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## ✿ A Conversation with Christopher Astley on the Occasion of his "Terrain" Exhibition at Martos Gallery, by James Scarborough

Christopher Astley's "Terrain," opened at Martos Gallery on February 15. It marks a pivotal moment in the artist's career. Known for his intricate blend of abstract and representational forms, Astley's work explores the essence of landscape painting, challenging and expanding its traditional confines. This exhibition, which also features select pieces from his "Seven Years Below" series, offers an exploration of the interplay between human cognition and the environment, presenting landscapes that exist at the intersection of the natural and the artificial.

Astley's "Terrain" series continues his fascination with the ways in which verbal articulation, memory, and cognitive processes shape our perception of the world. Through a consistent chromatic range and a collage of forms, his paintings emerge as metaphorical landscapes that reflect on the fragmentation of modern life and the pervasive impact of technology on our collective consciousness. Drawing from a rich tapestry of influences, including 10th-century Chinese landscapes, the multifaceted perspectives of Cubism, and the imaginative worlds of cartoonist Winsor McCay, Astley crafts a visual language that interrogates the nature of reality, memory, and history.

This exhibition not only showcases Astley's skill and conceptual rigor but also invites viewers to engage with art as a medium for expanding consciousness. Through his visionary landscapes, Astley encourages a contemplative dialogue with the viewer, challenging us to reconsider our relationship with the world around us and the myriad ways in which art can transform our understanding of existence.

**JS:** In your Terrain series, you employ a "persistent visual language" that blends abstract and representational elements. How do you navigate the balance between abstraction and representation in your work, and what challenges does this dual approach present in conveying your thematic concerns?

**CA:** At the beginning of my process all of the elements in my paintings are really representational. The parts that seem abstract are actually small, disconnected pieces of a larger representational image. From these I make a collage that I think has the potential to be compelling when it is painted. Depicting elements in paint abstracts and democratizes the pieces. When painting I pay close attention to what is happening right in front of me and try to put aside any notions that I have about what I think the painting is about or what it will finally look like. If a painting is successful, the original underlying themes are mixed with unexpected relationships; often, absurd characters and events appear and enliven it. This way, hopefully, the painting accumulates the complexity and oddness of life.

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**JS:** The concept of landscapes in your paintings serves as a metaphor for deeper concerns rather than mere depictions of nature. Can you elaborate on how you use the landscape motif to explore themes of verbal articulation, memory, and cognitive processes?

**CA:** At the time that I started to make the “Terrain” series I was reading Walter Isaacson’s book *The Code Breaker* about Jennifer Doudna, CRISPR, and gene editing. My father-in-law had also recently had a stroke and a few years before that, my good friend and painter Paul Bloodgood got violently mugged, developed early onset Alzheimer’s, gradually lost his (what was once exceptional) ability to verbally communicate, and eventually died. Less dramatically, I also noticed that my aging friends and I were having a harder time finding the correct words while speaking and I developed a (temporary) case of Vertigo in which a small crystal became detached and floated freely around my inner ear causing me to feel that what I was seeing in front of me was actually flying up and over my head while I sat still.

This is all to say that as I began painting my *Terrain* series I was contemplating the idea of people as biological DNA machines in a code created world and the way that these machines (we) perceive and organize the world. The language and the logic of these paintings derives from a combination of code as building blocks (with its relationship to the painterly grid and to digital imagery) and the way our minds perceive the world as fragments collaged together (also similar to the way that many painters make paintings (an example being the de Kooning collages at his retrospective at MoMA in 2011). When the brain is damaged the resulting collage from the corrupted fragments of memory that an injured brain puts together can be unpredictable and sometimes very revealing. The book *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy deals with memory, memory loss, and piecing a world back together after a head injury. I think the story that McCarthy tells is a great metaphor for art making and is an inspiration for me.

**JS:** Your work references a wide array of influences, from Chinese landscapes and Cubism to the cartoons of Winsor McCay. How do these diverse sources inform your artistic practice, and how do you integrate such varied inspirations into a coherent visual style?

**CA:** I’d like to say, first of all, that I try to hold on to all of my influences and the ideas I have about my work very loosely. I hate the thought of being so connected to an idea about the work that I can’t see an even more interesting idea that is developing right in front of me while I paint. The best ideas come to me while I paint. I actually think that spending a lot of time on a painting allows for more and deeper connections and time to lose track of the original idea, which to me is a good thing. As for the influence of Chinese landscapes, I am interested in the sense of hovering perspective that allows for a conflation of time and space, as if looking in from the outside and being able to see multiple perspectives all at once. I had an experience of this kind of conflation of time and space when I was in my early twenties, which led to my becoming an artist and is the core experience that all of my work circles around to this day. A similar sense of multi perspective and the related ‘collapse’ of time is also true for Cubism and the notion of simultaneity.

