

## MEET THE ARTIST – *Christopher Martin*

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The tiny red car is careening down Texas Farm Road 1390 at 80 miles per hour. It is one o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon. On McKinney Avenue in Uptown Dallas, christopher martin Gallery Four sits locked during business hours.

The gallery's namesake is playing "Italian Job" at the wheel of a Mini Cooper. He negotiates curves flying between fields of wildflowers and cow pastures while lamenting that the car will not do a good skid. Road trips have always unleashed his wheels.

In the passenger seat, I am futilely trying to write our conversation in script I can read. Two universals about artists have led us to this moment.

Artists are notorious for procrastinating. It is exactly this need to rub against the hard wall of a dead line that has resulted in great work throughout history. Three weeks of pleading for a new artist's statement have brought us to the eve before it is due.

Artists speak through their chosen medium. If that medium is not pen and paper, clarifying the results of your painting career through the written word can be a frustrating task especially when writing about abstract art.

Chris' first attempt at his statement began, "I have always been a bit conflicted about the idea of an artist statement. To put into words what one spends so much time expressing visually seems bane and redundant."

Not exactly the distillation of his creative genius I had in mind.

He finally agrees to allow me to interview him, but it must be now, and it must be in the

car. As his wife and gallery director, I have spent many hours in the car with Chris driving coast to coast with art in tow. I know the freeing effect the road has on us both. But an 80 mph interview, while taking notes on a legal pad, in a car with the suspension of a hummingbird, would challenge even Diane Sawyer.

We begin by cautioning each other about what we don't want. He doesn't want me to censor him because I know him so well, and I don't want him to sound lofty and abstract. I want the Christopher Martin you get over a Jack Daniel's and Coke ranting on every topic under the sun. This man is never lacking ideas, opinions, or passion.

Question one: "What do you remember about the early days of painting?"

He begins, "I remember how exciting and free creation was, the curiosity I felt, the joy of realizing a finished piece. The outcome didn't matter. I didn't care what people thought. No one relied on the piece being good or not.

I didn't have a studio to paint in so I left multiple apartments covered with paint, and I would think, 'there goes another deposit.'

The reward then, and still today, is to finish a piece that moves me, or a piece that confronts me. I want to feel something as a viewer as opposed to an artist. Once I experienced that feeling, my paintings became a very important part of life. As a painter, I think you have to allow yourself to look at art both ways - as a viewer and an artist."

"Do you find it easier to create now than you did then?"

"I find it easier to paint better today, but I can't seem to paint as much. The funny thing about experience with your medium is that the more you work with it the less experimental you become. Inherently, that will slow your production down. The more experience you have with medium the more critical you become of your output. You become more careful of your mistakes. That carefulness can kill an artist's career. Experience can be an asset or a liability. Luckily, I wake up more days thinking my experience is an asset and not a liability."

We gas up for our trip further into the Texas countryside and the past. He loathes my next question, "What inspires you?"

He colorfully informs me that it's a bullshit question and that someone's got to take that out of artist interview 101. But then he relaxes, saying, "Life inspires me. You do, history, people, places, animals, weather, plants, filling a gallery with paintings, and at times my own paintings do."

I go back to the early days, preceding his definition of himself as an artist. It is 1991 and he is young and owns a tropical fish store in Orlando, Florida. He is painting the windows of the store with reef scenes in the midsummer heat and boredom of a slow retail summer. The dazzling colors and patterns of tropical fish still influence his work today. "What were you feeling when you were painting the windows of your fish store?"

"Other than hot, the thing I remember most was a surge of confidence. Something in the feel of the brush, the paint, and the glass made me feel like I'd grabbed a key to something very important to my life. It wasn't about painting the fish. It was more serious.

I sensed something in the connection of paint and glass. It's so different from the feel of paint on canvas. I ask if he saw the handwriting on the wall designating him artist. "I didn't see it, but I felt it."

"Are there any pictures of that window?"

"I don't think so." I grimace with regret - I want to see the genesis.

He informs me for the first time in five years of knowing him that the window was not reverse glass painted but painted simply on the outside of the glass.

"How long did it take you to start the reverse glass painting style?"

"Five months."

"Why so long?"

"I had a vision of painted broken glass - shattered but bound by the paint. That vision led to curiosities about the possibilities of the medium. Terrible experiments with broken glass eventually led me to the reverse glass method."

Today, Gallery Four is full of twenty large acrylic paintings in celebration of his ten years as a career artist. The vibrant acrylic on acrylic pieces glow with iridescent and metallic highlights. Chris' canvases are also hugely popular, but the acrylic on acrylic method has become his signature. It is this technique that allowed Chris to leap frog up the chain of four galleries he created to exhibit his work. Growing from small gallery/studios to his large Dallas gallery and multiple dealer relationships across the country, he is as masterful at selling his work as he is at creating it. Many of his clients have more than one piece. At his openings, there is an air of friends returning rather than clients.

