Steer, Emily, “Sparkle and Sincerity,” *Elephant*, Issue 26, Spring 2016, pp. 134-141

SPARKLE AND SINCERITY

At first sight, you might assume that New York artist **CHRIS MARTIN'S** luminous, glittery work is intended as an ironic commentary on flashiness. The truth is quite the opposite. 'Irony is what I would call the academic trope of our time,' the former art therapist tells **EMILY STEER**. 'When you're using irony you don't face your own emotional situation and the implications that brings.'

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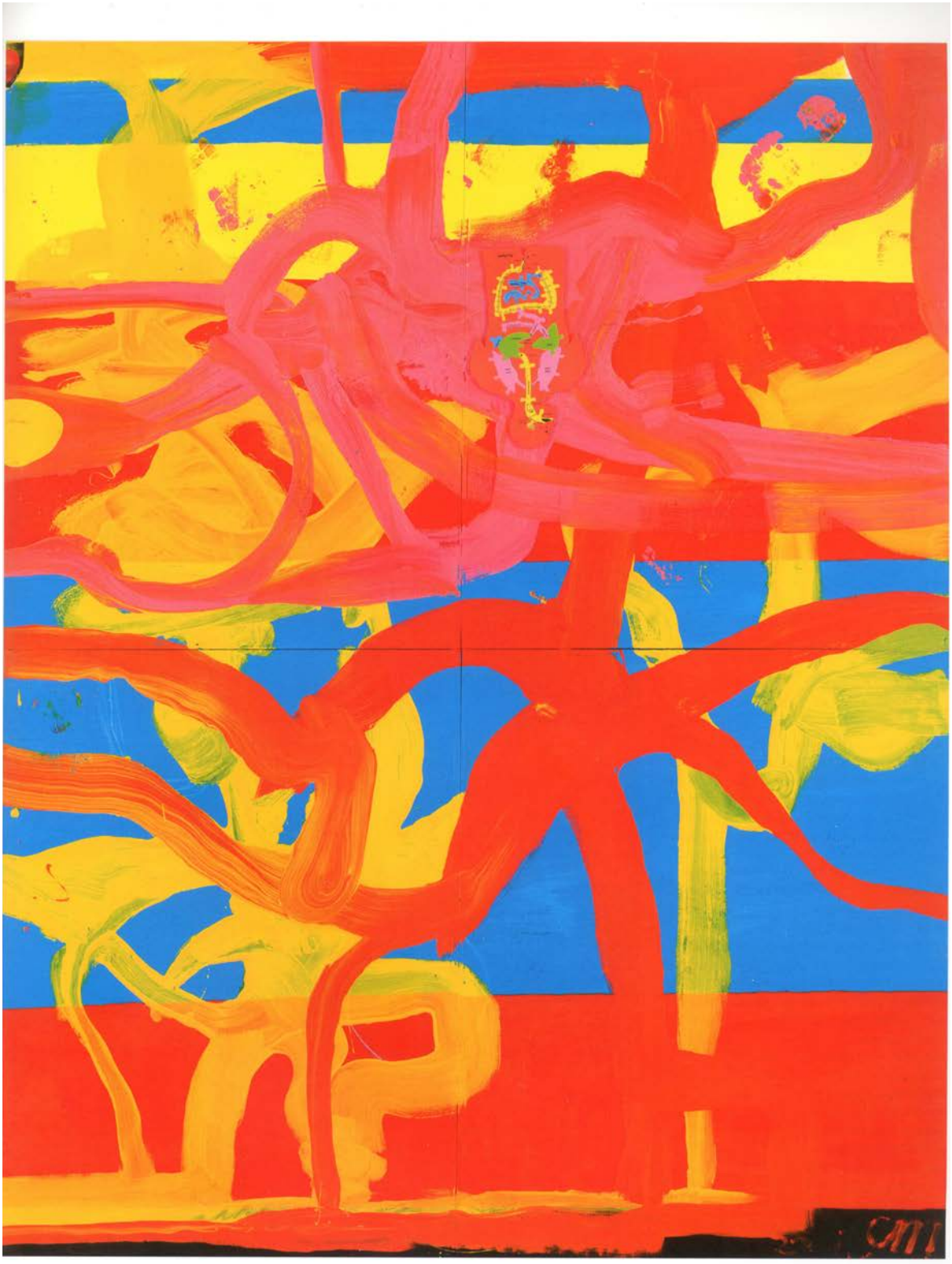

