

Fred Martin's Art of Abstraction and Hermeticism
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A hermit wishes to be praised for his abstraction.
—Alexander Pope

Among meanings of the word “abstraction” in English are “a state of withdrawal or seclusion from worldly things or things of sense” or the act of withdrawing, separation or removal--and euphemistically, “secret or dishonest removal, pilfering, purloining” (<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00000895>). Abstraction is a hermetic art--both in the sense that a hermit is one who withdraws from the world for a time, and in the sense that Hermes himself has a long-standing reputation as a thief. The hermit is one who steals from the world, who changes the arrangement of things in subtle ways, who tampers with reality, and then disappears. Because of the speed and mastery with which the theft is committed, the natural world appears unchanged, but feels strangely--uncannily--different. The art of the hermit is the art of abstraction, of turning away from worldly things, pick-pocketing nature on the way out, then returning what has been lifted--but putting it back just slightly out of place.

Perhaps you will understand now, when I say Fred Martin is a thief! These days, it is common to speak of “appropriation.” Postmodern art trades on appropriation from the past--from past artists, styles, and influences. To appropriate is to challenge modernism and its foundational assumptions: that there is a lineage of art historical precursors or influences the artist must overcome to create original art, and the belief that the artist's inevitable goal is to express the authentic self. Some of Martin's work involves appropriation in this postmodern sense. He is a collagist and a juxtaposer of images, and an iconoclast at times, as I will show, but Martin's work is *more*. It is not easily reducible to any one style. He steals liberally from a treasury of visual images: from the Abstract Expressionists like Rothko and Still with whom he studied, from West Coast figurativists like David Park, from the beat and funk artists to whom he was an older brother figure, from the hippies he taught, and from his own vast memory of iconographical and geographical impressions. But there is yet another kind of theft in Martin's work that I want to focus on--theft in the hermetic sense of carrying something from one realm into another--in other words, his art of abstracting.



Fred Martin: *The Wheel of Fortune, Tarot Card #X, 1995.*

Acrylic on paper, 68" x 44"

Coll. Mr. and Mrs. Scott Cratty

This painting, "The Wheel of Fortune" is from Martin's 1995 "Tarot Series." In the catalog accompanying his show of these works at Shanghai University, Martin says he was interested not in "representing the images in an identifiable way, but entering instead the feeling of the image." (<http://www.fredmartin.net/tarotbook.htm>)

These are not pictures of Tarot cards, but rather the record of expressive acts, feeling-ful, non-pictorial paintings in response to the archetypal images of the Tarot. As Martin puts it, "...it's not a 'picture.' That is to say, it's not *of* something; it's a 'painting'—that is, it *is* something. It does not *re*-present, it presents. You don't look through it to something else, You look at it for what it is." (2001, p.3).



Fred Martin: *The World, Tarot Card #21, 1995*

Acrylic on paper, 68 x 44 in.

Here is "The World," another Tarot image from 1995.

Martin has spent nearly fifty years now, on an off, studying these images. That study, more than a meditation or reflection on the images, is a creative conversation with them, and with the different meanings they've had at different points in his life. The strange beauty of the archetype, its magnetism, lies in its elusiveness; it defies interpretation as this or that. There is not just *one* meaning, but *many*. The Tarot is an exoteric picture gallery of human predicaments (the minor arcana), and the cosmic forces that operate on humans (major arcana). The esoteric Tarot is tool for growth, for the development of consciousness and will.

