. In 2015, he launched Hakuna Matata, a project space, sculpture garden and serialized novella.

197 Grand St, 2w, New York, NY 10013 Tuesday–Saturday 12–6 office@derosia.nyc

Derosia

Kat Herriman, Cultured, Winter 2016

CULTURED

ORION MARTIN: 30 UNDER 35

Q&A | DEC 2016 | BY MAXWELL WILLIAMS



Orion Martin. Portrait by Jeff Vespa.

Orion Martin's playful paintings depict friends, fruit, well-hung mythical creatures and flora in a colorfully kitschy way that is also crispy and chic— all with a dose of humorous irreverence. The L.A.-based artist is currently working on paintings for Bodega's booth at NADA Miami Beach.

How do you know a work you've made is good? When you're away from it for a while, then you feel good about it. When I first finish a painting I end up hating it, because I spend a long time with it, and then it's a traumatic relationship, but a little bit of distance makes you grow fonder.

How do you find inspiration? I save things on my phone a lot. Looking around you see a sign that looks like it would be a good painting, then you make a painting that tries to look like that sign.

Derosia

Kat Herriman, Cultured, Winter 2016



Installation view, Flatlands, Whitney Museum of American Art

If you could trade with anyone who would it be? I would probably trade with Jim Nutt. But I don't know if he would want my painting. Do they have to want the painting? Because he was my teacher and I don't know if he liked my paintings. But I liked his a lot.

When you aren't in the studio, where are you? Probably with my girlfriend. I like TV a lot. I'm watching *Transparent*.

In your practice, what comes naturally to you and what do you have to force? I would say painting comes naturally, but painting in a weird room for 12 hours straight isn't really very natural.



Orion Martin, Chean Brinx tres, 2015

ON UNSTABLE GROUND



Mathew Cerletty (b. 1980), *Shelf Life*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 in. (127 x 152.4 cm). Collection of the artist. Image courtesy the artist and Office Baroque, Brussels; photograph by EPW Studio, New York.

By Laura Phipps and Elisabeth Sherman,
assistant curators

A tension pervades the paintings of Nina Chanel Abney, Mathew Cerletty, Jamian Juliano-Villani, Caitlin Keogh, and Orion Martin. Although they approach their subject matter in very different ways, they share an interest in representing, while upending our understanding of, the phenomenal world. More than simply a categorical style, here *representational* implies a designation, characterization, or stand-in for reality that intimates a certain falseness. In a society at once fascinated by and suspicious of the concept of “truthiness”—a visceral belief that something is true despite an absence of evidence—it is not surprising that the veracity of representation would be regularly undermined. Underscoring our unease, the artists in *Flatlands* manipulate their subjects in order to impart their own brands of bizarre unreality. Objects such as Martin’s boot or

Cerletty’s vest; bodies, like Abney’s and Keogh’s flattened women; and places—Cerletty’s verdant field, Juliano-Villani’s underwater rock garden—are plucked from life. The departures that these artists make from perceived reality—constructing a figure from traffic cones, revealing the insides of a woman’s torso, suspending a home aquarium’s inhabitants in motionless perfection—key up otherwise innocuous subjects and lay bare their sinister undertones.

The paintings in this exhibition heighten that apprehension by simultaneously seducing and repelling the viewer. Complex compositions, vivid colors, and luscious surfaces, along with subject matter that is curious, sexually charged, or simply beautiful, draw viewers deep into their imaginary worlds. Once there, however, the garishness of those same colors, the dizzying density of the compositions, and the ominous, frightening, or uncanny characters and narratives force us back

out, disturbed by what had just intrigued. These competing sensations are at the core of the power of these paintings, allowing them to stay perpetually dynamic and exciting.

The featured artists also share a similar approach to illusionistic space, or depth of field. Their compositions are shallow and sometimes tenuous, as in Abney's patently flat scenes and Juliano-Villani's distorted perspectives. They don't recede deep into an illusionistic distance but stop short, like the scenic flats used to define space on theater and movie sets, conveying a sense of superficiality, even claustrophobia and anxiety. And, like tales performed on stages and screens, the subtle narratives implied by the artists' invented worlds are often allegorical in nature, their straightforward construction veiling a more complicated intent.