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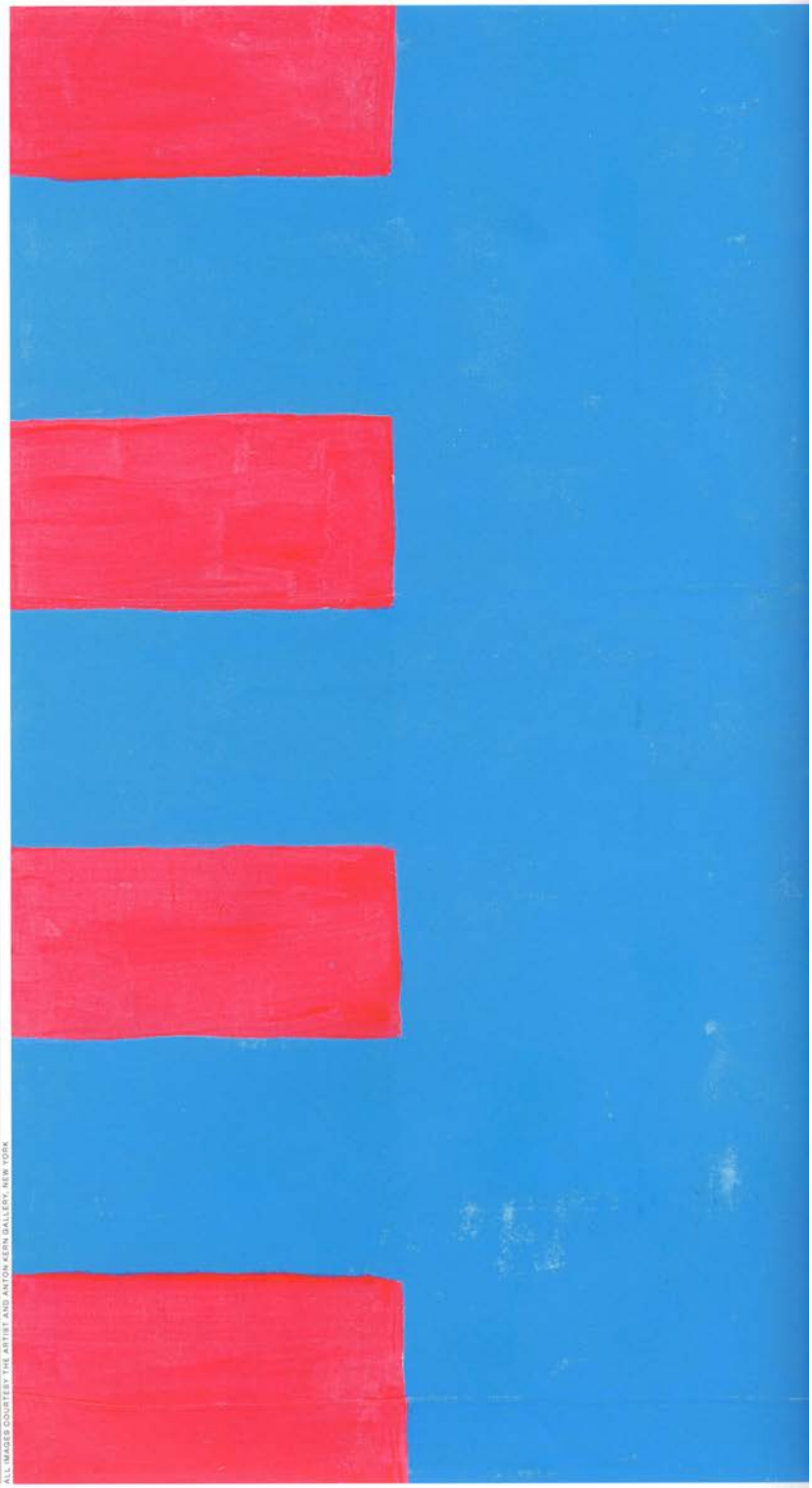
hen I first saw the work of Chris Martin in the flesh, I was struck by one thing in particular. Wow, glitter looks really awesome when there's that much of the stuff. This, obviously, was followed by a quick flash of shame. Excitement about large amounts of colourful glitter should surely not be vocalized in the middle of an art fair—this must be a trap.

