

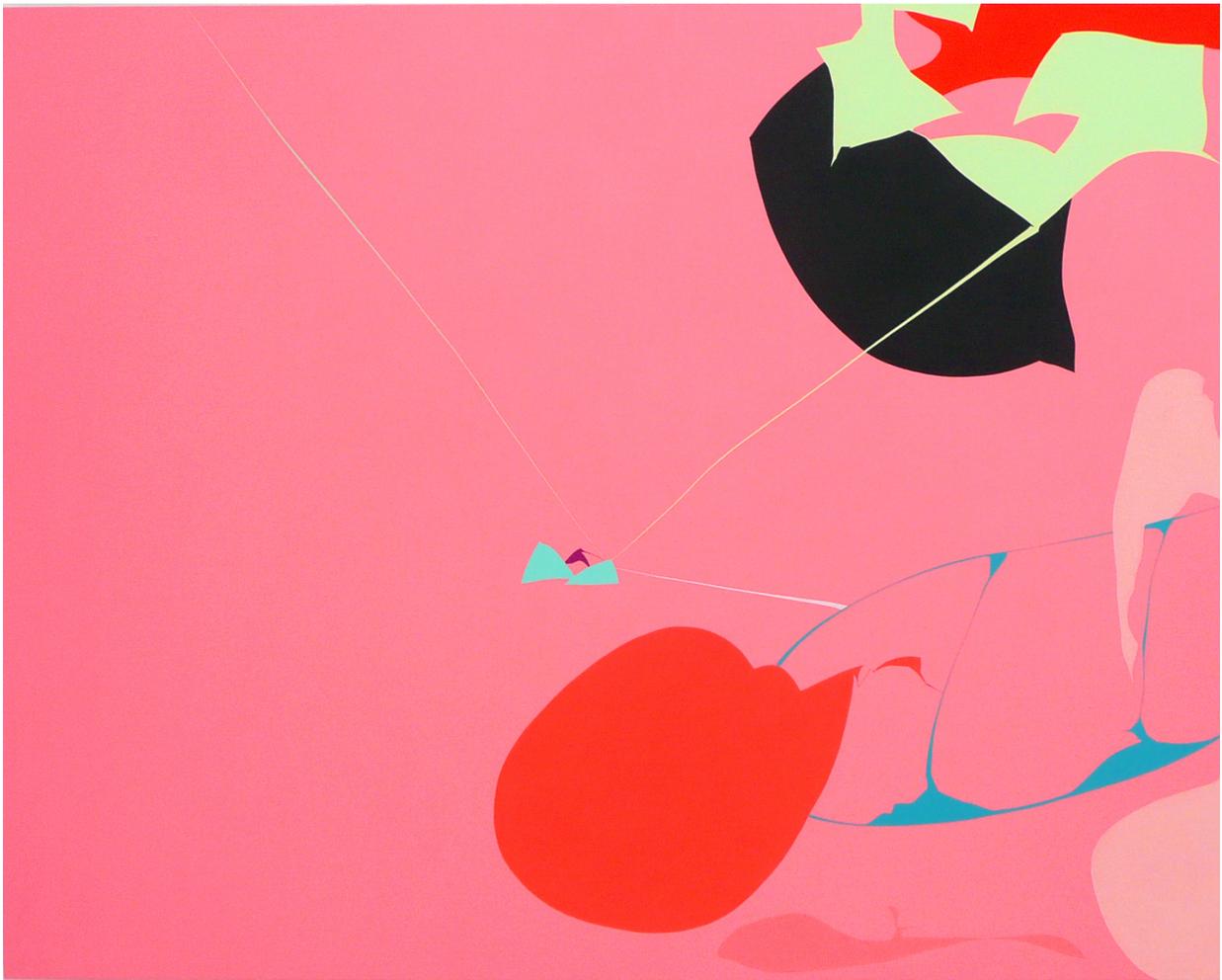
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KILLER TEXT ON ART

LOS ANGELES

HEATHER GWEN MARTIN

Luis De Jesus



Heather Gwen Martin, *Water Levels*, 2010

SINCE THE EARLY 1990s a particular aesthetic has been associated with abstract painting in the western United States, an aesthetic of over-the-top visual lushness that knowingly and aggressively updates ideas of "beauty," acknowledging our habituation to, among other things, synthetic materials and colors, and even the digital re-presentation of mundane reality.

Los Angeles, Houston, and, in particular, Las Vegas serve as the loci for this no-longer-new-but-still-pervasive aesthetic, but it should come as no surprise that one of its most persuasive practitioners should now emerge from San Diego, specifically from the University of California campus - where a similar affront to the art world's dominant "ugly-is-serious" trope had coalesced two decades earlier in the Pattern & Decoration movement.

Heather Gwen Martin began her studies at UCSD at the height of the "beautiful abstraction" tendency; according to her mentor, Kim MacConnel, even her earliest works "stood out in their commitment and sophistication." Recognizing a kindred spirit, Pattern & Decoration veteran MacConnel cultivated Martin's innate abilities and leanings, and the result is a body of work that still stands out in its commitment and sophistication - this time in the world, not just in the classroom. The tendrillous lines Martin employs, and the bulbous but brittle shapes she describes with them, appear in other contemporary painting and (especially) drawing, as does her palette, especially its almost painfully vivid chromatic levels. But nobody - nobody - else employing these now-commonplace formalisms makes them work this way, or even achieves quite this level of power, allure, and eloquence.

Martin clearly derives her intricate, tensile line from both nature and computer; but at heart it comes from her own hand, and its dogged quirkiness harks back to no less than Arshile Gorky. (The recent retrospective at MOCA provided ready comparison.) In a sense, Martin is an nth-generation abstract expressionist, devolving Gorky's branching gestures much as James Brooks and Conrad Marca-Relli and William Baziotis (and, yes, John Altoon and Jay de Feo) had. At the same time, her intense colors - and, especially, her raucous color combinations, sliding close hues and values almost painfully upon one another - owe a debt to the '60s-era hard-edge painting of such as Ellsworth Kelly, Leon Polk Smith, Jack Youngerman, Nicholas Krushenick and Deborah Remington. I have no idea whose work Martin knew previously (although, knowing MacConnel, he turned her on to at least some of these predecessors), but in this case

we're not talking influences, we're talking shoulders of giants. This is the panoply of American painters in which we can already place Martin.

Of course, the 33-year-old Canadian-born artist - who did grad work at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago - is a child of her time as well. In both her palette and her line, and especially in her tumultuous composition, with its eddies, zigzags, abrupt abutments and explosions - all rendered with the poised, crackling hairlines of digital rendering - you see her inherit not just from the aforementioned postwar masters but from more recently prominent painters such as Inka Essenhigh in New York and Los Angeles' Monique Prieto. The level of excitement doubles, then, looking at Martin's paintings: you experience an exhilarating eyeful, gorgeous, smart, risky and vertiginous, and at the same time you witness an American tradition coming to a head in its latest iteration.

- Peter Frank