

“An Offhand Sublime”

Brice Marden's serene, abstract paintings have earned him the status of a youthful old master BY GAIL GREGG

Chaos is in full command of this scruffy patch of Manhattan west of SoHo. A convoy of cars and trucks inches toward the Holland Tunnel, blaring its rush-hour cacophony of squealing brakes, horns, and hurled curses. Sirens periodically amplify the decibel level, and jackhammers contribute a steady percussion. It is something of a miracle, then, to ring the bell at Brice Marden's studio, in the hub of this industrial neighborhood, and be transported into an oasis of orderly calm and quiet.

It does not surprise that Marden's whitewashed work space should be as serene as the contained and reflective work he has been making these last three-and-a-half decades—work that critic Klaus Kertess has called “a kind of offhand sublime.”

What is remarkable is Marden's persistence in shutting out the noise of the art scene as it has evolved since the austere Minimalism of the 1960s. Political art, body art, environmental art, video art, flamboyant figuration, installation art—they all seem as removed from Marden's esthetic as the street's clamoring horns and insistent jackhammers seem from his studio. “He just keeps doing his thing,” says Marden's dealer, Matthew Marks. “It's a very single-minded pursuit.”

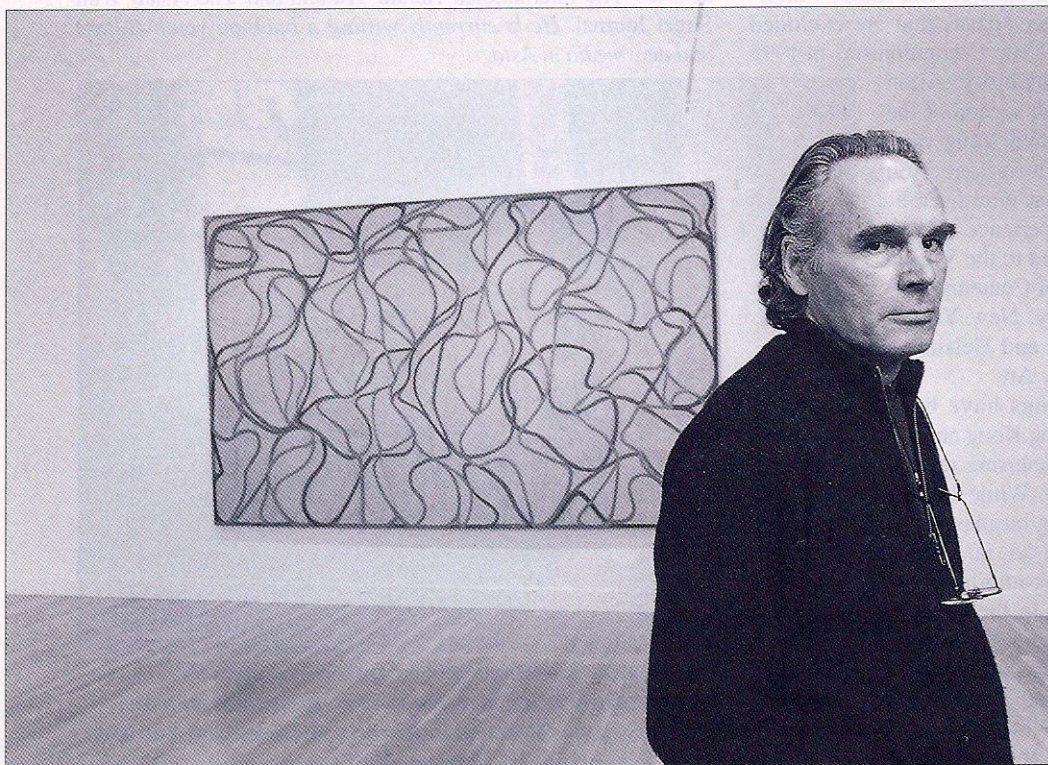
Art historian Robert Pincus-Witten, director of exhibitions at New York's C&M Arts, has dubbed Marden “the last great painter” of the 20th century—an artist who has maintained a stubborn loyalty to painterly values, even as prevailing art standards have veered to the photographic and the literal. While Marden brushes aside such praise, he acknowledges that painting—and abstract painting in particular—has become increasingly marginalized. For his part, Marden confesses that he doesn't fully understand certain new art forms. He wonders why video art isn't seen as a tangent of film or television rather than of fine art. He continues to prefer the “stasis” offered by a painting and takes comfort in knowing that it can be looked at again and again. “When you get stuff like this Norman Rockwell show, you begin to feel old and cranky,” he laments. “You lose track of the possibilities of painting, of abstract art.”

