

GAGOSIAN

HYPERALLERGIC

A Moving Meditation on Mortality in Brice Marden's Late Paintings
What I see as his late period reveals an artist who knows that change is inevitable, that mortality is hurrying closer, and that art is not a bulwark against time.

John Yau



Brice Marden, "Rowdy" (2013–21), oil, charcoal, and graphite on linen, 96 x 72 inches (© 2021 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Bill Jacobson Studio. Courtesy Gagolian)

Brice Marden's recent paintings and drawings are tentative, tender, heartbreaking, angry, vulnerable, and open. As his work requires him to engage the surface with gesture, pressure, and movement — which has been true since the beginning of his career — it is tied to what he can physically accomplish. Looking back at the career of this preeminent artist, I see three basic periods. In the first, which lasted from 1964 to the mid-1980s, he worked monochromatically and was known for the thoroughness of his attention to surface and the palpable yet elusive color he could attain with encaustic. There was an unmistakable physicality to his muted paintings, a tension between the expressive and the understated.

In the second period he re-envisioned how he used line and how he painted, and traded the subtle tactility of encaustic for diluted oil and drawing in what he once described to me as “dirty turpentine.” This period was inspired by his window designs for the Basel Cathedral; his travels in North Africa, where he looked at Islamic architecture in Fez and Marrakesh; a trip to Thailand, where he started collecting seashells, particularly volutes, and made layered drawings loosely inspired by their markings; and by 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).

In his paintings from this time, he would go back into the looping lines and, using a razor blade, make sure the edges were straight and clean. The lines were flat and moved gracefully, evoking Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings without resembling them in any way. I never felt that Marden thought it was necessary to either jettison the past or to quote it. He thought it was possible to move forward without assenting to these well-known choices, and time has proven that he was right.



Installation view of Brice Marden: These paintings are of themselves at Gagolian in New York (© 2021 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian)

Whereas Marden’s meticulousness and definitive visual statements characterize the first two periods, the third, or what I see as his late period, reveals an artist who knows that change is inevitable, that mortality is hurrying closer, and that art is not a bulwark against time. This awareness of the clock running out has had a major effect on his work and, I would hazard, on his psyche.

I estimate that this late period started around 2016–17, when he made 10 paintings measuring 8 by 6 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, restrained, and, as with his previous work, thoroughly thought through regarding its parameters. At the time, Marden was nearly 80.

Marden applied a thin wash of one of the terre vertes over the entire surface. He then measured off a horizontal line, 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. Next, he filled the square with successive layers of wet, slow-drying paint, allowing thin rivulets of color to drip down from the square's bottom edge into the band below, like ragged strings. 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.

Marden chose terre verte (also known as "green earth") with the knowledge that Botticelli used it as the underpainting of his subject's flesh in works such as "Idealized Portrait of a Lady" (egg tempera, 1480), where it peeks through the figure's translucent skin. Known as one of the most permanent of all pigments, it evokes both damp moss and decay.



Brice Marden, "Prelude" (2011–21), oil and graphite on linen, 96 x 72 inches (© 2021 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Bill Jacobson Studio. Courtesy Gagosian)

For Marden, color is never just color; it is connected to nature, light, and alchemy. It seems to me that no one has yet delved deeply into all the ways that color signifies and resonates in his work, from his reference to sunlight shining through a grove of olive trees to the trinity of colors he used in his works for the Basel Cathedral.

These are some of the thoughts, memories, and feelings that came to mind shortly after I sat on a bench in the main gallery of the exhibition *Brice Marden: These paintings are of themselves*, at Gagosian (November 13–December 23, 2021), but as I was looking at the work, another line of thought began to crystallize.

In the late '80s, following from his interest in calligraphy, Marden began working on Cold Mountain, a series of black and white paintings, drawings, and etchings inspired by his reading

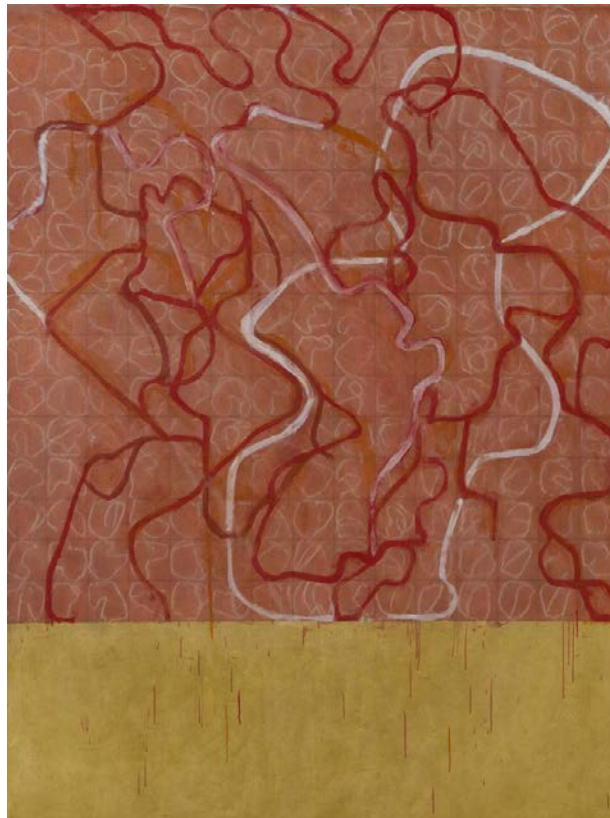
of the legendary Chinese hermit poet Han Shan, as translated by Red Pine. In an interview with the painter Pat Steir that appeared in the brochure accompanying these works in the exhibition *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, at Dia Chelsea (October 17, 1991 – May 31, 1992), Marden stated:

In the beginning I did drawings using the form that the poems take in Chinese, then I started joining image and calligraphy, using the shape of the poem as a skeleton. I am becoming more and more interested in the ideas of the Tao and Zen. The Cold Mountain poems are very much about that.