Today, the virtual hyperconnectivity of our daily lives masks a disconnect from the physical world, leading to a yearning for the tactile. Representational art answers this desire to be tethered to reality at a time when the world around us feels so insecure. The paintings in *Flatlands* also reveal a latent aspect of contemporary American life: the atmosphere of extremes, with fear and unease on one side and ambition, seduction, and luxury on the other. Around the globe, governments, economies, and the environment are becoming increasingly precarious, while forces of instability continue to mount and socioeconomic inequalities accelerate. Conversely, however, aspirations for over-the-top lifestyles show no signs of abating, and social media flaunt an endless parade of flawless self-presentation. The distance these artists create between the real world and their altered verisimilitudes leaves us apprehensive. We recognize ourselves, our longings, and our fears, and yet the mirror these paintings hold up is a funhouse version, warping our familiar comforts into something disturbingly revealing.

Mathew Cerletty's unique environments play with the psychology of familiarity and recognition, highlighting the disquiet lurking in the uniform, prosaic, or bland. He has said that having grown up in the down-to-earth suburban Midwest allows him to "find unique territory in the generic."¹ Through intense focus on a banal text (*Night of Our Lives*; 2014) or the transformation of recognizable objects, like a fish tank (*Shelf Life*; 2015) or item of clothing (*Returns & Exchanges*; 2015), into ambiguous and menacing forms, he deviates from convention in otherwise traditional or straightforward scenes. In other works, he merges multiple painting techniques: *Almost Done 2* (2015) combines a

faithfully illusionistic self-portrait of the artist driving a lawnmower under a painterly cloud with a flat, circular yellow sun hanging over too-smooth blue and green fields indicating sky and grass. These juxtaposed styles complicate any sense of seamless representation, reinforcing the paradoxical nature of his bizarre yet mundane worlds.

Cerletty's process has always begun with academic painting techniques that have fallen mostly out of favor in recent decades. Alongside his unabashed use of these old-fashioned styles stands his interest in the painstaking, skillful labor of his paintings—approaching the meticulous rendering of hundreds of individual sequins as worthwhile in and of itself, for example. His method challenges contemporary trends, which are characterized by cool, conceptually grounded processes, casually haphazard abstraction, and expressionistic figuration. Cerletty's early figurative paintings are indebted to John Currin (b. 1962), whose academic portraiture style reveals a preoccupation with class and taste through his perversions of ideals of beauty. In contrast, Cerletty's fixation on taste manifests not in such exaggerations but in his fastidious process, so earnest it verges on embarrassment due to the time and labor spent, as well as his specifically middlebrow content. His water towers, lawn mowers, J. Crew oxford shirts, and women—lying down, drinking milk, doing yoga—are so banal that his intense focus on them can seem perplexing, but also dryly and darkly humorous. Further accentuating the peculiar nature of these otherwise quotidian subjects, each of Cerletty's three paintings in *Flatlands* makes use of a mirroring effect, a technique he frequently employs. This doubling—whether it's a fish unaware of its twin reflected on the water's surface above or the perfectly symmetrical sequined pattern on an ornate vest—creates a perception of reality and its doppelganger, with Cerletty's paintings sitting firmly in the in-between space.

Beyond its confusing duplication of reality, a painting like *Shelf Life* also challenges the immediate sense of recognition it promises. Though the aquarium of exotic fish and fauna that Cerletty paints is certainly familiar from countless doctor's offices, restaurants, and classrooms, a close examination reveals an unease specific to the painting. The tank is tightly confined within the canvas's boundaries, without suggestion of a world beyond its edges; the artist says that he "think[s] of the aquarium's location as the painting itself."² Additionally, the finely rendered fish and plants are purportedly alive yet appear still, as if frozen in place. Even the

Whitney Museum of American Art
whitney.org/Essays/Flatlands

3

bubbles and ripples of the water seem static, emphasizing the feeling of claustrophobia.

Unlike Cerletty or Orion Martin, both of whose processes are deeply informed by classical technique, Jamian Juliano-Villani's approach comes from outside of traditional art history. Her reliance on airbrushing—a technique more commonly found on cars, skin, and cardboard signs in store windows than on stretched canvases—connects her work to popular culture and street aesthetics. This association is reinforced by the images that populate her dense paintings. Juliano-Villani voraciously sources imagery, drawing directly from comics, cartoons, technical manuals, and subcultural references. Extracted and crammed into a new context, each rubs up against others culled from altogether different times, places, and sensibilities, such as in *To Live and Die in Passaic* (2016), where a figure made of an orange peel carries his own segments as he walks across the clear blue water of an aboveground swimming pool. Within one painting, the references can span generations and decades. The resulting scenes incorporate humor, as Cerletty's do, but on a much faster register. Whereas his humor is dry and slow to reveal itself, Juliano-Villani's jokes land fast and, like cringeworthy punch lines in a dark comedy, dissolve into discomfort.

