

## Shining and Vanishing: Seen and Unseen in the Art of Leigh Martin

*Orpheus did not sing; he painted. Or better, he saw in the unseen what the shroud of darkness could not hide, with its mute and powerless requirement to appear. He understood ... the anxious desire to appear. ... The unseen that the painter will look for thus remains, up to the point of its final appearance, unforeseen – unseen, thus unforeseen. ... the unseen remains inapparent as long as it is, and disappears the moment that it appears as visible. The unseen appears only in order to disappear as such.*

Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 2004.<sup>1</sup>

*Second, what the trait and the entire visual work ultimately reveal is the invisible of the visible – an invisible that is at the heart of visibility, rather than being understood as a transcendent ideality toward which the visible would be oriented as toward an eclipsed Platonic Sun. ... The invisible can be thought of ... as the oneiric, imaginative, or memorial investiture of the visible, or as nascent ideality.*

Véronique Fóti, *Vision's Invisibles*, 2003.<sup>2</sup>

*Let's call a meeting to analyze the blur.*

Don DeLillo, *Libra*, 1988.<sup>3</sup>

I hope someday to see again a full-page comic strip from the *New Yorker*, which I saw first over twenty years ago. The cheerfully fluent page of drawings sketched the tale of a small event in the life of an aspiring, but unrecognised New York artist. The artist drags a friend back to his tenement block so he can show the friend his latest work. Except for the first and last panels, the comic strip depicts a protracted sequence of the artist leading his friend through overcrowded corridors, up and down staircases, to some forgotten corner in the bowels of the building where he stands back with excited anticipation to let the visitor see what he was there to see. What was there to see was a single wall of completely radiant blankness; an empty glowing at the hidden heart of a congested world; a luminous nothing. I have filed my memory of that *New Yorker* page alongside an image from Theo Angelopoulos's 1995 film, *Ulysses' Gaze*. Near the very end of the film, Harvey Keitel, as the filmmaker A, who has made the arduous journey to war-torn Sarajevo to find canisters of lost film

from 1902, sits in the ruined archive staring at a glowing empty screen while the projector still runs after the last bit of leader has flicked through the gate. We see nothing of the film fragment A came to see; we are not even sure if the remaining fragment was damaged beyond repair and if A saw anything other than blank film. Both of these images keep company with Lee Harvey Oswald's mother in Don DeLillo's novel, *Libra*, who "stayed up late watching the test pattern" on her Motorola TV; the monochrome white noise static playing on the mother's TV we see from outside the house in Peter Medak's film about the Kray brothers; and, of course, the incandescent emptiness of movie-house screens or outdoor drive-in movie screens in the time-lapse photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto.

I begin my discussion of Leigh Martin's art with this imaginary image file because I think his practice often entails a meditation on the hypnotically alluring differentiations of blankness; of near emptiness; of the virtually invisible; and, also, on a type of passivity that can accompany the creative enquiry. Martin seems constantly to refigure the paradox that conditions or states of absence generate their own peculiar kinds of presence – that plenitude is always pressing at the door of the empty room; that a depletion or ascesis of visual abundance, rather than a stockpiling of sensuous information, may put us closer to what Véronique Fôti calls "the intense visuality of a receptive attunement to presencing;" "the infinite play of an energy of manifestation that is at one with emptiness."<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1. Leigh Martin, *Untitled, Loaded series* (2007), resin on canvas, 60 cm x 63 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Jensen Gallery, Auckland.

One of Leigh Martin's favourite works of art is Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew into His Picture* (1981–88). The central feature of the Kabakov work is an empty chair placed in front of a prosaically painted white panel. A minute painted representative of the artist is in the process of disappearing into this blank painting as into "an enormous bright expanse pierced by an even, sparkling light ... an endless ocean of light ... [a] blinding depth."<sup>5</sup> This melancholy fading away, which translates into luminous bliss for Kabakov's aerial traveller, traces a threshold experience that mirrors the ambiguous narrative of immersion, loss, and dematerialisation lying at the heart of Martin's own practice. For over

fifteen years, Martin has been producing a body of work that is both intensely materialist in its attention to the particularities and sustained labour of production, and acutely sensitive to the fragility of its own metaphysical status.

