

GAGOSIAN

ARTFORUM

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Brice Marden

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Brice Marden's recent show "It reminds me of something, and I don't know what it is." included a sextet of horizontal paintings (each six by ten feet), as well as five smaller but still substantially scaled studies in oil (three by five feet), and four vertical drawings on paper. (I note at the outset the works' format because, in a very interesting way, they make an issue of it by playing their rectangularity against a contained square.)



Brice Marden,
Elevation, 2018–19,
oil on linen, 72 × 120".

Marden has long been fascinated by Chinese calligraphy, most evidently until now in his "Cold Mountain" series, 1989–91, which was directly inspired by the ninth-century Zen poet Hanshan. Yet the influence has never been straightforward. As he told his fellow painter Pat Steir about the "Cold Mountain" works, "I use the form of calligraphy, then it disappears, but it's always there, in some way." The newer pieces that were shown here are still very much in the spirit of "Cold Mountain" but go even deeper. They show the artist using a similar kind of meandering and almost nerveless-seeming gesture: Long, legato marks start and stop, often wandering down unexpected paths and into unforeseen entanglements. These mercurially uncoiling lines are usually wiped out or covered over, leaving ghost traces. The palimpsests are then layered with new networks of marks, and so on. The result is a great sense of depth—of a watery space that doesn't recede but stays very present yet has no ultimate end point: The plane is the achieved frontal surface, not a backstop.

But what's curious about the paintings, large and smaller, is that all this activity takes place in a squarish area in the middle of the overall rectangle, an area penciled out and flanked by vertical zones that are more or less monochromatic. One thinks at first of a Chinese ink painting mounted on a larger sheet—and not, for instance, of a Renaissance triptych, because the three areas that compose each of Marden's works are not distinct pictures, but parts of a single composition. (On the other hand, I also thought of those Velázquez portraits in which the central figure is surrounded by an amazingly variegated yet nebulous gray.) In any case, Marden's monochromatic fields on each side confer a kind of hieratic symmetry on something that would otherwise maintain, for all its abstractness, a kind of naturalistic randomness, and that seems somehow haunted by the memory of all the other paintings it might have been.

The effect is always to make the central area emerge with a greater force, whether the linear web is tightly woven, as in *Test* (all works

cited, 2018–19), or loosely, as in *Withwhite* and *Elevation*. In the last, the monochrome wings share the same tea green as the ground of the central painting-within-a-painting, but in most cases a chromatic or tonal distinction is evident: The gray of *March* is bounded by white, for instance, while the sides in *Qued* feature a distinctly paler orange than the one dominating its core. And not only does the central area of *Yellow Painting* have a more opaque version of its lemony hue than the areas that flank it, but you'd swear some spots look as if Marden casually used his carefully prepared surface to wipe his brushes, thus employing a trick he might have picked up from Velázquez, who would leave what sometimes look like accidental swipes of paint amid the glowing surrounds of a portrait head. Composed according to what at first seemed to be a consistent formula, each painting quickly and vividly revealed its particularity—and, in that particularity, a poignant beauty.

—Barry Schwabsky