



Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present two exhibitions by artist Gil Martin: From the Ground Up, at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from February 3 – May 24, 2017 and Smaller Works, at the Community Center's Sierra Room from March 1 – July 6, 2017. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Community Center, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chérie Louise Turner, who provided the following essay.

Plain Ole Dirt?

Upon arriving at abstract expressionist painter Gil Martin's studio, one is presented with an insightful surprise about his process: his work space is outdoors, under sky and clouds, allowing dirt, wind, rain, trees, bushes, and snow to make their impressions, to be a key part of the creative process. Martin has worked hand-in-hand with the chance marks left by weather and nature for over two decades. He works his pieces both on the ground (yep, right there on the bare earth, in grass and leaves) and stapled up on a large wooden wall in the "studio."

Describing how his process can go, Martin recalls a recent weather occurrence: "I did a bunch of painting on some big pieces, and a storm came in. There were thirty-mile-per hour winds, so these pieces started blowing around, wrapping themselves around trees, crumpling up, and getting rained on. This adds another layer . . . it adds an element that I have no control over at all. I like to play that game."

While such an approach may give the impression that the artist leaves everything to chance, Martin is quick to point out that in as much as he does "just let the paintings do their own thing— whenever I have too much control, I don't like what happens to them . . . at the same time I have complete control." By way of explanation, he adds, "If I don't like what happens, I keep going back into it and eliminating what I don't like; maybe I hose it down or something. It's full of chance but in the end, all of it is totally considered. I don't ever quit on something until it is exactly right."

Gil Martin was born and raised in Seattle, Washington. He pursued an interest in art at the University of Washington, but not as an artist: "I got my degree in art history and English literature," he says. "Originally I was going to be an art historian."

After graduation, Martin felt it was important, if he wanted to pursue art history, that he have some personal experience with art materials, not just be theoretical. So he took what would turn out to be a fateful city college painting class; it changed the trajectory of Martin's life. "I took a class from a really great teacher, and I learned more about painting in one quarter from this guy than I did four years studying art history," he enthuses. So thrilled was he by the class, Martin says, "I decided to become an artist."



Martin talking with Turner during November 2016 studio visit

From there Martin moved around the United States to study and eventually teach art. He spent a year at the famous abstract expressionism school the Art Students League of New York, in New York City, where an abundance of famous artists have studied, taught, and lectured, including Alexander Calder, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Jackson Pollock. At the University of Oregon, Martin earned his MFA; he did a residency at the Hambidge Center north Georgia; he taught at the Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, as well as a semester-long course in China; and in 2004, he moved to Fallon to take a teaching position at Western Nevada College, where he remains today.



Untitled, natural earth pigments on canvas, 4'x14', 2016

Martin started his art-making pursuit in a traditional way: becoming proficient in the foundations of painting through working within the genres of visual reality, such as still life and figure painting. And in fact, he recalls, “I was, at first, an anti-abstractist because I really didn’t understand it. I thought it was somewhat of a—like some wool was being pulled over someone’s eyes. It took me about five or six years at least before I finally started messing around with it.”

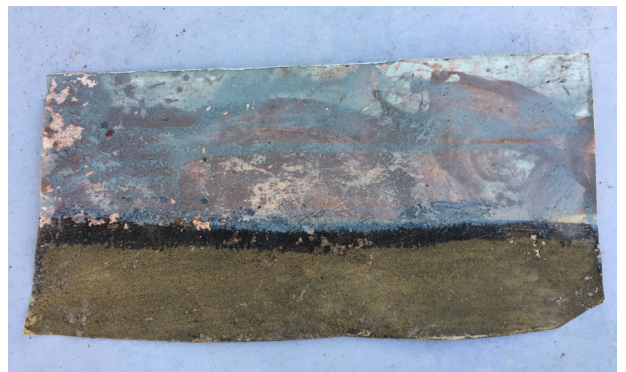
It’s a lane he’s stayed in almost exclusively for twenty-five years. And it was while in Georgia, about five years into his abstract expressionism explorations, that the natural processes of the outdoors started getting incorporated into the work. Martin soon after also looked to nature to fulfil another need: paint pigment.

For his paint colors, Martin uses plain ole dirt—he drives around the West in a pickup truck filled with buckets, into which he shovels different colors of dirt he spots along his travels: reds, greens, yellows, black, greys—they’re all out there. To create his paint, he mixes the dirt with cooked masa (you read right, the cornmeal used for making tortillas) and water, stirring it all together with a dollar store broom, which also doubles as his paintbrush: Martin’s technique is not delicate.

For the past many years, Martin has worked on large, unstretched canvases—in the neighborhood of roughly up to 4’ x 14’. Martin chooses to not stretch the canvas, leaving it instead loose and raw-edged, so that the material is free to “crinkle up on the ground,” the artist says, “do its own thing—so paint can pool and float around.”

These larger pieces often have a base charcoal drawing that is either partially or completely covered up by overlying layers of paint. As Martin notes, the drawing helps to provide structure to the works. The subsequent layers of paint add movement, depth, and complexity.

The earthy palate and simple line-work underneath immediately bring to mind cave paintings. Martin himself remarks, “Sometimes I look at my work and think, I’ve just got this elaborate process for recreating the cave paintings of Lascaux.” That being said, the work is also very much in the lineage of the abstract expressionist movement: gestural, well composed both structurally and tonally, non-representational, and intuitive—visual references to Richard Diebenkorn, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock are certainly evident. Also can be seen is the influence of Martin’s time in China, the expansive, amorphous



Untitled, natural earth pigments on paper, 15'x21', 2016

aesthetic, as well as the inspiration provided by nature: thin rivulets on one large work emulate those Martin noticed on a trail after the rain.

Recently, Martin has also been experimenting with another facet within the abstract expressionism realm: color fields. On thick, hearty paper he roughly brushes horizontal swaths of color up against each other. Of these, Martin says, “What I’m most concerned with are these fields of color, but I needed at least two of them to have some sort of relationship to each other. It’s as simple as that.” He adds, “I wasn’t trying to make a landscape, but I’m not going to deny it either”—for clearly these have a landscape-like appearance. And while they also maintain an abstract quality—there are no definitive elements; brushstrokes and the texture of the paint are evident; color play is at hand—they are, in the artist’s own words, definitely “evocative of the West.” As they are literally made of the Western landscape, this is fitting.

A critical part of creating for Martin is being sensitive to both the materials and the painting itself. A primary question he continually considers is, How do I use this material so that it maintains its integrity? How do I maintain the beauty of this material? Addressing that concern, he notes that he experimented with a number of different binders before landing on the cooked masa: “The corn doesn’t change the material at all,” he says. “The color of the bound paint is the exact same as the powder [dirt] in your hand.”

And regarding the images he’s after, Martin states that “the painting wants certain things, almost like a living entity. If you’re sensitive enough to it, you can see what the painting wants, what it needs.” A true master of his materials, expert in his genre, and fluid but intentional creator of his art, Martin, working with the gestures of his natural surroundings, coaxes into being images waiting to be found.

Chérie Louise Turner
San Leandro, California
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Martin discussing *Smaller Works* with Turner



Artist Gil Martin

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