

American Artist

"Going to California" *circa 1996*

The artist, Christopher Martin, is coming toward me with a fresh green creature on his fingertip. He is vibrating with excitement, "Look, it's a sign." He extends the crackly brown shell of a cicada topped by its former tenant, the most gorgeous big-eyed bug you can imagine. We've all seen the tiny brown prehistoric shells left behind. We know the buzz saw call that signals the dog days of summer, but have you ever *really* seen a *newborn* cicada? Huge black patent eyes and seemingly hand-painted 24-karat gilt accents evoke the scarabs of Egypt. Its' body is a spectacular mint green with sky blue gossamer wings. We admire it for a moment before it climbs from his hand, to his paint encrusted shorts, finally perching atop the shoulder of his technicolor paint shirt; a white V-neck who knows how many workdays and washes later. The earthy art critic, John Berger offered this legend of cicadas, "They say they are the souls of poets who cannot keep quiet ~ because, when they were alive, they never wrote the poems they wanted to."

It is the night before Chris leaves for Los Angeles to open a new gallery. Both coasts were considered. He chose the one with the sun. New galleries are nothing new. In the past fifteen years, Christopher has had at least six gallery incarnations in Dallas – all successful. Each left behind like a brown cicada shell so he could reincarnate young and green.

If Christopher Martin were a chartable stock, his graph would be *off* the charts. He is truly living the dream: fifteen years of painting gorgeous paintings and creating a substantial body of work, his own beautiful galleries, large commissions, big checks, a long list of collectors, and a painting

studio situated on four point two beautiful Texan acres. He has a happy family. And, CHM is also incredibly fit, driven, smart, and handsome.

Hate him yet? For the record, I should divulge now, that I am his wife. Don't let that deter you. I have much to report.

In the middle of America, it is Africa hot. From the deck of the painting studio, Bob Marley's, "One Fine Day," blasts to the weeds and butterflies. On the studio wall, a print scored at a flea market exhorts, "All fear is bondage." Christopher's studio sits atop a limestone dome with a cathedral view of the sky. Ten Mile Creek pulls a ribbon of trees through the Grand Prairie south of Dallas known as Cedar Hill, Texas. On the studio deck beneath tall wooden tables, four large dogs sleep on plywood floors drenched and splattered with paint. With the beasts underfoot, and the elevation, it's reminiscent of a feudal fort. A vein of quartz separates the studio from the creek. Coyotes, falcons, owls and snakes are more regular sights than our neighbors. In the fall, the red flags of sumac wave in front of the cedars that surround the fire pit in front of the studio. In the spring, wildflowers riot.

Chris surveys a dripping sheet of clear acrylic engaged in the random dance of governing water and pigment. He will be forty this year. As he paints, I ask the shirtless, Martin about the weight of being a mid-career artist. His answer is a good one, **"It's when what you've done buoys you and what you need to do rocks the boat."**

He checks himself, "Is that what it is? I'll feel like I'm mid-career in ten more years. Not yet." He looks at the sky squinting, "If you start when you're twenty, and end when you're eighty... that's sixty years. Then the middle is *thirty* years in..." He continues, "I've been doing it fifteen so I'm *quarter* career. Mid-career is when you peak. I hope I haven't peaked yet." Chris has always

maintained that he will likely never retire. **I would offer that he is as incapable of it as a shark is of pausing to rest, the quintessential workaholic artist.**

"How often do you want to quit?" I watch as the clear acrylic takes on tribal hues. The sun glints off strong shoulders as he washes color over the wet acrylic. There used to be a cedar grove at the studio's southern corner, but those were scalped for a helping of hot Texas sun. Something about drying times... "Saying it sometimes makes me feel better, but I never *really* want to quit. It gets harder to edit, and to make something you passionately love. There has to be a unique element that separates a piece from the 3,000 paintings you've already made."

