

IN CONVERSATION

Cameron Martin WITH GREG LINDQUIST

On the occasion of the painter's exhibition *Bracket* at Greenberg Van Doren Gallery (Feb 23 – April 23, 2011), Cameron Martin took a break at his Greenpoint, Brooklyn studio for *Rail Art Books in Review* Editor Greg Lindquist to visit and discuss his life and work.

GREG LINDQUIST (RAIL): Let's start with the work that's in your studio. Can you talk about the ideas in the paintings and how you've arrived at this palette?

CAMERON MARTIN: After many years of making full bleed pictures, where the image comes entirely to the limits of the support, I became aware of how with landscape painting in particular, you are encouraged to just dive into the picture, and you don't think about what's outside of the frame. There's an inherent illusionism that you buy into as a result of the full bleed. I wanted to think about ways of making the image itself the subject of the painting as much as what was depicted in the image. So I started doing paintings where the image was adjusted within the frame of the painting itself. The title of the show I have been working on, *Bracket*, came from thinking about multiple definitions of that term, one definition being a literal kind of framing. The word "bracketing" in photography refers to the idea of taking the same picture at multiple exposures, and "to bracket" something in philosophy is to exclude it from the conversation. There are photographic references and ideas of exposure in the work, and there is an implication of information that is missing or excluded within the paintings because of the way that the images appear to be pushed off the rectangle.

In terms of the palette, I want there to be a sense that it's not quite clear whether they are coming or going—whether the pictures are coming into being or in some sense evaporating—because I think that's somewhat indicative of where people are in terms of their relationship to nature at this point.

RAIL: So, are these paintings about, in some ways, a global disappearance or dissolving of nature, such as the polar ice caps?

MARTIN: I don't know if it's that literal. I think it's more about a kind of inability to grasp or connect with the natural world. Maybe it's also about the inherent abstraction that is part of how we try to make sense of nature. When I say that, I mean, for instance, the abstraction involved in even using a term like "the environment." There's no real way that people can get their heads around what that actually means, but it gets thrown around constantly.

RAIL: What about in terms of these paintings as objects? Images shift from one canvas to the next and the framing causes attention to the surface and physical fact of the painting. Would you consider them more self-reflexive or self-conscious as objects themselves?