I'm talking about Martin's solo exhibit at London's Frieze 2015 with the New York gallery Anton Kern. Commanding in scale, luminous of surface and neon in colour, Martin's canvases are a combination of naturally shaped forms, loose patterns and thickly applied glitter. The immediate feelings they communicate are joyful; they have a suggestion of 'hippy art' about them. His smaller works contain intense bursts of colour, as well as the occasional bit of Pop iconography, all served up with the same hands-on aesthetic. After an initial feeling of attraction towards the work—soon dismissed as the leftover childish longings for all that is disco—it seems natural to attempt to find the 'real' meaning. But concealing his meanings to trick an art viewing public and an art intellectualizing industry is not really the artist's style.

Martin was born in Washington in 1954, and has spent many years taking an unconventional route to his current position, via a BFA



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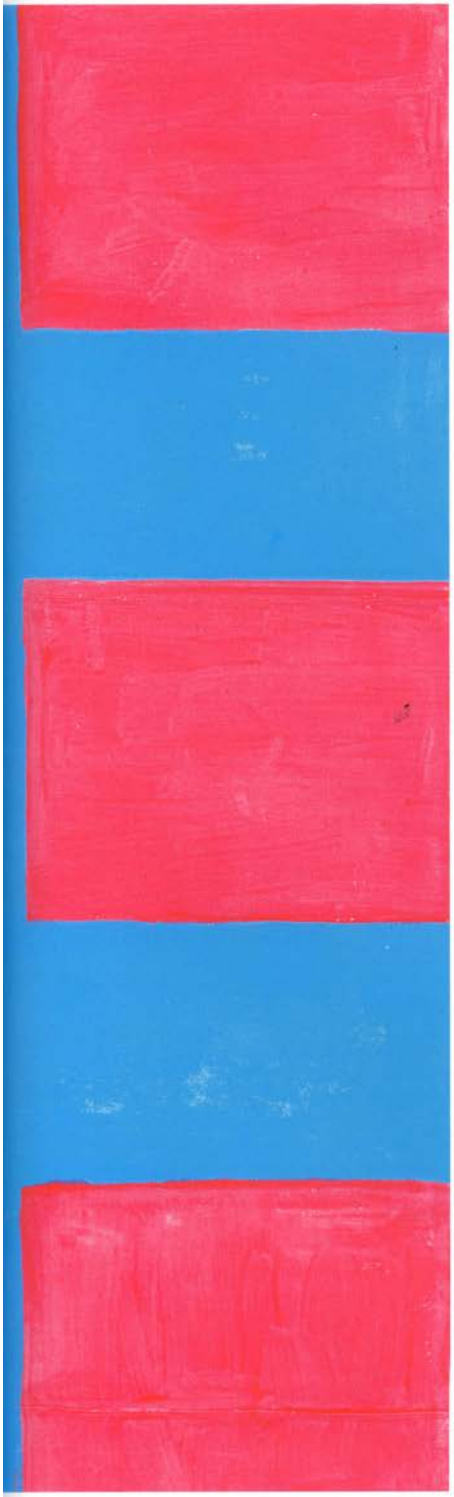

“PICASSO AND JAMES BROWN WERE THE TWO PEOPLE WHO REALLY LIT UP THE WHOLE THING FOR ME”

Certificate of Art Therapy from New York’s School of Visual Arts. He worked as an art therapist for 18 years. The more that you read about Martin, in fact, the more you realize how upfront his work is. You will hear his paintings with their New Age vibes described as ‘honest’, more concerned with immediate visual effects than cynical messages. There are stories of him inviting students to burn their work during his time as a tutor to allow them to loosen up their practice, not to mention a tale about him bringing bongos and a boombox to a talk at Columbia.

