

GAGOSIAN HYPERALLERGIC

Brice Marden's Latest Breakthrough

These are the paintings of a modern master for whom dissipation and loss of control have become integrated into the work.

John Yau



"Brice Marden: It reminds me of something, and I don't know what it is." at Gagosian Gallery, installation view; artwork © 2019 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo: Rob McKeever (courtesy Gagosian)

The argument between drawing (line and contour) and painting (color and light) goes back to the Renaissance and what some believe is the first great culmination of Western painting. In *Lives of the Artists* (1550), the Florentine writer and artist Giorgio Vasari emphasized the importance of *disegno* (drawing and design) as the foundation upon which all art rested. He believed that drawing was "the animating principal of all creative processes." Not surprisingly, his favorite artist was Michelangelo.

In *L'Aretino* (1557), which was written in response to Vasari, the Venetian writer and theorist of painting, Lodovico Dolce, claimed that Titian was the greatest artist of his time and that Michelangelo was deeply flawed. For Dolce, *colorito* (color and light) was of greater importance than *disegno* (drawing and design). He believed that Titian's handling of color and light outstripped Michelangelo's mastery of contour and form.

I can think of a handful of postwar abstract artists for whom drawing in a liquid medium was central to their practice: Piet Mondrian, Norman Bluhm, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Henri Michaux, Joan Mitchell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Tobey, and Cy Twombly. This is the company that Brice Marden belongs in. However, the group noticeably shrinks if we think about those who use a brush to draw in colored paint.



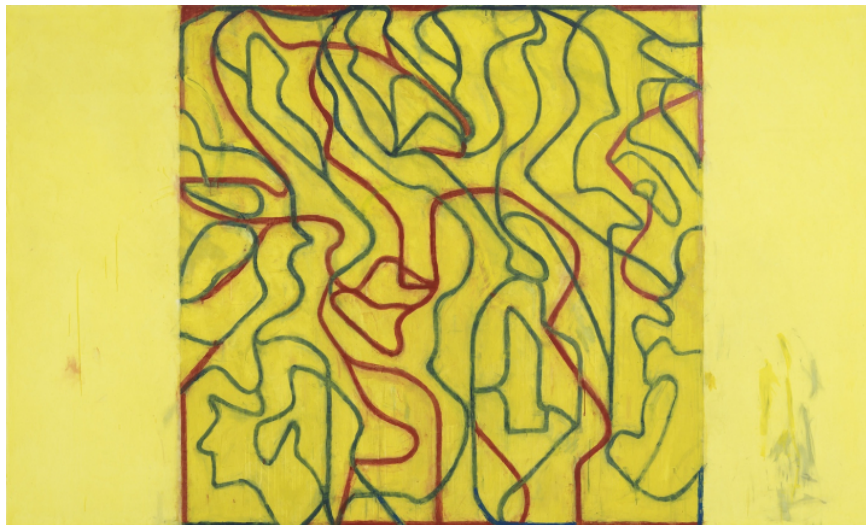
Brice Marden, "Oued" (2018 – 2019), oil on linen, 72 x 120 x 2 1/2 inches, © 2019 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo: Rob McKeever (courtesy Gagosian)

Since the rise of Minimalism and Pop Art, the seamless merging of drawing and color has been a dream pursued by few painters. More than anyone else in his generation, Marden committed himself to that pursuit. At a time when shaped canvasses were the rage, he worked on a rectangle with brushes, oil paint, and wax, rejecting Donald Judd's statement in the essay "Specific Objects" (1965): "The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall." Marden also disregarded the critique of painting offered by Frank Stella, who, in 1966, famously stated: "If something's used up, something's done, something's over with, what's the point of getting involved with it?"

With Marden, nothing is used up: drawing and painting remain both viable and radical, something that can be pushed into new territory. If you want to see and experience what new territory Marden has gotten to, as well as perhaps think about the creative space he has carved out for himself and others, as opposed to the constraints defined by those who believe that certain art practices – painting, drawing, or even working alone in a studio – are used up and done, you should go to the exhibition, *Brice Marden: It reminds me of something, and I don't know what it is.*, at Gagosian (November 9 – December 21, 2019).

I would also advise that the reader take some time to read Rainer Maria Rilke's "The First Elegy" from his sequence, *Duino Elegies* (1923), which contains the line: "For beauty is nothing but/the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear [...]" Art is not just for looking, it is also for thinking and reflection. When the person standing next to me says, "Interesting," and then takes out a cell phone to photograph a painting, I wish I was alone.

Beginning in the early 1980s, Marden worked his way out of Minimalism and reductive painting by merging two sides of his practice – painting and drawing. I think the art world has yet to fully address this aspect of his achievement, preferring to maintain the narrow definition that anything new in art requires a new technique and/or material, that one has to jettison the past rather than engage with it.



