

Agnes Martin at LACMA

April 24–
September 11, 2016

Since Agnes Martin's death in 2004, and indeed during the twilight of her life, the terms that have consistently structured our understanding of abstract painting have been under steady and tenacious renegotiation. Numerous exhibitions have attempted to either shed light on painting's marginal histories, or to recalibrate the relevance of abstraction in a post-internet era. The careers of seminal women artists have also been primed for re-examination (i.e. Lee Bontecou and Isa Genzken, among others). Arriving at the crux of these trends and organized in conjunction with the Tate Modern, the Guggenheim, and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, LACMA's posthumous retrospective of Agnes Martin, the first voluminous exhibition of her work in the U.S. since 1992, both punctured and reinforced the poetic mythology surrounding the artist and her practice.

The retrospective was thoughtfully housed on the top floor of LACMA's Broad Contemporary Art building, where the linear scaffolding of the open ceiling—and the pleasant diffusion of natural light into the space—appeared at times to be architectural extensions of the work itself. Following a simple chronological framework, the exhibition presented

the mythic “hiatus” that Martin took from painting (and the New York art world) from 1967 to 1972 as the show's unseen nexus, with her career unfolding in two phases of Before and After. Her temporary, fabled abandonment of painting for a nomadic, humble lifestyle in the New Mexico desert contributes to her mythology, and in many ways buttresses the reserved language commonly used to characterize and historicize her work.

Employing this chronological fracture as a curatorial structure wisely avoids over-categorization; however, it teeters on privileging a biographical reading of Martin's prolific output, a reading that the artist herself was by many accounts vehemently opposed to. In the context of Martin's ample oeuvre, which comprises both painting and writing, perhaps this disjunction should be framed less as a complete hiatus from creative endeavors and more as an immersion in traveling and writing¹—equally prolific actions that had outside influence on her drawings and paintings throughout the course of her life.

While the exhibition's narrative also reaffirmed Martin's conceptual and material straddling of two male-centric canonical movements—Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism—her work itself transcends these bilateral guideposts. In the catalogue, Tiffany Bell characterizes the feverish energy imbued in Martin's early, seemingly quiet grid paintings: “as though the energy of a Pollock drip painting has been stretched out and carefully sustained over time.”² While this sentiment astutely counters the notion that Martin's work is austere and hesitant,

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it still frames the hyper-macho Ab-Ex kingpin as the linguistic default against which her work is measured. If anything, this retrospective asserted that Martin's work consists of a bold language of its own making, a language that is self-sustaining beyond the predetermined historical structures that the artist herself shrugged off.

Martin's affinity for language, particularly as seen in her writing, seeps through the work. The entire exhibition, from serial pieces such as *On a Clear Day* (1973) and *With My Back to the World* (1997), to singular paintings such as *Homage to Life* (2003), to several divinely curated rooms dedicated solely to her small-scale drawings and prints, could be read as poetic intonations that ebb and flow within and between works, and that quietly unspool in the interconnected galleries. Her paintings and works on paper reveal a startling generosity and much-discussed poetic sensibility, the terms of which are transparent and readily available for the patient, observant viewer. Her simple means and abstract vocabulary manage to avoid appearing stale, generic, or static in temperament; on the contrary, her work is mercurial and mutable. The square format, which she employed almost exclusively, eschews the hierarchy of orientation. Even her rarely seen early biomorphic paintings, reminiscent of Arshile Gorky, cement the intrinsic way her work seems to form its own language system, complete with serial marks, grids, and lines as unique graphemes.

This retrospective served to remind us that abstraction, on Martin's terms, inhabits a liminal space beyond the muted asceticism of Minimalism and exuberant machismo of Abstract Expressionism—a space where the timbre of her seemingly quiet marks and lines is, upon close

inspection, actually incredibly bold and amplified. Here, amplification rests less in loudness, and more in a radical excavation of the very criteria that constitute our perceptions of gestural volume. Martin's economy of line and form betrays a language with a range so acute that the tonal changes in the work are rendered nearly imperceptible; one has to subliminally readjust focus to decipher her marks as being rooted in an inward-facing, enigmatic sonority as opposed to an extroverted performance of gestural bravado. This is an intimate act that reveals highly attuned expressions of subtlety rather than silence. As Martin herself observes, "we even hear silence when it is not really silent."³

This is subversive quietness, defined not by a *lack* of visual decibel in relation to Pollock or any of her other contemporaries, but by a tonal intensity and an emotional cognizance that are revolutionary in their precariousness for a woman painter to embrace. The notion of unspoken power masking as silence arguably connects to the narrative recounting Martin's hiatus from painting as well. Her insertion of a metaphorical pause into the weighted performance of gesture can be read in relation to her interlude from the performance of the artist in the studio.

Based on the modern conception of the artist as a singularly prolific object-maker, a breach in studio productivity unambiguously signals creative impotence, which undermines the mythologized stamina of the virile genius (an image indelibly linked to an artist such as Pollock). Martin's declaration of an intermission from painting reads as an embrace of vulnerability, as she again dismantles the notion that artistic power stems from a continuous, cacophonous recital of self-expression.