Martin's Tarot is a mirror for the artist at this moment in time; but also a portrait of the artist, a conscious disclosure of the artist's deepest feelings. Martin's talk of "entering...the feeling of the image" in his paintings describes the act of coming to terms with himself in the present and marking (performing) that self-awareness. (<http://www.fredmartin.net/tarotbook.htm>)

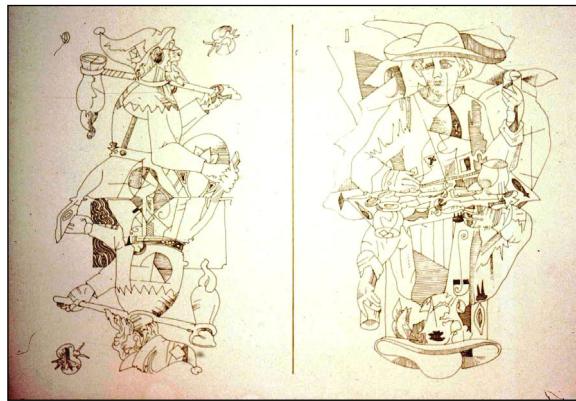
Il Bagatto, Tarot Card #1,

Visconti-Sforza Deck, Milan, c. 1450

<http://www.tarothermit.com/magician.htm>

This is a Tarot card from the mid-fifteenth century. It depicts “Il Bagatto,” the cobbler (the cunning artisan or craftsman). In the medieval social order, Il Bagatto is an artisan, a “nobod[y] operating outside the formal hierarchical world of the nobility” The cobbler’s “nobody-hood” allows him a kind of anonymity, an ability to disappear--to steal away--into the crowd. Here is the cobbler as he is depicted in an Italian series of painted cards of the Visconti-Sforza family of Milan--one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest versions of the Tarot. In later decks, Il Bagatto appears as The Juggler, and later as The Magician. His hat becomes a lemniscate--an infinity sign, and the tools and shoes on the cobbler’s table become the suits--the swords, pentacles, wands and cups--the elements of the natural world: air, earth, fire, and water, of the later Tarot. Also, in later versions The Magician holds a double phallic wand in one hand (a reference to Hermes) as he points toward the earth with the other, in an “as above, so below” gesture.

Martin first became aware of the Tarot in the fifties when he saw a deck that had been brought to California by an Italian farmer, his wife’s uncle, an immigrant from the old country. It was only later, in 1979, that Martin’s early encounter with these images bubbled to the surface and he seriously began using Tarot imagery in his work (<http://www.fredmartin.net/tarotbook.htm>). He left it for a while, then returned to it in 1995.

**Left: Bagatto from the Piedmont Tarot.****Right: Fred Martin: *Il Bagatto Sketch*, 1980**

This is a sketch Martin made from the dark image on the left. In Martin’s drawing, “Il Bagatto,” The Cobbler, is next to “Il Matto,” The Fool. These two are often iconographically paired: Il Bagatto plays carnival king to Il Matto’s motley jester or clown. These archetypal figures complement one another and keep each other honest. I see both of these reflected in Martin’s personality. He is both a painter and a critic; a devotee and an agnostic. Martin takes the same attitude toward his own work that he takes toward other art. Fred Martin is a passionate, expressive painter, who maintains a certain incredulousness or cynicism about Art with a capital “A.” He doesn’t think much about being hip, clever or trend-setting, and his own work defies categorization as this or

that style. He has lived through some of the major conflicts in Bay Area art--over figurative versus abstract painting, for example--and maintained his own approach.

Martin has a painter's eye--a discerning visual sense of what is important from the past; that is, of what *informs* painting. Martin is an historian and teacher, a re-teller of the oral history of making art--not necessarily the history of pictures, but of their creation. But while carrying on tradition, he at the same time maintains perspective or critical distance on the art scene. His work is personal--it has more to do with who he is now or was then, than with what is happening in the galleries. Martin has been successful and he has work in major museum collections, but he views the commercial art world as a big Wheel of Fortune; that, and his ability to achieve quietude, seems to keep his ego in check.



Fred Martin: *Il Matto Card and Tools*, 1979

Here is Il Matto, The Fool, making an appearance in Martin's studio. There is a balance of magic and foolery in Martin's process; he plays master and puppet; cobbler together of images, and one who mocks images when they become reified. It was interesting that when I asked Martin for a copy of Il Bagatto, he sent me Il Matto, and some of his Il Bagatto slides are marked Il Matto. This isn't surprising

when we consider their inter-relationship in his mind.



