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Lloyd-Smith, Harriet. "My brain is my studio': Kris Martin created space for thought." *Wallpaper**. March 10, 2020.

Wallpaper*

'My brain is my studio': Kris Martin creates space for thought



Kris Martin, Altar, 2014. Photography: Benny Proot

In Ghent this month, there's a conversation happening between two Belgian artists. At face value, they don't have much in common: they were born almost 600 years apart and their work shares few aesthetic traits. Yet Kris Martin and Jan van Eyck are bound with something deeper than time or materials: a vast symbolic vocabulary and ability to subvert perception and prove to their audience that nothing is quite as it seems.

In 'Exit', Martin's first Belgian retrospective, his work plucks moments from the past, destabilises the present and invents the future. Martin is a singular artist, perhaps best known for drawing Frieze London to a grinding halt with a tannoy

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announcement calling for a minute's silence to a tent full of bemused punters. Martin is also a deep thinker. For him, time, transience, 'the void' and human existence are the main points of enquiry; everything else is just a vehicle to transport them. He doesn't even have a studio in the conventional sense. 'My brain is my main studio. I am a truly conceptual artist and so I don't really need a studio.'



Kris Martin 'EXIT' Installation 2020. Photography: Dirk Pauwels

It's often less about what's there, and more about what's omitted. In the Greek sculpture *Laocoön Group* (a staple entry in art history books), the Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons are ferociously attacked by sea serpents. In Martin's replica, *Mandi VIII*, the snakes are absent. 'The evil thus becomes invisible, and I ask: what are these humans fighting against now? It's up to the spectator to fill it in. It could be depression, the coronavirus, mortality, anything. Everyone will view it differently. I like to create that space for thought.'

Martin's practice can verge on endurance art. Take *Idiot*, for which the artist hand-copied all 1494 pages of Dostoyevsky's novel of the same title, exchanging the name of the protagonist, Myshkin, for his own. 'I worked for months, like a monk. It was very consuming and at the same time liberating.'

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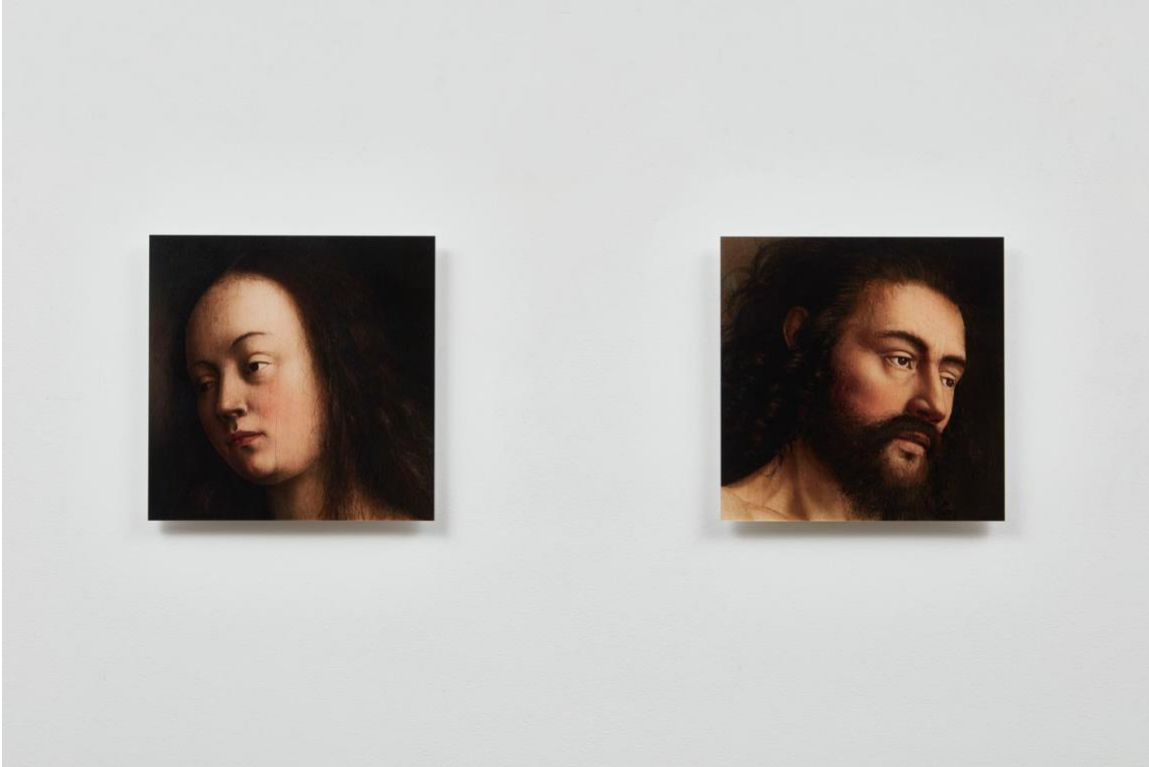


Kris Martin 'EXIT' Installation 2020. Photography: Dirk Pauwels

'Exit' introduces a new piece, *Microscope*. The concept goes straight to the point, if the point were turned on its head. Like much of his work, it's a readymade Martin has cunningly tampered with; instead of magnifying objects, it makes them smaller. 'When looking at people from a distance, they become minuscule, like ants. It shows the relativity of our existence on earth.'

In *Eve and Adam*, Martin has cut out the faces of the legendary pair from the Van Eyck brothers' *The Ghent Altarpiece* (of which Martin has also produced a hollow-paned replica, currently sitting outside St. Bavo's Cathedral). Instead of facing each other as in the original, they gaze in opposite directions, surrounded by a sea of blank space.

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Kris Martin, Eve & Adam, 2019 Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly, New York. Photography: Jason Wyche, New York

In tandem with Martin's exhibition, Van Eyck is having his own moment, 'An Optical Revolution' at the nearby Museum of Fine Arts. So what exactly does Martin see in him? Quite a lot as it happens. 'His sense for colour, perspective and detail are incredible, his craftsmanship with oil paint unsurpassed. But he also used his "technology", as you could call it, to serve a higher goal.'

A Kris Martin show, much like a Van Eyck, feels like an anthology series. With each new work, there is a new set of rules, characters and plot. Martin manages to mine thrills, chills and pathos from the most mundane of objects. Don't underestimate anything, there's always a twist and you're unlikely to see it coming.

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Kris Martin 'EXIT' Installation 2020. Photography: Dirk Pauwels



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INFORMATION

'Exit', until May 31, SMAK. smak.be

ADDRESS

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