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Author(s): Richard Tuttle

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Appreciation

What Does One Look at in an Agnes Martin Painting?

Nine Musings on the Occasion of Her Ninetieth Birthday

Richard Tuttle

I. When I think of an Agnes Martin painting, I see bundles of lines spread out vertically to make a horizontal line. A certain painting in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art often comes to mind. The general impression is of horizontal bands varying from white to gray to white again and so on until the entire square is filled. At this moment, the gray seems to subsume every aspect of the painting—its structure, dynamic, and pictorialism. It makes us look at line as afterthought, even though, upon reflection, it becomes obvious that line is what makes it all happen.

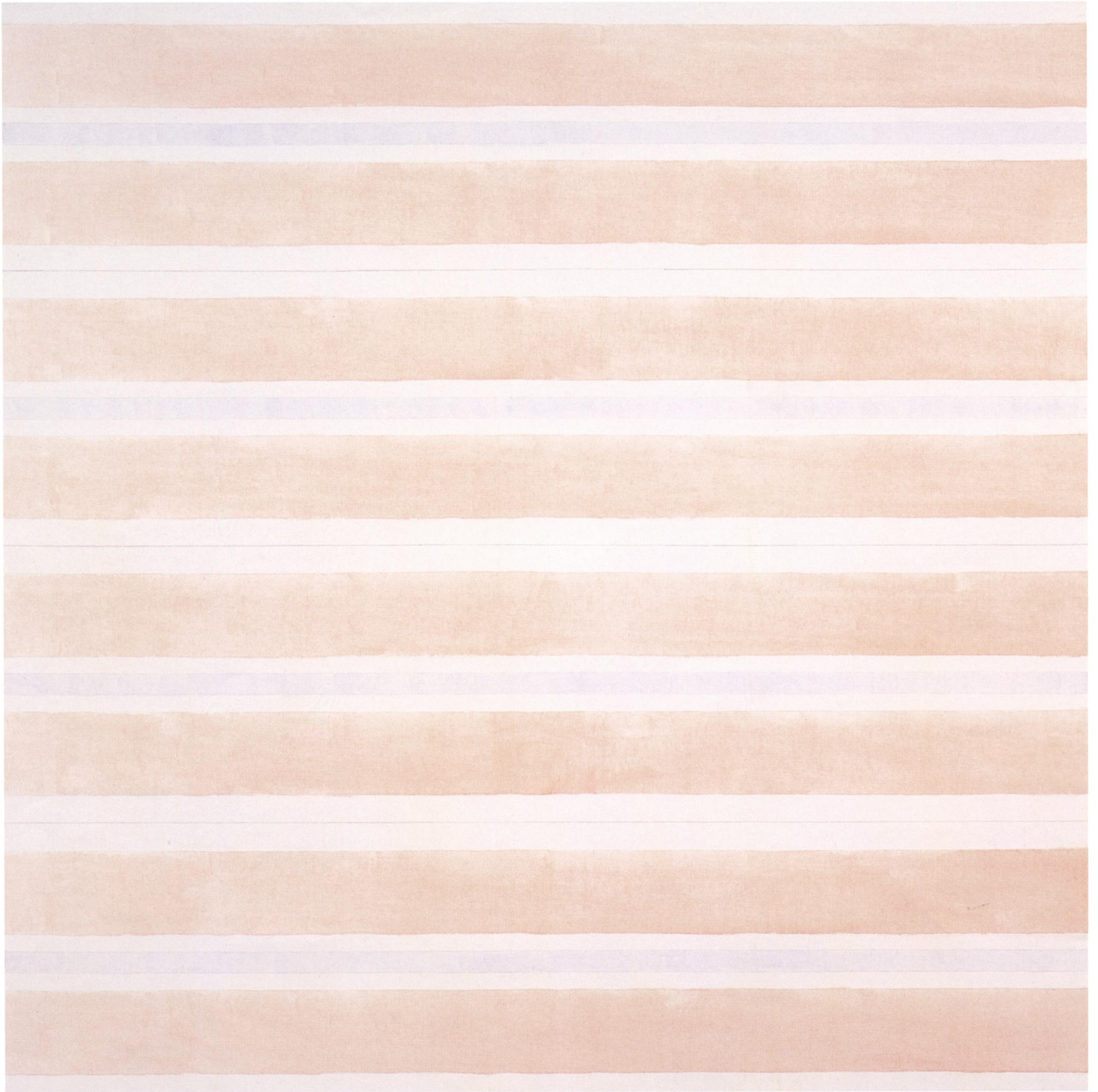
This is no trick or sleight of hand. Many of our most gifted artists—Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Martin—achieved success without painting in a traditional manner. In her work, the line takes over from the brush and becomes a vehicle for the most tender expressions.