Martin has pursued his enquiries into edge conditions between seen and unseen; nuances of rapport between visible and invisible, through a closely related set of works including: the *Dissolve* paintings, made through repetitive, regularised brushing; a number of wall-based works designed through algorithms based on photographic data and commercial paint classifications; the *Noise* works produced on a commercial paint machine using enlarged details of digital photographs; a small but important group of Polaroids; a growing body of digital prints and photo files; and *Loaded*, the current series of mesmerically sensual resin works. I will comment briefly on most of these

groups of work during the course of this text; my main aim, however, is to spend more time detailing a landscape of associations and interpretive affinities for the practice through the key tropes of the unseen or the invisible, appearing, and listening.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever medium or methodology Martin employs, whatever meticulousness in production, I always encounter his art as a form of poetic detachment and distraction; paintings made while looking elsewhere, photographs taken in a kind of trance. Martin's work prompts me to seek its significance somewhere off stage, off to the side, through an inclination to the oblique and phenomenally ephemeral. Clearly, Martin's intuition of the visual field is very different from the late modernist doctrine of the purity and confident autonomy of vision. For Martin, seeing is inseparable from various occlusions or cloudings of the visible; and optical experience may best be understood through analogies with acoustics and patterns of sonic flux. Rather than a specialised separation of the senses, Martin persistently seeks metaphors of synaesthetic sensory exchange to describe the aesthetic experience. As he values alertness to the barely perceptible, for Martin, visual acuity is secondary to the growth of the listening self. The place that phenomenological writer David Michael Levin gives to the construction of a 'listening self,' as an alternative to the subject validated through its optical jurisdiction, is provocative as critique for the fetishisation of sight in modernist painting; it is particularly resonant for an artist like Martin who grounds his painterly imaginary in various forms of minimal and ambient electroacoustic practices, as much as in the language of visual art.<sup>7</sup>

Many readers will be familiar with Rosalind Krauss' famous retelling of Frank Stella's admiration for the optical prowess of Red Sox batter Ted Williams, as told to Krauss by Michael Fried: "[Williams] sees faster than any living human. His vision is so fast that he can see the stitching on the baseball as it comes over the plate. Ninety miles an hour, but he sees the stitches." Krauss explains why the image of the batter was so apt a metaphor for visual modernism: "Vision had, as it were, been pared away into a dazzle of pure instantaneity, into an abstract condition with no before or after."<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, Martin's careful inadvertency would be catastrophic in the arena of such instant perceptual uptake. For Martin, painting steps up to uncertainty, and this orientation puts him closer to artists such as Gerhard Richter who talks about the fundamental 'helplessness' of the painter facing off questions of painting's expectations today. For Richter, as for Martin, the use of existing forms, compositions, or motifs, serves to place the painter in a state of receptivity; "the intention to invent nothing ... and to receive everything."<sup>9</sup> Laura Lisbon interprets Richter's stance as indicating "an obliterating of the known for an engagement with the unknown," through an internal turn within the painting that points away from its surface as mere visible image, "toward an effort to experience the ethical stance painting takes."<sup>10</sup> And this ethics has everything to do with 'looking for painting,' a vocation that assumes uncertainty and a cultivation of what some post-Heideggerian writers have called 'weak thinking' and 'weak ontology.'<sup>11</sup>

There are several aspects of Martin's art which make it a post-Heideggerian practice or post-phenomenological practice. By this I mean that, although Heidegger has much to say about the thingly character of the artwork, and Merleau-Ponty, for instance, has a rich way of talking about the participatory carnality of painting, what is most important for both of these writers is the way the art work – generic in the case of Heidegger; painting in the case of Merleau-Ponty – acknowledges the emergence of something that requires recognition rather than manipulation; something that elicits a style of approach before any dramaturgy of invention. As Jean-Luc Marion argues in his phenomenological discussion of the painting as a 'saturated phenomenon': "The truly creative painter, then, is characterised not by a plastic inventiveness imposing his will but rather by a passive receptivity, which ... knows to choose ... that [which] imposes itself from its own necessity."<sup>12</sup> The art

work allows something to happen. In this sense, I'd say Martin's art is about receptivity and inflected responses to the phenomenal world as – to use the lovely, haunted terms of phenomenological description – it appears for us, as it shines forth and shows itself, albeit with great reticence, as we incline our attention towards it; or tilt our head to see as it rushes up towards us.<sup>13</sup> Martin's practice references itself to this sort of horizon of expectation. So, the model of the painter looking at the painting as per looking at the world in front of them, like a contented quartermaster managing their 'stores of the visible,' is what we need to side-step here.<sup>14</sup>

