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Nº 14

# UPSTATE DIARY



## NO TELLING WHAT YOU'LL FIND

Helen Marden / Giorgio Morandi / Mark Rozzo / Kiva Motnyk / Jeff Shapiro  
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# AT HOMES WITH THE ARTIST

Whether it's Upstate,  
the island of Nevis  
or the Greek Islands,  
Helen Marden keeps  
the doors open.

Words Anne Godbersen

Photography Martien Mulder

Helen Marden with friends  
at the family's Plane  
Meadow Farm, Tivoli,  
NY. **Opposite Page:** The  
Mardens refer to their two  
properties on the island  
of Hydra, Greece, as the  
Up House and the Down  
House. The Up House  
being situated up on the  
mountain-side with views of  
the island and the Aegean  
Sea. A stunning view from  
the Up House.



Work in progress in Marden's stunning, light drenched studio in Tivoli, NY. **Opposite Page:** Marden's exquisite selection of rings. A true celebrator of life and art, Marden in front of her works in progress.



We are accustomed, in the age of Instagram, to a certain amount of posturing in all our interactions. But to be in the presence of painter, jewel box hotelier, and art world doyenne Helen Marden is to meet with a startling frankness. She speaks with easy candor about money, illness, and the unattractive behaviors of some New York City gallerists. Her conversation is studded with the names of art world luminaries (of one she says, with total equanimity, “I love her, but I don’t like her paintings, and I don’t think she likes mine”), but never does it feel like name dropping, only the natural mentioning of old friends, those trusted people with whom she discusses the business of life.

For the record, her social media presence is also radically honest, and by design. “Why not?” she says. As high-profile New Yorkers, Marden and her husband, the influential painter Brice Marden, might be expected to keep some things out of view, but her feed crops nothing out. In frame are travels to Morocco, Greece and Nevis (where they own the Golden Rock Inn), the goofing of grandchildren, and Marden celebrating her 80th birthday en famille, but also unvarnished images of the joys and burdens of long marriage, including Brice’s recent battle with cancer. “I’ve been right out there, because I figure it helps people,” says Marden. “Why should things be a secret?”

She welcomes me into her Tivoli, New York, studio with that same open and direct manner. The floors are covered in paint-splattered cloth, the margins are stacked with books and

newspapers, the rooms are illuminated by high, sunstruck windows that frame a field rolling toward the Hudson River. “The afternoon light is so beautiful here, almost always, regardless, storms or not,” she says. The name of her 2021 show at Gagosian, “Bitter Light A Year,” must make more sense to me now, she remarks. This was the light she sat with during that first sad year of the COVID-19 Pandemic, an unusually grounded time for Marden and her husband, both of whom were in their studios almost every day of lockdown. The result is the body of work she exhibited at Gagosian, a series of spectacular abstractions that couple loops and splashes of neon and jewel tones with found objects from the seashore and the street.

“I think of them as mandalas,” she says of these recent paintings. “A place to focus your thoughts and let your mind go. I really only like abstraction. I don’t like things floating around in there with arms and legs.”

“I have these up and I’ve been working on them,” she says, gesturing to the large canvases, which have a brilliant, resin gleam. She gestures to one: “Right in that smarmy yellow bit I want to put something, I don’t know what yet.” She settles into an armchair covered in textiles, the corners of her mouth darting in thought. As she responds to questions about her process, she is by turns reverent and profane, literary and tart, elegant and fun. “It takes a long time to figure out what I have to do next. I remember reading how sometimes Howard Hodgkin would look at his paintings for four years. I don’t want to look for four years. But it does take a long time. You have

to drop into what you’re doing. Sit in a chair and wonder. At a minimum, I need five and a half hours a day for me. Otherwise, I’d kill someone.” She pauses, giggles. “I mean, I’d be angry. Five and a half hours is —” she shrugs, as though to say, *I’ll take it.* “It’s okay.”

“Bitter Light a Year” followed another Gagosian show, “Tivoli,” in 2019. “A show is a chance to see and process your work in a way that artists don’t get otherwise,” the photographer Jessica Craig-Martin, a family friend, observes. “Between those two shows I saw an increased strength of conviction about what she’s doing. And a greater sense of play. Helen used that first show, I felt, to take the work into stranger and deeper territory.”