Running a hand through his long gray hair, the 61-year-old Marden remembers that he and painter Terry Winters sat at dinner recently, discussing important young abstract painters, until they realized that each one they had named had also gone gray. He wonders what younger artists think of his work, but can't imagine they “take much” from it. “You grow into a kind of isolation,” he muses.

Of course, Marden's status as a youthful old master of the American scene has earned him the privilege of splendid isolation. His paintings command up to \$3 million, among the highest prices for a living artist, and his gallery sells almost everything he makes before it is exhibited. Marden's work is shown widely around the world—most recently in a traveling exhibition that concludes at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh (May 23–August 13), after stops at the Dallas Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and the Miami Art Museum (where it is on view through the 5th of this month). Emotionally and financially, Marden can now afford to work according to his own instincts.

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ALEX CONTRERAS/DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

Marden with *Study for the Muses (Eaglesmere Version)*, 1991–98.

abstraction that appeared to have antecedents in automatic writing and calligraphy. "The move was bold and surprising," wrote critic Yve-Alain Bois in a 1993 essay. "It caught me unaware as it did many others."

Marden inaugurated his New York career, just three years after he received an MFA from the Yale University School of Art, with a one-man show of color-drenched, intensely worked monochromatic panels at New York's Bykert Gallery in 1966. Working within strict, self-imposed limits—having to do with format, size, color, and surface—Marden spent the next two decades perfecting the romantic, intuitive form of Minimalism he had created. With giant cake-frosting spatulas, he painstakingly built up layer after layer of color with his own concoction of oil paint, melted beeswax, and oil, a recipe designed to create an opaque, matte surface. The result was painting in which this hard-won color became the emotional text—as in the six-foot-wide *Nebraska* (1966), which suggested the lowering skies of a Plains state, or the rich, light-absorbing (and life-absorbing) black of *Otis* (1967–69), made after the artist heard a radio announcement of soul singer Otis Redding's death.

Two experiences during the late 1970s and early '80s set Marden on a course away from Minimalism. He was invited to submit a proposal for stained-glass windows for the cathedral in Basel, Switzerland, and he visited the exhibition "Masters of Japanese Calligraphy" at the Asia Society and the Japan House galleries in New York. The window project introduced to Marden's thinking issues such as those related to transparency and the use of the diagonal. The calligraphy show implanted the notion that line can stand as an abstract device rather than as a language tool or a description of something tangible.

Much has been written about the before and after of Marden and about the gulf between the two. But with the distance of a decade and a half, it is easy to discover abundant underlying affinities. What has not changed in Marden's work is his subdued, built-up color, or his commitment to abstraction—and to process. Modernist concerns about picture plane and series have also remained consistent, as have allusions to antiquity and monumentality, references to the figure, and a sense of containment. "It's as if the energy we associate with Pollock's art had been sedated, narcotized, deliberately and strenuously slowed down," wrote art critic David Rimanelli in 1994.

Propped on a low shelf in Marden's studio is a 75-by-107-foot canvas, sketchily painted with a meandering line that resembles an out-of-control Chinese calligraphic character. Part of the "Epitaph" series that has occupied Marden for the past



Attendant 5, 1996–99. A sense of containment pervades all of Marden's work.

half-decade, the fledgling picture will be lived with for weeks before he begins his slow process of blocking in color behind the first marks. In his earlier gestural work, Marden made "ghosts" from his marks by selectively erasing areas in such a way that the whited-out sections became active parts of the picture. In the newer paintings, he works backward from the first marks, weaving successive strands of color behind the previous ones and creating a sense of pictorial depth. In *Epitaph* (1996–97), Marden constructs a kind of open screen with his first loop of dark gray-green, which seems to push a cadmium yellow into the background, where a meandering gray-blue mark occasionally peeks out from behind. "It's almost as if the structure has been turned inside out," he says.

"You have to keep yourself in the situation where it's interesting to make the next painting," he notes of the need to introduce new ideas into his work. "You don't want to just crank it



Group of Five, Cold Mountain, 1988. In his drawings, Marden applies ink to paper with twigs.

