

axis



Discovery, 2016

Artist of the Month: Martyn Cross

By: Axisweb Editors
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Our first Artist of the Month in 2017 is Martyn Cross. We speak to him about painting, plastic bags and his upcoming projects.

Tell us about your practice, how would you describe the work that you do?

Normally I'd refrain from saying too much - describing what I do means giving the game away somewhat. They say a magician should never reveal his tricks. Not that I'm a magician, more like a clown maybe...

An artist friend once described my work as appearing to provide 'snapshots and artefacts from a fictional archeology of outsiderdom'. This is pretty close to the truth. I try to make things that appear as if they've been dug up a hundred years from now, found in a box in the attic or discarded on the street: things that are imbued with a sense of former life or history, created with intent but never meant for human eyes. I welcome a sense of inquiry – what is it? Where's it come from? Who's made this?

Much of what I make draws upon an endless range of differing sources - from dystopian fiction to Greggs pasties to hard bop jazz - but the resulting mash-up will always suggest an alternate existence, a strange character, an eerily familiar place or uncanny feeling. The rabbit warren hole I'm looking down is kaleidoscopic and ever changing, yet perversely it remains constant and consistent. At the heart of my practice lies a blend of compulsions: an unnerving need to physically produce something with my hands; a search for truth; to feel

some kind of connection to the space I exist within; to imagine other potential human existence or experience beyond what we know.



Echoes Answering Within Me, 2016, acrylic on found knitting pattern

I've always been a painter but I've continually struggled with it as a form. It taunts me but I'm still in love with it. I stopped painting on canvas about ten years ago after endlessly plodding along, and began using found images as a ground to build upon. There was a sense of glee in destroying one thing to create something new, and the thing I was vandalizing was the curiously whimsical vision of utopia found in knitting patterns. Working in such a fashion is quite structured – the images are always roughly the same size, there's a methodical intensity in making adaptations using layers of paint – it's an incredibly laborious process.

This compulsion to make paintings in such a way sits rather neatly with my interest in what is contentiously known as 'outsider art' and the working methods of artists such as KF Schobinger, Marcel Storr, Georgiana Houghton or Henry Darger – all of whom worked in great detail and with an obsessive tendency, but not necessarily for anyone other than themselves. In some ways the act of solitary studio practice is as important to what I do as the actual work itself – the romantic myth of the artist starving in a garret is an incredibly powerful sentiment and I enjoy playing around with it.

Across many of your pieces you use plastic bags as a material. Tell us a bit more about how you started using these bags, and how it has developed.

I've always collected carrier bags, particularly those with interesting graphics or wording, so to end up using them in my work was in some ways quite natural. I find their visual properties alluring and there's something tragically comic in holding a plastic off-license carrier bag full of dog waste. Walking around the city as I often do, you see plastic bags everywhere full of crap, stuffed in bins, caught on a branch, and I'm drawn to the destructive quality they're synonymous with. A beautiful tree, leaves shuffling quietly in the wind, mossy bark home to bugs and fungi... all visually destroyed by a bloody bin liner snagged high up in its crown. It makes you shudder at the futility of living when you walk past the same bag caught in the same tree day after day, but the visual chaos it brings is exhilarating.



My Name and I Have Been Erased, 2016

I've painted images of plastic bags a few times in my knitting pattern pieces but the idea of using them physically in work has only really gained traction recently. The issues I've had with painting as a process means I regularly try to push beyond the picture frame - I want to bring the image out and perhaps offer the viewer another way in. The first successful work to feature an actual carrier bag was *Air Bud* (2013). I had ironed plastic bags before and wasn't sure what I was doing with it as an activity, but in this instance I was actually playing around with an unsatisfactory painting and a random bag became trapped in the frame. It worked visually and from there I started fusing more plastic bags, making larger works, objects and masks. There's something really beautiful about the chance formation of the ironed bags - you have no idea how things will end up and can only control it in a limited capacity. The result is also incredibly tough and ironically slightly organic in texture. In the past six months I've been painting and collaging the fused bags which has been a really exciting development and one I'm looking forward to working hard with over the coming year.



Guts and Juices, 2015, acrylic paint on found knitting pattern

I noticed on your profile there are references to Pincher Martin, Bernard Skuse and Kerouac, how does reading and research feed into your work, and what is it about these kinds of characters and stories that you are interested in?

Reading has always been important to my work as it feeds a part of my brain craving for answers, offering a gateway to another world or throwing down a challenge. I predominantly read fiction but working in a bookshop means I'm drawn to all manner of subjects, ideas and histories. I'm always searching for something when reading, and usually it's a feeling - a state of being. That moment when words on a page tap directly into the core of who you are and align themselves with what you're seeking to communicate to others is a great experience. It only happens once in a while, but when it does it fuels something and encourages a chain of connections that may result in a piece of work, or it could just sit in my brain, dormant, waiting for an opportunity to coalesce with other randomness to form something else years later. My wife jokes that everything I read is basically the same thing just regurgitated and retold in myriad different ways – and she's right of course. I'm drawn to stories about individuals existing in extreme situations or environments where their mental state is pushed to the limit and they perhaps transcend into other states or realms. Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* is probably a key text in that regard, although David Vann is excellent at making you feel as if both the characters and the natural elements are screaming at you relentlessly. I like that.