Although Marden studied visual art in college and took art lessons as a child (“that was when I knew this was for me”), she has not always had that strength of conviction. “I think I was intimidated by Brice and the art world,” she says. The art world gave her reason to feel self-protective, as one searing memory attests. In a review of the 1995 Whitney Biennial, in which both Mardens’ work appeared, *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman belittled Helen’s in print. She recalls his glib dismissal: “‘She’s no Brice Marden.’ I thought, *Any fucking idiot knows that. It doesn’t mean I’m a serial killer.* I was in San Francisco and this paper was blowing down the street and there [Kimmelman’s piece] was. A little surreal. You know, ‘She’s no Brice Marden.’”

But Marden had, by then, gotten some *fuck you* energy

back. “I just thought, *Well, fuck you,*” she laughs. “*Fuck you,* came back to me.”

By then she was a mother to two daughters. “When I had Mirabelle and Melia, thought, if I can keep them breathing, I can do anything.” In the early 1980s, the summer the girls were three and four, the family traveled to Greece. “I got a little place, just a walk from our house. They didn’t know where I went, they had a babysitter. I’d just go away in the afternoon.” Marden remembers this time as pivotal. “That’s when I started again. It was the beginning of realizing I had to do this, the beginning of finding my confidence again.”

Marden has been traveling to Hydra, the Aegean Island often associated with Leonard Cohen, for over half her life. It’s a much-mythologized paradise that has attracted many expatriates and bohemian types, including Henry Miller, who writes in his travelogue *The Colossus of Maroussi* of Greece as a place where, “one has that sense of eternity experienced in the here and now.”

“When I first went, in 1970, Greece was really poor. I worked in the spring, and I had some money. I think I had four hundred dollars. I went, and in six weeks I spent two hundred and fifty dollars. That’s just how it was.” The Mardens bought their first Hydra house in the early 1970s. “It was the first year Brice made any money. It was a little house, like two hundred and seventy-five steps up.” Then in the early 1990s they acquired another house from a French count. Built in 1790, it was closer to the port. “The house hadn’t been reno-



Intimate vignettes, a shelf of momentos captured in the kitchen of the Down House on Hydra. The kitchen with its original windows and marble floor, a gathering place for family and friends, overlooks the inner courtyard. **Opposite page:** Marden loves a space to be in a state of surrender to nature. Another stunning view from the Up House: a terrace to simply sit and let the mind travel.

vated,” she says. “That was one of the pluses. Nothing is much changed in there at all. We don’t even have a proper stove because I didn’t want to cut something in the kitchen, so we basically have a hot plate. The walls are so thick in those houses. I love all that. You feel very solid.”

The artist Dimitrios Antonitsis, director of the gallery Hydra School Projects, points to the vines growing up through the patio stones, the original, warped transoms, the tile on the floors that are allowed to disintegrate. Marden’s approach, he says, is “to live in the house with the eye of an archeologist.” Craig-Martin sees in the Hydra house something essential about Helen’s aesthetic sensibility. “Helen once said to me, ‘I like it when nature is winning.’ She likes to see every part of the life cycle on her table. Bowls spilling over with brightly colored fruits and peppers. A mess of flowers in various stages of decay. Don’t throw away an old pomegranate. Everything I’m saying about the kitchen table, with this cornucopia of life and death going on, could be said about the work. There’s this tantric embrace of chaos.”