Juliano-Villani carefully considers every form she uses, researching cultural references as diverse as Japanese kappa creatures (*Haniver Jinx*; 2015), forms in an installation by Edward Kienholz (1927–1994) (*Boar's Head, A Gateway, My Pinecone*; 2016), and a character from a 1980s public service announcement (*To Live and Die in Passaic*). Her mashups convey a profound respect for the work of those she is referencing, like the profane animations of Ralph Bakshi (b. 1938) and Wilfred Limonius's (1949–1999) vivacious illustrations for reggae albums. Many of her pieces germinate from written lists and phrases, quick notations of ideas to seed the beginnings of paintings that explode into the visual overabundance that has become her signature style. This abundance can be seen in *Haniver Jinx*, where she has placed an apparently smiling Jenny Haniver—a “mermaid” carved and configured from the preserved carcass of a ray fish—in the middle of a bourgeois foyer as if it is a hostess greeting her guests. Beyond the obvious curiosity of the main figure, the scene is filled with other provocative objects: a locked box covered with suggestive lumps, dramatically draped furniture, cartoonish shadows, and a literal fish out of water. Juliano-Villani's obsessive research



Jamian Juliano-Villani (b. 1987), *Haniver Jinx*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 in. (91.5 x 61 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, purchased with funds contributed by the Young Collectors Council and additional funds contributed by Stephen J. Javars and an anonymous donor, 2015. Image courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin; photograph by Guntar Lapowski

and deep understanding of the sources of her subject matter imbue the works with a greater sense of authority than the often crowded compositions, jarring juxtapositions, or frightening forms may immediately imply.

Like Cerletty, Juliano-Villani also looks to fine artists whose work may be currently overlooked by the mainstream art world. Both cite the influence of Patrick Caulfield (1936–2005), a British artist whose Pop-related paintings from the 1970s combine different styles of representation, such as photorealism and illustration, in the same work. Caulfield focused on banalities as emblems of modern life—a concept embraced by Cerletty and Juliano-Villani in their own ways: while the former throws a spotlight on the banal, the latter warps banality until it is nearly unrecognizable. Despite their contrasting approaches, both artists highlight an underlying discomfort with these mundanities of everyday existence.

Caitlin Keogh similarly creates a sense of unease with reality in her large, graphic paintings, and, like Juliano-Villani, she blends wide-ranging source material. Rather than keeping their original texture, however, Keogh translates all of her references into her signature style, collapsing

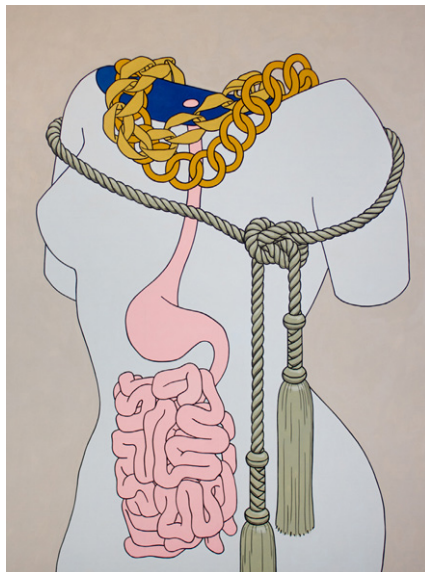
them into a new whole. In *Intestine and Tassels* (2015), for example, she has adorned a mannequin-like female torso with accessories from two very different contexts. Around the nonexistent neck of this headless form, Keogh has draped two necklaces copied straight from the painting *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (c. 1530), by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), in addition to a decorative rope and tassels based on images she has accumulated over the years. The figure's pink viscera are drawn in the same simple, economic manner as the necklaces, the torso, and the cord tied around the chest, reflecting Keogh's interest in depicting "idealized or fictionalized versions of interiority."³ With a background in technical illustration, she carefully and precisely describes each element of her paintings in clear, clean lines. The artist has said that she strives for an "informational clarity, a kind of explicitness" in the way that her paintings speak.⁴ Absent of any illusionistic flourishes, color acts as her only addition, distinguishing one form from its neighbor. Keogh collects each of these disparate objects like words strung together to form a sentence; once assembled, however, the grammar often falls apart, allowing for a friction between disjunctive elements.