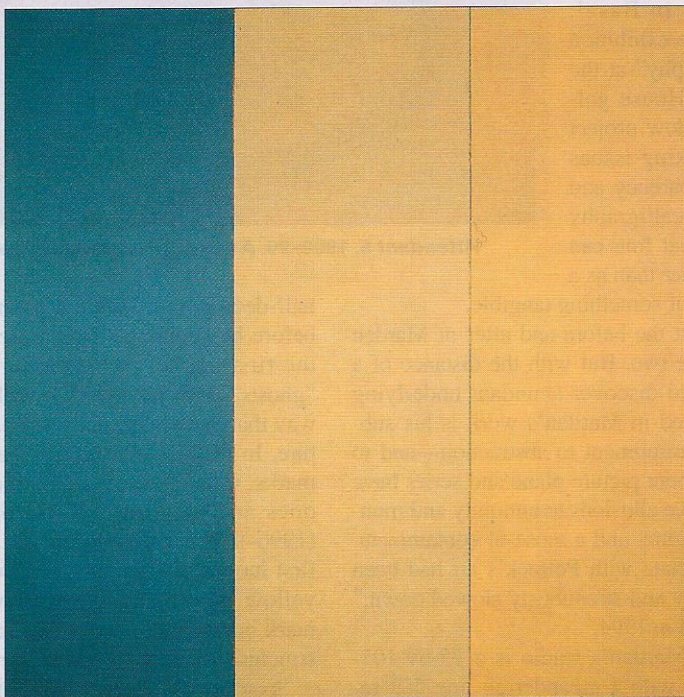
out.” Marden has accomplished that, in part, through travel and study—which has involved a decades-long pursuit of Eastern ideas and images. Reading through the writings on Marden’s work, one becomes aware of his early resistance to borrowing from other cultures, and then of a middle period of coyness about the casualness of his interest in Asian art. Today, partly as a result of “coming through middle age,” the artist has relaxed into an acceptance that culture knows no borders. “I was very self-consciously Western,” Marden says. “But you drop the barriers. It becomes very evident that the basic impulses in making art are the same all over the world.”

Marden is quick to protest that his interest in Asian art and culture is not a true form of scholarship. “You can just look at this stuff and understand the energy,” he says of calligraphy. He has also been able to relax into the concept of beauty, perhaps as a result of this same midlife passage. In 1991 he told an interviewer that “the idea of beauty can be offensive.” Today, he asserts that beauty is “something I consider” in painting—though it’s not something he sets out to accomplish. But Marden has no hesitancy in confessing that he is “very, very serious” about the romantic ideals of painting. “I like to

that he has little social life outside his family—wife Helen, daughters Mirabelle, 21, and Melia, 19, both in college, and son Nicholas, 38, a bass player in a rock band. Marden himself grew up in a Westchester suburb of New York, graduating from Boston University’s School of Fine Arts before receiving his MFA from Yale.

Though Marden’s marital strife and adventures about town have been well documented over the years, his wife and children seem paramount to his life today. A friend describes Marden as “remarkably” involved in the lives of his daughters. He was the kind of father who volunteered at school fairs and showed up for every assembly. Today, he eagerly describes Melia’s transition to college last fall and Mirabelle’s transfer to a school in the city, where she has inherited his old Bowery studio. “The children keep you very straight,” he says. And not only is Helen “my best friend,” he says, but “her opinion is the opinion I respect the most about my work.”

Unlike many artists, who regard the New York art scene as a necessary evil, Marden enjoys the opportunity to get to know artists “through their work”—and then to meet them in person. “It’s exciting,” he says.



Yellows, 1972. In his early paintings, Marden used a combination of oil paint and beeswax to create color-drenched works.

COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK (2)

"You have all this reference." Still, he claims that he talks to only a few friends about art—painter David Novros and, sometimes, Robert Rauschenberg. This is a far cry from the raucous days of the early 1960s, when most every painter in SoHo drank the night away at Max's Kansas City. (Marden and Helen met at the famous watering hole, where she worked as a waitress.) Marks, Marden's dealer since the early 1990s, is another member of his inner circle.

