

Derosia

Nathaniel Lee, Turning Point, April 23, 2021

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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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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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.”<sup>2</sup>



*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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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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.

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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.