When Merleau-Ponty says we don't see space from the outside as networks of related objects plotted by some disembodied geometer, but that for each of us, "It is, rather a space reckoned starting from me as the null point or degree zero of spatiality," he becomes a vanishing point of the world swallowed up by what supports him, rather than a point of optical orientation. "I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me."<sup>15</sup> This is the world as "the obscurity of the 'there is'."<sup>16</sup> For better or worse, the very difference for Heidegger between art and craft is that the work of art is not about 'the action of making;' it is instead a "bringing forth of beings in that it *brings forth* present beings ... into the unconcealedness of their appearance." And, not only is this appearance a 'shining,' a 'clearing,' an 'open space,' it is inseparable from the '*double concealment*,' from what is 'not mastered;' what is 'confusing' at the very heart of things.<sup>17</sup> This accords with Merleau-Ponty, for whom the invisible is a lining of the visible, something that vision cannot excise from the "reflexivity of the sensible," from the "promiscuity between the seeing and the seen."<sup>18</sup> One legacy of the phenomenological tradition of interrogating the presence of what appears and retreats from us is the obligation to continually renew and reset our relationship with what might or might not be given for us to see.



Figure 2. Leigh Martin, *Dissolve #1* (1998), oil on canvas, 101.6 cm x 101.6 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Jensen Gallery, Auckland.



Figure 3. Leigh Martin, *Dissolve #1* (1999), oil on canvas, 175 cm x 170 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Jensen Gallery, Auckland.

Begun in 1994, the *Dissolve* works are an ongoing series of post-Minimal tonal abstractions produced through a quasi-industrialisation of the body, a prolonged immersion in a closely circumscribed act of painting. Starting with carefully laid-down bands of paint on a wet ground, Martin would steadily brush the painting vertically and across, with wide soft brushes, for anything between 12 and 20 hours, up to the point when the paint just started to set off. Martin refers to the arduous bodily routine of repeated actions that produced the *Dissolve* series as 'metronomic.'<sup>19</sup> The making of each painting required considerable physical stamina; pauses in the activity were for coffee or comfort stops only. It was as if the paintings were scoring the labour of the artist's body; directing the process through which they would take form – as if the whole of the artist's body was cooperating with the emergent structure of the image, instead of finessing a hand-eye coordination. Sustained, regularised brushing transformed the paint into a diffused, all-over surface; a surface that would flex optically, responsive to subtle fluctuations through its field of equalised tensions. The emotional tenor of these paintings was acute and piercing, as if affective content had seeped into the imposed neutrality of the procedural method in crucial but carefully adjusted doses.

Each *Dissolve* painting started with a layer of dark paint to which bands of lighter colour were added. At the time, Martin regarded this as a reference to traditional oil painting methodology, in which the working of light back into darker paint for local effects was common. The sustained working of wet into wet is also a quotation of the traditional *alla prima* technique, but Martin attenuated it into something like self-cancellation. The continuous brushing and over-brushing kept drawing the oil to the surface, folding the medium back into itself, and muffling the surface differences in tone. This led to a virtual reversal of the initial tonal structure, making it difficult to discern which layer had started as the top and which as the ground. In the *Dissolve* works that retain a stronger contrast between dark and light, a sumptuous rippling spreads across the whole surface as the constant cross-brushing has pulled the paint into wave patterns. The ambiguous temporalities of inversion, duration and delay within these works also put Martin in mind of the traditional photographic process whereby a longer time in the developing tray means that an image will disappear into darkness, while over-exposing the image in the camera burns it away with too much light.