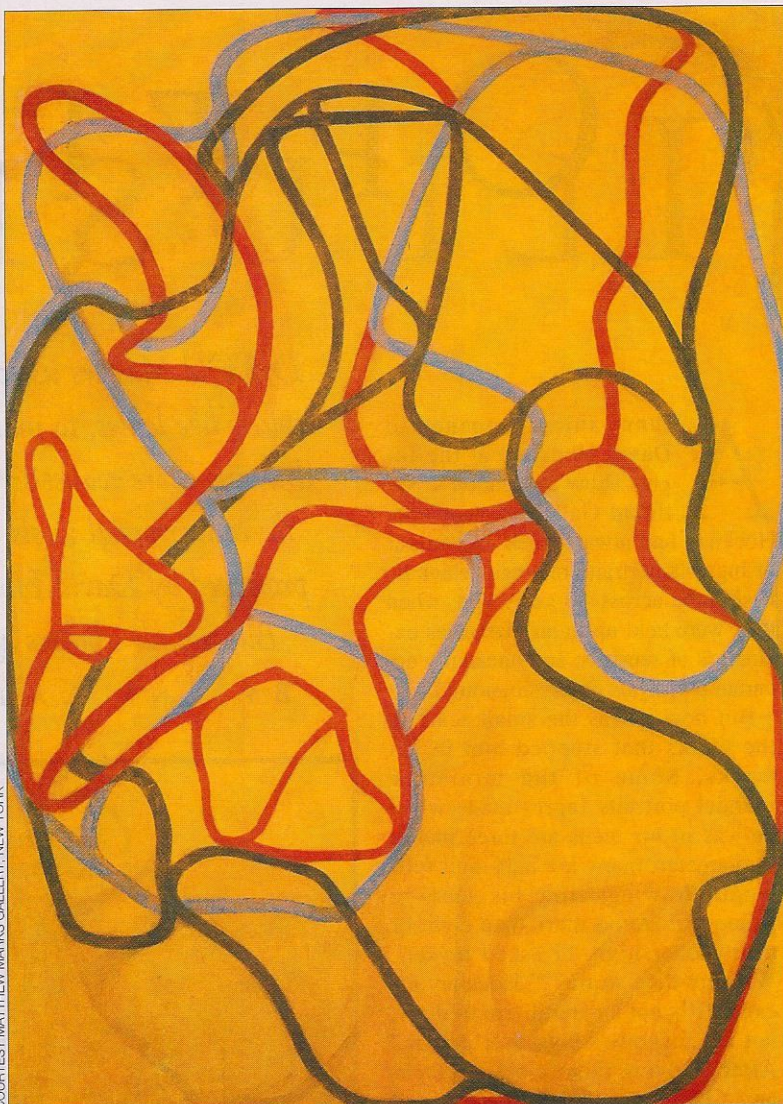
Keeping the Marden operation running smoothly now entails the help of several assistants who file press clippings in black binders, organize schedules, book plane flights, prepare drawing materials, and carry out other tasks. Outside the studio there are an equal number of demands, including museum galas, openings, speaking engagements, and dinners with collectors. Then there are the trappings that come with celebrity status in today's art world. With his brown eyes, long hair, and black-jeaned swagger, Marden sometimes finds himself recognized on the street, and downtown venues count themselves lucky if they draw a crowd that includes him. "You have to be careful not to get co-opted," he says.

Novros, who met Marden while the two were at a Yale summer-school program, has watched Marden's work time become increasingly compromised by "the myth of being Brice." He sees Marden as an "obsessive" and "persistent" artist with an abiding interest in the activity of painting. "The minute you get an audience—a market—it takes an enormous will to keep pursuing your work out of that same place," Novros says. "Probably he wishes this whole issue of being Brice Marden wasn't so time-consuming."

Marden escapes the "professional base" of New York for significant hunks of each year, traveling with his family, visiting the Greek island of Hydra every summer, and driving to rural Pennsylvania for long weekends. These forays allow him a break from social distractions and the freedom to be more lighthearted in his work. "You can work on different ideas in each studio. When I get to these other places, it's more like I am an amateur."

One summer in Hydra, where he and Helen own a house, Marden pulled fragments of marble out of local dumps. Reacting to their irregular forms, he added touches of delicate color to their smooth surfaces. These marble paintings from that period are among his most spirited work. Marden says he adjusts his color palette to stand up to the intense, "invigorating" Aegean summer light. The timeless nature of the craggy island has also prompted a fascination with mythology. *Sea Painting* (1973–74), *February in Hydra* (1991–94), and the "Muses" series of the early 1990s are among the products of his long relationship with Hydra. "It's been an enormous help in my work," he says.

Drawing also has long sustained his painting. In fact, the seeds of Marden's late gestural paintings can be seen in his drawings. "He's always drawn, ever since I've known him," says Novros. "The painting comes out of the drawing." Says fellow painter Pat Steir, "Drawing is the skeleton of all his work, even his earliest work." Marden's drawings, however,



COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK

Bear, a painting from 1996–97. "Drawing is the skeleton of all his work," says fellow artist Pat Steir.

prized for the delicacy of their shivery marks, made with ink-dipped twigs, have an audience of their own. This past fall, bidders at Sotheby's sent the price of *Cold Mountain Addendum* (1991) skyrocketing to \$629,500, far above its estimate of \$150,000 to \$200,000.

Earlier last year, C&M Arts bought Marden's encaustic masterpiece *Yellows* (1972) for \$1.48 million. Marden distances himself from the stratospheric prices his pictures command, insisting that "artists don't make paintings to sell. They make them because they have to be made." But he acknowledges that sending the work into the world allows an artist to "see how you stand."

In November, he'll ship a new show off to London's Serpentine Gallery, known as a venue for hip British art. He confesses to some nervousness about being seen in such a setting. But there is little doubt about how he will prepare for this new exhibition in Kensington Gardens, where pickled sharks and poured-concrete negative spaces have claimed the attention of viewers. He'll shut his door on the noise outside and begin the slow, painstaking process of "collaborating" with a painting. "It's called fine art for a reason," Marden says. "It's comprised of intense observation and philosophical thought." ■

Gail Gregg is a New York painter and writer.