Keogh delves deep into the corners of art history, reinterpreting familiar references, such as

the surrealist still lifes of René Magritte (1898–1967) or the adornment of a Mannerist portrait, and reviving otherwise overlooked histories like Christina Ramberg's (1946–1995) diagrammatic female torsos or the florid canvases of Philip Taaffe (b. 1955) from the 1970s Pattern and Decoration movement. One oft-used source, seen overlaying a drawing of a ribcage in *Vines* (2015), is the floral patterns of Victorian designer, poet, and socialist activist William Morris (1834–1896), a major inspiration for the Arts and Crafts movement. Morris's belief that true art, as both a decorative and a functional part of life, must question its connection to moral, social, and political doctrine aligns closely with Keogh's own philosophy. She incorporates signifiers such as Morris's patterns, pastel palettes, and simplified figures to express her engagement with ideas of labor, the degradation of the terms *beauty* and *decorative* in contemporary art, and the politicized body. All of Keogh's references are selected to fill her compositions with the weight of their history, shrewdly enriching the work with the politics and positions of these artists from previous generations.

Keogh's depictions of the female form—headless and idealized, like store mannequins—are simultaneously alluring and powerful yet vulnerable, suggesting the artistic and political battles over the body that she is determined to fight. As in *Intestine and Tassels*, Keogh often enacts a sanitized trauma on them, punching neat holes through the torsos' images, putting the visceral insides on display on the outside, or implying a quiet threat with a casually draped rope. In this work, by obliquely pointing to the potently feminist tale of Judith's decapitation of Holofernes, she takes the suggestion of violence a step further. These dualities are reminders that, despite decades of advancements by feminist artists, the female body continues to be a site for the male gaze, an object to be manipulated into fantasy and stripped of its own agency. Keogh's women are at once mindless objects and their own forces of beauty and ferocity.

Whereas Keogh deploys limited numbers of streamlined forms to convey complex political ideas, Nina Chanel Abney overloads her canvases with equally simplified shapes, in turn obscuring and revealing the content embedded within them. She works intuitively, almost automatically, with music and books as well as news and images sourced from the internet constantly feeding her information as she paints. Much like Juliano-Villani, Abney parses the cacophony of life into discrete elements. Words found on city streets—*checks cashed*,



Collin Keogh (b. 1982), *Intestine and Tassels*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 64 x 63 in. (163 x 160 cm). Collection of the artist. Image courtesy the artist; photograph by Jordan Freeman



Nina Chanel Abney (b. 1992), *What*, 2015. Pigmented inkjet print, acrylic, and enamel on canvas. Photo: © Nina Chanel Abney. Family Collection. Image courtesy/Kravis Gallery, New York.

ATM, cool, sorry we're closed—share space with geometric forms and bodies, as visually chaotic as the hurried world around us. In her 2015 painting *What*, central figures are surrounded by circles, Xs, hearts, and bars that fill and spill out of blocks of color defining the background. The overall effect is of a staccato rhythm that keeps the eye dancing around the canvas, alighting on high notes or getting lost in the noise. Her typically larger-than-life paintings envelop viewers and force a kind of confrontation with the elements of the work.

At times, Abney's painting takes social justice as its main subject—increasingly so as the news stories filling her studio are more and more politicized. In *What* and other recent works, police and citizens tussle and face off in aggressive conflicts, the geometries around them exploding to animate the scene. Abney shares Keogh's interest in the politicized body, both painters simplifying and highlighting the human form to locate moments of manipulation and violence.