Martin recalls the process of the *Dissolve* paintings as one in which any increase in rigour and 'strictness' of approach always led to an increase in the appearance of indeterminacy. The more impersonal and physically determined he tried to make his working method, the more the paintings became tinged with the ineffable and seemed to recede from him into something approaching the atmospheric and ambient.<sup>20</sup> This paradox recalls Chuck Close's observation that while Vija Celmins' ocean paintings were physically "very pinned down ... they also seemed like ghosts."<sup>21</sup>

In the introduction to his *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Jean-Luc Marion describes the carefulness, the deliberations, the 'precise operations' of the phenomenological method as a way of managing the transfer of initiative from itself to the object under consideration; to the apparition as such. Marion's interpretation of the phenomenological procedure matches the way in which Martin, too, consistently follows certain formal and material procedures in order that he "takes the initiative in losing it." "The methodological beginning here establishes only the conditions for its own disappearance in the original manifestation of what shows *itself*."<sup>22</sup> Contrary to the popular assumption that the "painting, like every work (of art or not), is born from work, from a worker ...[as it] belongs to its author, whom it reflects," in *The Crossing of the Visible* Marion claims the "authentic painting," in fact, "escapes as much the one who signs it as the one who looks at it."<sup>23</sup> Just as Kabakov's artist disappears into his own painting, so Martin's procedural logics are handover initiatives, allowing him to disappear in some measure, thereby enabling the advent of the painting

in its own terms. While the *Dissolve* paintings used the artist's body as a virtually hypnagogic actor to produce themselves, Martin's wall-painting projects matched the colour and vertical banding from digitally enlarged details of the exhibition sites to the anonymity of commercial colour charts in order to override, or at least qualify, the artist's personal taste and compositional ambitions, and to incorporate a measure of indirectness and inadvertency.



Figure 4. Leigh Martin, *Register/Test Pattern* (2000), Art and Industry Biennale, Physics Room, Christchurch, 2000, Dulux acrylic interior house paint, dimensions variable. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Jensen Gallery, Auckland.

In *Register/Test Pattern* (2000) and *Close Ups of the Horizon* (2001), the muted tonalities of the colours and the relaying of the bands to recall test patterns helped to ensure the wall-paintings could be read as banal, bland and impersonal, as a trade demonstration of colour co-ordination at the same time as producing aesthetic effects of exquisite discrimination and emotional subtlety. These were not paintings that confronted their viewers; they worked on the senses like memories and mood states, like falls of light tinted in response to the emotional climate of an interior space. But they also receded from the viewer, sinking into a remote, pragmatic world of proprietary decorator technology. Martin was pleased with the way in certain lights they almost disappeared in the uniform sheen of the wall's surface.<sup>24</sup> The title *Close Ups of the Horizon* (a title for a phenomenologically inclined practice if ever there was!), was borrowed from American comedian Steven Wright, and suggests immersion in a precisely located non-place; in an atmospheric condition of blurred and dissolving boundaries. The title also recalls the flight path of Kabakov's artist vanishing into the haze of the permeable work of art.



Figure 5. Leigh Martin, *Noise #3* (2004), oil on canvas, 101.6 cm x 101.6 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Jensen Gallery, Auckland.

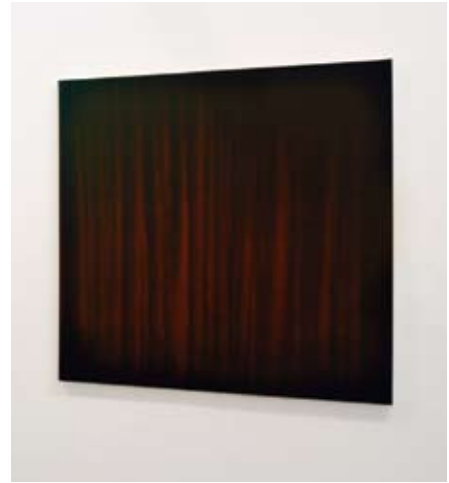


Figure 6. Leigh Martin, *Untitled, Noise series* (2003), oil on linen, 135 cm x 137.5 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Jensen Gallery, Auckland.

