

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTslant

**Brice Marden: The Illuminating Flatness of Painting**

by Alexandra Giniger



*Red, Yellow, Blue*

**Brice Marden**

**Gagosian Gallery - Madison Ave.  
980 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10075  
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In his iconic 1965 essay on Modernist Painting, Clement Greenberg seemed to be anticipating Brice Marden, whose 1974 *Red Yellow Blue* series touches directly upon Greenberg's analysis of the emergent Minimalist school of painting at the time: "Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else...One is made aware of the flatness of [Modernist] pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains."<sup>[1]</sup>

When we enter the room of Marden's five large-scale works, on view at Gagosian Madison Avenue through February 23, 2013, "flat" is most definitely the word that first comes to mind. The paintings are hung in a semicircle, which enables the multitude of hues that make up the

three primary colors for which each work is named to bounce off one another and inspire dialogue within the viewer. Though at first glance the paintings may seem overly simplistic in their absence of subject matter, it is this very quality that persuades the viewer to examine the elements of the paintings themselves. By stripping his canvases of any defined narrative, Marden has successfully achieved the presentation of painting in its purest essence. We are made acutely aware that the works upon which we gaze are not representations or imitations of actual, three-dimensional life, but are, rather, materials on canvas, applied by an artist's hand.



**BRICE MARDEN**, *Red Yellow Blue* Installation view; Photo by Rob McKeever.

After we acknowledge that these works are just that—objects of art—we are free to get lost in the subtle depth found both in Marden's use of pigment and in his application of color. His distinct, on-the-spot mixture of turpentine and wax with oil paint lends to the paintings a fleshy and tactile quality, aided, no doubt, by the artist's use of a spatula and knife to administer the paint. The most intriguing work in the room is Marden's *Red Yellow Blue IV*, 1974.<sup>[2]</sup> The artist has told his viewers that each work consists of the three colors: red, yellow, and blue. On this particular canvas, however, there is no clear "red" to be found. Instead, we are greeted with a deep, almost purple shade that, if it *must* be red, is a hue reminiscent of dried blood, which invokes extensive thoughts of life, death, and everything in between. We approach the painting with the presumption that the color is red, as this is what has been declared by the artist; but this "red", and how we associate what we actually see with the title given to us, is sure to be unique to each viewer. By severing the line between indicator and indicated, Marden opens up the world of the individual viewer's mind, which is infinitely more powerful than any world that is merely shown to us. Again, Marden's work appears to be a manifestation of Greenberg's words:

The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an utter flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-

l'oeil, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness, and the configurations...still suggest a kind of illusion of a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension. Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye.<sup>[1]</sup>



**BRICE MARDEN**, *Red Yellow Blue* Installation view; Photo by Rob McKeever.

We no longer view the world of the artist voyeuristically, as if from the outside. Rather, through his paintings, Marden passes the artistic torch to the viewer, thus allowing us to create and to paint on the canvases what our inner eye perceives. There is such depth to every encaustic hue created by Marden, such power endowed upon the viewer to create an abstract world within a flat canvas, that each pool of red/yellow/blue and undulating light locks us in front of the paintings where we stand.<sup>[3]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup> Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." *Art and Literature* no. 4, Spring 1965: 193-201.

<sup>[2]</sup> Brice Marden, *Red Yellow Blue IV*, 1974. Oil and wax on canvas, 74 x 72 inches.

<sup>[3]</sup> Quotation appropriated from Toni Morrison, *Beloved*: "Paul D... followed her through the door straight into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood."

—Alexandra Giniger