It was in Greece that Craig-Martin first became close with the Mardens. She traveled with the family to Hydra and beyond to help care for the girls. “Helen took the girls, and Brice, and me, and a small white dog, around the world, and it was all done spontaneously. Nothing fazed her at all. It’s the way she thinks and moves in the world. We would arrive in Thailand and look for little shacks to rent on the beach. They were three dollars each at the time. We’d get three — one

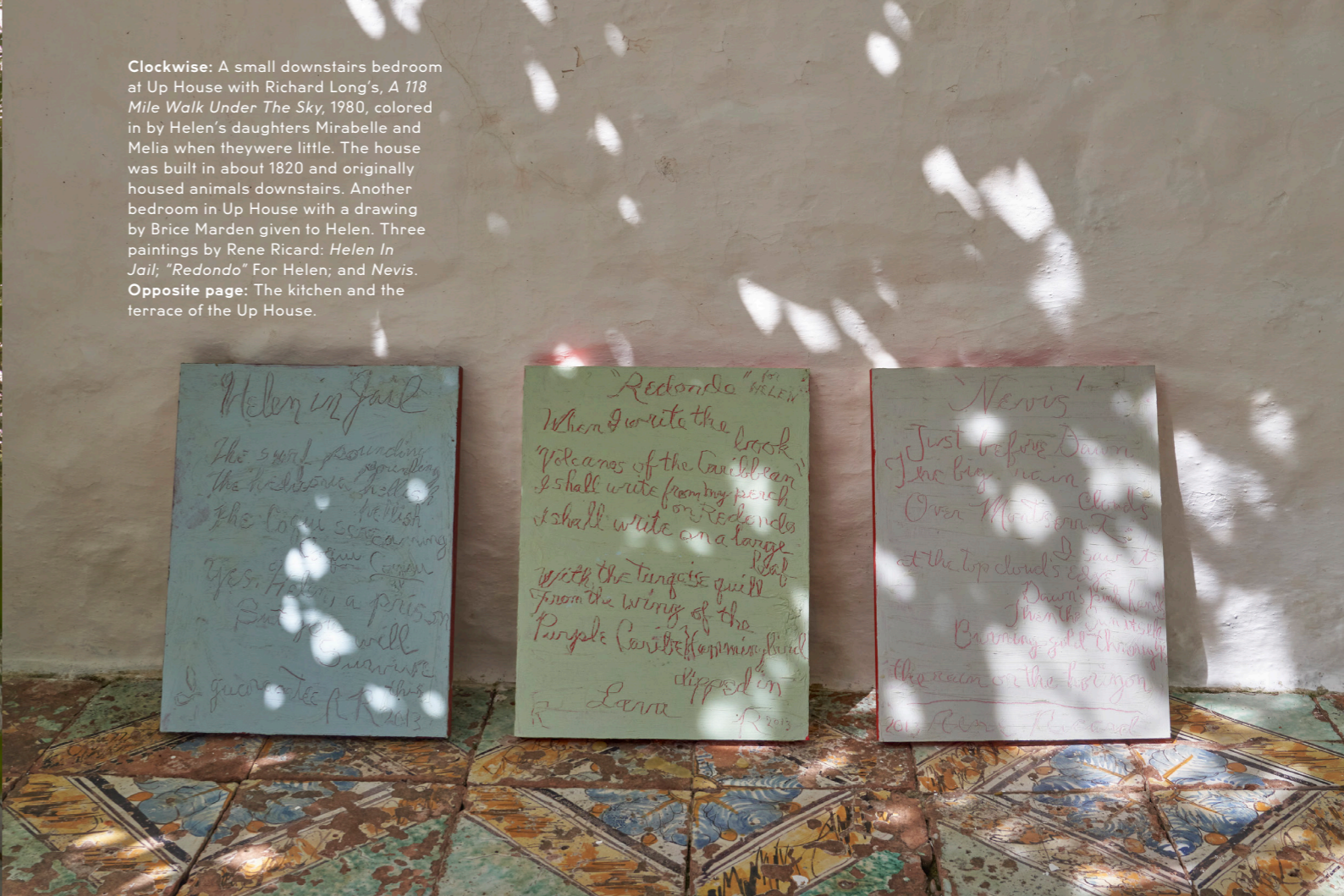
for Brice and Helen and Melia, one for me and Mirabelle, and one for Brice to draw in. At the time Helen had not been making work. She did not have a three-dollar hut. When we got back from that trip, she got a tiny studio and she made these tiny paintings, almost the size of postcards.” Of the recent work, Craig-Martin says, “It’s moving to see her get up from those small, shy paintings to these big motherfuckers. They’re increasingly fearless.”