II. I am intrigued and touched by a quality of her paintings that is not real, which may be related to such things as phantoms and mirages. It moves from there to here. Frankly, it is something I have always looked for in Martin's works, whether large or small. It is something I cannot but join to a personality, a young girl perhaps, alone in a great wilderness. The grid becomes a void in which her movement is infinite and elusive. The girl comes to pause when we perceive her tenderness.

Some might refer to the space in which something like this happens as "mystical." It would be a slight, indeed, not to see these paintings alongside other important contributions designated in this way. They are a gift to the artist as well as the viewer.

III. One of the things that fascinates me about her paintings is the way they leap from the wall. Their tautness and freshness are what life gives us, here bounded by the square. Martin is compelled to make adjustments, so that she can say, "I am trying to break down the power of the square, or I am trying to straighten out the veins of a leaf." Her need to modify is so great that it leads to an abundance of rich elements and discoveries. The linen itself abounds. Ideas, already suggestive, are energized, and yet there is a calming effect as form is brought to chaos.

Her work is original in a number of ways. How a grid of lines can be called *Grass*. How the emotion is more important than the idea. How the space is real yet genuinely ambiguous and charged. A formal balance is demanded, which separates painting from "just line" in the most honest, egoless manner.



Agnes Martin, *Affection*, 2001.
Acrylic and pencil, 60 x 60 in.
PaceWildenstein, New York

Something else so basic to Martin's painting easily goes unnoticed: It is about bringing or giving light. We respond to her work as if to varying kinds of light. We slowly discover these responses, simultaneously unknown and familiar to us, wonderfully disconcerting and ultimately revelational.

IV. Driving to Taos from Abiquiu, New Mexico, along the rim road, I am excited that I will soon see some of Martin's new paintings—that all of this will be captured inside a painting. Knowing that I can look across the picture plane and pinpoint with my eyes the place where it will happen seems a more minor piece of speculative imagination. Yet there is a balance that I enjoy between these two large systems of understanding, knowing and seeing. How can more people have the opportunity to look at a Martin painting that not only offers pleasure but also a better way of seeing? From time to time we need a new way to pictorialize. The abstract expressionists gave us one that was somewhat akin to looking at a landscape. Because work like this came out of the experience of looking at the magnificence we have here in the West, artists have assumed that we could see the nonobjective as easily as the objective world. We need to train viewers to bridge the differences in seeing.

What does one look at when one looks at an Agnes Martin? Many would say “nothing,” for there is no image—only lines and color. When we stand before such a painting, our act of “seeing” has all the aspects of seeing a knife or a ball, but we do not see something that we recognize from the material world. What do we see then? An emotion—for example, the truth of happiness. This separation of the act of looking from the experience of seeing—without falling into the cognition of actuality—is real painting.

V. Imagine holding a pen perfectly steady from one side of a page to another. The hand-drawn line integrates all things and animates with its own personality, but it also divides the page. Profundity such as this can take us unawares, and we can overlook that this is drawing.