It follows then that I enjoy meeting or encountering characters who appear reclusive or removed from everyday life. I've been obsessed with the West Country eccentric Bernard Skuse for some time now and my recent residency at Ocean Studios was structured around research made into his world. After finding a tiny article about him in an old local history publication I've spent a few years uncovering his story and still only know very little. In some ways you can know too much – you need to hold back. What I've found however is enough for me to build new mythologies upon and has enabled me to create alternate fictions about his life. I'm fascinated by those 'known unknowns' and how to weave a new story from them.

Another motif which crops up repeatedly in your work is a mask. Tell us a bit about the influences for this, and maybe how these more sculptural pieces differ from your painting work.

The sculptural works have always played a supporting role in my practice, but recently they've started prodding me for more attention. In some ways it feels like I'm fleshing-out the parallel world I've created in the paintings and collages: making things more tangible and real. I don't really see it as a separate area of study, more that it's simply an extension of what I'm doing already.



We Will Rise, 2016, acrylic paint on collaged knitting patterns

The masks have become more prominent as my painting practice has evolved to include humans less and less. I guess there's some deep-rooted anthropological need for me to visually address our presence in the world and I do this by making something with eyeholes. It's quite primitive. A key passage I refer back to time and time again can be found in Russell Hoban's post-apocalyptic classic *Riddley Walker*:

"Its some kynd of thing it aint us but yet its in us. Its looking out thru our eye hoals. May be you dont take no noatis of it only some times. Say you get woak up suddn in the middl of the nite. 1 minim youre a sleep and the nex youre on your feet with a spear in your han. Wel it wernt you put that spear in your han it wer that other thing whats looking out thru your eye hoals. It aint you nor it dont even know your name. Its in us lorn and loan and sheltering how it can."

For some reason I'm intrigued by the idea we're a shell or vehicle that's possessed by some other ancestral form. It's as if this lineal thread of former life resides within us and only contemplation or meditation can get anywhere near accessing it. Don't get me wrong, I'm no follower of L Ron Hubbard and I don't subscribe to any kind of belief system, but it's interesting how the studio practice of rumination, reflection and hard work can channel higher things; things we have no control over but which are controlled by something nonetheless. I know when I'm painting I sometimes get into a kind of hypnotic or transcendental state where I switch off, unaware of my surroundings. I keep working. I miss eating lunch. I lose track of time. It gets late. What's going on there? It's a bit trippy at times...



Hewn Off Head, 2016, fused plastic carrier bags and acrylic paint

Which artists working at the moment do you admire?

There are way, way, way too many to list. This year has seen some cracking exhibitions and I'm tempted to say Ragnar Kjartansson's survey show at the Barbican is the best thing I've seen this decade, but then I remember Michael Simpson's beautiful leper squint series at Spike Island and Rose Wylie's heart-stopping paintings at Chapter in Cardiff earlier in the year, and I change my mind all over again.

Just before her exhibition at Chapter, Wylie gave a talk about her practice at the Arnolfini. Hearing her speak so enthusiastically and chaotically about her work was a rare treat indeed. A true giant of painting with a fascinating studio practice. I was also lucky enough to visit Michael Simpson's monastic studio during his Spike exhibition, which was a singular privilege. Such a strong mix of passion and serenity and cool...

I've been following Kai Althoff's career with interest for some time and was pleased to see a catalogue produced recently for his show at MOMA. It's such a beautiful object in its own right and apparently he was

uncompromising in its design. An interview between the artist and curator of the exhibition makes for a tough read too – he comes across as a petulant child and there are a few moments that make you wince, yet it's utterly compelling. It's hard to know whether he's constructing his own myth or not, but either way, I know when I first encountered his work at Michael Werner a couple of years ago I was knocked out by his multifaceted approach.

Paul Johnson's exhibition at Focal Point Gallery in Southend-on-Sea last year definitely opened my eyes to the possibility of broadening my practice. I've always been a fan of his hand-coloured paper collages, so to encounter a huge, rusty up-ended dune buggy in the main space of his show completely blew my tiny mind. The fact it was displayed next to an object that had been made in the artist's pocket only furthered to create a sense of salvaged history and failed utopia. That struck a chord and it's also an apparent quality in other artist's work that I admire like Francis Upritchard, Steven Claydon and Ben Rivers.



I like it and so I do it, 2016, residency at Ocean Studios

You are currently based in Bristol - how is the scene there? Are you part of a studio or involved in group projects as well as your own practice? What do you have coming up?

The Bristol scene is going through an interesting period at the moment. Spike Island and Arnolfini are obviously a major force, but there are a few smaller artist led set-ups like East Bristol Contemporary, Test Space, Champ, BEEF, and others besides, doing good things and offering young or early career artists much needed opportunities to show work and be active in the artistic community.

Despite this I don't necessarily feel hugely connected to a particular local framework – I dip in and out of everything. I have a studio at BV in Bedminster which houses a hundred or so artists but I actually feel part of a larger network that goes beyond the confines of the city. I'm just as likely to be found in Cardiff, Bath, Plymouth, Exeter or London as I am in Bristol – I go wherever there might be something worth engaging with.

That being said, I'm currently working with my studio mate Jodie Marks on setting up an artist-run space within our studio – Jodie's studio to be precise. It's early days but it evolved from discussion surrounding our plans for the forthcoming year. Realizing that opportunities were few and far between we've decided we'll create our own luck and organize something ourselves. With a strong focus on studio practice we're looking to not only show other artists new work but also orchestrate talks and engender a collaborative effort in the creation of exhibitions. It's just about getting artists together to build new networks and give them the space to experiment. Or something...



One Hundred and Fifty Thousand Years, 2016, acrylic paint on found knitting pattern