

Cameron Martin

Bracket

*A conversation between*

*Cameron Martin and Amy Sillman.*

AS The first work I saw of yours was in the Whitney Biennial in 2004. They were landscapes with gold backgrounds.

CM They switched between being gold and a type of metallic grey, depending on how the light hit them.

Right, but they were metallic mountains. It was mysterious to me. Were you proposing majesty or tarnished simulation? I did not really know.

My answer at that point probably would have been somewhere in between. That ambiguity was precisely what I was after.

You've continued to paint nature. What is at stake in the consistent depiction of beautiful, very large-scale spaces, yet with equally consistent vexed possibilities of entry? Is that about utopia and dystopia?

I don't think a lot of the work is actually beautiful. Some of it depicts something quite hostile or foreboding, though perhaps less so in the new work. But landscape as a subject matter interests me because it is in many ways an exhausted genre, an almost impossible challenge to deal with. At the same time, the environment is something about which people feel such intensity, such a sense of frustration and futility. Talk about a "vexed possibility of entry." So pictures of nature are relatively evacuated, and yet they evoke an imperative.

## Bastine Study

2010 acrylic on canvas over panel

48 x 36in 121.92 x 91.44cm







For the new paintings, you actually went there. You drove out to nature and took pictures; you did not just clip out stock photos.

In fact, that has been my method for a while now. Using appropriated imagery ran its course for me many years ago. It may be perverse, but even though the work deals with the impossibility of connection, I still like trying. There are also spaces within the new paintings that require you to be in front of the actual object, these very pale sections of tone that are really available only to your eye, that visually come up after you've spent some time with them. Part of the rationale behind that was to make sure that there was an element of the picture that could only be experienced in person and was not reproducible. That might correlate somehow with the corporeal aspect of being out in the world, as opposed to its representation.

On the other hand, you said these paintings are reflective of digital culture...

That is true. I would not say that the work *is* digital, but it has some sort of digital implication.

Do you mean like the way the rectangular images are now so elongated? Does that, for example, imply a computer-screen scrolling effect?

Yes, right.

## Elecule

2010 acrylic and watercolor on paper

39.25 x 26.25in 99.7 x 66.7cm







So are these digital in the sense that the paintings are about the way the images are moved around, or how they are located?

When I started making the paintings, originally I was thinking more about film, how it structures movement and depicts time. But there was also the experience I had helping to design my last book using InDesign. The image-shifting that takes place in the grid of that program clearly had an impact on the way I composed these pictures, which in fact I didn't fully realize until Sadek Bazarra, who designed the book, pointed it out.

So the framework that you have set up for these paintings is the canvas itself, with its pregnant, white "no-space" background...

...which somehow might provoke the question, "What is not in that picture?"

Right...you are locating the image through a negation. So you have staked out a kind of non-place, but then you keep on rendering the world, showing how it is presented...even while you seem to go to pains to conceal the means of production of the pictures. It is almost impossible to know whether they are paintings or screen prints, or printed prints, or prints with paintings over them.

And the place that is represented is sort of slipping away. It is either coming or fading, it is not clear.

It's as though the wool is pulled over my eyes, but I do not know if it is you who is pulling it...

[Laughter]

## Sempiturn

2010 acrylic on canvas

60 x 60in 152.4 x 152.4cm











There is no origin. There is no agent.

You see why it is kind of tricky?

Yeah, it is right on a line, intentionally.

So you gravitate to the not-known, to the area beyond the representation, but you construct that experience from things that are very much in the world that you live in, like mountains. So this is a kind of double negation, or stymied sublime.

That is crucial to the work; however much it is faded, there is some belief that there is still a world to be grounded in. Maybe that is where the picture functions for me, and that is why it is not completely abstract. And that might be some of the Romantic part of my work that you have brought up in previous conversations we've had. There is still something there that is tangible and valid, but at the same time it is constantly illusory.

**Bastine**

2010 acrylic on canvas  
72 x 72in 182.88 x 182.88cm



It seems you pit the illusory against a picture  
that is not only real and valid somewhere  
in the world, but a picture of *the good*.  
These paintings have a kind of moral edge,  
in a way, I think.

Even though the images flirt with a kind of  
purposeful cliché?

Yes, because there can't be cliché or kitsch  
without really high highs and really low  
lows. We don't have kitsch about chicken  
soup...we have kitsch about God or beauty  
or something.