With her rudimentary vocabulary of shapes, Abney frustrates easy readings of race and gender roles, combining and confusing expected representations of each character in her scenes. Sometimes she alternates skin tones within a single face, giving a pale face a dark nose or vice versa. In *What*, two figures—one white, one black—are kneeling at the feet of a police officer, both seemingly in the role of detainee yet both wearing yellow police badges. Here the complications are less about twisting real life into fiction, as in Cerletty's and Juliano-Villani's work, and instead present a version of reality that forces us to confront our own unconscious prejudices, without providing answers to the challenging questions these biases pose. Abney's paintings demand that we engage with their difficult subject matter long after we've walked

away from her work. As she explains, "I've become more interested in mixing disjointed narratives and abstraction, and finding interesting ways to obscure any possible story that can be assumed when viewing my work . . . I want the work to provoke the viewer to come up with their own message, or answer some of their own questions surrounding the different subjects that I touch in my work."⁵

All of the artists in *Flatlands* share an interest in the surface of their works, an attention to the design and finish that is reminiscent of the concerns of pattern or product design. Abney's surfaces suggest almost no illusionistic depth, resembling collaged paper more than painted canvas. Orion Martin, on the other hand, paints his forms so carefully that the final effect nearly appears computer generated rather than created by hand. If Keogh and Abney reveal the political in the decorative, Martin is interested in the power of the decorative and, like Cerletty, the lure of the unblemished surface.

Like Juliano-Villani and Abney, Martin manipulates otherwise unrelated ideas—sourced from his own inventions, low-resolution images found online, and knickknacks from his studio or home—into a new whole, dreaming up objects and tableaux that have their origin in the world around him but which ultimately result in something quite oddly otherworldly. In *Triple Nickel, Tull* (2015), for example, he combines two elements, a fanciful high-heeled boot and a theater's backstage, in a way that is visually and conceptually perplexing. The boot is so finely rendered that each stitch and grommet looks touchably real, yet the form itself has a flatness and weightlessness that contradict that illusion. The stage set, however, is more impressionistically depicted, conveying a dreamlike quality that seems to make it more easily inhabitable by the viewer's imagination than the bizarre precision of the boot.

Martin intentionally invents scenarios that are difficult to paint; he sets up problems for himself that don't have real-world, logical solutions. As with the boot in *Triple Nickel, Tull*, he is often pursuing a hyperreal effect, asking, "How convincing can I make it look?"⁶ In this, his adversary and tool is light: how it passes through or bounces off surfaces, obscures or highlights them, and reveals their material properties absent the sense of touch. His skillful handling of its manifestation—highlights and shading—gives the boot its tactile realism and the setting its drama and dreaminess. Martin's uncanny paintings convince the viewer, if only for a moment, that his impossible scenes or creations



Orion Martin (b. 1988), *Triple Nickel, Tull*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 35 1/2 in. (102.8 x 90.2 cm). Collection of the artist. Image courtesy the artist and Bodega, New York

could exist in the real world, while simultaneously undermining this impression through their patent impossibility. His preoccupation with surface and its tenuous relationship with veracity feels very *au courant* in a society in which so much is experienced online: despite all the information available for consumption, we are left touching only the smooth glass of the screen.

Like Juliano-Villani and Keogh, Martin shows a strong affinity with the work of the Chicago Imagists of the 1960s and 1970s. While Juliano-Villani's paintings more closely recall the verbal confusion and violence of the Hairy Who's aesthetic, and Keogh's interests lie in the politicalization of the body evident in the work of Ramberg and other Chicago artists, Martin's paintings synthesize the fantastical realities and slick surface obsessions of painters such as Barbara Rossi (b. 1940) and Jim Nutt (b. 1938). Martin's combination of recognizable and inert subject matter points away from the scatological references in much of the Chicagoans' work yet often shares their proclivity toward bodily aggression. Whereas the curves and forms of the boot in *Triple Nickel, Tull* echo the corsetry of Ramberg's feminist depictions of undergarments, the tight laces crisscrossing the smooth pink ribbing of

its opening verge on anthropomorphism, implying sexual organs and bondage. This insinuation of both seduction and pain, in combination with the darkness behind the theater curtain, signals a sense of enticing dread.

These five artists use the tools and current vernacular available to them to comment on pressing concerns of our zeitgeist. Through their painted illusions of reality, each is shaking the ostensibly stable ground of daily life and revealing it as a false construction. Abney and Keogh engage directly with a revived and necessary urgency around race and gender politics, while Cerletty, Juliano-Villani, and Martin unravel our world in more oblique ways. Yet despite their disparate practices, their works share a common dynamic, simultaneously attracting and repelling the viewer. This taut push and pull of anxiety and desire creates a dialogue with the viewer, as if each painting begins a thought that trails off in an ellipsis, inviting us into the work to complete the thought. Despite this invitation, the challenging and unsettled nature of these works frustrates this exchange and questions our assumptions of representation and reality, leaving us pleasantly disquieted.

