

GAGOSIAN



Brice Marden: When the grass is greener *Ahead of a solo exhibition in London, the artist talks about ‘terre verte’ and changing gallerists*

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Brice Marden at his studio in Tivoli, New York © Eric Piasecki

The celebrated artist Brice Marden is standing outside at Rose Hill, his compound in Tivoli, New York, the sun glinting off the Hudson River and through a thicket of trees behind him. There’s a hint of autumn crispness in the air, but the leaves and grass remain summer-green.

Marden and his wife Helen, also a painter, bought the 19th-century wooded estate above the river shortly after the 9/11 attacks because they wanted a retreat closer to their Manhattan apartment than their Pennsylvania country house, and Tivoli is only a couple of hours’ drive. “I basically live here now,” says Marden, his raspy voice just above a whisper. “I say ‘basically’ because I refuse to admit I live here.”

A few white curls peeking from his trademark knitted fisherman’s hat, Marden gives a brief tour of what he calls the “big house”, including a sunken, Zen-like gallery holding an enormous Chinese scholar’s rock, a recent gift from Marden’s new power dealer, Larry Gagosian.

Marden, who will turn 79 in October, keeps multiple studios on the property but paints in the airy rooms of an old carriage house. There, in two separate spaces, each lit with a wall of windows, hang his newest paintings: a series of 10 monochromatic canvases, all in terre verte, a green pigment originally dug from the Italian earth and used by the ancient Romans, as well as by medieval and Renaissance artists as a base for flesh tones.

Despite the abundance of green inside and out, Marden insists that the paintings — heading for a solo exhibition at London’s Gagosian Gallery, opening October 4 — were not consciously inspired by the verdant views. “I keep thinking, I’m here, I look at it all the time, it’s going to have some effect. Maybe it is. In a certain sense, these are pure landscape paintings. It’s the earth.”

His daughter Mirabelle, a photographer who co-founded the now-defunct Rivington Arms gallery, says that location inevitably invades her father’s practice, whether it’s the light on the Greek isle of Hydra, where he’s long had a house, or the moss garden he planted in Tivoli. “It’s a part of the work,” says Mirabelle. “He’s always been obsessed with moss. I think these are Zen, poetic paintings about nature.”

They are also what could be called rule-based conceptual works in which paint is both the medium and the subject. Marden devised a set of parameters: the paintings are identically sized, eight feet by six; each is divided into a square, covered in multiple coats of paint, and a rectangle below, washed in just one veil of colour and speckled with whatever drips happened to fall on it; and each canvas is exclusively devoted to a different brand of terre verte, like a Consumer Reports comparison test.

“So you’re not exercising decisions,” Marden says, somewhat disingenuously. “You’re just applying.”

With some brands, like Williamsburg, he’d been a loyal customer. But Marden had never even heard of Rublev. “Some, it’d be very difficult to get a couple of layers on, then suddenly the next layers would go very easily,” he says. “They each took on their own character.”

Marden would brush on a layer, then scrape it smooth with a palette knife. His last step was drawing a straight line between the deeply hued square and the more transparent rectangle. “You can barely see it,” he says. “It gives it just a little bit more definition.”

The final shades range from a burnt gold to a vibrant bluish green. “My daughter kept coming in and saying, ‘Don’t overwork it!’ She’s got a great eye,” he says — then adds, “She really gives me a rough time.”

In Mirabelle’s view, painting the series has given her father a new sense of freedom: “He was able to go out on a limb.”

Or as Marden puts it, “You know, I’m getting old. I can do whatever the f**k I want.”

Perhaps — but he also gives the sense that he’s mulling his late period quite seriously. He recently left his longtime gallery, Matthew Marks, for Gagosian. Although Gagosian has mounted two exhibitions of historic Marden works in recent years, this show marks the artist’s first since joining the gallery — and his first in the UK since 2000. With 16 spaces in the US,

Europe and Asia, Gagolian's geographic reach is one reason Marden made the switch. It's also giving him a case of nerves.

"Now I worry, I've done these paintings, and they won't see them here [in New York]. I've always considered myself part of a debate. I see every artist's exhibition almost as the presentation of a paper: this is what I believe, and I'm trying to influence you. I've always considered myself a New York painter."

Marden grew up middle class in the suburb of Briarcliff Manor, close enough to the Hudson that his father would take the family to watch the sun set over it. After studying art at Boston University, (where his attraction to abstraction was anathema) and Yale, Marden headed for New York. There he became Robert Rauschenberg's studio assistant and honed a romantic persona.

"I just figured I wasn't smart enough," he says. "So I stuck with the more mysterious. I was totally intimidated by someone like [Donald] Judd. I never even talked to him. I just assumed he wouldn't want to talk to me."

He broke through with monochromatic panels, made with a kitchen spatula, but by the 1980s was looking for a way out. "I was trying to get more drawing into the paint or have the drawing more evident," he says. "It just wasn't happening. I mean, it was there — if you lay down in front of the painting."

Then he fell hard for a show of ancient Asian art. "What I liked about the calligraphy is I didn't understand it. You couldn't read it, so it was abstract. It's another way towards a freer expression."

Marden's ribbons of paint swooped and swirled across his canvases like dancers or a mythical, entwined alphabet, and they were quickly favoured by elite collectors including Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, Frances Bowes and Linda Macklowe. In 2006 the Museum of Modern Art mounted a major retrospective, leading *The New Yorker's* Peter Schjeldahl to dub him the "most profound abstract painter of the past four decades". A few years ago, he began experimenting with monochrome again — though he says not in conscious reference to his early work — and made a few paintings with *terre verte*, which he showed at Matthew Marks.

Over the years the Mardens have amassed an impressive real estate portfolio. In addition to three homes in the US and one on Hydra, they own the Golden Rock Inn on the island of Nevis and the Hotel Tivoli, which Marden says they bought because it was depressing to pass the shuttered old railroad hotel in town. Their most recent acquisition is a riad in Marrakech. "Marrakech is this pink city," he says. "I think one of the first things I'll do is a painting based on the pinks."

He has works in progress everywhere, including a project painting five canvases each in Nevis, Tivoli and Manhattan, each with three rows of five calligraphic characters. "The whole thing is because people say, 'What's the difference?' We'll see."

Staring at the *terre verte* canvases in the hush of Rose Hill (save for the ceaseless barking of his dog Teddy and the whistle of a passing train), a couple of days before they leave for London, Marden ping-pongs between satisfaction and fretting. "I worry if they're too much influenced by the black Pollocks or the black Rothkos," he says. "I worry about things — you're working on a

painting and all these thoughts go through your mind. You tend to be very hard on yourself. I just don't know how these will fly."

He pauses. "But when I look at them, I'm really happy I made them."