Martin followed another form of strategic acquiescence to the given, in both motif and process, in his *Noise* works. Produced between 2002 and 2004, these paintings depended on a protracted operation using a wall-mounted digital flatbed printer that relays its image through fine sprayed jets of CMYK oil paint with a series of horizontal passes. The images that Martin used for his paint-machine works were primarily either of flowers or curtains. The curtain images generally came from the artist's own Polaroids; some of the flowers and shrubs have been photographed by the artist, but most of them are taken from seed packets or magazines. One reason that floral imagery appeals to Martin is its ability to signify both iconographic exhaustion and the *claritas* of beauty; "the beautiful ... tinged with banality," as Martin puts it. The curtain imagery in several of Martin's paint-machine works inevitably recalls one of painting's founding narratives. In the mythic competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, Zeuxis' illusionistic painting of grapes that tempted passing birds is found wanting in comparison to Parrhasius' painting with a curtain, which Zeuxis discovered, on reaching to draw back the curtain, was in fact a complete illusion. At one level the tale reads as a contest between an illusionism that can fool birds and a more sophisticated variant that can deceive the human mind. I think a contemporary reading of the tale would recognise Parrhasius' move as signifying painting's essential difference from its visible image, painting's essential self-masking as Laura Lisbon discusses it, and its continual dialogue with the unrepresentable to which the image will always be inadequate. So Martin's curtains enfold and distract vision with their continual movement between possibility and impassive disregard. Like Parrhasius' curtain, one of Martin's curtain paintings stalls the quest for the image; stalls what Emmanuel Levinas calls the "avidity of the gaze;"<sup>25</sup> implicitly calling up while suspending what Marion names the "muddy tyranny of the visible."<sup>26</sup>

Usually Martin completed each of the *Noise* works with several layers of glazing, using synthetic oil-based resins applied uniformly across the whole surface. Although these paintings have a predominantly low tonal range, it is more important to note that the indistinctness of their floral or folded fabric imagery also results from the intrinsic 'noise' of the paint machine; its incapacity



to produce sharp edges, the coarse grain of its always slightly unpredictable spurts and mists of colour, and its propensity for 'ghosting' or mis-registration of colour separations. In other words, the digital paint system consistently manifests a high ratio of noise to signal. Noise is what contaminates a signal, what keeps data from becoming information or information from becoming meaning. Noise returns an excess of information to formless bits, to particles of meaningless data once more. Noise can be understood as an in-between state, a condition of liminality, and an incessant undertone pitched on the multiple edges of pleasure and irritation. As Michel Serres evokes it, noise is a continuous murmur which can never be silenced either within our bodies or in the world that constantly moves around us:

We never hear what we call background noise so well as we do at the seaside. ... In the strict horizontal of it all, stable, unstable cascades are endlessly trading. Space is assailed, as a whole, by the murmur: we are utterly taken over by this same murmuring. This restlessness is within hearing, just shy of definite signals, just shy of silence. ... Background noise may well be the ground of our being.<sup>27</sup>

Martin's aesthetic depends on attunement to this background; on listening in to what might be called an 'aural unconscious.'<sup>28</sup> This quietly omnipresent noisiness which crosses borders between states is a crepitation, a cloud of sonic abrasions, a persistent sifting of matter, an atomisation of difference between subjects and objects. It is a granulation and sieving of the world; it is atmosphere.<sup>29</sup> Martin's Polaroid photographs of close-cropped architectural details, blurred with light and flecks of material texture, are non-locatable probably; they frame patterns of cloudy luminosity, weather patterns of buildings' interstices, corrugations and perforated panels, mosaic tiles and minor structural events. The Polaroids seem to support Walter Benjamin's claim that architecture is experienced intermittently "by a collectivity in a state of distraction"<sup>30</sup> as a type of background that is, in which noise and message are almost indistinguishable.