You’ve previously spoken about Richard Tuttle’s ability to step aside from a painting, rather than coming on strongly as ‘the maker’. Is this something that you feel when you create a work—the ability to step aside from it?
Well that’s almost a state of grace and it’s very hard. It’s when it comes together and you step back and go: ‘Wow, who did that? It’s really nice.’ One always hopes for that, that you can be of service to the whole tribe by presenting something that comes through you, but that is larger. The only other issue there is: Do we know what we’re doing? There is a certain trust that you don’t know what you’re doing, but that you carry on. That is the skill and maybe the experience, where you learn to deal with your own sense of discomfort or lostness inside a process.

I’ve read people describing your work as honest painting rather than something which is trying to be ironic or cynical, or trying to discuss the loaded history of painting. Do you feel that you have pure intentions?
Irony is what I would call the academic trope of our time. It’s much easier to do—but to focus on the irony is to be distant. When you’re using irony you don’t face your own emotional situation and the implications that brings. There was a time, obviously, when irony was a really fresh, radical thing for people. But once something becomes the dominant mode it’s safer. It’s a way of being removed from yourself and the process that you’re engaged in. In particular it’s used to distinguish fine art from popular art. You might use the drawing on the back of a motorcycle jacket or rock’n’roll posters or a Christmas card or something, but you’re not acknowledging the sincerity involved in a lot of that work. I actually try to do the reverse, which is to see not where it’s fake, but where it’s real.

I’d like to talk to you about your abundant use of glitter. Am I correct in thinking that it came from

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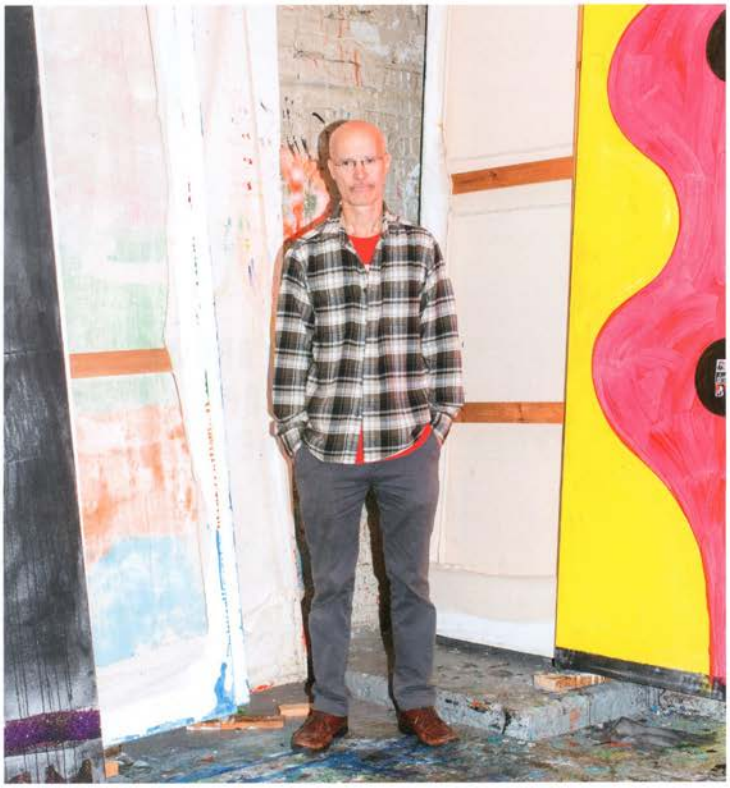

