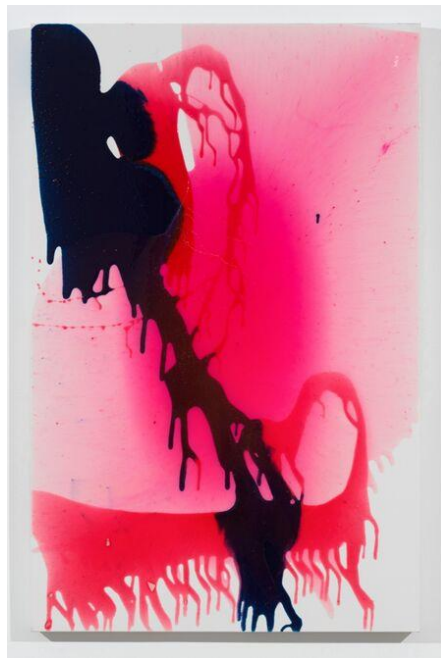


GAGOSIAN



## In Athens, Helen Marden Paints a Spectrum of Grief and Love

Allyssia Alleyne



*Helen Marden, Night Song, 2022. © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian*

It's been just over 12 hours since Helen Marden returned to her home in Tivoli, a village in Dutchess County, New York. Overlooking the Hudson River, it's one of the many homes she shared with her late husband, the celebrated painter Brice Marden, over the course of their 55-year marriage, and a short drive away from the studio where she's worked for the last five years. "After Brice died in August, I think this is a good place for me to feel—I don't know, faith isn't the right word. But I think I feel psychologically more stable here," she said. "It just seems appropriate for how I am right now."

Marden's been away since early September. Mostly, she's been in Greece, where she recently opened her first show at Gagosian's Athens outpost, which runs through October 21st. Its bilingual title, "Agape/Αγάπη," was inspired by a conversation with the artist Dimitrios Antonitsis, founder of the annual Hydra School Projects summer exhibition.

“He said, in ancient Greece, that kind of love [agape] meant a giving back, a sort of unconditional love,” she explained. “And I thought, I loved Brice, I love Greece. It just seemed like a short, perfect title for the show, you know?”



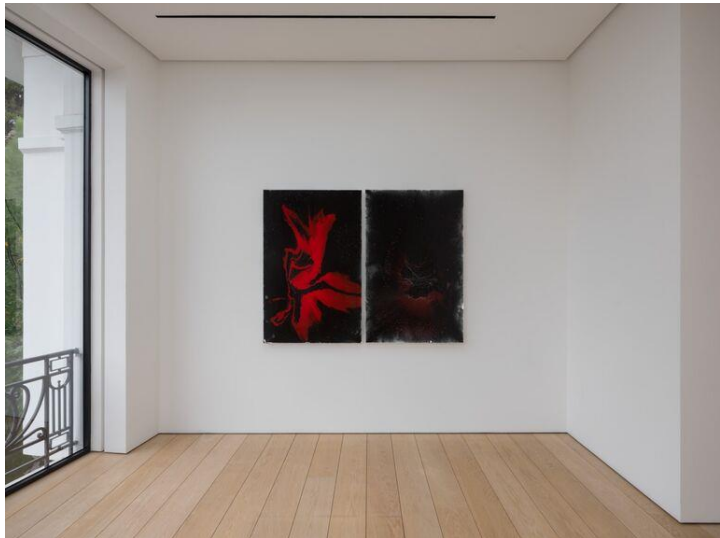
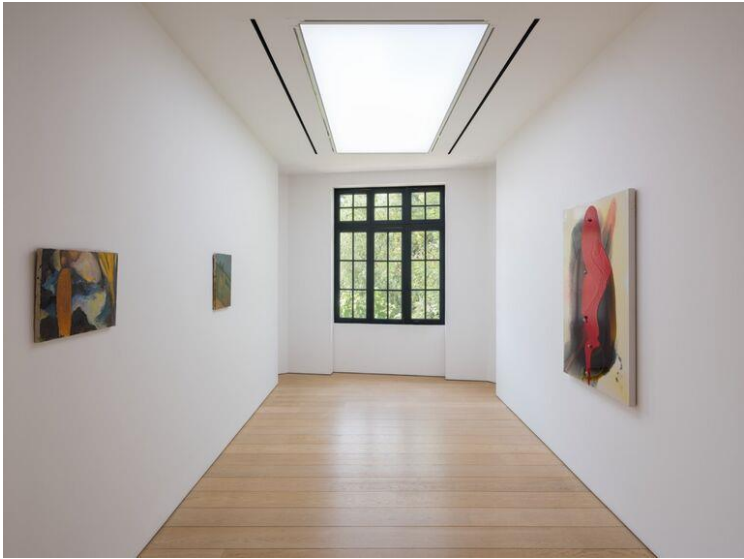
*Helen Marden, Hero, 202. © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian*



*Helen and Brice Marden at the Parthenon in Athens, c. 1970s. Courtesy Helen Marden Studio*

Greece had always been special to Marden. She and her husband started summering on Hydra in the early 1970s, and maintain a historic home on the island. It’s also where, in the early 1980s, Marden decided to put her BFA to good use (she graduated from Penn State in 1963) and commit herself to painting, encouraged by artist friends like Kiki Smith and Jennifer Bartlett. “Mirabelle, one of my daughters, didn’t even know that. I said, ‘Yeah, that’s when I went back to work, when you were little, three and four.’ I rented a little house and went there in the afternoons,” Marden said.

