



Title

Brice Marden (1938–2023)

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Brice Marden (1938–2023)

by Richard Shiff • 08.11.2023

In 2012 Brice Marden [FIG.1](#), who died on 9th August 2023 at the age of eighty-four, was enjoying the late spring season at his studio in Hydra, a location he favoured for many years – an elemental environment of sunlight, rocks and water. He was preparing thoughts for a lecture to be presented at Tate Modern, London.¹ Perhaps the state of nature on the Greek island had intoxicated him, for on arrival in urban London, he found his notes ‘way too romantic’.² London had obliterated the aura of Hydra. Remarkably sensitive to atmospheric variation, Marden often experienced his immediate surroundings as unique and exhilarating. Sensations of raw nature, even when filtered through a studio window, motivated his aesthetic efforts. Romance – in the early modernist sense of the Romantic naturalism of Caspar David Friedrich, the Hudson River School, the Barbizon painters and Gustave Courbet – constituted the essence of Marden’s art, wherever he worked.

From his high-rise Manhattan studio along the Hudson, Marden romanced the tidal changes in the river below. While in Hydra, his linear drawings romanced the movement of light and water in the Mediterranean. His responsive graphic gestures to rocks were nominally instances of abstraction, usually lacking a veneer of representational resemblance [FIG.2](#). Descriptive detail was never Marden’s aim. His love of the natural environment amounted to an all-consuming feeling, too intense and unnameable to be anything but abstract: the sensation of an immersion or identification of the self with an enveloping physicality. Marden knew that he was real, and the emerging art object with which he identified – the art object that he became – had to be just as real, neither a fiction nor a projection that would exist at an imaginative remove. Marden’s paint became at once the earth, the water, the air, even the fire of his existence. Having observed the desolate, corrugated, pitted landscape of western Nebraska in 1966, he captured the feeling of this land in a colour with, appropriately, no definitive name [FIG.3](#). Nebraska’s ‘white green gray trees’, growing from the earth, reflecting the sky, inspired a layered greenish surface of oil and wax that could simultaneously look decidedly grey.³ Later, when Marden became absorbed with Asian calligraphic linearity, he generated a personal calligraphy [FIG.4](#), an inscribed language that resisted being read – signage to be felt, not interpreted.

Marden’s 2012 notes refer to ‘capturing the evocation, being *about* something not a picture of it’.⁴ He might have eliminated ‘about’ from his phrasing: to be something rather than to be its depiction.

From the earliest stages of his career, he ignored the culturally indoctrinated division between artist-as-subject and work-of-art-as-object. Others of Marden's generation were familiar with this possibility through the phenomenological speculations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty; but Marden himself acquired this grasp of reality through a mode of practice that he invented for his personal use – energetically spreading, rubbing and scraping layers of pigment (paint or graphite) against or into a resistant surface.

The humanistic naturalism of Marden's abstract art parallels the function that nature assumed for representational painters of the nineteenth century, at least as some critics of the time theorised. In a curious inversion, nature itself would identify subjectively with the presence of an artist who sought to represent objectively a view of this same nature: 'Something of yourself [your feeling] remains suspended in the hushed thickets and in the branches of the mute trees [...] According to whether your heart is sanguine or somber, nature celebrates with you or consoles'.⁵ Staring at the Hudson or the Mediterranean, or at his own art, Marden was observing what these bodies of water retained of himself. That is to say, nature and an artist's materials, as though in concert, transfer emotional content from inside the artist to a place outside, where it can be seen. An artist becomes the co-creator of forms never fully controlled. In Marden's early work, the 'outside' image appeared as a dense, monochromatic plane, minimally articulated [FIG.5](#); in his late work, the image became calligraphic or cipher-like in appearance – lines that might seem to flow, yet were scraped down into the palimpsest of the physical support [FIG.6](#).



Fig. 1 Brice Marden in his studio in New York in 2017. (© 2023 Brice Marden and Artists Rights Society, New York; courtesy the artist and Gagolian; photograph Mirabelle Marden).

Marden at work embodied the feeling of colour and light, of surface and shape, of stillness and motion. For his lecture at Tate Modern, he wrote: 'Stop the motion, freeze the energy, only to show the motion, keep it moving, retaining the energy'.⁶ To arrest the motion yet keep it moving: this was no contradiction, but rather an indication that any living form reaches its resolution in ambiguity, like a green that is visible as grey. Marden also recorded a fascinating line from Henry David Thoreau: 'It seems natural that rocks which have lain under the heavens so long should be gray, as it were an intermediate color between the heavens and earth'.⁷ Theologically, the heavens are bright, the earth is dark. Rocks on the surface gradually grow into grey. The grey of the natural environment, like Marden's grey, represents all light, all colours, all values, all possibilities.