Later, he said:

It's not a form of writing. I am not trying to make a language.

I do not think that Marden is trying to make language, but looking at the paintings and drawings I began to think that there is an asemic element to these works that should not be ignored. This is particularly true of the painting “Chalk” (oil, charcoal, and graphite on linen, 96 by 72 inches, 2013-21), which seems to have transformed everything that Marden has previously done into something fresh — at once calm, accepting, and exposed.



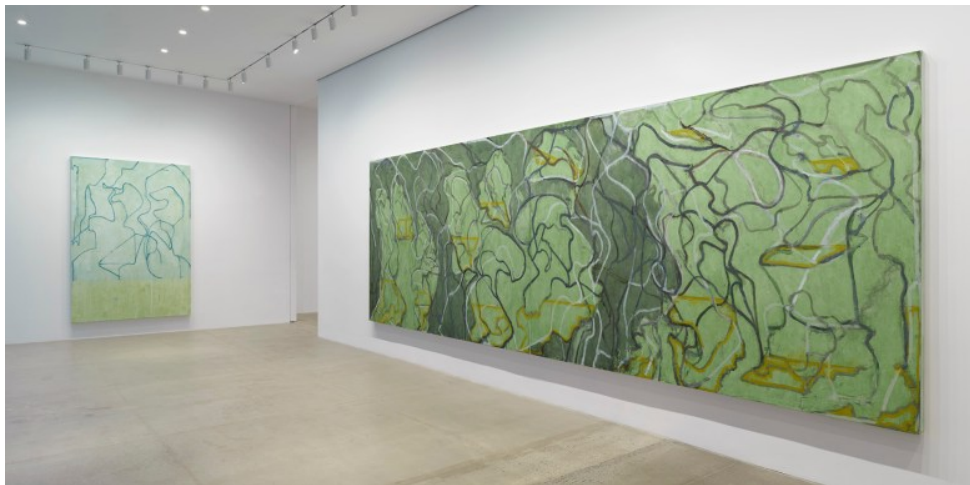
Brice Marden, “Chalk” (2013–21), oil, charcoal, and graphite on linen, 96 x 72 inches (© 2021 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Bill Jacobson Studio. Courtesy Gagolian)

Using the same proportions that he chose for his terre verte paintings, Marden demarcated a 6 by 6-foot square, leaving a two-foot band below. He then divided the square into a grid of 225 squares, using a pencil, so that it rests on the band. The palette in the upper part of the painting consists of sandstone red, Chinese red, and ghostly white, while the band below is a mustard

yellow infused with green — obliquely complimentary colors. The band also stirs up associations with Chinese scroll painting, in which the work is mounted on yellow silk.

Within each square of the grid, Marden has used white to render a rounded form, sometimes as an open line and other times a bisected form, that evokes nature (i.e., rocks) and linguistic signs. The grid can also be read as a chart, but of what? Evoking chalk (the painting's title), the faint white lines suggest an indecipherable language, a record whose meaning we can only guess at, as well as a state of impermanence. Over this grid of white, organic shapes, he has drawn a series of lines in red and white paint. One of the white lines seems to define the silhouette of a figure. (How do we read it?) The other white lines are used to partially cover a red line, sometimes painted wet into wet, so they become a particular hue. Some of the red drips down the greenish band.

“Chalk” is a layered painting or palimpsest in which Marden brings together different materials — graphite, pencil, and oil paint — and two monochromatic grounds, with further marks and lines made on the larger area. In contrast to his penchant for control, which certainly was a hallmark of the monochromatic paintings and of later works, such as the six-panel painting “The Propitious Garden of Plane Image, Third Version” (2000-6), in the collection of MoMA, Marden has been letting go since the *terre verte* pieces. His use of asemic signs recognizes that one cannot say everything in language, and that some part of our experience remains indecipherable. And yet, knowing this, he does not arrive at the same emptiness twice; he never turns this inability to write the inchoate into language into a theme or variation. Every painting is different. By his earlier standards, these works are unfinished and contingent on the artist's aging body.



Installation view of Brice Marden: These paintings are of themselves at Gagosian in New York (© 2021 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian)

In his interview with Steir, Marden recognized the role that time played, its effect on the body, and he made no attempt to seek refuge in style:

I am 5' 8 ½", and I weigh this much, and I am left handed, and I'm a certain age. That has a big effect on what a thing looks like. The kind of mark I can make physically.

The Tao teaches the adept to let go of expectations and live in there here and now. When Marden continues the vertical row of marks on the far right side of a drawing, even as the ink is running out, he does not replenish the ink but records himself fading from view. The signs he makes

might not be decipherable, but they spoke straight to my heart. They are the diary of an aging man living in time, while conveying his love for certain places and sights. I think they are among the most open, deeply moving paintings and drawings that Marden has made in his already storied career.