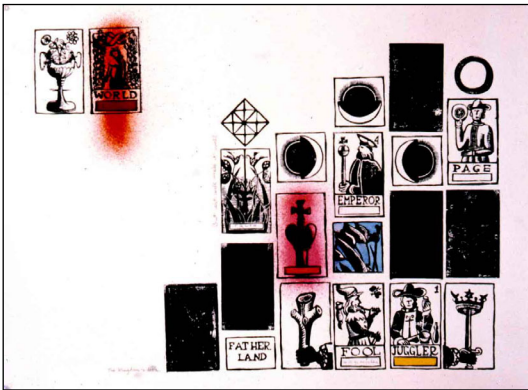
Fred Martin: *Il Bagatto Sketch*, 1979?

Here is the cobbler with the suits: the swords, pentacles, wands and cups. This was made after Martin completed a series of linoleum block prints based on each of the cards, and concurrent with a watercolor series he was beginning.



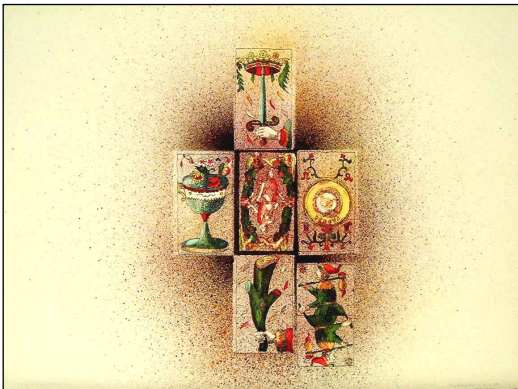
Fred Martin: *Sketch for a Portfolio of Etchings*, 1980?

Here the drawing is developed into a sketch for the frontispiece for a portfolio of etchings in 1980.



Fred Martin: *Linoleum Block Print*, 1980?

Here Martin pastiches together some of the linoleum block prints. In this one, Il Bagatto appears as The Juggler. Notice, again, he is next to The Fool!



Fred Martin: *Linoleum Block Print*, 1980?

Here are the suits again, surrounding The World and joined by The Fool. The Tarot is most often thought of as an instrument for divination. But to the hermeticist this is only one, relatively esoteric, meaning of the cards. The implicit challenge with the Tarot, as with other occult tools, is to recognize its culturally embedded lessons and put them into action in the present--in everyday life. In Martin, this means to abstract from them--to respect their

power, but to simultaneously maintain perspective on them. Martin is in two places at once! He is at once an archivist and a scribe, preserving elements of the original imagery so that it can speak for itself, and at the same time he stands apart, maintaining perspective, and regarding the symbols and structures of the Tarot as grist for the mill, as bricks in a continuous bricolage. This, I believe, is another aspect of Martin's abstractionism; namely, his ability to maintain critical distance and detachment from his art, his ability to not take himself too seriously or treat his subject matter too earnestly. The thief can't be too attached to stolen objects, but must live to steal another day. It is the *art* of thievery that matters in the end.

But there is another hermetic quality in Martin, a quality that emerges when he is at his most abstract.



Fred Martin: *Ace of Swords*, 1995

Acrylic on paper, 68 x 44 in.

This is Martin's *Ace of Swords* from 1995. What I see here is his physicality. He puts body and soul--but especially body, into his work. These paintings are more performances than pictures. But they are not just records, cross-sections, or snapshots of creative moments. They are active paintings without being self-conscious or contrived "action paintings." Our response to them is bodily and kinesthetic. Remember what Martin tells you about his method: "Keeping the same size helps the eye and body know where they are" (2001, p. 5). The *Ace of Swords* (meaning "air" and "communication") is a very straightforward, vertical, left-right, abstract painting.