Brice Marden, "Yellow Painting" (2018 – 2019), oil on linen, 72 x 120 x 2 1/2 inches, © 2019 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo: Rob McKeever (courtesy Gagosian)

Looking back on the 1980s, it becomes apparent that Marden was inspired by many different things: his window designs for the Basel Cathedral, where he begins to think of the surface as a plane through which light passes, and introduces diagonal lines into his vocabulary of marks; the time he spent in North Africa looking at Islamic architecture in Fez and Marrakesh; a trip to Thailand, where he started collecting seashells, particularly volutes, and began making layered drawings loosely inspired by calligraphy; and the exhibition, *Masters of Japanese Calligraphy, 8th–19th Century*, at the Japan House Gallery and Asia Society, New York (October 4, 1984–January 6, 1985). Each of these engagements helped him to re-envision how he used the line and how he painted.

What binds the monochromatic paintings that Marden made from the mid-‘60s to the early ‘80s and the work he has done over the last 30-plus years, in which he draws in paint, is his commitment to an elemental process. The other thing that has been consistent in his work – at least until this exhibition – is a tendency to work in thematically related series.

In 2016-17, for example, Marden did 10 paintings measuring eight by six feet using 10 different brands of terre verte oil paint; each painting was done in one of the brands, with the paint applied in successive layers. The process was incremental. A thin wash of the color was initially applied over the entire surface; a horizontal line was then measured off, which resulted in a square on top, tightly filling the upper portion of the vertical format, while leaving a wide band running along the bottom. This compositional structure seems to have been inspired by the proportions of a vertical sketchbook that he was using at the time.

Marden would then fill the square with successive layers of wet, slow-drying paint, allowing thin rivulets of color to down from the square’s bottom edge into the band below, like ragged threads. By dividing the canvas into two unequal areas and covering the surface in strict monochrome, Marden limited his control over the painting’s imagery as well as surrendered his ability to determine what happened in the wide band below. For this artist to forfeit his well-known penchant for meticulousness, control, and restraint, is no small thing.



Brice Marden, "March" (2018 – 2019), oil on linen, 72 x 120 x 2 1/2 inches, © 2019 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo: Rob McKeever (courtesy Gagosian)

This is why I think the six paintings in the current exhibition represent a breakthrough. They are the paintings of a modern master for whom dissipation and loss of control have become integrated into the work. They are the open declarations of a person who recognizes that he is beginning to fade from the world. They are the markings of a man letting go of the vivid and sensuous domain that has occupied his acute attention for many decades.

While there are also works on paper and smaller paintings displayed downstairs in a separate exhibition space of this multi-tiered gallery, I want to focus exclusively on the six large paintings.

In “March” (2018-2019), the composition’s flanking gray bands help concentrate the viewer’s attention on the faintly gridded square overlaid with hesitant red-brown, gray, and dirty-white, ribbon-like lines tangling and untangling across the center of the painting. In some areas, Marden layers lighter gray brushstrokes over darker gray ones. Look at the brushstrokes closely enough and you can see where he stopped the brush before turning or shifting direction. By leaving the record of his process bare, like a winter landscape, Marden exposes his vulnerability, uncertainty, determination, and persistence. The hesitations – at once deliberate, awkward, and vulnerable – fill the painting with feeling, all of which is further underscored by the chilly colors and the stains that are left when the artist has used turpentine to wipe out a mark.

If, at times, as in ‘Yellow Painting’ (2018-2019), the shapes made by the overlapping red and green lines remind you of a jigsaw puzzle, the fact that they don’t fit together is part of the painting’s meaning. The drips and faint traces of earlier marks enact a form of dispersal, our unavoidable destiny. This underscored by the cluster of marks, as if Marden wiped his brush on the painting’s yellow band on the lower right hand side.



Brice Marden, "Withwhite" (2018 – 2019), oil on linen, 72 x 120 x 2 1/2 inches, © 2019 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo: Rob McKeever (courtesy Gagosian)

In “Withwhite” (2018-2019), whose blue, red, and yellow ribbons of paint on a milky-white ground contain faint traces of earlier brushstrokes, Marden is engaged in a dialog with Willem de Kooning’s late paintings and more than holding his own.

From the particularities of the palette to the overlaying of the brushstrokes to the distinct compositions, each of the six paintings offers a differently nuanced experience. What they do share, as well as insist upon in varying degrees, is the achingly poignant tension between completeness and incompleteness — between the desire for more and an acceptance of the given.

With the untimely death of Jackson Pollock and the suicide of Mark Rothko, it once seemed that America would never have a generation of artists who would make great work late in life. That changed with de Kooning and Agnes Martin. Jasper Johns has been making great paintings for the past decade. And now Brice Marden has joined this tiny club.

While it is the convention to think of paint as a material that covers a surface, I think when it comes to Marden’s work, we might do well to think of it as a means to expose inchoate feelings marked by a tender sense of beauty and longing, and to document an extraordinarily resilient sensitivity to the thrumming pain, terror, and loneliness of being human.