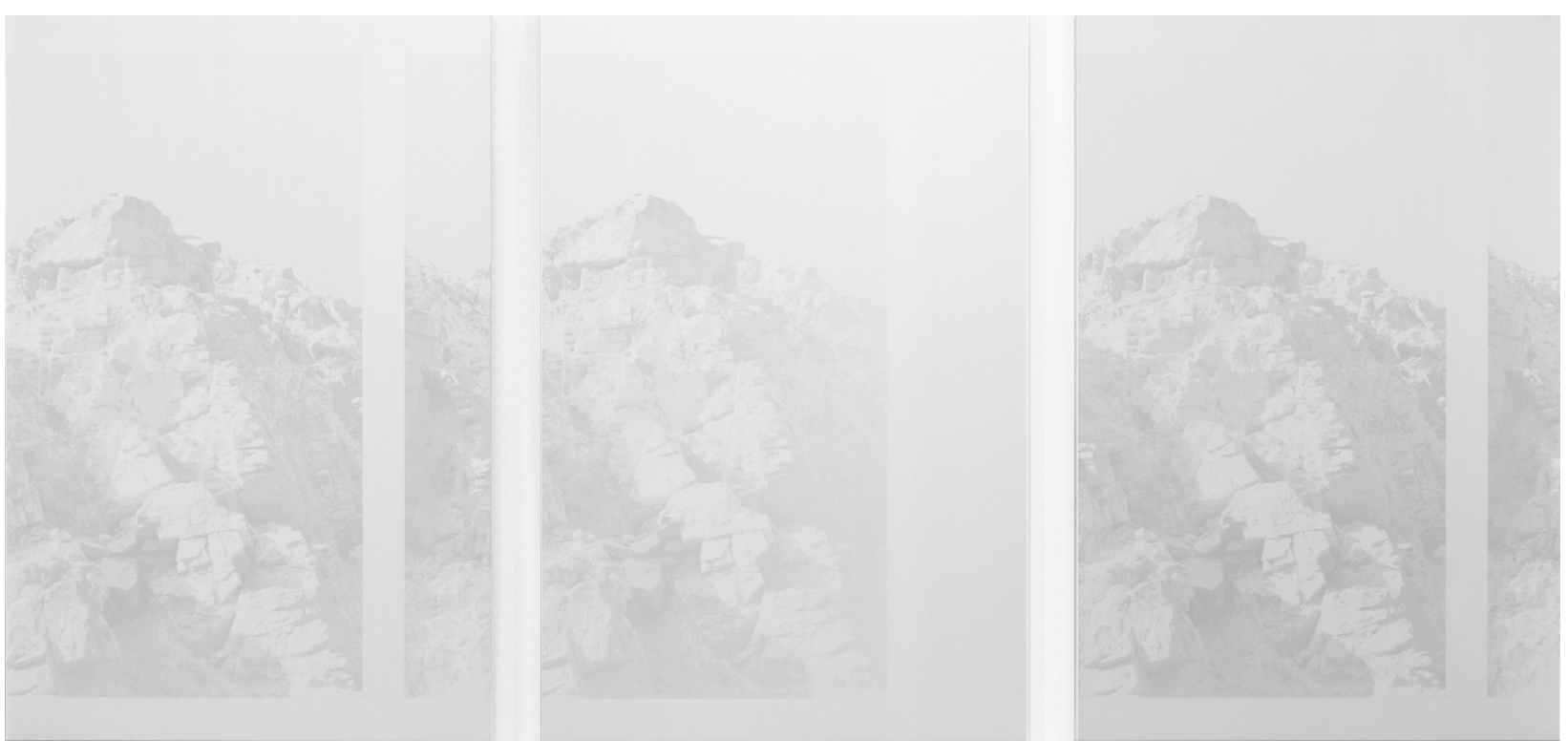
MARTIN: I think maybe more self-reflexive. I made an attempt to make it difficult to decipher what it is you're actually looking at—obviously they present themselves as paintings because they're done on canvas and they're stretched, but then there's this other way in which they allude to photographic and printing processes. I went to pains to create a kind of media collapse, where the terms "painting," "photography," or "printing" might be more difficult to separate.



Cameron Martin. "Bastine Study," 2010. Acrylic on canvas over panel. 48 x 36".



Cameron Martin. "Stratal," 2010. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 60".



Cameron Martin. "Tisdor Sequence," 2010. Acrylic on canvas over panel. 54 x 115.5" overall dims; 54 x 36" each panel.

RAIL: It's interesting that there's always a graphic quality in your work, whether it's derived from something handmade or mechanical.

MARTIN: The processes that I am using now evolved in a way that was relatively organic. Several years ago, there were certain images that I wanted to explore that were just inherently more graphic, and so I divided up the way I made paintings and started to think about things in a really medium-specific kind of way—the choice of materials and how the picture was executed was based on the image itself as opposed to being just a formula. That led to making some graphic paintings that were done with a whole series of stencils, which I cut myself on the canvas, using masking tape. It was incredibly tedious, especially as the images got more and more complicated. In the case of this new work, where they're so photographic, at a certain point I realized that I could continue to do what I was doing, but it was going to take me about a year to make each painting. Although I used to take a photograph and make a drawing from it and then work from the drawing to make the painting, now the photographs get imported into the computer and collaged, and then I make a series of tonal separations that become the layers of the picture. I have an architectural plotter that cuts out the separations, so I can make these incredibly complex stencils that then get built up over a number of layers. It's still a very tedious process and it takes a long time to make a painting, but not as long as it would if I had to cut every single thing by hand.

RAIL: So you've essentially developed a hand-involved process of painting akin to screenprinting. There are also striations in the paintings that may refer to bubble-jet printing.

MARTIN: There was already this quality that I brought up before, where they were questionable as to how the image got on the canvas, and I was thinking about how there are so many people making "paintings" now with Epson printers. I wondered what it would mean to go to the perverse extreme of painting a picture that was made to look as much as possible as if it had been printed by an ink jet printer. So, for instance, with that large painting of the birch forest, I included these lines in the picture that might reference printer data error or the printer running out of ink. But, of course, I didn't actually press "print" to make the painting.