We are sitting at a stop sign, and Chris asks me which way. We take a left and accelerate into a corner.

"How have you changed as an artist since the early days?"

He smiles broadly and says flippantly, "I get paid now." Then allows, "Getting paid for painting is one of the most vulnerable issues in the art world; the arbitrariness of value. Once value is assigned like a point system it changes people's comprehension of the object. A 55 million dollar Picasso equals 55 million points - that wins in the art continuum. Everyone agrees to abide by Christie's, Sotheby's or the museums' valuations. It's one of the most subjective things in the world. Ultimately, people can only understand the value of a piece to themselves not anyone else. But once 'Value' is articulated that becomes what's important. When you talk about worth, it can be absurd. At some level, it's completely insane to value art the way we do as a society. Think about paintings that fetch in excess of what some third world country's GDP amounts to, and worth takes a twisted turn. When you take the comparative value of that Picasso versus the value of the same money for world relief, it seems way off balance. With my own paintings, I ask myself, 'Would I rather have the painting or the check?' If I evaluate the value a work will bring to someone's life, and the client agrees with me on that value, then, I get paid."

I am struggling to write. The road is making my writing nearly illegible, and he's speaking so quickly... "Slow down!"

He apologizes, and brakes - suddenly the world outside slows to calm and comprehensible. Life with Chris is often this way - it is just the speed his brain moves. I try and keep up.

We resume.

"How does being from Florida, your love of fish, and the ocean influence your work?"

"Water. Water is the most powerful and creative force that exists.

It's an element that's shaped nearly everything around us. Our planet wouldn't exist. Living in Florida, you feel the fullness of the water and everything that comes with it - all of the life. All powered by the sun. Not like Portland or the Northwest Coast. They may be swimming in water, but they don't have the sun to catalyze it. Florida fills up with water and burns with the sun...filling and emptying. Full of life."

There is a long full pause and I look over to see his eyes full of tears.

He is verklempt, and Homesick with a capital "H." Just describing his home state, it is apparent how difficult the transition to land-locked Dallasite has been.

"Living around that permanently influenced the way I see the world. Water connects all living things. Florida has an interesting presence that's very affecting. You either get Florida or you don't. "

He glances in the rear view mirror, "And the fish you asked about, I handled 400 different types of tropical fish from all over the world. The brilliancy of their colors, the iridescent patterns definitely made a lasting impression on my color theory."

We realize we've been driving without regard for direction and no map in the car. Briefly we consider stopping for a map, but neither of us want to halt the flow of our conversation. I glance at my page of scribbled questions.

Onward.

That Chris' paintings are abstracts to be filed under the heading, "Abstract Expressionism" is undeniable, but their universal appeal seems firmly rooted in nature. A review of his show titles reveals: Fauna, Elements, Soleil, Liquid, Blur, and Astral Showers. His style is mercurial changing from the saturated geometrics of his youth, to floating color fields, and ultimately morphing to the highly organic compositions of today. Robert Ellis Patterson, an early dealer and friend coined the word, "organimatism." to describe Chris' work.

Chris' take on this is, "My current work exists based solely on observations of nature. I pursue the harmony of the organic. The closer a piece is to natural formations or patterns the more successful I feel it is. Using the same forces nature does, I try and manipulate heat, wind, water, and pressure to harness a natural vision. There is a great art piece by, I believe, Marcel Duchamp. I can't remember the title, but he left a piece of glass in nature for a year and then represented it as art. It's an example of the artistic effect of time and weather. It also challenges what we think of as art. Andrew Goldsworthy is another manipulator of nature I admire."

He pauses looking out at the east Texas fields, "When you observe wood grains, the veining of a marble slab, the alternating colors in petrified wood, sand dunes, rivers, mountains, deserts, cellular formations, they are all inherently poetic and attuned to the laws of abstraction. Study them closely, and you'll identify compositions of wondrous abstraction. We are surrounded by these masterpieces."

I think about what Chris uses to achieve his own masterpieces and laugh: leaf blowers, heat lamps, blow dryers, spray bottles, drills, squeegees - not Mother Nature's poetic tools, but striking results nonetheless.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Munich curator of reverse glass painting, Simone Bretz, states, "Well-executed reverse-glass paintings do not reveal the complexity of their manufacture. Since the designs are applied to the back of glass panes they must be built up in reverse - starting with the foreground and working "backwards" - which makes corrections virtually impossible."

Chris has described painting this way like a chess game - thinking four or five moves ahead to avoid literally painting himself and the piece into a corner. The simplicity of his pieces belies a complex underpinning of thought and technique.

"Do you feel a growing mastery of your medium?"