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As for Winsor McCay, I just love those cartoons—the energy and imagination of them are unparalleled. I love the pairing of the graphic lines and those beautiful colors and the way that they are printed on paper. They led me to start looking closely at Japanese wood block prints whose energy and dynamism are in conversation with Winsor McCay’s cartoons. My interest in McCay and Japanese wood block prints led to my series “Seven Years Below.”

**JS:** The Terrain paintings suggest a world that is both natural and artificial, with a focus on the dislocation and fragmentation of modern life. In what ways do you believe contemporary technology—such as drones and computer rendering—affects our perception of reality, and how is this reflected in your art?

**CA:** I think that drones and satellite imagery allow us a whole new way of seeing and collecting information about the world. I think they are very exciting. I also find computer screens super interesting in the same way that photography and various forms of printing (lithography, inkjet, wood block) are. I look carefully at all of these forms and am inspired by them. They give me ideas about painting.

**JS:** The Seven Years Below series portrays the chaos and irreality of war through a hallucinatory lens. What draws you to explore the theme of conflict, and how do you approach the representation of such a tumultuous subject matter in a way that challenges traditional perceptions of time, space, and history?

**CA:** I am really not deeply interested in the study of modern or historical warfare but I am drawn to the energy of the scenes and action as a painterly device and a metaphor for emotional states. I am captivated by the smoke, the explosions, the fire, and the bodies in action. I like the way that these dynamic actions stand in contrast to the sense (in my paintings) of the moment being permanently frozen.

The series title “Seven Years Below” refers to throwing off the normal way we view time on a linear spectrum. Instead of time being behind or ahead of us it is below. The historical figures and events depicted in these paintings are chosen simply because they are historical or appear to be historical (of a certain time and place). In the paintings, however, people/events become un-stuck in time and therefore can be moved around on the time space grid. Imagine a *Star Trek* episode where Captain Kirk and crew run into George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison in full regalia on some lonely planet in a distant galaxy. To me the paintings channel Kurt Vonnegut’s notion of the time and space in *Slaughterhouse Five* where the extra-terrestrial Tralfamadorians are able to see all points in space-time simultaneously. Human perception, in comparison, is likened to being on a railroad car moving quickly on rails running along one edge of the Grand Canyon, having one eye closed and the other looking straight at the opposite side of the canyon through a ten-foot-long tube. In the Seven Years Below Paintings I attempt to remove the tube.

**JS:** Your artistic process in a windowless studio and the deliberate distance from direct observation of nature suggest a unique approach to creating landscapes. Can you discuss the significance of this choice and how it impacts your creative process and the final outcome of your work?

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**CA:** I would love to have a window. But after overpaying for a big studio with windows for many years I rented the cheapest studio I could find which means no windows. There is a skylight but it tends to throw glare down on the paintings so I keep it blocked most of the time. I work from a collage so I don't think that the lack of natural light matters that much to me. I am aware of and compensate for the color of the light in my studio and the skylight allows me to check when I need to. I really would love to be able to easily open a window and get fresh air and look outside.

**JS:** In discussing your work, you've touched on themes of human mortality and uncertain times. How do you see your role as an artist in addressing these existential concerns, and what do you hope viewers take away from your exploration of these themes?

**CA:** I believe that what we (people) perceive on an everyday basis is the tip of a very large iceberg in which consciousness and the material world are actually indistinguishable from each other. The act of making art opens a pathway for artists to tap into this deeper level of consciousness similar to taking psychedelics or meditating. This heightened experience of connectedness can be imbued in a work of art and transmitted to a sensitive and receptive viewer of that artwork even if it is hundreds of years later. I believe that this type of perception is innate in people and needs to be developed in order for humans to evolve to the next level of consciousness and realize their connection to everyone and everything else in the universe.

*The exhibition runs through March 16. Martos Gallery is located at 41 Elizabeth Street, New York, NY 10013. Gallery hours are Tuesday - Saturday, 10AM - 6PM. For more information, call (212) 560 0670 or visit [martosgallery.com](http://martosgallery.com) and [shootthelobster.com](http://shootthelobster.com). Photos courtesy of Martos Gallery.*



Terrain #1, 2022. Oil and Gesso on wood panel. 96 x 78 in/243.8 x 198.1 cm.

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Terrain #2, 2023. Oil and Gesso on wood panel. 67 x 84 in/170.2 x 213.4 cm.

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Terrain #3, 2022. Oil and Gesso on wood panel. 96 x 80 in/243.8 x 203.2 cm.



Terrain #6, 2023. Oil and Gesso on wood panel. 60 x 48 in/152.4 x 121.9 cm.

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Terrain Study #7, 2023. Oil and Gesso on wood panel. 24 x 30 in/61 x 76.2 cm.