When Chris and I first met, he thought he would die young. Thankfully, he doesn't speak of that anymore. In the spa cabin attached to his studio hangs a framed print, "The Chronology of Painters. Creators of Western Art 1250 to the Present" (which in this case was 1950.) A gift from an early assistant, Robert Patterson, it serves to humble and capture the randomness of art history. Hung above the toilet, Christopher sees this print everyday, if it still registers. Bands of color floating above each artist's name correspond to their life span. Chris has lost two dear assistants and champions of his work. Kolin Ooi, his Malaysian assistant of nine years and Robert Patterson who was Chris' gallery director for three years from 1999 to 2001. It is such a loss and a shame. Everyone needs the lodestar of people who know where you come from, the ones in your corner with sponges and Vaseline saying, "Get back in the ring and kick some ass." Kolin knew when Chris was painting well and when he wasn't. But his motto of "No Problem" was usually just the tonic Chris needed to keep moving. Kolin cared deeply about Chris, leaving a painful hole in the fabric of family and work as he departed a year ago.

A scholar of abstract art, Robert always maintained that Chris was destined for greatness. After

assisting Chris in Dallas, he represented Chris in his own Austin gallery for a time before his own tragic exit. Robert coined the word, 'organimatism' to describe Chris' work. Google it, and you'll find only my references to his apt word. He would love that.

Twenty-six degrees, four minutes north and eighty degrees, nine minutes west of the equator, Christopher was born in the latitude of Fort Lauderdale, 1969. He will always function best by the water. His doting and beautiful silver-haired mother, a good landscape painter, is the source of his artistic gene. His father kicked in the business acumen and optimistic visionary genes. Were it not for a reversal of fortune, the whole family might be yachting in the Bahamas. Both of Chris' parents have worked tirelessly in the gallery sharing their talents and energy to see that Chris' success continues. That it's a family affair has always been a blessing; it's the Martin Way.

Being in control of his gallery space in addition to creating the art has been the formula from the beginning. Not many artists have the *cojones* or energy to run their own gallery.

There are those who cast stones with the pejorative of "vanity gallery."

When asked about this, Chris will tell you, "I have a venue for my artwork to be seen and purchased. I enjoy the business aspect of being an artist. It's a challenge and something I find extremely engaging. Self-representation takes something that is 50% and makes it 100%. A lot of artists have done it throughout history and engaged that process."

He cites Damien Hirst selling his work through Sotheby's and effectively self-representing. We argue for a moment as I think it's completely different since there is no Damien Hirst Gallery, but I let it go. Often, we are like puppeteers pulling each other's strings and laughing at the known results. Pursuing this argument would be futile. I have ten years of them to prove it.

The National Endowment for the Arts funded a study called, "Artists in the Workforce from 1990-2005," which researched artistic trends based upon census data. The study found, "Compared with the American labor force as a whole, artists are much more likely to be self-employed. Almost one-third of artists were self-employed in 2000, compared with less than 10 percent of the labor force. About half of fine artists and writers were self-employed, with photographers at 42 percent and musicians at 35 percent.

This pattern of high self-employment was evident in the 1990 census data, but the 2003-2005 data indicate that the numbers of self-employed artists are increasing, with 35 percent of all artists self-employed, and each artist occupation showing more than 20 percent self-employed."

Seeing this, I know there are paint pioneers scattered across America living history that hasn't even been written yet - right now. As an artist's wife, the support I give him sometimes feels like a two-legged tripod. There are days I wish I could find the other painters living this dream in America. How many are there? Where are they? Who are they? I often wish for him his own Algonquin table or the Parisian salons in the early twentieth century... compatriots to commiserate, laugh, and drink with... Painting can be such a lonely occupation.

When I ask him with only a touch of irony, "What's it like living The Dream?"

He says, "You have to remind yourself it's a dream..." His blue eyes scan the distance thoughtfully, **"I guess the dream is a constant work in progress, not a place you reside.** When you have the kind of life we do and write it all down, it's blessed and magical, but it comes with a heavy toll." Selling over a million dollars worth of paint in a year takes a small village. It is one thing to paint to sustain yourself. Another thing entirely to support your family, and the growing list of assistants: the men who hoe the fields at the Martin Art Farm by sealing, constructing, framing and delivering the work,

the team of women who tend to the business details of the gallery, your "overseer" father, two kids, four dogs, a cat and a wife.

