

## GAGOSIAN

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### Conversation: Helen Marden & Ricky Clifton



*Photography Douglas Friedman*

For Helen Marden, the urge to explore her surroundings, both nearby and distant, has never flagged. In the past year, she split her time between Upstate New York, Cape Cod, and the Caribbean island of Nevis, where she runs Golden Rock, a boutique resort she co-owns with her husband, Brice—with whom she more recently co-founded another such venture, Hotel Tivoli, near their Upstate home.

In her latest solo show at Gagosian, “Bitter Light a Year,” Marden unveiled a series of paintings completed over the chaotic course of 2020 and early 2021. The compositions play off the lineage of Abstract Expressionism—an affinity that speaks to the artist having come into her own amid New York City’s art world in the 1960s. And, in line with the iconic styles attributed to the original giants of the movement, these compositions likewise bear witness to Marden’s subjective, in-the-moment impulses as a painter. No less are they a testament to her fascination

with naturally occurring objects and forms—among the materials affixed to the canvases are shells from a shop in Provincetown, others she gathered along the beaches of Nevis, and porcupine quills from an open-air market in Marrakesh.



*Helen Marden, Future, 2021. Resin, powdered paint, shells, plastic and glass on linen, 50 x 50 inches. © Helen Marden. Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian*

Marden’s itinerant lifestyle has hardly held her back from becoming a celebrated fixture within New York City’s creative landscape. And, at 80, she boasts a broad and eminent circle of friends. One such friend, the interior designer Ricky Clifton, spoke to Marden on the occasion of “Bitter Light a Year.” Never one to settle for the status quo, Clifton reached out to a few others who are close to Marden—Francesco Clemente, Jessica Craig-Martin, and Rachel Feinstein among them—to procure interview questions. —*Rachel Small*

**RICKY CLIFTON:** I’m going to start with the first time I ever laid eyes on you. It was at a poetry reading Rene Ricard did at MoMA in the spring of 1977. I just remember your swagger. I remember I was sitting on the aisle and you walked by and I thought, “My god.” And I’m from Texas—it was beyond a cowboy swagger.

Anyway. This is from Francesco: “Since you’re equally fond of natural forms and artifacts of traditional societies, is it reasonable to think that you see your paintings as the place where nature and culture can meet?”

**HELEN MARDEN:** If I were a thoughtful person, I might think that way. To me it’s more just instinctual. I don’t know how it forms. I know where babies come from—I don’t know where paintings come from. I’m almost 80—so, I would say, my whole fucking life.

**CLIFTON:** Is joy the subject of your paintings?

MARDEN: I never think that way. I believe we have to seek it and hopefully help others find it. Joy is what we need now, to me, in this dire time, and I like that. Niki De Saint Phalle, that was one of her things, you know? There's lots of angst, there are lots of other things in the world, but there's not much joy or depicted joy or someone who is trying to assume some kind of joyful position. But [for me] that just happens. I don't sit down and write, "Let there be joy"—I'm not a goddess [who can] just say "joy!"



*Helen Marden, Evening Tide, 2020. Resin, powdered paint, shells, plastic and glass on linen, 50 x 50 inches. © Helen Marden. Photo: Robert McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian*

CLIFTON: "Joy to the world!" This relates to Jessica's question: "You don't sugarcoat things, and you're into darkness and ugly beauty. The world is a mess, yet your work conveys an optimism."

MARDEN: "Ugly beauty"—I don't think that way at all. What would be the point? It's like Agnes Martin and all her quotes about beauty. I'm trying to do something that people look at and see something else or go somewhere else, perhaps, in their minds. But never "ugly beauty."

CLIFTON: But Jessica was shooting for a comment about optimism?

MARDEN: I'm naturally optimistic. I had that quote on my Instagram from [Albert] Camus ["In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer"]. No matter what goes wrong, I seem to have some sort of relentless optimism.

CLIFTON: Okay. Alexander Gorlizki is interested about you getting away from your family, because you're a free spirit.

MARDEN: I hope so. But that doesn't mean getting away from my family. I go into my studio, I shut the door, I sit down, and I drop into my own space. And then, there I am: me—in my chair, thinking about my work. I don't have to go 6,000 miles away.

CLIFTON: Rachel Feinstein wants to know: How—with family, with business, with all the things going on in your life—do you find time for creativity?



*Photography Mirabelle Marden*

MARDEN: I just do it. It's not forced, I love painting. I hope I live to be 100 and I paint until then.

CLIFTON: Stanley Whitney wants to know what you don't collect—he's fascinated by the things that you love.

MARDEN: I only think about what I love and like. What I don't collect, I don't collect, because I never think about it. Quilts, I guess? I don't collect quilts. I hate them.

CLIFTON: That's a good one.

MARDEN: Or cookie jars or shoes. I don't collect any of that. I collect forms that interest me or have a patina or color. Hell, I don't know, Ricky. Okay thank you darling.