This is an assertive, to-the-point, phallic (but not just phallic), painting. I see this as a statement, as an assertion of Martin's intellect and will--as a message and a demarcation. Because Martin makes his journals as available as his paintings and drawings, it is easy to see his works as markers or tokens he leaves at certain moments in his developmental process. Martin is perpetually engaged in a process of conscious self-transformation--more simply, he's on a Gnostic path. His paintings record not just new knowledge but new experiences along his way.



Fred Martin: *Untitled Self Portrait with Spine*, April, 1996

Acrylic on paper, 68 x 44 in. ([Click here to enlarge.](#))

This is another painting from 1995, "Untitled Self-Portrait with Spine." Martin's use of his own body gives his paintings an unmistakable physicality or presence. This constitutes another form of abstraction--the abstraction of taking something from one realm or plane and transporting it to another. Martin does this in two ways: First, he emerges from the studio, his sanctuary or private place, very forcefully and emphatically making his presence known. He takes something secret and makes it public, makes the esoteric exoteric, hiding secret wisdom in obvious and conspicuous places we'd never look. Perhaps this is a misdirection, a sleight-of-hand gesture to distract us from our overweening curiosity about the creative process--which of course is mysterious and can never be known! In this sense, Martin is a sly

man; he appears accessible but is ultimately elusive.

Second, Martin abstracts from his own bodily sensations, transforming felt impressions into something visible. His work affects us physically and kinesthetically, resonating with our own bodily experiences.

Peter Schjeldahl, in a recent *New Yorker* review of “Picasso Érotique,” an exhibition in Montreal of Picasso’s explicit art, noted that Picasso’s “chief passion was always for himself in action as an artist and a lover” (2001, p. 89). Schjeldahl contends Picasso and Einstein [!] share a “visual” and “muscular” sense--Einstein’s theories “felt satisfying” before he did the proofs. “What the intellect of each man required,” Schjeldahl suggests, “was already present in his body” (p. 90). I find a similar kind of reliance on the physical and bodily in Martin; he always seems to consult with his body in the process of making a painting.

Picasso’s sexual longings aren’t concealed in his work but are openly revealed. He doesn’t sublimate his lust through art; his works embody his passion, his masculinity, his bawdiness. Similarly, in Martin we don’t see sexual problems being worked out, we see solutions! We see Fred Martin’s comfort with his body, and his willingness to stand shamelessly naked. In contrast to the pathological narcissistic preoccupation of many postmodernists, Martin’s acceptance of his corporeal existence is healthy Narcissism.

Especially in this painting, Martin is abstracting in yet another way. He is taking something from one realm and moving it, uncannily, to another. Here is a powerful image of the Kundalini, the serpent power or energy that resides in the base of the spine. Martin’s painting is a phenomenological description of an altered state: Martin is exposing here something deeply internal, the generative energy activated in yogic practice, energy that runs through the spine from the sexual to the intellectual center. This painting has the feel of a Kirilian photograph or a neo-Reichian orgone trace. Martin once again abstracts, taking something astral and making it physical, taking something psychic and making it visual, turning himself inside out--exposing his secret process.



Fred Martin: *Triumphs and Terrors of Sex in Classic Form*, 1952

Oil on canvas, approx. 48 x 60 in.

Collection Oakland Museum of California

It is useful to contrast this with Martin’s earlier work--this is “Triumphs and Terrors of Sex” from 1952. Here he prettifies things, makes sexual issues into something painterly. I have the feeling here that he’s more self-consciously making an abstract painting, that he is more concerned with how it looks, and with sex as subject matter, at this stage, than with the painting as a pure

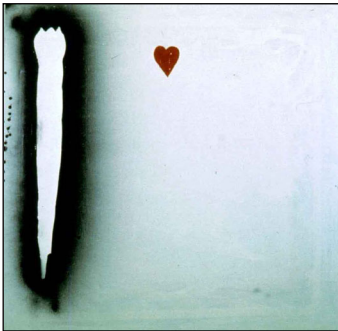
expression of charged feeling.



Fred Martin: *Illustration from Freshman Core Lecture*, 1996

Acrylic collage on paper, full size 44 x 30 in.

