

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), shown above]. 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.

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.

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 calls for such a meticulous treatment?

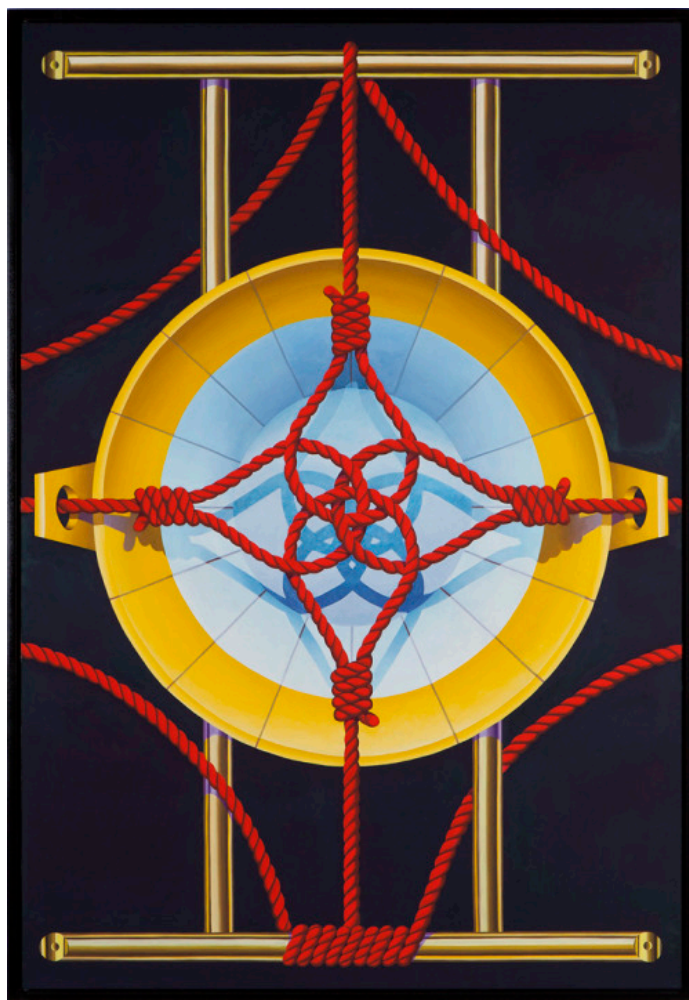
Part of it's just about being into the craft of painting. Obviously, I'm very particular about the surface, which has a lot to do with the artists I admire—like, the precision of a Karl Wirsum painting is so cool to me, his ability to create these perfect surfaces, to the point where you walk up to it 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.

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.





Spreads 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.

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.



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. 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 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 not as a move away from a signature style, but rather as variations on longstanding themes.

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 imagining 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.

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