



Martyn Cross, *Of oil and Earth*, exhibition view. Courtesy of Hales Gallery

## OF OIL AND EARTH

BY MEER ART

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Hales is delighted to announce *Of oil and Earth*, Martyn Cross's second solo show with the gallery. In an exhibition of ambitious new paintings and drawings Cross explores passages of time, connecting wider histories to his own beginnings.

Cross is known for paintings which are deliberately hard to place, with a timelessness reminiscent of unearthed artifacts. For him, the act of painting is a way to discover and explore the inner life and strangeness of the contemporary everyday. Imagery pours out of Cross, initially thinking through drawing - there is a diaristic quality to pencil, oil pastel and charcoal works. Paintings are then made in contemplative layers; his application and use of colour creates works that hum. Sanding and scratching the surface, Cross strives to make paintings that have lived a life, the trace of their existence evident. In some cases, drawing an immediate connection to the earth, Cross mixes sand with paint, building an increasingly complex painterly surface.

*Of oil and Earth* takes its title from one of the paintings in the show and a 1934 text by Virginia Woolf writing about Sickert: 'his paint has a tangible quality; it is made not of air and star dust but of oil and earth'. This show of new works continues Cross's exploration of the biomorphic landscape - the top of a head, a singular eye, a pointing hand emerge from the ground to form knowingly ambiguous narratives. An array of influences and references come into Cross's drawings and paintings, including medieval imagery, cartoons, the artwork of Cecil Collins and books, particularly the *Septology* series by Jon Fosse.

Underpinning Cross's exploration of medieval imagery has been a 'medieval painting pilgrimage,' where he journeys to churches around the United Kingdom to look at wall paintings. What once were painted in vibrant

colours are now faded to muted tones. In his paintings Cross conceptualises colour as condensing the history of time. The years it takes for medieval paintings to soften, he creates in months. During the painting process, Cross highlights our conscious and somatic disconnection to this relatively recent medieval history and to the more ancient, biological beginnings of how we came to be.

Exploring these beginnings, Cross remembers his personal past to think through our collective history and future. His own history is anchored in his hometown of Yate, as a teenager trying to break away from the trappings of suburban life, he now looks for meaning in those roots. Yate is derived from an old English word *giete* which means a gateway or entrance - Cross thinks of Yate as an opening portal, a wormhole to another dimension. The paintings, like one of his favourite childhood cartoons Jamie and the *Magic torch* - shine a light onto a fantasy world, reflecting the escapism he sought in his youth.

Musing on the hours spent skateboarding along the identical streets, riding bikes on road trips, and escapism through psychedelics, Cross notes that 'these solitary pathways offered an enlightening experience which I return to memorially as an older human. However, they're not romantic visions of the past, rather they tap into a trembling or silently brooding solastalgic view of our sense of place'. (2024)

**Martyn Cross** (b. 1975, Yate, UK) holds a BA in Fine Art from Bath Spa University. He lives and works in Bristol, UK. In 2023 Cross was shortlisted for the John Moores Painting Prize and had a solo exhibition, *My Assembled Selves* at Flatland Projects, Bexhill-on-Sea. His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Hales London, UK; Marianne Boesky, New York, NY, USA; and Ratio 3, Los Angeles, CA, USA. His work has been included in group exhibitions at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK; OSHSH Projects, London, UK; Modern Art, London, UK; Oceans Apart, Manchester, UK; Bath Spa University, UK; Spike Island, Bristol, UK; Limbo, Margate, UK; Stroud Museum, UK; Kettles Yard, Cambridge, UK, among others. Cross's work is in the collections of the Arts Council Collection, UK; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, USA; The Roberts Institute of Art, London, UK; the NN Contemporary Art, Northampton, UK; and the Fundación Medianoche0, Granada, Spain.