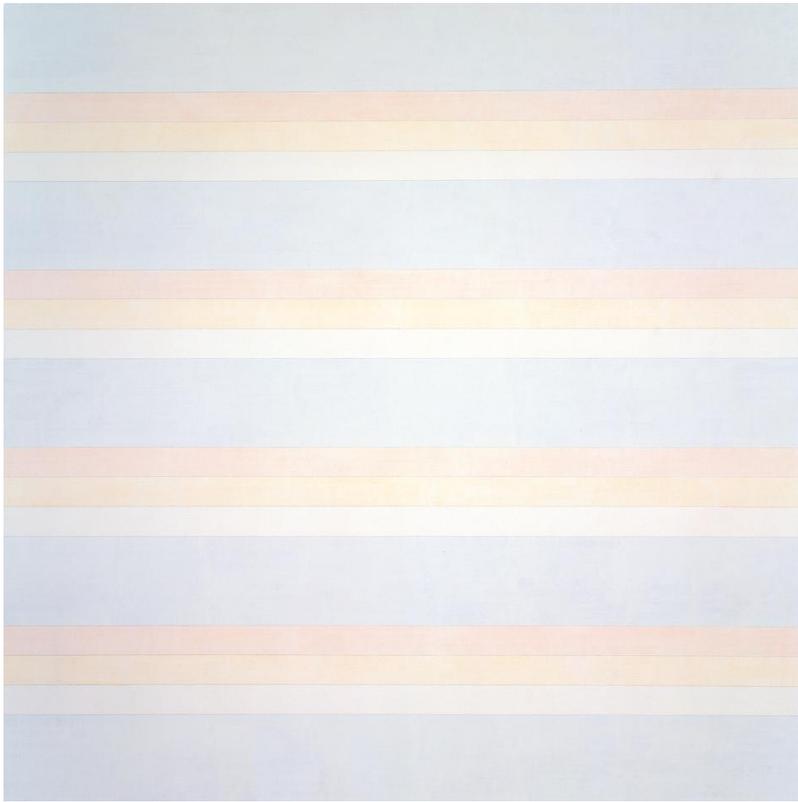


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Guggenheim Museum in New York Readies Agnes Martin Retrospective

'When we all spend so much of our lives in front of screens and looking at mediated images, it is an experience that I think people will appreciate'



Agnes Martin, 'Untitled #2,' 1992, acrylic and graphite on canvas *PHOTO: AGNES MARTIN/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Agnes Martin painted in New York for 10 years before moving out west to New Mexico, where she honed her distinctive style in the quiet of mountain vistas and desert light until her death in 2004.

For her career retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, opening Friday, some 80 paintings and other related works of hers have been gathered to tell the story of an artist whose subtle, meditative style often communicates in whispers.

Understanding them, said Guggenheim senior curator Tracey Bashkoff, entails “going to each canvas, seeing what’s the same and what’s different, clearing one’s mind.”

“These are very slow paintings,” added Tiffany Bell, co-curator of the show. “The more you look, the more you see.”

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Martin started out in New York in the 1950s, when she searched for new ways to paint alongside other artists in a storied area of lower Manhattan known as Coenties Slip. It played home to Ellsworth Kelly, Gary Indiana, James Rosenquist, Lenore Tawney and others looking to move on from Abstract Expressionism, a style dominating

American art at the time.

“It was a huge challenge to see if anyone could make another picture,” said Pace Gallery chairman Arne Glimcher, a close friend of Martin as well as Ad Reinhardt, whose notorious “black paintings” seemingly took abstraction to its limit.

“If Reinhardt was the end of painting,” Mr. Glimcher added, “Agnes was a beginning. She proposed another alternative and gave interesting permissions for the future.”

Early works in the Guggenheim exhibition feature floating compositions with rounded, organic shapes, but it was when Martin struck upon the idea of painting within a strict geometric grid that her style loosened up and found a way to breathe.

“Though the paintings are reduced in their structure and forms, reduced to lines and nuances of color,” Ms. Bashkoff said, “she maintained that emotional content was there. She was looking to capture positive universal emotions like happiness and joy.”