Portrait by David Brandon Geeting

“I THINK EVERY ARTIST SHOULD HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO BURN THEIR OWN WORK!”

your time as an art therapist, when a lot of your patients were using it?
Yes, that was where it started, and then I began working with it myself. Everyone loves glitter! But there was a certain point when I was looking around at what was considered unacceptable, what was considered bad taste. Looking at those areas is always very healthy. And you're looking at your own taste. I was thinking: Well, these patients want to use glitter, but that's because they're not visually sophisticated, they don't have fine culture—so of course they love glitter. And then you start to see your own prejudice: 'Glitter's not a serious thing, it's for kids and old ladies.' So when you see your own taste, it's a moment when a light bulb goes off. I tried it out and, unfortunately, I fell in love with it.

You have quite an interest in—for want of a better word—'outsider' art. But you are also accepted by the contemporary art world. Do you ever feel the need to pull away from the institutionalized art scene?
It's an arbitrary thing, but there are these distinctions that aren't arbitrary, they are based very much in keeping art as an exclusive domain of a high-society, upper-class situation. You're saying there is great value here because these are the special, famed artists. But if you accept the fact that some of the best art is being made by ten-year-old children all over the globe, then you suddenly lose your standards—and those standards are based on this exclusive club. There are great paintings just lying on the sidewalk, and there is a part of me that is interested in painting, any kind of painting: paintings in barbershops, graffiti art, paintings that kids do, paintings every conceivable way. I was always interested in that, but then when I worked as an art therapist it was very clear to me that the work my clients were producing was fantastic: it was really terrific painting. And they of course had internalized this opinion from society that said that their work was worthless, and they were worthless, and how could they be any good at painting because it was the first they had ever made.

Obviously the tribe has people who are great singers or great dancers and they're trained and they rehearse every day. When you see someone like that dance, it's something very special. But then at the same time, when there's a party going on everybody gets up to dance, and everyone knows they can dance. When you see someone who's having a great time dancing, well, that's great dancing! It's a very human skill, and the closer I stay with the very original impulse to make a painting, the better it is. You can never get rid of your own training, all the books you know about, all the paintings you've looked at. But there are moments when you do forget all of that—where it comes in through the back door when you're not worried about it.

So who were your main influences when you started out? Were they visual artists, or did they come from the wider world?
Really it was Picasso and James Brown. Those