1. Mathew Cerletty, correspondence with the authors, December 20, 2015.

2. Cerletty, correspondence with the authors, December 13, 2015.

3. Caitlin Keogh, conversation with the authors, December 17, 2015.

4. Ibid.

5. Huffington Post, "Nina Chanel Abney's Paintings Mix the Pretty, the Political and the Perverse," February 20, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/16/nina-chanel-abney_n_1282316.html.

6. Orion Martin, conversation with the authors, August 26, 2015.

Derosia

The New Yorker, January, 2016

THE NEW YORKER

FLATLANDS

January 14 2016 - April 17 2016

On the fifth floor, Frank Stella's abstract paintings swoop off the walls; in this ground-floor exhibition, five young realist painters find new possibilities in two dimensions. The best work comes from Caitlin Keogh, whose depiction of a headless mannequin with visible intestines pays homage to the Chicago Imagist Jim Nutt. By comparison, Orion Martin's glossy surrealism and Nina Chanel Abney's mashup of pinups and Stuart Davis glyphs feel rehashed. Jamian Juliano-Villani, whose wild work can thrill at large scale, looks lacklustre in a small scene of anthropomorphized traffic cones. Mathew Cerletty, at thirty-five, the oldest artist in the group, shows landscapes as blandly generic as desktop backgrounds. The show borrows its title from E. A. Abbott's 1884 satire, in which a square asserts the existence of a third dimension and ends up in prison; it would have been nice to see a hint of such rebelliousness here.

Whitney Museum

99 Gansevoort St.

New York, NY 10014

Dealing in Contradictory Illusions



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The idea of “deskilling” has incited considerable chatter in the contemporary art sphere in the past decade. In economics the term refers to the technically undemanding labor performed by most modern industrial workers. In art discourse it identifies the deliberate rejection of traditional craft in the service of conceptual provocation and expressive freedom.

KEN JOHNSON
ART REVIEW

While today’s art abounds in insouciant, apparently slapdash, clumsy, lazy and otherwise deskilled works, not all artists have deskilled themselves. Many are those who you might call — not pejoratively — semiskilled. Their techniques come not from the grand tradition of realistic representation extending from Velázquez and Vermeer to 19th-century academicians like William-Adolphe Bouguereau. Rather, they draw on methods associated with commercial illustration and design in order to play with public signifiers and personal poetics.

“Flatlands,” an engaging small show in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s nicely proportioned lobby-level gallery, presents a dozen works from the past three years by five young (all born since 1980) semiskilled painters. As the exhibition’s organizers, the Whitney assistant curators Laura Phipps and Elisabeth Sherman, observe in an online essay about the show, the artists in “Flatlands” “share an interest in the surface of their works, an attention to the design and finish that is reminiscent of the concerns of pattern or product design.” Fortunately, the show is more interesting, visually as well as conceptually, than this dry characterization seems to promise.

Mathew Cerletty’s highly finished paintings deal cleverly in contradictory illusions. The Magritte-like “Night Puddle” depicts a wide field of lush grass under a dark sky and a full moon. An irregular opening in the grass reads paradoxically as both a watery puddle and as an irregular window to the sky. In “Shelf Life,” Mr. Cerletty fills a 4-foot-by-5-foot canvas with the fourth wall of an aquarium populated by bright little fish, green plants and a glowing purple rock, all against a beautiful, deep-blue background. Mildly psychedelic, it smartly equates the actual painting and the illusory fish tank as hypnotic visual objects.