Agnes Martin a draftsman? When her work is included in sophisticated exhibitions of drawings, some people are hard put to call these straight lines “drawings,” for drawing is the least difficult to understand of the means she uses for her painting. It is the part that she has brought most down to earth. She has said she loves line, and she makes us love it in the same way that she does. But we can also see the loved lines conspire. At a certain moment her drawing becomes a painting.

That is partly because when the drawn line gets to the painting, it is received proportionally—another of Martin's great discoveries. The sculptor Donald Judd approved, realizing that her paintings were as proportionally astute as his minimalist boxes.

Of course, we are all operating under the great dictum of Leonardo that there are no lines in nature. By using lines all over her paintings, Martin defines nature as something outside the painting. From there, she also excludes ideas and other things. Painting as exclusion was an important concept, a milestone in the road to an independent, more useful (but not more utilitarian) art.

Mostly Martin's drawings on paper make a space, a drawing space. The latest drawing I own has so few lines—some of which are even covered by the mat—that I mentioned to Martin that it seemed a high point had been reached in the ratio between drawing and empty paper. She said she had diluted the ink, too. By this additional restraint a painting had been revealed, and the boundaries again blur. The drawings, though, have always been on semitranslucent paper. There is a gentle pressure, which allows the light to come through the paper.

VI. Painting is inextricable from life. A painting recently unbound from the subject can be free to engage us with issues of great universality. Calm. Repose. Silence. Stability. These are things I come to expect from an Agnes Martin painting.

Fear could also be one of these issues. The artist chooses not to be crushed by life and returns art to the truly social by ending fear with her work. That is a kind of heroism.

To the owner of a Martin painting, living with something that has no tricks can be disconcerting. Martin's depth of knowledge of the knowable, everyday quality/quantity of things is given with almost naive generosity. Those who know Martin are aware of her love of camping and hiking amid Southwestern vistas, adventure, athletics, cars, and of her great sense of humor. These are the kinds of things she actually paints with, and these give life to her pictures.

VII. Future art historians will note the pause in Martin's paintings between 1967 and 1974. The paintings before 1967 are more based in things like perception, perfection, and are not of this world, and those after 1974 are more about happiness and recognition, albeit still self-referentially definable and abstract. These later pictures begin with the major silk-screen print portfolio *On a Clear Day* (1973). Martin's famous speeches are from this transitional time. The clarity of her words is also astonishing. The paintings began as if where the earlier paintings had left off—the tendency toward a six-panel composition, three bands over three.

It is a wonderful thing to compare how these two groups were made. There is a pressing down in the earlier and a lifting up in the latter. Rare is the artist of this quality who can perform these two feats.

When artists age, their work can become more prescient, more solidly engaged with issues of emotion and vision, as they begin distancing themselves from the world. Martin's paintings span the modern and beyond. New York art dealer and artist Betty Parsons once called their lines "strings of the heart."

VIII. Martin's art also fits within a Platonic lineage. Even though Plato banishes the artist from the city, or perhaps because of it, I have always thought the artist is the true philosopher. Look at the references in Book V of *The Republic* to "lovers of the vision of truth," those "who love the truth in each thing," and the ones capable "of seeing or loving absolute beauty." How well those phrases apply to the ability to comprehend absolute beauty that is found in Martin's paintings.

IX. We have a late painting—six bands, two of each primary color, although the "red" is made with orange, a first for her. There is a certain light that it requires to look its best. Now I know that light, so when I enter the room, I first look for the light and then turn to the painting. If the light is right, the colors come alive in a special way.

I was first attracted to this work by its simplicity and the masterful painting, a tour-de-force by someone at any age. These are two forms of completeness, yet now I see it was the beginning of something more. In their sheer beauty, the colors almost rise from the painting, heralding the latest phase of Martin's art in which the double issues of love and language culminate in the production of light itself.

The author first met Agnes Martin in New York in 1963. Both artists now live in New Mexico, and they exhibited their work together in 1998 at SITE Santa Fe and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. These comments are excerpted from remarks presented at a March 2002 symposium held at the Harwood Museum in Taos, New Mexico, in honor of Martin's ninetieth birthday.