[Laughter]

And you embrace the possibility of the  
imagery as a kind of deception—or a lie.  
Taking such a keen interest in lies seems  
related to morals to me, especially because  
the lies sort of implicate all of us, actually.  
Vilem Flusser said that all images start  
out as maps but end up being screens, or  
something along those lines.

## Kernan

2010 acrylic and watercolor on paper  
29.25 x 40.5in 74.3 x 102.8cm









Your last body of work was more like the underdog image, like the tree branch that was dying. But here, the roots are alive, the rocks are beautiful, they are still in the process of geologically forming—everything is kind of doing what it's supposed to be doing.

But the truth of the matter is, and maybe this is the part where it's "tricky," while it does look like that, all of the images have been manipulated in the computer.

They may look like they are real places, but they are really not. That picture in the triptych, *Tisdor Sequence*, for instance, it looks like a mountain, but it was made on the computer from a picture of a pile of rocks on the side of the road in eastern Washington.

But it still brings a class of images to mind that really does exist, and I know that you are enough of a nature boy that you've had these experiences. So you're not just sitting in your room constructing Second Life fakes.

No, it's definitely not that.



## Tisdor Sequence

2010 acrylic on canvas over panel

54 x 115.5in (each panel 54 x 36in)

137.2 x 293.4cm (each panel 137.2 x 91.5cm)







You seem to bring to the table something that has a weight. It's not just an arbitrary picture, and in fact it's the opposite of arbitrary. I think it's about something like heaven.

In the previous body of work, everything was deadened. It was made when the Bush administration was pushing through all this completely pro-business and anti-environmental legislation. There's an attempt in the new work to reflect our current situation, which I see as a time where we aren't quite as sure who the enemy is. But it's still fading away, probably just as quickly.

But there were other motivations and goals as well. The birch forest picture, *Balentane*, for example, was a formal challenge to see if I could pull it off, because it's the most technically complicated thing I've ever tried to do. I was interested in a space that has an implication of incredible depth but without the use of a horizon line.



## Balentane

2011 acrylic on canvas

66 x 105.5in 167.6 x 267.9cm







The paintings of the woods are dynamic compositions, and they are very complicated, where the older paintings are kind of more declarative. And the new ones aren't painted in parts.

Right. In the previous paintings, the forms were superimposed over a gradient ground that made up the "sky" and were therefore more static; these are more dynamic. There is also a certain amount of chaos implied in those forest pictures.

I actually think that the chaotic composition is really important, given what you have said. It's not as symmetrical and implies something kind of angled, off-kilter, that is still to come.

The chaos pushes back against the rectilinear framing a bit.

## Stratal

2010 acrylic on canvas

60 x 60in 152.4 x 152.4cm







Though it's deployed through all kinds  
of questions, your work still has a  
psychological quality of wanting to believe  
in something.

On paper I'm someone who doesn't  
believe in much. I'm essentially an atheist.  
I don't have a great deal of conviction  
about the potential of our political system.  
What do I believe in? Love between people,  
friendship, kindness, that kind of thing.  
But in terms of grand themes, there isn't  
that much that I believe in. Except, in this  
idiosyncratic way, I believe in pictures.

## Ovital

2010 acrylic and watercolor on paper  
28.5 x 40.75in 72.4 x 103.5cm









What is the meaning of the ongoing somberness in your work? You seem to resolutely refuse to address your issues in a mocking tone or in a form of the absurd, even though as we've pointed out, the work is tricky. Is the solemnity a way to avoid the easy option of "bad painting"? I feel some antagonism to the defacement of the image. It strikes me as an immature gesture.

## Caston

2010 acrylic on canvas over panel  
40 x 30in 101.6 x 76.2cm







Maybe that is why I keep thinking that  
there is a kind of moral quality here.  
You're sort of a Puritan, maybe the  
way Agnes Martin was a Puritan —  
very restrained and serious-seeming.  
But you are not bracketing away things  
that displease you. In fact you are  
welcoming things that rile you up,  
that get you outside your training  
and outside your picture. Or dealing  
with the vicissitudes of the picture.  
Maybe you're a kind of pervy Puritan  
who is interested in the appearance of  
truth and the possibility of deception.  
Well, look at the poster on the wall  
I made as a self-portrait—it says,  
"Professional Hobbyist Ruined By  
Calvinism."

*Amy Sillman is a painter who lives in  
New York. She and Cameron Martin are in  
a color theory reading group together.*

## Extriant

2010 acrylic on canvas over panel  
45 x 60in 114 x 152.4cm







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Cover: *Tisdor Sequence*, 2010, acrylic on canvas over panel

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