In the face of this sometime burden, I decided Christopher needed a holiday from duty and obligation, and conspired to surprise him for Christmas. **I try to do a respectable job as muse, but this time I may have overshot...** As the only bidder on a triple black Alpha Romeo Spider Veloce convertible on Ebay, I've now realized 'overpriced' might be a fair description. Especially since after two joy rides, the car went to visit the mechanic semi-permanently. But CHM will tell you even though it's not his be-all end-all dream car, that it is still his favorite gift of all time. Riding so closely to the road, that you can feel the seams in the pavement, the leathery smell of the hand-stitched seats, and the wind in his hair have a restorative effect on said artist especially when he drives the Alpha to his beloved yoga after drinking a large cupful of homemade vegetable juice. Cars are central to Chris' existence. We are in the car again as this conversation unfolds. No Mini Cooper of the interview from five years ago – it's a GMC Yukon – a beast of a car perfect for the 40,000 miles he has put on it this past year; both coasts for art shows, photo trips, and deliveries. 'The Kon' is usually stacked to the headliner with paintings.

Phone the neighborhood kids and warn them now. Apparently, The Dream takes a lot of hard work.

"Anxiety bites the nails of success." is Chris' favorite quote. Attributed to Bono, it is the distillation of

the way he feels about the view from his current pinnacle. As we talk and drive, Governor Clements' 2,000 acre former ranch unreels like a ribbon in the window behind him "For me, there are two perspectives you can take on creativity. One, every time you create something good, it pulls from a finite pool of creativity. Or, that it's a generative thing, the more you do, the more you create... the better it becomes." He leans toward the windshield resting on the wheel, "You fall into one of those two camps... and it can change on a daily basis. One day I feel like that, and another day I feel like, 'How many more of these expressions can I go through and be good at it?'" My hand is cramping as I wonder which is truer: that creativity is infinite, or capped by a quota of greatness? I vote infinite. "It's just," he bites his lip and glances in the rearview mirror, "it all comes back to your perspective and putting too much emphasis on success and failure. Is it a huge deal or no big deal? It's a paradox you're constantly balancing. I'm constantly moving and working in a way that can be really gut wrenching... It's tough – and feels hard right now. The majority of the time it feels challenging..." He hesitates before rounding out his dismount with the optimism that has buoyed his entire artistic life, "...with windows of coasting."

If you visit our gallery in Dallas, know two things. One, it is a world-class gallery space in every respect. I would covet it if Chris and I walked into it in any other city. Two, it is a beautiful mausoleum in the midst of the misnamed Victory development. We are lucky to have a devoted following, but it has been like watching a watering hole dry up in the Okavango Delta. Some days it feels like we're the last crocodiles in fast drying mud. It is because of this that the expansion to LA feels acutely relevant. Timing the swing from the platform of the known ~ to the trapeze bar of 'The Next Right Thing' can feel perilous.

I ask him about the next plum he'd like to pick.

The analogy escapes him and he says eloquently, "Huh?'

The universe sends me a better analogy as we pull up to a "T" intersection with a grimy white building painted with the words, "Third Wish."

It is absurdly unexpected and surely inspires everyone passing it to daydream. We look at it, and I say to him archly, "Well?"

He says, "I already got my first two... First, to do what I'm doing and have it provide for a living. Second, to marry you."

He is really not stupid this artist husband of mine.

"Third, healthy kids."

This wish is likely motivated by his work with sick children.

The Kidz Creations paintings he paints with children have raised well over \$250,000. It is never lost on us how bitterly arbitrary life can be after a painting session with the children.

"You get four?" he asks.

"You tell me."

"Hell yes."

He contemplates a moment, "Wishing for happiness is too subjective. My fourth wish would be calmness and being at peace with myself. Contentment. Even being content with change. Contentment, faith, and execution, and that all those things can live together with ease."

Faith is not a word Christopher uses often. Most religions annoy him, so it's necessary to follow up on that one.

"Faith in what?'

"That the next idea is good, and that something better will come of it. Faith in my ideas and the ability to execute." I take it as a good sign that already the colors he is painting with are more exuberant. Our company is Radiant Fortune after all....

All great artists are blessed with patrons. Chris is lucky enough to have a few.

The Packer family of Dallas owns one of the most dynamic and comprehensive collections of Chris' work. Their beautiful home is museum-like in its display of the gorgeous large-scale pieces they have collected over the last twelve years. As asset manager of a large real estate portfolio, Melayne Packer has played a role in shepherding several corporate commissions to Chris, like the spectacular sky lobby paintings of the Wells Fargo Plaza building in Houston Texas. A diminutive platinum-haired angel, our Lady of the Arts, Melayne, says, "To look at his paintings is to be transported from where you stand into his translucent yet deeply colorful world. Then you meet the man behind the art, and you think to yourself, 'Of course!' Because Chris can articulate with clarity how he views the world. The best part is that he shares with us that world, which is gorgeous, through his eyes. My husband and I have collected many of his pieces, and we love that our home is immersed in his art. My favorite piece looks like so many suns and planets exploding in a happy universe. It's a trip worth taking!"