Engaged in his intense creative process, Marden became 'Plane Image', the collective descriptor that he invented to signify the entirety of his art, at once objective materiality and subjective soul. His art was himself, 'Plane Image', Brice Marden.⁸ In 2006 when I was writing for the catalogue of his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, I consulted one of his private notebooks, which included the quotation from Thoreau and, most importantly, a number of intensely rendered studies in black graphite, destined to develop into his multi-layered, multi-coloured pseudo-monochromatic images. In his offhand, generous manner, Marden let me borrow the notebook. He may have thought little of the diminutive studies, but I regarded them as fully finished, miniature examples of his remarkable process. He had expended so much energy in establishing the deep tonality of the articulated forms that the paper often buckled from the pressure of his pencil (also used to incise the exterior edges). I think now that Marden – in his well-known early works and perhaps even more in the concentrated miniatures of the private notebook – was splitting the atom of pictorialism. He was releasing all the energy that would eventually find its place in his late calligraphic grids and his squares and rectangles with ribbons of colour [FIG.7](#), at once taut and relaxed. Rather than stabilising, the concentrated optical energy of his art kept expanding.

While I was marvelling at Marden's notebook pages, the artist was completing the six panels of *The Propitious Garden of Plane Image, Third Version* [FIG.8](#). This work has the rigour and intense compression of the earlier compositions, now clearly extended across nature's spectrum of visible hues: red to orange to yellow to green to blue to violet. Marden related the construction of the *Propitious Garden* to numerology: the multivalent character of numbers, which in common usage nevertheless remain precisely singular. He was told that his personal number was six. The dimensions of the panels, Marden said, were 4 by 6, 'which is twenty-four'. Yes, if you multiply, but not otherwise. 'Which is six', he then said, referring to the addition of the digits of the multiplied result. Is the calculation inconsistent, or is it something that, like an attraction to nature, generates a nameless, unidentifiable feeling? Marden had a romance with the abstractions of number, measure and colour as well as with the base reality of nature. 'I was beginning to feel this was some sort of ultimate self-portrait', he said of his painting.⁹ Marden, through his art, identified with – indeed, he became – all.



Fig. 2 *Rocks*, by Brice Marden. 2008/2017–21. Oil on linen, 2 panels, overall dimensions 2.1 by 6.8 m. (© Brice Marden and Artists Rights Society, New York; courtesy Gagosian; photograph Rob McKeever).

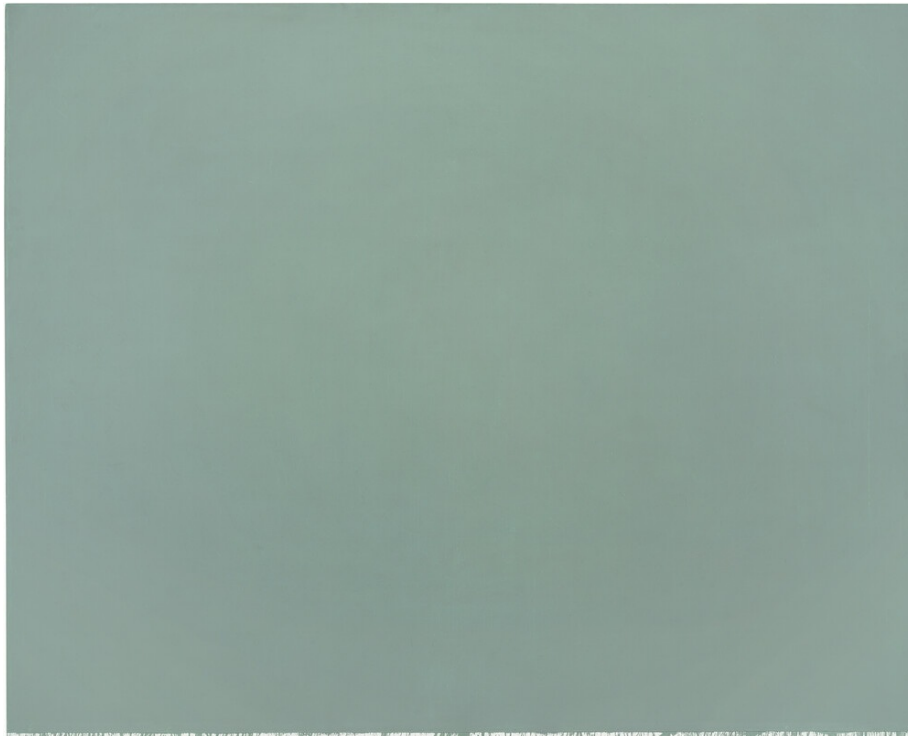


Fig. 3 *Nebraska*, by Brice Marden. 1966. Oil and wax on canvas, 147.3 by 182.9 cm. (© Brice Marden and Artists Rights Society, New York; courtesy the artist and Gagosian).



