

ARTFORUM

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Dear Philip,

Unfortunately we are unable to use your review on the work of Ron Martin. I appreciate your enthusiasm about the work, but both Ingrid and I were unable to comprehend your piece. We found that there were large theoretical gaps between thoughts, (that you assumed the reader would understand) which made it impossible to get at your critique.

If you would like to rewrite the review, we would certainly take another look at it. I realize that you have not written for Artforum previously, so that you might not know exactly what we strive for. Please feel free to get in touch with me if you have any questions or comments.

Best,



Elizabeth Hess
Managing Editor

RON MARTIN, Carmen Lamanna Gallery

Ron Martin's black paintings of the past six years are substantial masses of hand-worked paint that oppose themselves as bodies to the viewer; his new paintings, on the contrary, at first seem narrative and decorative. If these two characteristics engender the new works, they put into question Martin's modernist ambition of creating a painting as an autonomous mass that calls for autonomous acts: the artist in making and the viewer in seeing.

The presentation of these twelve paintings as an ensemble circling the gallery brings a narrative to awareness. A narrative is implied through the build-up of paint from canvas to canvas: in the first, black paint was allowed to set, then scraped and torn from the canvas; progressing through the series the paint accumulated until the pulled and threaded acrylic massed in clumps in the last. This sequence presents itself as an organic growth independent of formal act; it suggests an intention directing the sequence, subverting the experience of each.

The worked and kneaded, polished and opaque black surfaces of these paintings demand an attention detached from this narrative. None of the paintings can be judged in relation to another painting - that is, judged by their quality - or analysed in terms of technique or formal comparison of part to part, or part to whole. Each is a simple

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entity, as Martin writes - a "Simple" - and, as such, cannot be approached, outside the wholeness of their experience, through history, language or intention. In spite of this, the viewer is drawn to the space between hand and eye, to the painting's hand-craftedness. This shift of attention to detail detracts from the character of wholeness Martin proposes, at least, if we interpret that wholeness as contained in the space of the body in front of the painting.

Each painting is a moment in the narrative and a separate entity, and functions both as a trace and presence. The Martin's act of scraping and physical manipulation of paint can be followed in the actuality of the material and image. The artist is implicated in bringing this work to form even though each painting is set apart in its own existence, open to the play of light and movement of the viewer. Material and act are present, not represented, in accordance with the modernist critique of representation.

The organic appearance of these paintings undermines this intention -creating an imagery of the organic with all its attendant attributions, and metaphorically embodying a representation. The narrative of the ensemble and the "subject" of the paintings meet here, reproducing the whole in a part. The specificity of material tends toward an illustrative and decorative organicism. In the end, unfortunately, we are driven to associations of chaos brought to form, and the

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conjunction of form and origin in the act of the artist, all of which we recognize, against the artist's desire, as a formal act.

Martin's paintings must originate within experience to be effective; the viewer, like the artist, is implicated in the act; such is the work's modernism. Today with our faith in immediacy and presence shaken, it is not certain within the conventions of the art gallery that this engagement can lead to an ethic, and whether the representational and consequential can so simply be opposed. Perhaps recognizing the uncertainty of modernist painting's situation at this time and the limits of his own activity, Martin has changed his painting from substantive and opposing masses to surfaces of more tentative origin. A change in language and intention has not followed: material practice precedes. Only if we match the new paintings to past intentions and performance do they appear at a decorative loss. Freed from these intentions, they positively fulfil the sensual conditions set for their existence. Their success is literal and simple, in eyesight, not in ethics, not in the step away to the metaphysics of the artist's exemplary act, but in a step toward the paintings' independence and responsiveness. Within our reduced expectations, they maintain and call forth what painting can demand today.

Philip Monk