RAIL: I know your work has been discussed in terms of Japanese woodcuts and the Hudson River School painters like Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt. Where do you see that you fit into that tradition, or break from it?

MARTIN: I've been influenced by looking at each of those different types of work, especially Japanese ukiyo-e prints, but I don't think I am part of those traditions. One of the things that's interesting to me about working with landscape at this point is that, to go back to this idea of bracketing, landscape is the genre that has been bracketed from critical contemporary art discourse. That history you speak of is so rich and complicated, yet at the same time there was a moment, that's maybe not entirely identifiable, when that kind of imagery became so evacuated that it was rendered almost meaningless.

RAIL: Do you think it has anything to do with how advertising has co-opted landscape?

MARTIN: That plays into it. That's where my interest in landscape initially started. I was collecting advertisement photographs that had pictures of nature in them, and I was aware of how those pictures worked toward generating a kind of non-specific nostalgic experience, where the specificity of the location, geographically or historically, is completely eradicated. It's just meant to conjure this place that you have some relationship to in your memory, having actually been there or maybe just through having seen an image. And in a way, I still toy with that sensibility in the paintings themselves, because the images are not of real places, they're composites that are made in the computer. I want for them to work in that same manner of evoking something that is a stand-in in terms of memory, or something like that. But I'm not really interested in rendering a place that you can identify and say, for instance, "Oh, what a great rendition of the Grand Canyon." I want it to function more abstractly than that.

RAIL: Your paintings are made based on photographs culled from places around the world, but is your work a specifically American view of the "landscape?"

MARTIN: I'm not sure. That might be true because people from other countries have regularly said so, but it's not intended. *[Laughter.]*

So much early American landscape painting was generated by a Manifest Destiny mentality. We're just at such a different point historically, where virtually nothing is undiscovered—everything is owned.

RAIL: Or at least charted by GPS.

MARTIN: Right. It's all been mapped out. There's no way we could have that relationship to depicting nature now, whether it's Carleton Watkins or Thomas Moran. Of course, the funny thing about Moran is that he was making fiction in order to sell the West. He was making sketches on site and then paintings from memory when he came back to his studio—an early advertiser.

RAIL: Your paintings can be linked to environmental or ecological issues that in the 1970s were addressed in work that was executed outside of the gallery in Land Art or with New Topographics in photography. Why depict landscape with painting now?

MARTIN: I guess it comes back to that as much as I am interested in landscape as a subject, what I am most interested in is the image as a subject.

RAIL: But the image is almost always a landscape.

MARTIN: Maybe a more concise way of putting it is that I'm interested in the imaging of landscape. There are all kinds of other media that one could employ, but at this point I don't have ideas for making a video, for instance. When you get into the headspace of thinking about painted images, that's what you know, or at least it works that way for me. But I wouldn't want to have to make the case that it's the most effective way to communicate. Painting is about something slower than the way communication typically works now.

I tend to be more interested, in terms of other painters, in people who are engaged with ideas around perception. Something that happens with my work, because of the inclusion of images of nature, is that it becomes the de facto topic of the work. But I'm also interested in trying to think about what purpose there is at this point in time in actually making a painting, because there are many arguments that can be made for its obsolescence. One of the possibilities seems to me to be a perceptual experience that's not possible through any other means. So for instance, in these paintings, the striations that we talked about before in that one painting, on one level, yes, they reference this culturally embedded kind of sign, but in another way, they're all about the experience generated through the proximity you have to the picture, that space between your eyes and the picture plane, and what happens as that changes. In addition to scale and proximity, there's also time. Although a cliché, that's something painting can still accomplish—it makes people actually look, in a way that's unique to the medium.

RAIL: Right, that you have an experience that unfolds over time and that the pigments and the way that the light reflects off of those pigments is irreproducible in any other media.