There are the Wills of Arlington, Texas, the married couple that verge on addiction with a prolific collection of sixty-nine pieces dating from their first purchase in 1997 from the Milan Gallery in Fort Worth. When Chris does work with other galleries, they have usually been family-owned. The Milan Gallery of Fort Worth and The Kodner Gallery of St. Louis are outstanding examples of respected family-run galleries that have been great partners over the years. In the twelve years Tal Milan has

represented Chris' work, he will tell you, "I have had no other artist that I've given more shows over the years than Christopher Martin. Chris has been the consummate artist! Always pushing his techniques to new highs. Almost yearly, we have watched him grow his talents and reinvent this unique style of art. I have said many times, 'I believe Chris to have the golden touch.' He is an artist that continually betters greatness. One very important facet is that his work appeals over and over, so the clients always have multiple pieces. They never stop at one purchase."

The Wills are the perfect example of this. When I playfully ask if Dale and Cindy Will need an intervention, Dale tells me, "It is a multi-faceted answer. Over the years the allure of Chris' work has been its constant evolution. His work has remained vibrant, unique and timeless - we never tire of looking at our pieces. Our friendship has played a role - it is great to hear the story behind the paintings, it makes each one unique. Everyone associated with Chris (family, friends, employees, simply everyone) has an absolute and sincere enthusiasm for his work. The one thing we can say with surety is that we have never purchased a Chris painting as an investment - each one is hung and enjoyed whether it is in our house or the overflow gallery ~ the neighbors. **Some may say we're addicted. In the kindest, gentlest way, we simply say we need more walls.**"

The spectrum of Chris' collectors runs the gamut from former President George Bush Sr., who was given one of Chris' 9-11 flags as the recipient of The Joseph Prize, to the retired bus driver who called raving after his lasik surgery about how bright his paintings are, to the schoolteacher who took two years to pay off her painting.

Brian Evetts, a friend and collector left his job in the world of finance for a year and a half hiatus to work with Chris in the art world. When I ask him for any thoughts, he is happy to share them with me, 'albeit a shortened and sanitized version.' "I have been lucky enough to call Chris a friend for

about 10 years having been blown away by one of his paintings during a visit to the Dallas area for work. Upon first meeting him and getting a call shortly thereafter to join him for a drink, a friendly bond grew based on mutual respect of each other's life experiences and curiosities about business, pursuing success and enjoying life's journey. I got to know Chris during our endless late night discussions over my vodka and his bourbon. During these discussions, we routinely debated the day's political, economic, and social topics. Or better said, I tried to rebut what was usually a pretty adamant Chris on a topic for the day. We always turned to each other's business challenges and offered up insight; serving as a sounding board for frustrations and successes. I became very impressed with Chris's business knowledge and how he applied his creativity and entrepreneur based approach to business and life. I was an Executive Director for a software company that sold to predominantly financial institutions. We routinely held seminars where we brought executives from some of the world's largest financial institutions together for joint discussions and presentations. I brought Chris in as a guest speaker. It was always an audience of bankers, who worked in a profession that was very regimented, structured and worlds apart from the field of art or the life of an artist. However, Chris was able to establish a strong bond with these folks through his ideas about creativity and approaching each day as if it's a clean canvas from which to define success. His life story and approach to day-to-day living truly became an inspiration to those he spoke to and we leveraged Chris routinely for motivational speeches. I was always blown away by their reactions and how inspired everyone felt after hearing him speak.

We began to talk about the opportunity to expand his career and extend the focus of his marketing efforts outside of the Dallas area and outside the boundaries typically defined by

galleries representing artists. As we were brainstorming these ideas, I was getting bored with the grind of corporate life. I was always inspired by Chris' do it yourself approach and over time decided that if I was ever going to pursue life outside the closing walls of the corporate world, that now would be the time to do it. And who better to do it with than a good friend who defied the laws of needing or wanting to work for someone else? Even though I had a fairly luxurious lifestyle, and a steady executive position that took me all over the world, I left it all for a cause deeply rooted in my heart: a desire to help Chris be successful in his career as an artist. I spent a year and a half helping market Chris throughout the country by talking to galleries, art consultants, designers and architects about Chris' works. It was one of the most rewarding experiences I've had, having a chance to work with a good friend, traveling the country and selling what I believed and continue to believe is a revolutionary talent in the field of art. Chris is not even close to being recognized on the national and international level that I believe he will be over time.