With a silky-smooth touch, Orion Martin creates mysterious, psychologically charged images that call to mind works by the German Pop-Surrealist Konrad Klapheck and the Chicago Imagist Art Green. “Bakers Steak” depicts a green-glass-shaded brass lamp and a centered quartet of illusory brass rings seeming to perforate the picture. White flowers on serpentine green stems emerge from the darkness within and beyond the rings as if from the painting’s own unconscious. “Triple Nickel, Tull” features a Victorian-style, high-heeled, knee-length boot against a blurry, architectural background. With all its laces and lace holes carefully described, the boot

“Flatlands” continues through April 17 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, Manhattan; 212-570-3600, whitney.org.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, COLLECTION OF ALAN GRUMET AND SONIA LEE

Top left, Orion Martin’s “Bakers Steak” (2015); top right, Mathew Cerletty’s “Night Puddle” (2013); and above, Nina Chanel Abney’s “Where” (2015), all part of the new exhibition “Flatlands,” featuring a dozen works by five young painters at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Flatlands Whitney Museum of American Art

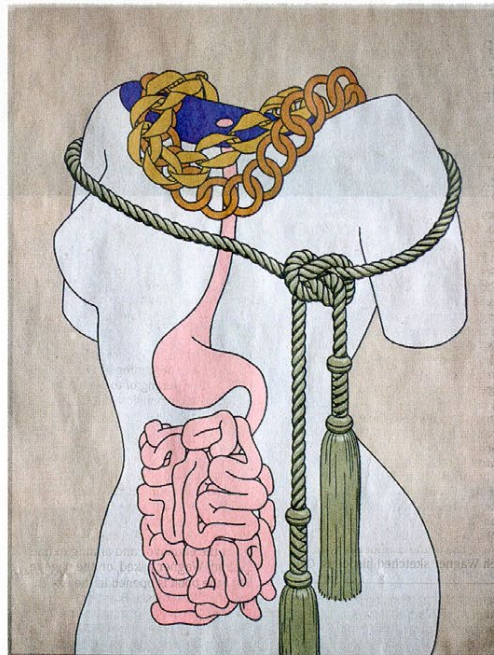
intimates a Freudian, fetishistic vibe. Jamian Juliano-Villani paints wildly heterogeneous montages of images drawn from all kinds of sources, from scientific illustrations to comic books. “Boar’s Head, a Gateway, My Pinecone” depicts a modern apartment in which a spectral figure draped in black with an animal skull head, a much enlarged blue sea horse and a pine cone are impaled on a giant metal skewer. It’s funny and bizarre like a surrealist scene in a David Lynch movie. “The Snitch,” in which a scary, long-legged, puppetlike figure constructed from orange-and-white traffic cones strides through an underwater rock garden, could be a child’s nightmare.

The neatly outlined compositions on two large canvases by Caitlin Keogh resemble pages from a morbid coloring book for grown-ups. “Intestine and Tassels” depicts the outline of a woman’s torso with a rendering of the human digestive tract inside and a rope with tasseled ends encircling the shoul-

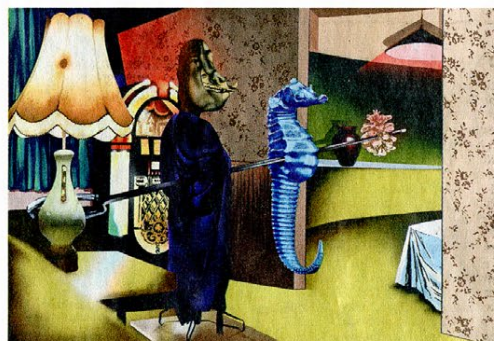
ders. “Vines,” in which colorful flowers and vines are laid on top of a book open to a picture of a rib cage, similarly meditates on life and mortality.

The show’s biggest, most visually and socially assertive painting is Nina Chanel Abney’s 18-foot-wide “Hot-house.” Made mainly of flattened, stenciled forms in high-contrast colors, it pictures what appears to be a scene in a strip club. Seven women and a man, all nude, provocatively pose amid a flurry of symbols and letters representing an environment of commercialized lust. It’s a terrifically energetic, feminist update of Picasso’s brothel painting “Les Femmes d’Alger.”

It’s noteworthy that all these five painters have B.F.A. or M.F.A. degrees from high-caliber studio art programs. They come from a system that encourages students to reinvent art for themselves and to figure out whatever skills they need to convey with maximal efficiency whatever they have in mind. In that sense, most M.F.A. holders are self-taught. Far from outsiders, however, the good ones are, like the artists of “Flatlands,” acutely wised up semioticians, savvy players with the tropes, memes and cultural politics of the Age of the Internet.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST, JET NEW YORK

Above center, Caitlin Keogh’s “Intestine and Tassel” (2015); above, Jamian Juliano-Villani’s “Boar’s Head, a Gateway, My Pinecone” (2016).