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Jean-Marie Martin at the Soho Center for Visual Artists

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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

JEAN-MARIE MARTIN AT THE SOHO CENTER FOR VISUAL ARTISTS



Jean-Marie Martin, *East River*. Techniques mixtes ; 182,8 cm x 182,8 cm x 91,45 cm. Montréal, galerie Trois Points.

Two major works by Jean-Marie Martin dominated the "Out of Found" exhibition at the Soho Center for Visual Artists. As the exhibition title suggests, Martin works almost exclusively with found objects. Nevertheless, his assemblages have the highly finished look of 90s deco: objects are selected from corporate furnishings, finishes are architectural.

Both works take the form of extended bas-relief, with a firmly established background panel roughly six feet square. A floor, on which three dimensional forms rest, is set at right angles to this plane. Martin's earlier paintings could be said to have been heading in this direction, with canvases animated by painted attachments of various kinds. But there is something distinctly new here. The artist has realized much more than an expressionistic, somewhat tentative push into the third dimension — he has found a meaningful resolution to problems in both two and three dimensions.

In the current exhibition, emotional content has been distilled in favour of a sparer, more cerebral statement. In "Levittown", Martin's painterly approach has been limited to a much reduced role, animating the copper-coloured background with the artist's gestures. In front of this, two gold-painted wire trash cans rest in sawn-off classical columns each set on an area covered with two cheap imitation Chinese carpets. This urban symmetry stands guard over a framed and formalized hole that penetrates the background plane and is lit by a shielded brass light, the kind that used to be found on old paintings in offices. The hole resembles a bank deposit slot, or the type of old fashioned maildrop to be found in elegant skyscrapers. Roughly six inches square, the opening seems to invite you to put your hand in it, but its impassive glow seems as it is ominous as enticing. Empty, it is the enigmatic focus of this work. The copper panel is attached with aluminum screws to the rear

structure, and the presence of the screws is emphasized by the use of washers. Below this panel is another, this time of cyan plexiglass illuminated from behind and reminiscent of contemporary computer screens. The bottom panel is painted in green *faux marbre*.

The contrast between the illuminated areas and the others, the blend of sedate furnishings with the high-tech and ultra practical, all combine to create an unsettling effect.

For all the fascination with surface and man-made materials, Martin's overall achievement is symbolic. The title gives it away. The elegant appurtenances, grouped around an empty centre, and the dominating presence of the trash cans suggests the artist's feeling about what Levittown the place is all about. The tacky Chinoiserie of the rugs, which might be said to suggest a harmless interior pretension, actually supports the overall design: it is corporate plan, insensitive to its occupants, regimented, rigid, and without humanity or creative insight. All the major elements arrive in twos, not only evoking the ark, or the kind or residence that would-be suburbanites might see as a refuge from New York City, but also suggesting how little originality, idiosyncrasy or even humble individuality most people feel entitled to claim. Levittown becomes a symbol of a misguided exchange; of a dangerous freedom that has been sold for a mind-numbing regimentation. Whose presence is most strongly felt here? Not that of the inhabitants, but of the builders, bankers, perhaps even the Mafia in the form of the garbage industry.

"East River" features a surface of fake granite, slate and linoleum tile. Again there is a strong suggestion of the presence of corporate America, and the intent of Martin's visual irony becomes clearer. In the midst of these "indoor-outdoor" surfaces is a framed fish tank, with a few real rocks at the bottom of its unnaturally blue water. The same shade of azure is echoed in the plastic panel in which the fish tank has been set. The message is clear: the blue, which seems so attractive at first glance, is chemically provided, and is visual notice of the river's death sentence. Even cleaned up, it provides nothing more hospitable to nature than a swimming pool might, filled with chlorine, algicide, urea treatments and, for cosmetic appeal, "Party Pool" (tm). Fishes are, of course, long gone, and so are plants, beneficial bacteria and the like.

The blue plastic emphasizes that this is a static rather than a living condition, and the water level,

visible at the top of the tank, suggests that the viewer is just able to keep his or her head above water. On the base of the piece rests an anvil boasting a new coat of bright copper paint. This too has the look of inappropriate effort – it is shiny and clean, but by no means restored to its original nature or purpose. It remains part of the debris of the river, an anchor, an albatross, dragging the viewer downwards.

The change in Martin's work of the most recent period is important. Here is an artist who has emigrated from Canada to New York, presumably to attempt to "make it" in the most famous art scene in the world. But instead of merely transposing the same work, even the same medium, from one place to another, Martin has discovered in the transition the possibility of a greater depth in his work. The sunshine may have gone from his palette, at least temporarily, but Martin's new use of found objects has a convincing sophistication. The slick surfaces appeal to the faddist decorator in us all. They are familiar. They exude the smug success of the eighties, a certain beguiling reassurance. The viewer, seduced into taking a longer look, receives a thought-provoking surprise.

The smooth, hard textures of Martin's found finishes make sure that his message does not emerge from the maudlin dregs of disappointed romanticism, but from a cool view of a harsher reality. "Levittown", for example, does not suggest that emigration solves any essential problems – an important observation for an expatriot to make, surely. Can the symbolism of minor refuges, local environmental disasters, stand for bigger, even global issues?