1. Baas, Jacquelynn. "Agnes Martin: Readings for Writings." *Agnes Martin*. Ed. Frances Morris and Tiffany Bell. New York: D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers Inc., 2015.

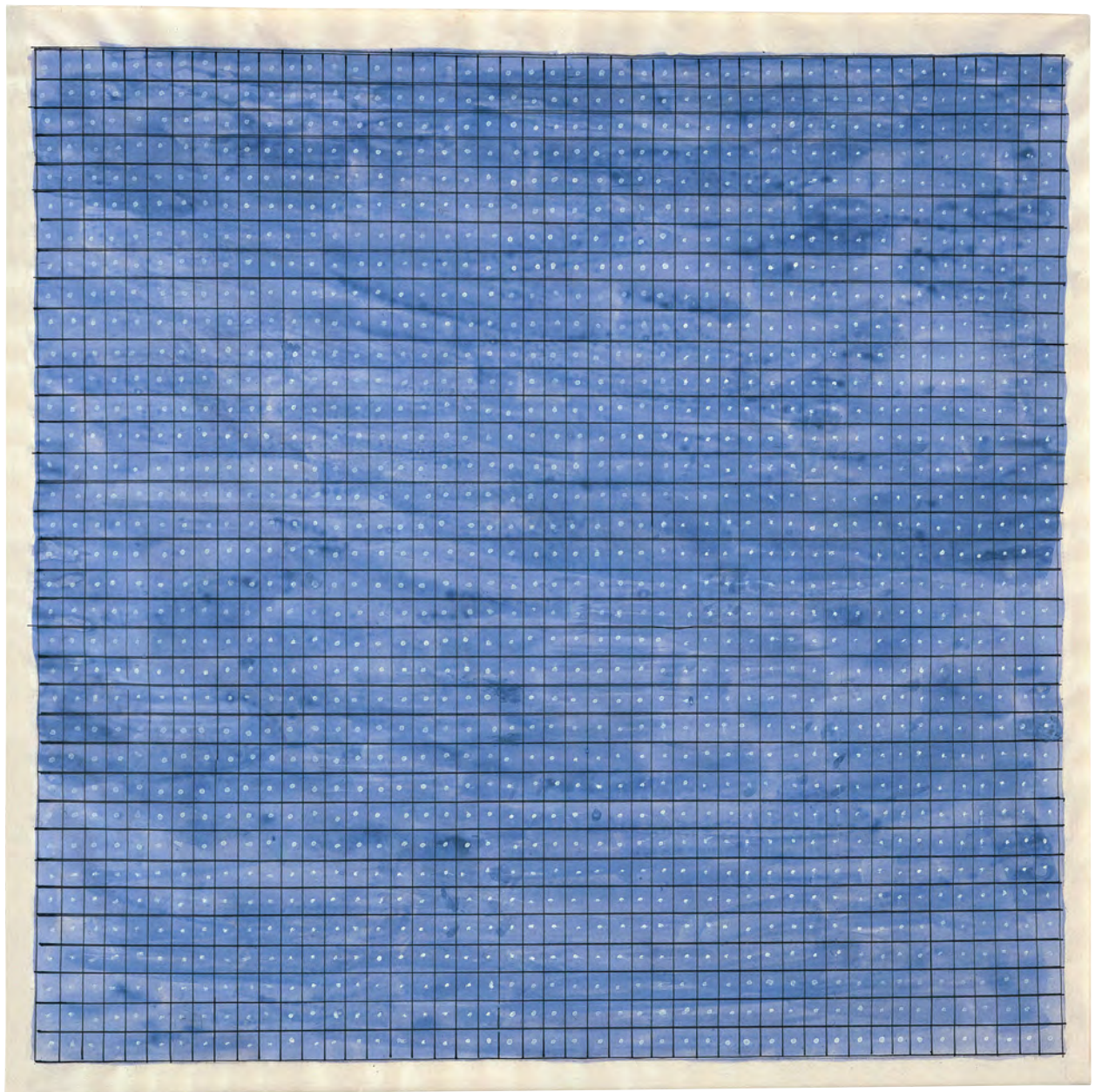
2. Bell, Tiffany. "Happiness Is the Goal." *Agnes Martin*. Ed. Frances Morris and Tiffany Bell. New York: D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers Inc., 2015.

3. Martin, Agnes. "Beauty is the Mystery of Life." *Agnes Martin*. Ed. Frances Morris and Tiffany Bell. New York: D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers Inc., 2015.



At its best, the retrospective demonstrates that this poetic, introspective shift in Martin's creative practice benefits her later work greatly. Her pivot from painting to writing, and her eventual marriage of the two, can be viewed as a pivot from the labor of abstraction to the language of abstraction—an assertion of personal agency and tacit power that radically challenges the dominant models for both.

1
Agnes Martin, *Homage to Life*
(2003). Acrylic and graphite
on canvas. 60 × 60 inches. Col-
lection of Leonard and Louise
Riggio. Image copyright of the
Agnes Martin/Artists Rights
Society (ARS), New York
and courtesy of Pace Gallery,
New York.



2

Agnes Martin, *Summer* (1964).
Watercolor, ink, and gouache
on paper, 9.25 x 9.25 inches.
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