"Absolutely. I feel as though I'm at about a 40% level of mastering the possibilities. That percentage parallels with my age - I'm probably 40% done with life."

"How does ten years of experience affect your perspective?"

"Ten years allows you to start answering these questions. The retrospect is a ticket to talk about it. There are also areas I know I can't speak anything about. My only education is my experience with the tangibles of living as a career artist negotiating my work and life in the art world."

The word, 'education' prompts me to ask his philosophy on self-educated artists vs. university-educated artists.

"As it affects me personally, and the creation of my art, it is very insignificant. In the business of art, it affects me greatly. The art business has an unfortunate tendency to devalue talent that's self-expressed or not formally trained, unlike the music or entertainment industry, which celebrates it. I mean who cares if your favorite musician was schooled or not, or if your favorite actor went to Julliard?"

I bait him with next question knowing full well what his response will be. "Can talent be educated?"

He raises an eyebrow and replies, "Art existed before universities! Cave paintings, tribal pictures. Process can be learned, materials explained, history can be theorized, and students get pseudo-subsidized access to studio time so in that sense yes. Does it make artists that weren't already on their way since birth? I don't think so. In today's reality, most artistic expression is channeled, prepared, and properly presented to society with a series of acronyms placed behind the artist's name. I'm not from that mold, but I don't let it affect my work. I can't. I have ideas of exploring schooling, but I'm too engaged by my work right now."

We stop speaking briefly between questions for my hand to uncramp, and for enough heads-up time to prevent the interviewer from getting carsick.

"What are your goals for your work?"

"Simple. For my paintings to challenge me, inspire me, provide for me. I hope to see intricate natural patterns at work, the natural tempo the lines form, or subtle fractionalizations of color. The pursuit of these defines my paintings as failure or success. Successes allow me to let the paintings go. Failures are the constant correction of a focusing vision."

He climbs down from his ambitions for a moment. We pass a nondescript church at a junction. There is a tall metal slide sitting like a beacon reflecting the sun. A playground relic that would burn the back of your legs all the way down on a hot summer day. We stop the car and walk over to it both of us silently referencing the feel of this type slide from a hundred different memories. Chris climbs to the top stumbling on a loose step on the way up. He rates the ride down a disappointment.

Nearby, a decrepit merry-go-round sits beneath a huge tree. The wooden slats are like driftwood - some missing, but the curved metal handholds beg to be spun. We debate the age of the ancient go-round, and then I cannot resist a ride down the slide. I rate it higher than Chris strictly for nostalgia's sake.

An abandoned school bus across the road catches his eye and he wonders about the grandness of things when they were new in the face of their now imminent decay.

I have another question that will make him groan, but I plow ahead hoping even an ill-conceived question might lead us to an exciting answer. "What is your favorite part of painting?"

He laughs ironically and says, "Flexible hours?"

"My favorite times are the beginning and ending of a piece, and then again when it finds a home. But those are also some of the most frustrating times. The middle process, well."

He stops, and never really picks up that thread instead following a tangent that is probably brilliant, but that will be forever lost to posterity due to his driving and a bouncing legal pad.

I ask him about a charity project we have dubbed Kid's Creations.

"The idea came from Jim Gause in 2002 to work with the kids actually affected to create something for their own fund raiser."

Charities ranging from Scottish Rite, to Make- a-Wish, and the March of Dimes have benefited immensely.

"Painting with over 13 groups of children in three years, and raising close to \$100,00 from the auction of the original paintings and prints, has been rewarding in every way. It allowed me to fulfill a desire to take the good fortune I have, and give some of it back. It exposes me to the flow of pure creative expression that is only present when kids are creating without expectations or ego."

"Who inspires you?"

"It's hard to point to a few. The people who inspire me have done it with their zeal and conviction - leading with ideas and action. Bill Gates, Sting, Columbus, and the normal list of achievers - the Sinatra, 'did it my way' method. It makes me want to further my craft and my being. It's the courage to stand by whatever call you make that I respect. Follow through is inspiring. The list of people who've done that is long, but never long enough."

We are nearing Dallas now, and I am reluctant to end our field trip. Thoughts turn to the business we've locked up on a 'school day' for this madcap jaunt. "Could you talk about being an artist and a gallery owner?"

"The nontraditional role - has inspired and challenged me. I was diligent in my efforts to make it happen because I wanted to control the way my work was presented - even if it was ever to be presented. Having my own gallery has been a great opportunity and success for me. It is highly sensitive, and you've got to be careful because it's all so closely tied together. Everything must be kept in check. A lot of artists deal with the similar issues, but I have an immediate connectivity to people's response to my work is revealing and rewarding."

Chris parks the car in front of the gallery. I think of the success and reward of having created and sold millions of dollars of work that nourishes people daily. Most artists' dream of this. This artist reached for his vision, and stretches further everyday. That is the truest artist's statement imaginable