This is a detail of an illustration from a Freshman lecture by Professor Martin in 1996. In the lecture, he once again spills the beans about creation, by disclosing his own process. We are struck by the strong vertical again--a powerful red vertical slash that announces itself. I think Martin's vertical stroke is infused with psychic force. I resonate to its use. Seeing these images made me recall some of my own paintings...



Will Wadlington: Three *Untitled* paintings from 1974

...and the way, in the mid-seventies, I was exploring something visually similar.

I was interested in a vertical shape, the outline of a cobra skin I had, and which I turned into a painting. I don't think this invoked anything like the Kundalini-energies of Martin's paintings, but I liked the shape, and I was certainly thinking of the snake as transformer, and its skin as a physical remnant of transition from one realm to another.

The shape stayed in my work for a while. In the painting on the right, I turned it on its side.

But getting back to Martin, here are a few more of his paintings, from 1981.



Fred Martin: *Untitled*. July 15, 1981

Acrylic on paper, 68 x 44 in. ([Click here to enlarge.](#))

Martin provided these in response to my request for a slide of a painting, "Snake of Stars." I don't know if these are "snakes of stars" or not...but these have an astrophysical, Hubble telescope quality about them--they remind us of images of the creations of stars, of spinning galaxies, and of primordial ylem. But whatever they are, above all, they are abstract paintings.



Fred Martin: *Untitled*. July 22, 1981

Acrylic on paper, 68 x 44 in. ([Click here to enlarge.](#))

Describing the impulse to abstract painting, critic Donald Kuspit talked about a "will to unintelligibility," which he thinks emerges out of the modern artist's revolt against the Enlightenment ideal of rationality, the belief that the world is ultimately explainable. The abstractionist rebels against this belief by his or her "refusal to represent the world of shared reality" (p.119). Abstract painting is immediate and unmediated; it takes us directly to the realm of process and experience. It bypasses the conventions of seeing and acts directly on the senses. Martin is such an abstractionist rebel, whose spontaneous and muscular painting process repeatedly reminds us of the mystery of creation. Martin is also a transgressive artist whose cynicism about Art idolatry applies even to

abstractionism as an "ism." In this way, he reminds us what is really important--the making in the moment.

Kuspit also understands the urge to abstraction as a withdrawal from the world of false external selves into an inner world of authentic experience. "When we have become all too compliant to modern reason, all too accepting of its administration of our existences, all too emptily social and accommodating," says Kuspit, "we rebelliously revert to the archaic condition of authenticity." (p. 120). Martin's hermeticism is just such an abstracting of self from the over-administered, over-psychologized world. Martin's process is direct and spontaneous; he doesn't know in advance what will emerge. Instead, he uses the surface for divination--letting his inner psychic experience speak for itself. As Giambattista Vico said, the power of divining is not just "to understand what is

hidden *from* men--the future," but also "what is hidden *in* them--their consciousness" (1744/1968, p.102).

Martin's paintings are not representations of the archetypal images of the Tarot, but rather records of the ways in which he entered "the feeling of the image" on this or that occasion. This is an example of what Kuspit considers "the paradox of abstract art," that is, "primary process thinking...seemingly spontaneous...but apparently...cabalistically mediated, because of its non-representational form."

When Martin paints, he adeptly withdraws from the world of sense and reason, the world of calculation and planning, to an inner environment of solitude where he encounters what had been, up to that time, hidden from him. Upon his return, he reveals what he has found--but he reveals it in a subtle, abstract way. Just when we think we can grasp some revealed truth, it slips away, and we are reminded, by Martin, that the path we must take is the path of experience, not acquired knowledge. As one of our foremost hermeticist-abstractionists, Martin turns what is occult into something slyly revealed, and what is psychic and personal into something physical, tangible, and overt. Martin is here at this moment showing you his creative process, but like the hermetist he is, he'll just as quickly withdraw from this world and you won't know where to find him.

*Thus let me live, unheard, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me dye;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lye*
—Alexander Pope

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