Fig. 4 *Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)*, by Brice Marden. 1989–91. Oil on linen, 274.3 by 365.8 cm. (© Brice Marden and Artists Rights Society, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; courtesy the artist and Gagosian).



Fig. 5 *Grove Group II*, by Brice Marden. 1972–73. Oil and wax on canvas, 2 parts, overall dimensions 182.9 by 274.3 cm. (© 2023 Brice Marden and Artists Rights Society, New York; courtesy the artist and Gagosian).

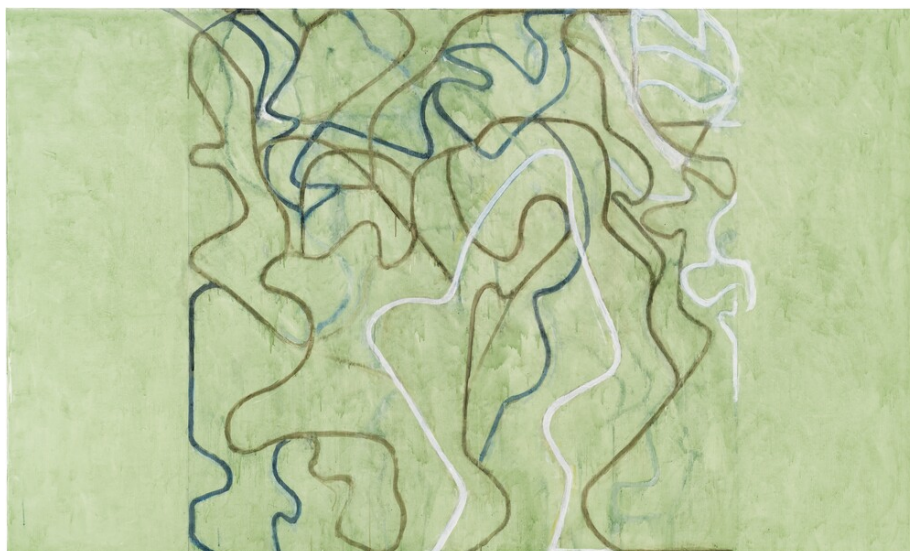


Fig. 6 *Elevation*, by Brice Marden. 2018–19. Oil on linen, 182.9 by 304.8 cm. (© Brice Marden and Artists Rights Society, New York; courtesy Gagosian; photograph Rob McKeever).



Fig. 7 *Santorini 2*, by Brice Marden. 2010–18. Oil on linen, 190.8 by 135.9 cm. (© 2023 Brice Marden and Artists Rights Society, New York; courtesy the artist)

and Gagosian).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Brice Marden: A Retrospective of Paintings and Drawings* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006–07, showing *The Propitious Garden of Plane Image, Third Version*. 2000–06. Oil on linen, 6 panels, overall dimensions 0.8 by 7.3 m. (Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York; photograph Jonathan Muzikar).

Footnotes

- 1** See ‘Brice Marden: American artist lecture series’, Tate (14th May 2012), available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_8l9DhBhn4, accessed 6th November 2023.
- 2** B. Marden: ‘This is what I do’, in *idem: Ru Ware, Marbles, Polke*, New York 2013, pp.37–41, at p.37.
- 3** Personal notebook of Brice Marden (1966–1974), unpublished manuscript note, June 1966; typescript of notes taken by Brice Marden while viewing his one-person exhibition at Bykert Gallery, New York, 20th November 1966.
- 4** Marden, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.38, emphasis in original.
- 5** P. Mantz: *Salon de 1847*, Paris 1847, pp.96–97.
- 6** Marden, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.38.
- 7** H.D. Thoreau, entry for 23rd June 1852, reprinted in *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, Boston 1949, IV, p.134.

- 8** Marden, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.39: 'Plane Image is just another way I refer to myself or the studio or whatever'; see also M. Duffy: 'Two and four make six: in the studio with Brice Marden', in G. Garrels, ed.: *Plane Image: A Brice Marden Retrospective*, New York (Museum of Modern Art) 2006, p.121: "'Plane Image" is me. I consider it a synonym'.
- 9** Marden, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.39.

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