Glitch music, field recordings, found sound compilations and a range of digitised ambient works are highly significant to Martin's situating of his current practice in a culture of noise discrimination. Martin says it was when listening to chill-out music, electronic experimental trance music in the mid 1990s, that he arrived at his current sense of how his painting could operate. Martin's interest in forms of electronic music and sound art has gravitated to artists and labels that work at the minimal and finely textured end of the contemporary experimental spectrum. Whether we think of the muffled groans and submarine clicks of Chris Watson's Iceland recording *Vatnajökull* (2003); the fibrillating and droning digital buzz of John Duncan's *Tap Internal* (2000); or the extraordinary passages of filigreed and tesellated electronic minutiae and static flutter on Rosy Parlane's *Iris* album (2004) that evoke the crystalline hissing of ice in white heat – much contemporary sound art produces aural border conditions that are acutely intense. As suggested above, such edge conditions, or threshold states of murmuration, sibilance and buzzing, are experienced as modes of continuous, pleasurable discomfort, as they destabilise the lines that demarcate the inside from the outside of the body.<sup>31</sup>

Increasing attention paid by visual artists, like Martin, to what could be called the 'sonic turn' in current practice denotes sympathy with the ongoing philosophical critique of oculacentrism as one of the ruling paradigms of Western modernism. This turn, for a visual artist like Martin, also testifies to what Marion says about the privileging of vision relative to the privileging of the apparition: "as soon as apparition dominates appearing and revives it, the subjective specifications of appearance by this or that sense are no longer essentially important: whether I see, touch, feel, or hear it, it is always the thing that comes upon me each time in person."<sup>32</sup> Further light is thrown on Martin's courting of the auditory by Finnish scholar, Janne Vanhanen:



How to think of sound itself when the epistemological focus of our thinking and our concepts is located in a seeing subject? With its temporality and immersiveness, sound seems to avoid clarity, categorisation and objectivity. Light and sight reveal objects, sound is the result of processes, of something happening.<sup>33</sup>

Vanhanen is echoing the way Levinas talked about the subversive role sound can play in relation to vision:

In sound, and in the consciousness termed hearing, there is in fact a break with the self-complete world of vision and art. ... Whereas, in vision, form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it, in sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content. A real rent is produced in the world, through which the world that is *here* prolongs a dimension that cannot be converted into vision.<sup>34</sup>



What most impresses on first encounter with Martin's current body of paintings, the *Loaded* series, is the lavishness of their chromatic luminosity. Begun in 2007, the new works are made with a combination of synthetic oil-based pigments and eurathane resins applied over a uniformly coloured ground. Various opaque or translucent layers of resin are poured over canvases layer by layer. Once dry, each layer is laboriously sanded with very fine-grade paper before the next layer is poured on. Up to one third of the resin applied runs off before it dries, leaving rigid droplets of colour around the edges of the canvas. Currently the paintings are produced on a tilting cradle of the kind that a panel beater would use to support a car door for spray-painting. Martin applies all of the layers of colour himself; the final protective coat of clear resin is applied commercially.

Figure 7. Leigh Martin, *Untitled*, *Loaded* series (2009), resin on canvas, 55 cm x 45 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Jensen Gallery, Auckland.

These works willingly answer to Marion's description of the painting emerging from the stupor of the unseen as something momentarily too much for sight.

Still dripping with the formless and colorless obscurity of the ὕλη [matter] from which it was born with difficulty, as though covered in amniotic fluid, the unseen enters through the space of a frame into the royal court of visibility, ... radiating. ... it shines with the dazzling, irrepressible brilliance of those who have been miraculously saved ... phenomenon par excellence. The last unseen, henceforth transformed into and by visibility, raises it to a degree of intensity hitherto unknown – or more precisely unseen.<sup>35</sup>

The resin works, generically referred to as the *Loaded* works, embody the characteristics, perhaps almost too literally, of what Marion calls the 'saturated phenomenon' – that is, the object of consciousness that pains consciousness as its excess, its overabundance of intuition, overflows the determinations of any concept.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the earlier paintings in this series contained swathes of bright and even lurid colour, some created unmappable amber darkness. But many were tinted, or stained white fields, as if their muted colours had been seared by intense heat and sunk into a bright opacity. All of the elusive behaviours of colour and tone that comprise the works' implicit depths lie sealed beneath the hard syrup of the resin's glassy finish. The brilliance and glare of the works' light effects, whether tending to the rich and shrilly coloured, or to the blanched and pearlescent, seem to signal vision in a state of *extremis*. Simultaneously, these works put me in mind of J. G. Ballard's character Jim in *Empire of the Sun* who says the white radiance which fills the sky from a distant nuclear explosion is "like God taking a photograph;"<sup>37</sup> and of the blankness and cloudings of sightless eyes, of vision occluded. Martin himself acknowledges that earlier resin paintings, in which the stained whites predominate, stare back at the viewer like unseeing cataracts, thus thwarting while acknowledging the powerful, unconscious expectation that paintings confirm their significance to us by returning our regard.

