

## “TEN” AN ARTISTS’ STATEMENT VIA INTERVIEW

The tiny red car is careening down Texas Farm Road 1390 at 80 miles per hour. Christopher Martin 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.

It is one o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon. On McKinney Avenue in Dallas, Texas, christopher martin Gallery Four sits locked during business hours. Today, Gallery Four is bursting with 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 paintings are his signature method. It is this technique that carried Chris up the chain of four galleries he created to exhibit his work; two in Uptown Dallas and two galleries along McKinney Avenue over ten years. Many of his clients own more than one piece, and at his openings, there is a sense of friendship that supersedes the collector relationship. Christopher is as masterful at selling his work as he is at creating it.

Christopher's first attempt at an artist's 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 banal 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. Two universal truths about artists have led us to this moment:

*ONE: 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. In celebration of his TEN year show, three weeks of pleading for a new artist's statement have brought us to the eve before it is due

*TWO: 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 is a frustrating task especially when writing about abstract art.

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 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."

He loathes my next question "What inspires you?" throwing me a sardonic look from under his crocheted beanie.

He colorfully informs me that it's a bull\*\*\*\* question and that someone's got to take that out of Artist Interview 101. But then he relaxes, saying, "Life inspires me. You inspire me. History, people, places, animals, weather, plants, filling a gallery with paintings, and at times my own paintings can trigger me."

We stop to gas up and drive deeper into the past. 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?"

"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."

"Are there any pictures of that window?"

"I don't think so." 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."

"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 without it.

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. Landlocked Texas is difficult to him.

"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."

The universal appeal of what are undeniably "Abstract Expressionist," works are firmly rooted in themes of nature. Show titles from years past reveal: Fauna, Elements, Soleil, Liquid, Blur, and Astral Showers. Christopher's 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, "Organismatism." 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 painting 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.

He pauses looking out at the Texas fields, "We are surrounded by nature's masterpieces. 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."

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 retrospective 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 can have subsidized access to studio time so in that sense yes. Does it groom artists who were not already artistic from 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."

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 us. 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 into the world. Failures are the constant correction of a focusing vision. "

Back in the Mini, I have another question that will make him groan, but I plow ahead, "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..."

I ask him about a charity project we have dubbed, 'Kidz Creations.'

"The idea came from a friend, Jim Gause, in 2002 to work with the kids actually affected to create something for their own fund raiser. The kids come to the studio to paint as a group and then that piece is sold at auction..."

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 \$100,000 from the auction of the original paintings and prints, is very rewarding. 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. I'm inspired by people with conviction and who lead with ideas. 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."

"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 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. I have an immediate connectivity to people's response to my work which is revealing and rewarding."

Chris parks the car in front of the gallery. I think of the success of having created and sold millions of dollars of work that inspires and nourishes people daily ~ many artists' dream of this. This artist reached for his vision, and stretches further every day.

*That* is the truest artist's statement.