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Stewart Oksenhorn/Aspen Times WeeklyBelgian artist Kris Martin prepares his stone-and-paper installation, "Summits," at the Aspen Art Museum. An exhibition of Martin's work shows through Jan. 24 at the museum.

ASPEN – “Summits,” a new installation at the Aspen Art Museum by Belgian artist Kris Martin, aims to strike a balance in human instincts, between the reckless, self-centered ego and striving for achievement that pushes all of mankind forward. The piece features eight boulders, each topped by a cross.

Martin, who was born near and lives in Ghent, a flat, low-lying city that wouldn’t put a resident in mind of mountains, says “Summits” is partly a cautionary work.

“For me, they’re all very dangerous, mountains,” he said. “They’re filled with a dangerous power, especially for puny little human beings, like we are.” Martin makes it clear that the danger isn’t just physical. Metaphorically, there is a part of human nature that craves an ascension to heights that are not necessarily to our ultimate benefit. “People are really concerned with mountain tops – being the richest, the most beautiful. And we often give our lives for it. The top of something is the most beautiful, the most desirable – but that’s only in our minds.”

Martin finds another note of warning, separate but perhaps related, in the installation: Once you’ve reached the top, the climb is over. “The top is nice when you haven’t reached it,” he said. “But once you get to the top, the potential is gone. Dreams are what keep people going.”

Still, it’s hard to see “Summits” as being essentially cautionary in tone. Martin’s boulders are roughly the height of an adult human, give or take a foot or two; they don’t overwhelm the viewer. The crosses – inspired by the numerous cross-topped mountains all over Europe – indicate that, yes, these mountains have been successfully summited, conquered.

“The top looks reachable,” said Martin, an engaging but intense 37-year-old. “It’s quite comforting to see the idea that someone has been there. You see the cross and you know someone’s been there before you.”

In the context of the battle between ego and soul, probably the most comforting element of “Summits” is the cross itself. While the nature of the mountain-top cross is to be big – you want it to be seen from below – Martin’s crosses are barely visible, barely there. These crosses are a couple of inches tall, made of paper. As Martin glued them to the boulders one afternoon last week, he gave instructions to staff members at the Aspen Art Museum on how to re-glue the crosses if they happen to be knocked off – a near-certainty, given their delicate presence. Martin’s desire was not to impose himself on nature, but to leave the barest footprint.

“You have this rock, very heavy, a brutal element produced by nature. They’re sculptures already,” he said, showing his intensity by placing each cross just so. “And I wanted to make my intervention in a way that it becomes clear that, as a human being, what I think or might do is so temporal, so fragile compared to this huge continuum that holds us all together. You have a high contrast between the human intervention and the Genesis, the day God made the world.”

Given the use of the cross, religion was bound to enter into the conversation. Martin acknowledges that he is “a religious person.” But “Summits” is not meant to impose religious beliefs on anyone, and Martin offers as proof that the essential quality of his crosses is their unobtrusiveness. Thanks to its scale, the work is not critical or forbidding. Instead, the installation conveys an acceptance of human desires, and places on roughly equal footing the desire to push oneself to the fullest potential (admirabl e), and the motivation to leave everyone else in the dust (morally questionable).

“Somehow, it’s human nature to climb mountains,” Martin said. “Even if it takes your life. Every year people die climbing Mt. Everest. And that’s not suicide. It’s human ambition to conquer these forces of nature, to fight with nature. Or against nature, which is what we’re doing right now, slightly screwing it up.”

Martin considers the possibility that the primary intention behind “Summits” could be to inspire. A cross on top of a mountain is going to have the effect of a challenge: This peak has been climbed; are you going to be the next one up?

“It’s my goal to make an image to make people dream,” Martin said. “It might be inspirational to many people. It’s belief in things, belief in the ability to reach things that are at first sight impossible to reach.

“But at the same time, making people aware there is risk.”

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The Aspen Art Museum's Kris Martin exhibition includes two components in addition to "Summits."

"Idiot," a project that dates back to 2004-'05, is based on "The Idiot," Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1868 novel about the transcendent goodness of man. Martin spent five months – "monk-like," he said – transcribing the book by hand. The only change the artist made to the original text was substituting his own name – "Martin" – for the protagonist, Myshkin. It is a tiny mark that Martin equates to the paper crosses in "Summits."

"The Idiot," Martin said, "describes the biggest issue in my life – someone trying to be his best for everybody, but this is just meaning his defeat. He's going down; he's crashing. He's dead. And he's full of compassion. So you might say he's an incarnation of Christ, in the moral sense. He's embodying the Christian morality."

For the Aspen Art Museum project, Martin's original manuscript was reproduced to create approximately 800 copies of "Idiot." They are bound in cheap imitation leather and printed on thin paper, reminiscent of hotel-room bibles. The books will be placed in Aspen hotel rooms, and will also be offered for sale at the museum.

The final work in the exhibition is "Golden Spike," a tiny gold nail that is hammered into the museum floor, and is intended to remain there as long as the building stands. Martin has used the spike in some of his previous exhibitions, though not all, as a marker of having reached a new creative era for himself. The most obvious reference, said Matthew Thompson, the museum's associate curator and curator of the current show, is to the golden spike that was used to commemorate the connection of the eastern and western portions of the trans-American railroad. But Martin says the symbol has long been used by paleontologists to denote the discovery of a new era of civilization.

"This is dividing my life between a before and an after," he said. "I insert the golden spike to mark some time, somewhere, that I did something. Something really important that indicates a change."

Jens Hoffmann, director of San Francisco's CCA Wattis Institute, will discuss the exhibition with curator Matthew Thompson on Jan. 21 at the museum.