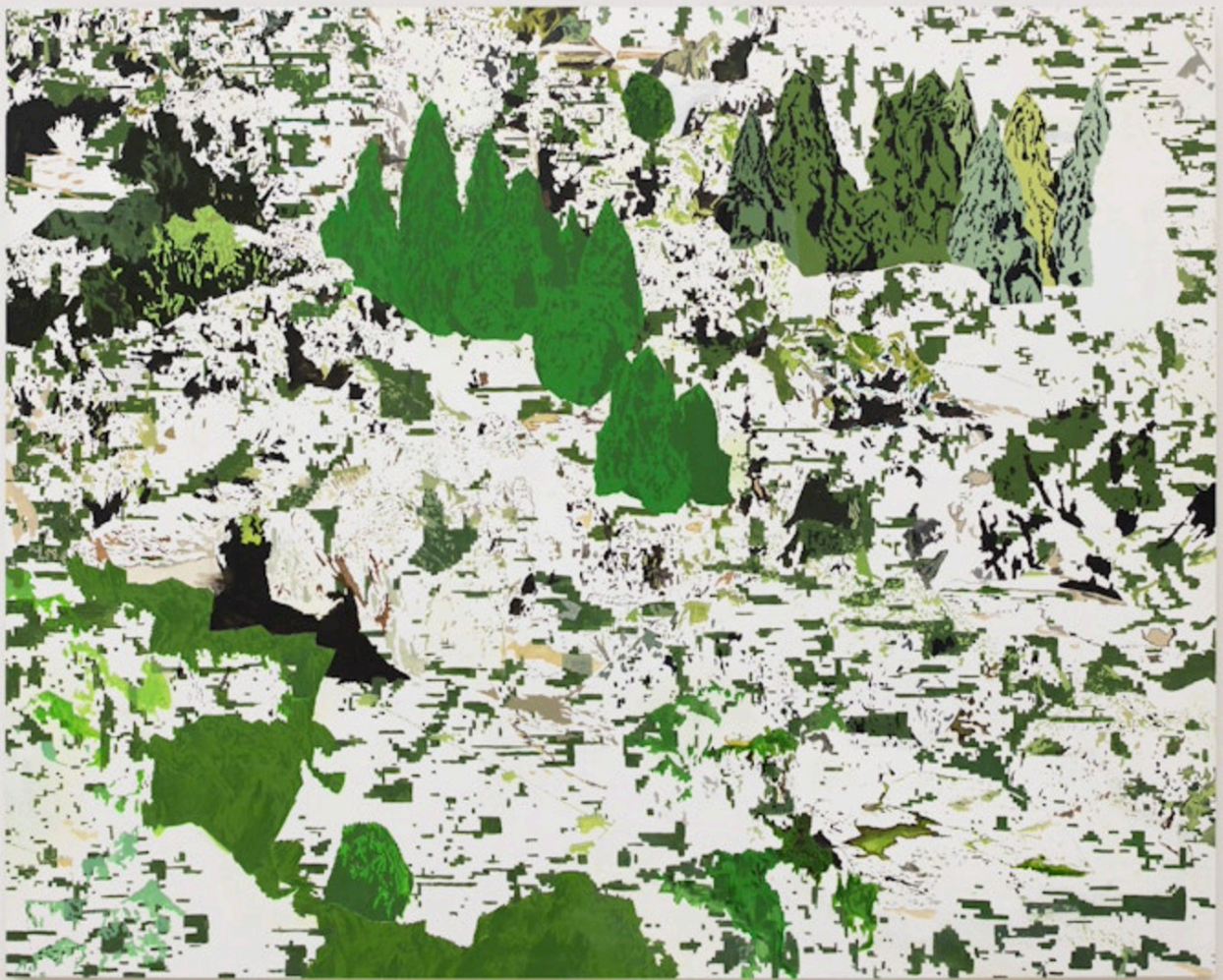


**ArtSeen**

# Christopher Astley: *Terrain*

By [Ekin Erkan](#)



Christopher Astley, *Terrain #10*, 2023. Oil and Gesso on wood panel, 60 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Martos Gallery.

# MARTOS GALLERY

Christopher Astley's *Terrain* at Martos Gallery features ten sprawling canvases from his series of the same name, each depicting verdant landscapes and meadows. Each element is comprised of small, quadrilateral, pixel-like squares and rectangles that coalesce into flattened green canopies, chestnut-ochre boles, and ribbons of chartreuse grass planes. At first glance, the series readily echoes the "post-internet" visual lexicon sported by digital painters like Alexei Shulgin, Bunny Rogers, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, and Petra Cortright. But where Van Kerckhoven and Cortright use the filter, palette, and vector-layering tools of programs like PhotoShop and After Effects to transform widely circulated online imagery into nebulous abstractions that are printed onto canvas, Astley hews true to oil and gesso on wood panel. Furthermore, Astley's landscapes do not have their roots in digitally-circulated images. Though Astley's series, executed from 2022 to 2024, depicts lime-green pine trees, verdurous plains, and jade tufts of grass in progressively blockier, pixelated terms, it does not entirely renounce the painterly. Indeed, the occasional errant dispensation of a right-angle corner or uneven edge betrays the brush's presence. These are not "digital paintings" but paintings that trade in digital seeing and remembering.