Through all of that work effort, one constant remains, my respect and admiration for Chris on a personal level. He is caring, thoughtful and would do just about anything to assist those in need whether it's his family, his friends, the kids he supports through many of his charities, or a stray dog he finds in the street. On top of it all, his artwork continues to evolve and impress. The opening of his first gallery outside of Dallas in Los Angeles is exciting for me for the obvious art collecting opportunities that it will present, but also for knowing that it is another small step in what will continue to be an evolving and expansive career for Chris the artist and yet another journey I get the opportunity to discuss with a good friend."

Chris and I pass a rock dealer. How nice to be a rock dealer. Rocks never go out of style, there's

always a need, an endless supply, and the people come to you and haul them away. I often marvel that Chris keeps producing and reinventing. He can't just pick up the phone and reorder inventory... But people *do* call and order "stuff" up on the phone from him... He makes it look easy to "paint to order," but it is a tall order to match someone's nebulous expectations. "Commissions..." was there ever a more stifling word? Often the check can be freeing, but the execution can be knotty. He has painted two three-story paintings for the sky lobbies of the Wells Fargo Plaza in Houston. His metallic halide photos grace hotels and restaurants in multiple cities. And there is the most recent installation, a 54' x 20' painting in the lobby of the spectacular Equinox spa and gym in Dallas.

Chris' inspiration is the pursuit of intricate patterns that mimic nature. As he creates, he manipulates heat, wind, water and pressure to achieve that end. Subtle fractionalizations of color like those found in petrified wood, the veining of a marble slab, or reflections on water are the same harmonies he seeks for his paintings and photographs.

The extraordinary luminous circles that grace the sixty-by-twenty-foot wall of the Equinox Spa and Gym in Dallas were pitched without Chris ever having painted a single circular piece of acrylic. For two weeks, we all gave him a wide berth as he grumbled around the property, stomping about until he finally found his groove with the new medium with spectacular results. The current challenge occupying his paint table is a commission inspired by that same Equinox piece, for the lobby of the new Dove Mountain Ritz Hotel, in Tucson, Arizona.

Our son Conrad is speaking with his Daddy on the phone as Chris drives to Los Angeles. Chris stopped in Phoenix after driving 16 hours and sold a piece to collectors who live in the area. When three-year-old Conrad asks what his Daddy is doing, Chris says, "Daddy sold a painting today..."

Precious one-year-old Piper chimes in a singsong voice, "Daddy, painting...." Conrad hesitates, his blue eyes wide. I prod him gently after a moment of silence. "What do you want to tell your Daddy?" meaning only for him to tell him about our day. In a big voice, he says, "Thank you!" We laugh and laugh.

One week and three thousand miles later, The Martin Lozano Gallery in LA is open for business. Kandy Lozano, a phenomenal encaustic artist we represented in our fourth Dallas gallery, now lives in Malibu. She and Chris decided to open a gallery together sharing the risks and rewards. Fortuitously Chris sold a sizeable painting the first day the new gallery was open for business. Chris will tell you it feels like he's hiked to the top of a mountain to set up base camp for the next climb to the summit... He is tired but hopeful. The flag is planted. What will the view from this peak be? We joke that our next stop will be our own island, but it is definitely in the telescope. Check back in ten years to see if that is indeed our manifest destiny.

In 1996, Christopher Martin painted a fresh green painting and christened it, "Going to California," after the famous Zeppelin folk song. Thirteen years and an abundance of paint later, he creates the successor to that piece. He had to feel the road and scan the horizon before he was able to paint the expansive, twelve-by-four foot painting, "Gone to California." It is a vibrant, dynamic piece of work full of movement and depth, circles and light. It looks like technicolor raindrops on water. The last lyrical lines of Plant's song, 'Going to California,' "Standing on a hill in my mountain of dreams, telling myself it's not as hard, hard, hard as it seems," are where we find our hero today.