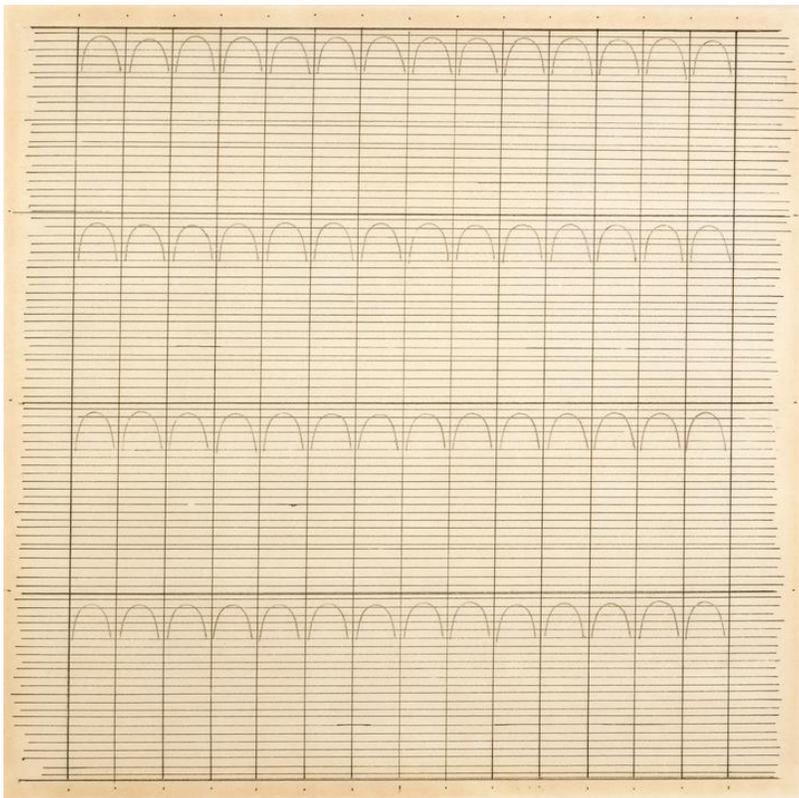
It takes time to register the nuance and subtle distinctions in color in much of Martin’s work. In front of 12 blue-gray paintings from 1979 titled “The Islands,” the curators, in the midst of installing the show, spoke of seeing different colors at different times.



A 1960 photo of Agnes Martin, whose work will be on view at the Guggenheim later this week. *PHOTO: ALEXANDER LIBERMAN PHOTOGRAPHY ARCHIVE/J. PAUL GETTY TRUST*

“We stand here sometimes, and it looks a little pink, but then we change our minds,” said Ms. Bashkoff.

“Some have written that it has green stripes, but, so far, I haven’t seen any green,” said Ms. Bell.



Agnes Martin, 'Untitled,' 1960, ink and graphite on paper *PHOTO: AGNES MARTIN/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS)/THE ELKON GALLERY*

This style of Martin's developed largely in New Mexico, where she moved in the late '60s and worked in isolation until her death at the age of 92. Her quiet style of painting, captured in the documentary film "Agnes Martin: With My Back To the World," which will screen during the exhibition, evolved through long spells of meditation and bouts with schizophrenia. The illness haunted her for decades but didn't figure into artwork that was made during her better periods, according to friends.

"She never painted when she wasn't in a good mood," Mr. Glimcher said.

Instead, when well, Martin would take long scenic drives around Taos at startlingly high speeds that belied her calm persona.

"She sped around and just loved to drive," said Mr. Glimcher. "The river, the mountains, the snow—it was wonderful going with her, like seeing the landscape under a microscope."

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"There has been this quasi-mythical notion of Martin as a saint of the desert who could sit so still that birds would perch on her shoulders," said Nancy Princenthal, author of the 2015 biography "Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art." "But she was also a fiercely determined artist who very successfully pursued a life as a painter whose work was in the public eye."

Martin's style evolved though the years but maintained its measured qualities, as well as a resistance to reproduction that could compare to seeing the paintings up close.

"When you start to look, you can make a decision as to how far you want to keep going," Ms. Bashkoff said in front of "A Grey Stone," a painting from 1963 with thousands of hand-dabbed marks of paint that come together in a seemingly infinite whole.

The effect continues to work on Martin's followers and new initiates as well.

"When we all spend so much of our lives in front of screens and looking at mediated images, it is an experience that I think people will appreciate," said Ms. Princenthal. "It takes you out of yourself."