Installation view: *Christopher Astley: Terrain*, Martos Gallery, New York, 2024. Courtesy Martos gallery.

# MARTOS GALLERY

Throughout the “Terrains,” Astley employs diagonal lines—sawtooth planes, painted in alabaster white rectangles—that bisect the picture plane. In earlier works from the series, such as *Terrain #2* (2023) and *Terrain #3* (2022), these channels could readily be interpreted as tumbled-pebble paths or snow-topped trails. The arborous coagulations and tree branches that top these serrated pixel-lines cast shadows over them, suggesting that the latter are continuous with and a part of the same reality as former. Beginning with *Terrain #6* (2023), however, Astley’s landscapes are increasingly freed from veristic grips. The serrated white channels become an alien force—an outside afflatus “from without.” These lineaments grow into block-like concatenations of sharp, individuated rectangles. Where shrubs float along them, they are *sans* shadow. This progression is coeval to Astley’s increasingly contracted use of perspective in later works like *Terrain Study #7* (2023) and *Terrain Study #11* (2024), which enjoy an intensification in pixel-pocked structuration all around. The trees, bushes, and grass all become progressively pixelated. The digital vernacular eventually rises to its nadir and, naturalistic hangovers abdicated, Astley allows for his white lines to unspool their full, foreign force with his “white paintings,” *Terrain #10* and *Terrain #12* (both 2024). Much of the verdure is now captured by white, the occasional fir effluvium strip or verdant rod reminding us of the green wilderness’s presence. The Outside’s insistence has taken over the canvas as negative space, the once lush landscape now shot through with a cascade of white, pixel-sized gaps and gapes.

# MARTOS GALLERY

*Terrain #10* and *Terrain #12* are the two most recent works from the series, prompted by an episode from the artist's recent past. Following a pulmonary embolism, Astley's physician informed him of the possibility of early-onset dementia. This indicates a striking continuity between the thematic content in Astley's 2020 "Seven Years Below" series and that of the "Terrains."

"Seven Years Below" was an *ukiyo-e* inspired ambit where the artist overlaid collated imagery of historically indeterminate soldiers on sabulous mountains. As evinced by Astley's recent interview with James Scarborough, "Seven Years Below" was concerned with "the chaos and irreality of war" — that is, particularly for those of us who have not experienced it first-hand, how our episodic memory might represent a broad concept like "war," abstracting and equivocating myriad images of disparate battles and soldiers. In both "Seven Years Below" and "Terrains," we are privy to the churning of episodic memory as it conceptualizes representational items like "war" and "landscape." Both series function as meta-studies on remembering that forego veridicality in favor of mental representing-cum-imagining. Throughout Astley's "Terrains" we traipse through increasingly memory-pocked imagined reflections on an indeterminate landscape. We find Astley painting both how he may eventually come to remember such a landscape, until there are only slivers of memory left, *and* how he imagines this forgetting will optically appear. This is done effectively. Foregoing overly saccharine ruses and sentimentality, Astley perspicaciously imagines the narrative process of forgetting.

# MARTOS GALLERY



Christopher Astley, *Terrain #2*, 2023. Oil and Gesso on wood panel, 67 x 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and Martos gallery.

# MARTOS GALLERY

The question then rises to the fore of *why*, exactly, does Astley adhere to the device of pixel-painting and what does his broader engagement with digital vernacular tell us about the meaning of the series? After all, Astley could have chronicled this imagined process of forgetting with veristic landscapes overtaken by pooling blank craters. Astley's aforementioned interview is revealing, as he remarks, "I think that drones and satellite imagery allow us a whole new way of seeing and collecting information about the world." Much the same can be said for computer screens. Yet Astley's "Terrains" demonstrate that these digital apparatuses do not so much "allow us" new ways of seeing as *force* us to see qua digitality. Memory and imagining are no exception. The images that Astley relays as forfeited by episodic memory may, indeed, be landscape images derived from a search engine, but this is too simplistic for what Astley's paintings demonstrate. They instead decry an interest in our contemporary modes of seeing and remembering. In its rapprochement with digital technologies and media, perceptual experience has been sublated such that even memorial retention and recollection of worldly wilderness is suffused with the being of the digital. Whatever their original source—whether it be a primeval forest or a photograph from Google Images—imaginings and retrieved memories, alike, are set into the pixel-jagged contours of a digital relief.