**T**he Mardens are part of a circle of artists to whom they offer inspiration and support. “Helen’s been amazing to me, always,” Craig-Martin says. In turn, Marden credits the support of female artists, including Cecily Brown and Elizabeth Murray, for helping her get back in the studio. “Jennifer Bartlett would tell me, ‘Oh Helen, just tell everyone you’re a painter. Just write your name.’ I rented a little studio in New York. And I’d think *God, how am I going to do this again?* I wrote my name in red. I wrote my name over and over.”

Of the recent work, Marden says, “it’s how I visually think. How I experience the world. It’s traveling all these years, what I’ve distilled...” she pauses, her apple cheeks emerge against the platinum curtain of her hair, she revises. “*Distilled* sounds a bit pretentious. But something like that.”

“There’s a commitment to the present moment that Helen has that I think continues to astound Brice all these years later,” says Craig-Martin. “She’s given so much, providing a life, and amazing homes, and her idea of travel. It’s been enormously influential on Brice and it’s something that I don’t





Clockwise: A small downstairs bedroom at Up House with Richard Long's, *A 118 Mile Walk Under The Sky*, 1980, colored in by Helen's daughters Mirabelle and Melia when they were little. The house was built in about 1820 and originally housed animals downstairs. Another bedroom in Up House with a drawing by Brice Marden given to Helen. Three paintings by Rene Ricard: *Helen In Jail*; "Redondo" For Helen; and *Nevis*. Opposite page: The kitchen and the terrace of the Up House.

*Helen in Jail*  
 The sun pounding  
 The kitchen shells  
 The log fire  
 Yes, Helen is a prison  
 But you will survive  
 I guarantee it

*"Redondo" Helen*  
 When I write the book  
 of volcanoes of the Caribbean  
 I shall write from my perch  
 on Redondo  
 I shall write on a large  
 slab  
 with the turquoise quill  
 from the wings of the  
 Purple Caribbe Hummingbird  
 dipped in  
 Lava

*Nevis!*  
 Just before Dawn  
 The big rain clouds  
 Over Montserrat  
 at the top cloud's edge  
 Dawn's first light  
 Then the sun itself  
 Barring gold through  
 the rain on the hot ground



Hanging in the beautiful light of the living room at Down House, *Untitled*, 2018, by Helen Marden. **Opposite page, clockwise:** an Up House bedroom which used to be Helen's studio. The sleeping dog is a sculpture by Cathie Pilkington. On top of the cabinet, a Helen Marden painting. A painting by Cornelia Tipuamantumirri on the left wall of the main hall of Down House. The marble clad bathroom at Down House and another breathtaking view.

In a Down House bedroom, a children's chair that lights up (a gift from Lisa Liebmann and Brooks Adams) and a small painting by Vahakn Arslanian next to a column from Swat (Northern Pakistan).

Below: Paintings by Socrates Fatouros in the main hall at Down House. Opposite page: All from the Down House, the kitchen seating area with a traditional Hydra style sofa, the inner court with a hammock, and a vignette from the kitchen with the original and still working water cistern.



think he would have done without her. Brice likes to put a certain order to things, and Helen is sort of the opposite, and perhaps that's where they meet."

When I visited Marden's studio, she had just returned from a trip to Egypt. Although she had brought watercolors on the trip, she hadn't used them. "In Aswan, it was too beautiful. I got up before dawn just so I could see the light come up, birds flying around. I just wanted to stare at things." When I checked in with her a month later, she and Brice had flown to Morocco, just before new Omicron variant-related travel bans were imposed. Morocco is another of the places Marden returns to again and again, a fascination that began with the American expatriate writer Paul Bowles, especially his extensive translations of, among others, the Moroccan writer Mohamed Mrabet. "There was something about the storytelling," she says, of first encountering this work. "I was smitten."

As our conversation in Tivoli comes to an end, Helen gives one of her little shrugs, as though to say, *enough explaining, enough about me*. "This is how I am. And I'm just going to keep working until I die. I'm not going to have more hotels, more whatever. I am happy with what I've chosen. I'll go where I go, Morocco and Greece. I'm going to work in my studio." ■

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