MARTIN: And photography, for instance, doesn't work that way. I think in photography often the visual experience can be just as productive as looking at it in a book format. Sometimes it's even better. Or on a computer screen, where the photograph is backlit. Whereas with painting, that's never really the case. There might be work that unfortunately looks better on the computer screen than it does in person, but it's still a very different experience being in front of a painting. Which is why, even though I'm invested in exploring intersections between photography and painting, I still maintain that the thing that I make, in order to have this perceptual experience, has to be a painting.

RAIL: Speaking of the visual pleasures of painting, I see a Morandi book in your stack—

MARTIN: Oh, I love Morandi's work, but almost as a guilty pleasure. I like the idea of the life project of Morandi endlessly painting those still lifes. On a purely formal level, the economy and simplicity of Morandi is very attractive.

RAIL: In making your own images, you apply almost all the paint by spraying now. Do you ever miss using the brush?

MARTIN: I definitely have moments of envying people who work differently than I do. I think that's typical for most artists. I'm not saying that I'll never use a brush again, I've just landed on this technique that feels effective for what I'm trying to say right now. But when I go to my friend Amy Sillman's studio, for instance, and there's color everywhere and it smells like oil paint, I think, "This is what painting is. What am I doing?" But I've never had a reverence for a certain material—I've come from a more conceptual and theoretical background, so I don't have that romantic relationship to paint. But maybe in this you can hear me saying that I wish I did in some way.

RAIL: About theory: you went to the Whitney Independent Study Program, where painting is not usually the dominant mode of inquiry, partly due to its historical and capitalistic baggage. Do you think that painting as your choice of medium was paradoxically solidified during your studies there?

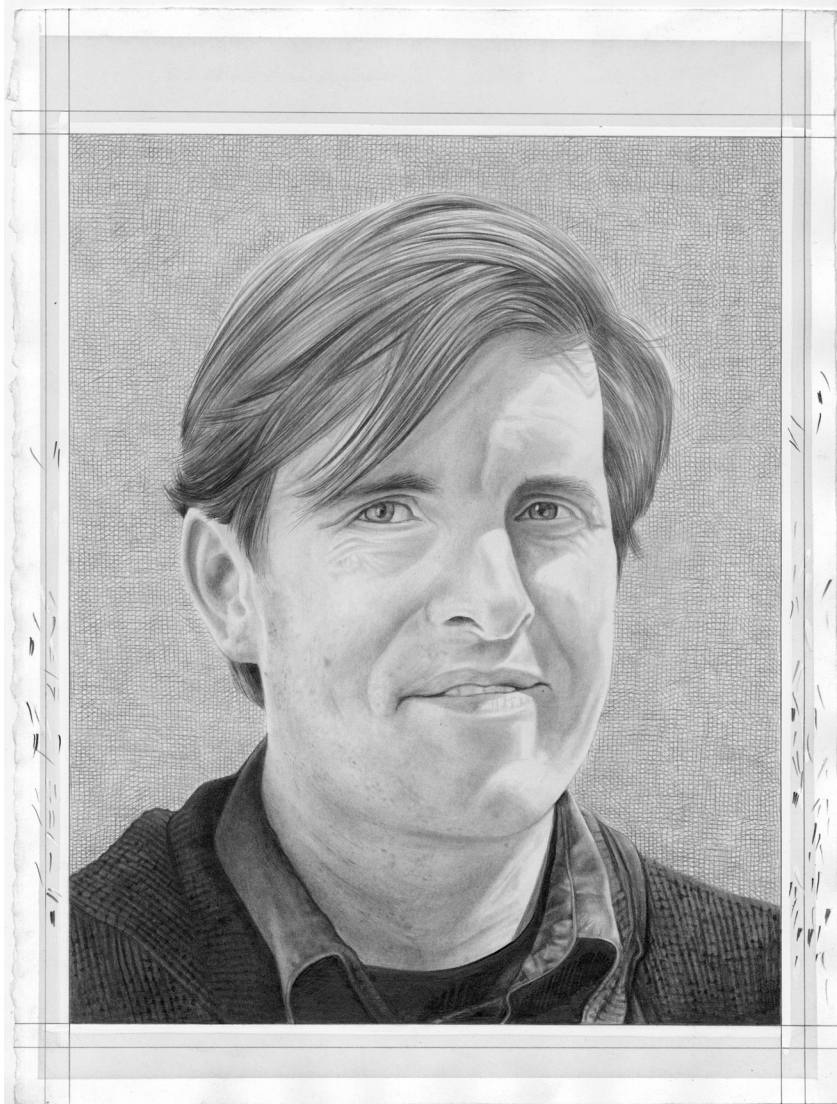
MARTIN: It certainly wasn't a conscious move, or a reaction of some sort; it just turned out that way. I read a great deal, but I'm not particularly interested in making work that ends up being a kind of regurgitation of theoretical issues. I guess in my work I am concerned with something more philosophical than theoretical, whatever that might mean. For me, work needs to maintain a visual quality that can't be reduced to a text. I feel like the purpose of making visual art is to produce some kind of visual experience that is available only through that means. And so if it's reducible to a text, I don't understand why it wouldn't just stay a text.

