

GAGOSIAN



Helen Marden: “I am fascinated by the mystery of life”
Proud at 82, the American painter talks about her life, her beloved Hydra, her art and her travels.

Ioanna Gomouza



Helen Marden at the Golden Rock Inn in Nevis in 2018 © Douglas Friedman. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian

Helen Marden speaks to Athens Voice on the occasion of her exhibition titled "Agape" at the Gagosian Gallery.

She speaks softly, smiling, with the understanding of a person who recognizes that she has a good life and insists on not giving up, despite having recently experienced a painful loss. Just a few weeks after the death of her husband of 55 years, the famous renowned artist Brice Marden, Helen Marden stands in front of her colourful canvases at the Gagosian gallery in Kolonaki. Majestic at the age of 82, determined, you might say she still directs the setting for this conversation, choosing the exact spot and arrangement of the seats. Spontaneously, the words that the artist, curator, and her beloved friend Dimitris Antonitsis used to describe her a year earlier for the exhibition "Brice Marden and Greek Antiquity" at the Museum of Cycladic Art come to my mind: "an existence that occupies the space of a galaxy"...



*Helen Marden, Agape/Αγάπη, 2023, installation view © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo: Stathis Mamelakis Courtesy Gagosian*



Helen Marden in Hydra, c 1980s, Courtesy Helen Marden Studio

It has been more than half a century since she has been returning to the country in the summers, to her beloved Hydra. The calendar read 1970 when she decided to visit a friend in Spetses. *"I worked for a photographer for six months to save money. But I wondered, who are all these elegant people going to Hydra? So the next day, we went to Hydra, and I fell in love with it. The natural beauty, the water, and the light, the whole 'package' suited me. Greece is the most beautiful country on Earth. Where else do you find such light?"* she says.

She worked in his studio, their daughters enjoyed their holidays on a picturesque island with friends beyond their American surroundings, and when they flew back to "normality," tanned, their shoes worn out, and their hair blond from the sun, they looked like islanders – so much so that once a German banker friend of theirs was worried about what was happening to them.

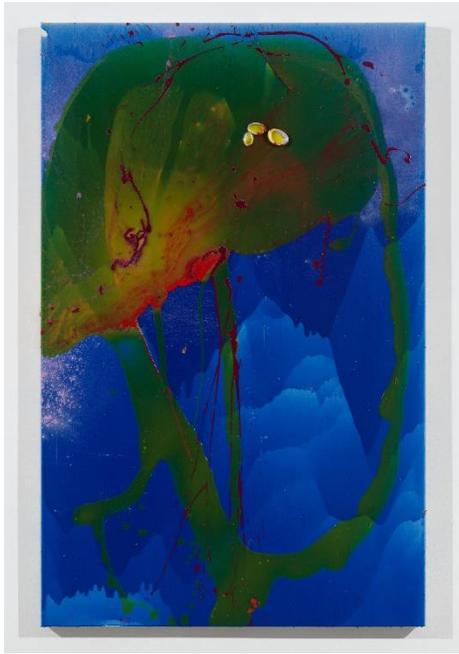


Helen, Brice, And Mirabelle Marden att the Parthenon in Athens, C. 1970s, Courtesy Helen Marden Studio



Helen Marden in Hydra, c 1980s, Courtesy Helen Marden Studio

Wandering is in her nature and it didn't take long to show. In college, she read a lot of Paul Bowles and his translations of stories from narrators like *Mohamed Mrabet from Tangiers*. Having received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Pennsylvania in 1963, it was only a matter of time before she boarded a flight to Morocco. The people, the light, the markets, the Medina, the mountains fascinated her from the very beginning.



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



Helen Marden, Hero, (2020), © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian



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

For years, she had her compass aligned, even in India, where her daily life fueled her watercolours.

"My work comes instinctively, I don't think about it. Whatever comes from within, that's how it happens. The way Brice draws inspiration from a place is more specific, with the water, the landscape, and so on. In my case, not really. But there has always been a connection. I think the air, the tastes, the smells (from the trips) are everywhere in my works. I don't know if it appears so vividly, though. Two or three years ago, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, we managed to go to Casablanca in the fall and travel around the country by road. When we flew to Madrid after two weeks and visited the Prado, everything seemed so... brown to me. I thought I was Moroccan."

Not by chance, some years ago they acquired a riad here, one of the retreats they set up around the world – in Nevis, in the Caribbean, the boutique resort Golden Rock even “runs”. And it's on these two sides of the Mediterranean, in the Argosaronic and in Morocco, where she wants to return.