There is something both effusive and inscrutable about the viscosity of Martin's new works. Their evident fullness has a sense of the 'too much' and their blankness seems a blanking out from some form of sensory or informational overload, or from a content which is accessible only through a type of paradoxical hiding of the unmanageable Real. This blanking out, which operates to screen the 'too much' as it withdraws from sight, is consistent with notions of the ineffable as the unrepresentable, formless chaos that underlies the familiar structures of our habitual world. The ebullient formlessness of these paintings makes sense in terms of painting losing itself wilfully in the anarchic luminosity of vision, "the blinding intensity – the primary force"<sup>38</sup> of the gaze that emanates from the world that Lacan has described as "pulsatile, dazzling, and spread out."<sup>39</sup> Some of the largest of the recent works, with their reflective expanses of syrupy greens or pinks, recall the fatal attraction of Narcissus' pool. Their continuously spreading glossy viscosity wants to engulf and disorient us through saturating chromatic immersion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks are due to Leigh Martin for the many enjoyable conversations over the last few years about painting and music, and for the exchanges of literature and cds.

- 1 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 26, 27.
- 2 Véronique Fôti, *Vision's Invisibles: Philosophical Explorations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 73.
- 3 Don DeLillo, *Libra* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 15.
- 4 Fôti, *Vision's Invisibles*, 52 and 83.
- 5 Ilya Kabakov, "The Man Who Flew into his Picture," in Ilya Kabakov, *Ten Characters* (London: ICA, 1989), 9.
- 6 I use the terms invisible and unseen interchangeably in this essay; Marion distinguishes them in *The Crossing of the Visible*.
- 7 David Michael Levin, *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).
- 8 Rosalind Krauss, "The Im/Pulse to See," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Dia Art Foundation, Bay Press, 1988), 51 and 52. Krauss' isolated moment of optical intensity could well be regarded as a phenomenologically reduced one; through the Stella, Fried, Krauss context, however, it serves as exemplary of the postivist, 'what you see is what you see' position of Stella; and that supports a theory of visual mastery, not a phenomenological waiting on and attending to the appearing of the world. Prolonged reflection on this dazzling ball could constitute it as an eddy in the visual field; but I don't think this is exactly what it means for Stella or Krauss at this point.
- 9 Gerhard Richter, quoted in Laura Lisbon, "Painting and Ethics (or looking for painting)," in Richard Roth and Susan King Roth, eds., *Beauty is Nowhere: Ethical Issues in Art and Design* (Amsterdam: G + B Arts International, 1998), 162.