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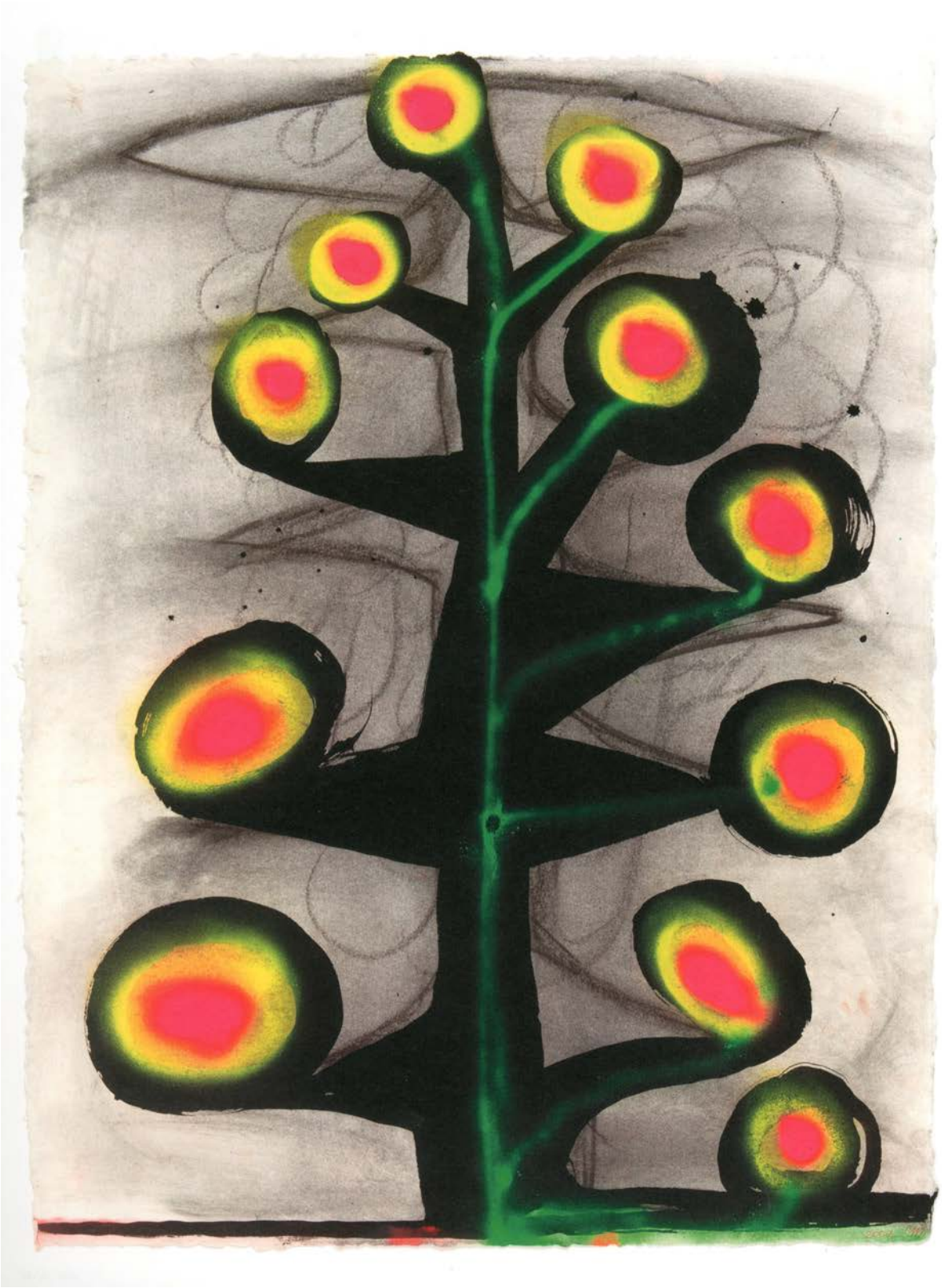

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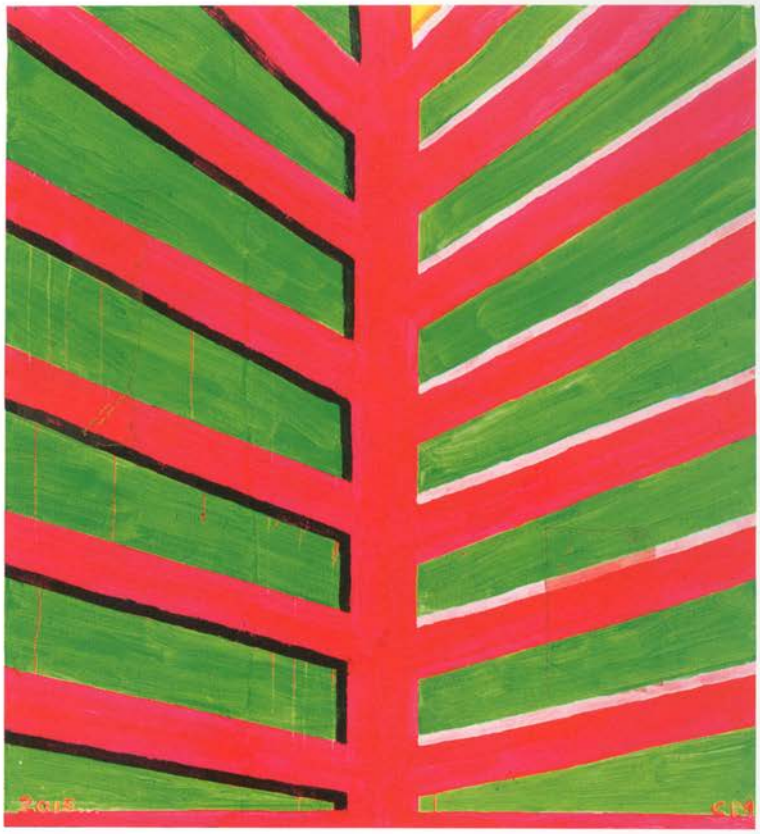
Opening spread
Untitled
2014
Oil, acrylic and collage
on canvas
245.1 x 198.1cm

