

# JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture



## **Earth Hymns: A Conversation with Martyn Cross**

By: Juxtapoz Editors  
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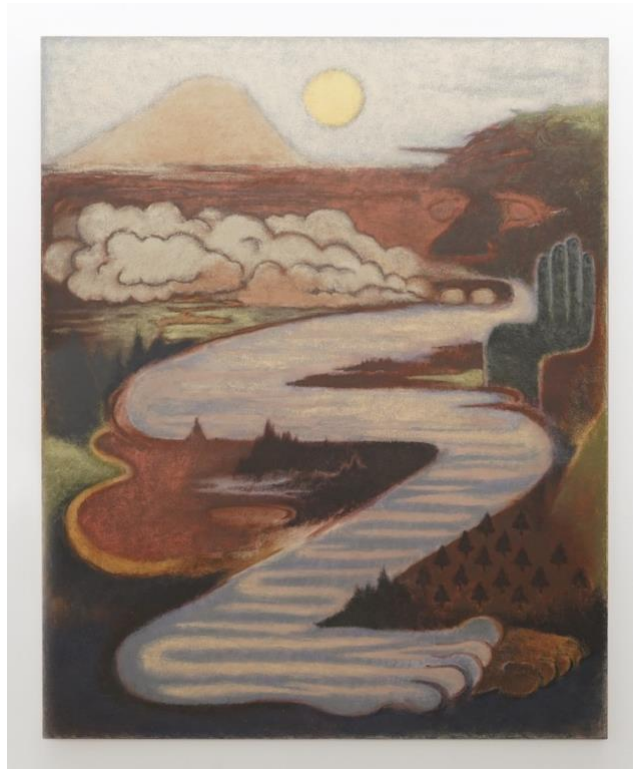
There is a great deal of intimacy, mystery, curiosity, and intensity in the delicately crafted works by Martyn Cross, whose first solo exhibition outside of the United Kingdom is currently running its final week at Ratio 3. *Earth Hymns* comprises a substantial body of moody paintings as well as works on paper, through which the Bristol-based artist explores the technical aspects of his practice as well as themes that occupy his mind.

There were a number of artists we've been obsessing over here at Juxtapoz, whose practice involves reworking the same motifs time and time again. Cross is certainly one of those, as his work revolves around the few ideas that he tends to experiment with. Through slight compositional changes, use of different shades of earthy hues, and interchange of elements between concepts, his visuals keep changing and developing, basically living their own lives. The result of such a process is an exceptionally coherent body of work within which each image adds to the next one, and their reading correlates with the exposure to his oeuvre. To put it simply - the more you see, the more you connect with it.

And during that process, each individual painting goes through a number of phases and changes, resulting with a precious appearance of a finished piece. Built from gentle caresses of a dry brush, and using a stylized, almost drawing or even text writing-like approach, they feel like a selection of pages from an ancient

manuscript rather than a painting exhibition. Anthropomorphic surreal panoramas coming to life as faces of stunned elders, and broken figures forming peculiar landscapes with their giant bodies. Probably hiding a great, profound message behind the assortments of symbols and forms, they seem to invite the viewer to go through them over and over again, until some sort of narrative might start revealing itself.

As instant fans of the work but not quite certain about what we're looking at, we got in touch with Cross and had a brief conversation about this particular body of work and what led to the process.



**Sasha Bogojev: What's the idea behind the title of the show and is your overall body of work connected in that direction?**

Martyn Cross: The title Earth Hymns suggested itself after re-reading Max Porter's novel Lanny. One of the main characters Dead Papa Toothwort isn't actually a human, he's more a living thing that is nothing and everything all at once - he's phlegmy globs of litter, oozing sticky tar and the sting of a nettle. He spans time and place and feeds on our minds and memories. Whilst the exhibition certainly isn't about Lanny specifically, it chimed with the themes I'm currently exploring in my paintings and the idea that we are just mud with eyeballs and feelings. I guess in some ways I see each painting as a song and together the exhibition forms a choir.

**Can you tell me a bit about the technical aspect of your work and what draws you towards creating such intricate surfaces?**

I see the paintings equally as objects as much as I do paintings. They are things that in their creation are held and caressed and physically roughed-up, all with the intention of creating some kind of surface history. It's also important for me to make the canvases from scratch to imbue them with my own physicality before even starting to paint.



**What about the paint application and manipulation process? The images feel very frail yet part of the canvas..**

The paint itself is applied with a dry brush and layers form before I then bother the surface further with sandpaper and other dangerous looking tools. In the end I want the surface to hum or vibrate. I like things that look as if they've seen a life. Some people like box-fresh trainers - I prefer my kicks well-worn.

**What sort of influences inform your practice and how do you work around that initial moment of inspiration?**

Influences come from anywhere and everywhere, although my predilections evolve and mutate over time and I'll naturally succumb to certain obsessions. The works in *Earth Hymns* are channelled from a range of sources: medieval wall paintings, gargoyles, emojis, the Happy Mondays... But predominantly the thing that usually kick-starts it all will be reading works of fiction. The way an author structures a sentence or a paragraph can have lasting impressions, cropping up in my mind's eye weeks, months and even years after having read something. In a way, I'm visualising and blending multiple reference points before recording those visions in paint at the studio.



**What is the life cycle of your images like? Do they start directly on the canvas or somewhere else?**

In suggesting themselves onto the canvas, the paintings offer a sense of truth that is beyond my comprehension. Beginning life as a quick charcoal or pencil doodle in a sketchbook, the paintings flesh themselves out with colour and develop personalities which evolve over time. In some ways they're no different to living creatures.

**There is an almost tangible sense of melancholy in your work, but what are some other emotions or realizations you're trying to convey in your paintings and how do you go about those?**

Particular emotions may present themselves but it's not something I'm necessarily forcing. In many respects the paintings are just a reflection of my mood at the time of creation, and it just so happens a lot of these were created over the period of international lockdown. They've become visual motifs of that time - fraught with internal anxieties, loaded with depression and trying to relieve themselves with dumb humour.