Two early works from this period are on view at Gagolian, but the show is a primarily a mix of new works where her signatures shine through—large canvases with streaks of pinks and reds (a palette absorbed over decades of travels to India) pulled through resin and spattered on linen, with bits of shell, feathers, and flashes of gold.





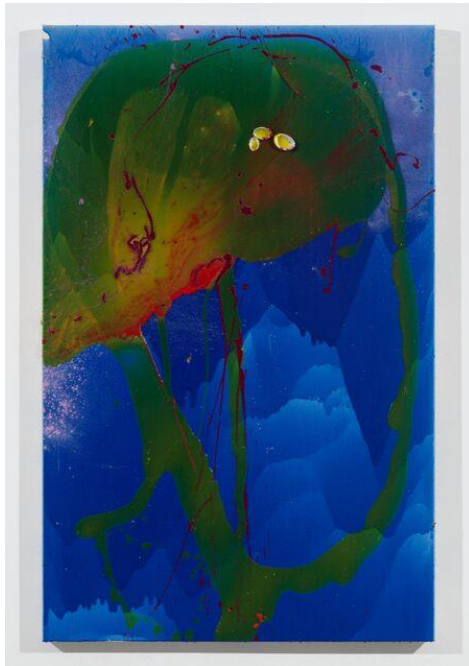
*Installation views of Helen Marden, "Agape/Aγάπη" © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photo: Stathis Mamalakis Courtesy Gagosian*

“People in the early years scorned me because Brice did these very serious paintings, and I thought to myself, ‘What the hell are you doing?’ But when Brice was [Robert] Rauschenberg’s assistant, we talked a lot about color, and you know he used a lot of color. It made me less...” She paused. “I never was scared of it. It’s just how I am.”

Marden is not, in her words, “an intellectual artist.” She’s disinclined to harp on influences and symbolism, process and motivation. “I’ve spent a long time traveling and looking at things, but I never pinpoint it to say, ‘Well, this came from that,’ you know? I used to think when I traveled and did watercolors that I’d be able to tell wherever I was by the watercolor, but I don’t know if that’s true. And anyway, I don’t really think that way,” she said. “I never think this is what I’m gonna do. Mostly I just do it.”



*Portrait of Helen Marden in 1997. Photo by Kurt Markus. Courtesy the artist and Gagolian*



*Helen Marden, Hydra Viper, 2020. © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian*

Consider her use of the seashell in her work. “[It] started years ago, when I started reading about seashells and what could be considered ancient but fragile, and maybe a feminine twist. The feathers were, I think, the same thing; it just came to me,” she said. Ahead of this show, “there was a dead bird outside of my studio and my assistant cleaned it and plucked a few feathers. I don’t know why.” (The majority of the feathers in the show, she clarified, were ordered in.)

But when it comes to “Agape/Αγάπη,” she admitted, there’s an undercurrent. Though the show was initially conceived in early 2023, there are works that reflect a tumultuous period of her life in



different ways. A diptych, *That Somber Day* (2023), painted during a difficult period in her husband's battle with cancer, is uncharacteristically gloomy, with swirls of red cutting through vast fields of black. A series of small, round canvases, created in the immediate aftermath of his death, she refers to simply as the "grief paintings."

"That was what I could concentrate on," she explained. "Last summer, Brice was really failing, and to do a larger painting, I really need to concentrate. I have to have my whole energy and body thinking about it. And I couldn't do that when I was thinking about Brice and what was going on. So these smaller paintings were what I could mentally do."



*Helen Marden. That Somber Day, 2023. © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagostian*

There, however, the palette remains bright, buoyant, with feathers protruding in bouquets. "People think of grief as something dark. I don't think that way. With grief, you're celebrating something in some way—a life or a time together. So these funny colors came into my mind."

Marden remembers encountering a similar feeling when she traveled to Hydra ahead of the show, returning to the 18th-century home she and Brice had purchased in the 1990s, with its thick walls, shutter doors, and decades of mementos. "It was never renovated, which I love. I would just lie there in the living room, and just feel enclosed in a good way. Then I started thinking, 'Oh, all these memories have gone up to the ceiling, and they're hanging off the corners of the room,'" she remembered. "I liked it. I thought I might feel weird, but I felt okay."

Back in Tivoli, Marden was "excited" to return to the studio, to see the works in progress she left behind and get back to painting, the thing that centers her. "I mean, maybe that's a poor choice of words right now, but I am," she said. "My life, this new life I have now, I want it to be good, I want it to be joyful."

"I don't want to mope around, you know. I want to work."