Second spread
Seven (Pink and Blue)
2014
Acrylic on canvas
224.2 x 195.6cm

Third spread, right
1969
2015
Acrylic on paper
48.3 x 33cm

Opposite
Untitled
2007
Acrylic, spray paint,
charcoal on paper
76.2 x 58.4cm

Right
Untitled
2015
Oil, acrylic and collage
on canvas
162.6 x 149.9cm



were the two people who really lit up the whole thing for me. I grew up in Washington DC, in a very segregated society in the early '60s, but the music on the radio that I really loved was the great African-American and soul music. That just knocked me out. And then I discovered painting by trying to copy Picasso. I realized you can do whatever you want, there is this whole freedom. So the combination of James Brown and Picasso seemed like that was going to be really fun.

Can you tell me a little about your upcoming exhibition at David Kordanksy?
The two spaces at David Kordansky are beautiful; they're big spaces, there's a lot of light and I'm particularly excited by the idea that I can show really large works in Los Angeles. I've shown in LA maybe three or four times but I've never shown my larger work. There's something fresh about LA right now, it's a really exciting art scene and there are a number of younger artists who I really think about, and admire, and they're all living in Los Angeles. They're in a real community there of excitement and openness and they have their own kind of aesthetic and their own take on things. It's very independent and it has its own spirit to it. I also love the landscape, I love the light out there and the sense of colour. It's very different from New York. The light in the gallery spaces is just very attuned to that. One thing we're going to do is create some paintings and put them in neon-lit boxes and put them on the outside of the gallery. I had a very interesting experience in Brussels: I had a show where we were able to put up a number of larger works outside and it is so thrilling to have it out in the world. It's really interesting to see art as just another thing out there, but on the other hand also see how it has a special relationship [to people], because unlike other images we see outside, it's not trying to sell toothpaste or a movie.

Many of the paintings that you create to show indoors are also on a pretty large scale. Do you approach these differently from your smaller, more private drawings?
Yes. I mean, there are two words: one is scale and one is size. Scale is a kind of interior relationship. So you could have a small painting that has vast scale; even though they're small there could be a sense of a giant universe in there. The thrill of a large size for me is that you can definitely expand this inner scale; you can have this big wall of a painting but then come closer and see this very little thing. It's something that the big European tradition of painting uses: you might have a big battle scene, but then you can also go up and spot a little detail of a woman's drapery or a piece of armour or a horse's nostril. That really excites me, that you can get a big mural inside one painting.

And finally, can we discuss the time you encouraged your students to burn their work?
That was just a situation with some students and myself, and there was all this energy, this excitement because people were feeling like they could do anything. People were making work and planning to burn it. I think every artist should have an opportunity to burn their own work! It's a very illuminating thing to do. The larger issue is one's sense of freedom in the act of making something. If you are very protective of what you're making, then there is a fear that you don't want to ruin it. The reason I'm very interested in artists' drawings is that if you have a piece of paper you are very free to do something crazy. If it's a bad drawing, it's just a piece of paper. That freedom to go out and possibly fail, to risk something—it's much easier to do if you aren't worried about the material that's involved.

Chris Martin is showing at David Kordansky from 9 April until 21 May 2016.