- 10 Lisbon, "Painting and Ethics," 162 and 169.
- 11 Discussing the term 'weakness,' along with cognate terms such as 'friction' and 'distance' in post-phenomenological Italian philosophy, Giovanna Borradori suggests that metaphysics newly apprehended is "worthy of attention precisely because it is worn and eroded by self-criticism." Giovanna Borradori, ed., *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988). Gianni Vattimo says that the "occurrence of Being is ... in Heideggerian ontology, an unnoticed and marginal background event," and that what "remains" in the work of art "has the nature of a residue rather than an *aere perennius*. ... It is capable of enduring not because of its force, in other words, but because of its weakness." Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), 86.
- 12 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 36.
- 13 "The 'there is' of the world is not the other of carnal reflexivity. Since this reflexivity advents only by falling short of itself, it realizes itself only as the upsurge of the world. The world is like the site of the being of this lack, the trace of this imminence." Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 159.
- 14 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 24. "But equally, to say that the world surrounds me makes it impossible for the world to subsist as a pure fact, as an atom of being: this would be to conceive knowledge still as a kind of frontal gaze. The world's laterality with respect to intellectual possession is equally laterality in relation to a factual contact, in such a manner that the world's transcendence is not reducible to the position of a transcendent. Possessing the world intellectually and reaching a pure fact where it lies are two ways of not being of the world." Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 158.
- 15 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in Galen A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 138.
- 16 Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 137.
- 17 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 17-78.
- 18 Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 129 and 132.
- 19 All references to the artist's comments come from conversations with the author dating back to 2003.
- 20 In an essay that investigates relationships between given systems, methodological norms and subjective inventions, Richard Shiff discusses 19<sup>th</sup>-century French critic Paul Mantz, who proposed a form of 'slippage' whereby the "trace of the individual ... would simply 'slip into' (se *glisser*) the picture," "even though the normative conventions of style would neither have encouraged nor accommodated this personal element. ... Mantz's position entails that the more intensely and scrupulously, hence objectively (even mechanically), a painter observes a given site, the more subjective the picture might become, defying precisely what one would expect. Within this 'condition,' 'objective' and 'subjective' become productively confused." Richard Shiff, "Puppet and Test Pattern: Mechanicity and Materiality in Modern Pictorial Representation," in Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson, eds., *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science, Technology, Art and Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 331.
- 21 See "Vija Celmins interviewed by Chuck Close, 1992," in Lucinda Barnes et al., *Between Artists: Twelve Contemporary American Artists Interview Twelve Contemporary American Artists* (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1996), 21-44.
- 22 Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9.
- 23 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 34.
- 24 This reticent aspect of Martin's wall works accords with Vija Celmins' comments on painting's potential to signify the elusive and ephemeral: "One of the things I like about painting is that it is so slight a presence ... you can't trip over it like any object. You turn away and it disappears immediately, you know?" Vija Celmins in Lane Relyea et al., *Vija Celmins* (London: Phaidon, 2004), 46.
- 25 Emmanuel Levinas quoted in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1994), 556.
- 26 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 65.
- 27 Michel Serres, in Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 78 and 98.
- 28 The productive term 'aural unconscious' is used by Brandon La Belle in *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2006) and by Jeremy Tambling in "Towards a Psychopathology of Opera," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9 (1997): 263-279.

- I first heard this term used by Simon Ingram at a recent presentation of John Nixon's "Colour-Rhythm Films" and "Donkey's Tail: Ad Hoc Blues" at Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland, NZ.
- 29 See Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as an Aesthetic Concept," *Daidalos* 68 (1998): 114. Other essays in this issue of *Daidalos* devoted to the luminous, the atmospheric, the urban and the ambient are pertinent to the preoccupations of Martin's practice. See also Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009) for a consideration of the reflexivity of 'appearance as appearance' in relation to the spectral, ephemeral and phenomenally slight as potential resistance to various forms of socio-political coercion.
  - 30 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 239-40.
  - 31 See Martin Seel, "Flickering and Resonating: Borderline Experience Outside and Inside Art," in Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 139-58.
  - 32 Marion, *Being Given*, 8.
  - 33 Janne Vanhanen, "Loving the Ghost in the Machine: Aesthetics of Interruption," in *Ctheory*, ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (article a099, 26 Nov 2001), <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=312> [accessed 12 Oct 2010].
  - 34 Levinas, quoted in Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 556.
  - 35 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 31.
  - 36 Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon" and "The Banality of Saturation" in Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 18-48 and 119-44.
  - 37 Near the end of Steven Spielberg's 1987 film, *Empire of the Sun*, Jim says the Atom bomb was "like a white light in the sky. Like God taking a photograph." Tom Stoppard wrote the screenplay adaptation of Ballard's novel in 1987. Jim's comments in the film are a conflation of two experiences in the novel: Jim's pre-war memory of monsoon season sheet lighting, which his governess likened to "God ... taking photographs of the wickedness of Shanghai;" and Jim's witnessing of the glow from the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bomb at the end of World War 2, "as if the sun had blinked, losing heart for a few seconds. ... the light [that] was a premonition of his death, the sight of his small soul joining the larger soul of the dying world." J. G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), 202, 208.
  - 38 George Baker, "The Space of the Stain," *Grey Room* 5 (Autumn 2001): 13.
  - 39 Lacan quoted in Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993), 174.