RAIL: You have directly referred to environmental politics in your work, like Bush's Clear Skies Initiative that lessened air pollution controls in favor of big business. How much are you interested in politics, or activism?

MARTIN: I think I suffer from the same kind of frustration or sense of alienation that I'm talking about in the work, which is difficult. There's so much contradiction involved, I think I would really be a hypocrite if I said that I was making environmentalist work when I'm making paintings using petroleum products.

RAIL: Right. That reminds me of punk rock records I liked in high school that had anti-capitalist, anti-establishment sentiment, yet ironically were only available at the mall.

MARTIN: So I'm not really willing to claim that I'm any kind of activist. I think that it's more of a reflection of a certain sensibility. It's about a kind of frustration. For instance, when I alluded to the Clear Skies Initiative in that show I did several years ago, the work had a darkness to it that was clearly imbued with a sense of discontentment. But again, I couldn't really claim that it was political art per se.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

RAIL: Do you believe that painting could ever take a strong political position?

MARTIN: I think it can try, but I don't believe that it's a very effectual tool, certainly not for communicating to a large audience. My friend George Rush has a theory that I think is very funny, but also perhaps true, that at this point the audience for painting is like the audience for opera. So if I was going to work for political change, I don't think I would do it through painting. That doesn't mean painting can't talk about political issues in some way that might be interesting and even enlightening—and certainly there is painting that does—but I'm just not so convinced of its efficacy.

RAIL: Is the best we can wish as painters to express melancholy about political issues we feel we have no control over? I also wonder how much this has to do with being overwhelmed by the capitalist structure that we're working within as painters—is the best we can hope for raising awareness?

MARTIN: It seems like most of the time you're probably preaching to the converted, and there are forces at work that are so great they can seem insurmountable. It's definitely daunting.

RAIL: Those limitations seemed evident in the subject of Luc Tuymans's last show *Corporate*, which tried to take a provocative stance on corporations within the strictures of Zwirner's empire. Even though you have different ways of delivering a painting, you and Tuymans seem to share some aesthetic sensibilities.

MARTIN: Helen Molesworth has this great essay in the Tuymans retrospective catalog about how if Gerhard Richter was the "photo painter," then Tuymans is the "television painter." His light comes from a rear projection in a sense, and it's about a certain passivity of the viewer. That allowed me to see his work in a way that I hadn't thought about before. My opinion about him has shifted over the years—his Belgian Congo paintings, for example, were a provocative engagement of history with painting, and it felt like the affect of his brush stroke brought something to the subject matter. But I'm not so convinced by his recent paintings.

But if Richter is the "photo painter" and Tuymans is the "television painter," then perhaps the rest of us that follow are "digital painters." Literally, in my case, I use the computer for the production of my paintings. That has become the dominant form for image making in our lives, so it would only make sense that we reflect on that now. And if you buy into the argument that Tuymans is a "television painter" then he's already an anachronism. And there is certainly a younger generation that has a completely synthetic relationship to the digital.

RAIL: When you say digital, do you mean images or videos?

MARTIN: Well, increasingly moving images are embedded into the Internet and rapidly replacing television. So we have to take that into account, but I was thinking about still images, because that's what I tend to think about most of the time. ■■