

# STATION

Sam Martin's paintings are like jewels, complete in their uniqueness. Created slowly over years, months, weeks and dense in material layers. There is a describable process applied in their making; a series of steps that can be sign posted. However, the path from beginning to end is labyrinthine, as Martin traverses a path backwards, forwards, sideways and across, reversing from dead-ends towards eventual resolution.

The title of the exhibition 'Phenemar' is a composite word. Generated by Martin through a form of exploratory word collage, developed during the Melbourne winter COVID lockdown of 2020 as an adjunct to his studio-based painting practice. Using a basic printer-scanner, scissors and tape, Martin reconfigured lines of words taken from various texts connected to his areas of interest, to create evocative typographic drawings, read as poetry. From these dada-esque linguistic mash-ups, 'Phenemar' emerged: the conflation of 'phosphene' – the dots that pass by our closed eyes – and 'grammar' – the rules of language construction.

Martin draws a broad swath of influences into his painting practice including, but not limited to, and without judgement or hierarchy: Surrealism, Op-Art, traditional textile making, ancient forms of writing, action painting, the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, psychoanalysis, camouflage techniques of butterflies, Man Ray's dust paintings and the theories of Michel Foucault.

To describe his process, Martin says, "I create a dialogue and record accumulative chance and incremental improvisation." These paintings began as loose pieces of canvas cut from a roll at various scales, each defined by watery ink marks accumulated in a haphazard fashion, some by intentional brush marks, others by serendipitous meeting with a wayward drop. Piled on the studio floor, enveloped in folds of their own making, the marks double, dissolve and distort.

*"As beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table."*  
– Isidore-Lucien Ducasse

In preparation for an exhibition, selected paintings are flattened and laid bare for examination. Mirror images are made on tracing paper. A series of line drawings, ethereal versions of the originals, add to an ever-accumulating archive of tracings to be used as instructional maps, used as guides to forge future paths for the artist and his paintings.

A pattern, a machine, a piece of cloth, a needle and two threads.

Over the painted canvas, a terrain is marked out, plotted from the chance tracings. A loose set of instructions are followed as Martin embroiders the traced pattern, matching the under-painting colours as closely as possible to the colours of thread available. Here the tussle unfolds between commerce (what combination of colours are worthy of commercial production amongst the infinite possibilities), machine (how malleable can the sewing machine be beyond the specific functional bounds of its invention and construction), and artist (how ingenious can he be in mixing, matching, pushing and cajoling the threads, needle and machine to meld to his artistic will). By embracing the glitches that occur in the failings of mimicry or mismatch of colours, Martin allows for the creative potential of chance.

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Layered over the illustrated terrain, Martin adds asemic writing – wordless in form, with no semantic content and evading subjective interpretation. At other times it is snippets of his collaged poems. For example, in the painting *one opening one*, two different modes of asemic writing are evident in the raised welts of embroidery, one cursive and organically formed, the other angular and jagged. In this manner, Martin meshes language with image in an abstracted form, opening up the paintings as invitations to the viewer to engage in free association.

When looking at Sam Martin's paintings, there is a certain level of material curiosity (how are they made? how long does the making take?) which can be distracting. However, describing the more process-oriented steps the artist takes in creating the works can help in making us feel more at ease with a deeper level of engagement. The intention of the works is not to be interpreted in a way that exposes some unknown truth. Rather the opposite: to create a sponge on which disparate meanings can be layered, unfixed and floating across the surface of our visual realm, like the shifting shapes behind our softly closed eyes.

– Samantha Barrow, 2021