*Helen Marden, Agape/Αγάπη, 2023, installation view © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo: Stathis Mamalakis Courtesy Gagolian*

Helen Marden, Hydra and “Agape” at Gagolian gallery

In Hydra, she picked up her brushes again after abandoning painting for a while. Two works from 1980 on the first floor of Gagolian in Athens remind of those days and the artistic path she has crossed since, the transition from the abstract rendering of the stubborn, rural Greek landscape to the distillation of its topography into biomorphic forms.



Helen Marden, Summer Fire, c 1980, © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian



Helen Marden, Valley, c 1980, © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

"One of our certainties was that we both worked constantly, we went to our studios every day. It was wonderful. Brice was obsessive. His drive helped me to progress too. It took me many years because the New York art world underestimated me. It was a completely different world for women at the time, at least for me. But when I decided that I had to work, I talked to Jennifer Bartlett and especially to Elizabeth Murray, who encouraged me a lot because she had children too. I thought that if I could raise children, I could do anything."



Helen Marden, *Agape/Αγάπη*, 2023, installation view © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo: Stathis Mamelakis Courtesy Gagosian

Working in the shadow of a famous male painter did not seem to have been favorable for her own artistic journey. She acknowledges, of course, that her partner was supportive of her work, although it took years to recognize her work. *"Two weeks before he died, he came to my studio and started laughing because, of course, I work so differently from him. When I asked him what he thought about the works a few days later, he said that half of them were fine,"* she says, laughing.

He was the one who introduced her work to the famous art dealer Larry Gagosian. Over the years, she has exhibited her work at the individual level of the gallery. She has participated in group

exhibitions at the New Museum, the Drawing Center, the Whitney Biennial, and The Last Brucennial in New York, as well as at the Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University. In 2001, her works were featured in the tribute "Aura and Incarnation" at Hydra School Projects.



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

Her third exhibition at Gagolian and her first in Greece is titled 'Agape,' a word that recurs as a repeating motif in various songs and signifies enduring, unconditional love.

From her early works on Hydra to recent creations, her paintings are fueled by her connection to contemporary abstraction, an unquenchable interest in nature, and the magic of Greek and other cultural traditions. Vibrant compositions with bold colors, abstract forms with flowing bundles of threads that twist and overlap.



*Helen Marden, Agape/Αγάπη, 2023, installation view © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo: Stathis Mamalakis Courtesy Gagolian*



*Helen Marden, Agape/Αγάπη, 2023, installation view © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo: Stathis Mamalakis Courtesy Gagosian*

In her practice, she covers the canvas with liquid resin, and as it dries, she adds pigments in powdered form, working with speed and intense gestures. *'You know what I do? I sit for an hour with a color in my mind, and then, running, I go and mix the resin. Then I pour the color and run again, and so on,'* she revealed in a recent conversation with her friend and fellow artist Kiki Smith. *'There is a great prejudice against color, especially for women artists who use color. It's like a sign that they are not good enough or not smart enough,'* she emphasizes about her palette.



Helen Marden, June, 2021, © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian

However, this time, black was not absent from her palette. *'It's a darker year,'* she admits. *'As Brice's health declined, I thought I couldn't concentrate on creating large paintings; I didn't have the strength and energy. So I created the small round works presented on the ground floor, which I call paintings of sorrow because it was the scale I could manage.'*



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

Embedded on their surface are feathers (a reference to Icarus), seashells, twigs, and sea glass, elements from the natural world, both fragile and resilient, vital and transformative, they reveal, you might say, a glimpse into the play of life, infused with childhood memories—since during hikes she used to collect seashells with her mother.



Helen Marden, Agape/Αγάπη, 2023, installation view © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photo: Stathis Mamalakis Courtesy Gagosian



Helen Marden, "Sannuk II", 2023 © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian

Helen Marden: her loss and plans for the future

Despite the sorrow that comes with loss, she doesn't want her artistic expression to exude darkness. On the contrary, she wishes to infuse it with joy. *'It may be painful, but it's the natural cycle of things. You know, we had an exceptional life with Brice. There were difficult moments, as there are for everyone, but love was there, the real strength between us. It's in my nature to be optimistic, to travel and see. To be optimistic and to find love is a decision in a way. I think you have to keep your heart open.'*



Helen Marden, 1977, © Kurt Markus, courtesy of the artist and Gagolian

She no longer wants to live in the city, visit museums in Europe, or be concerned with the art world and its social whirl. Before COVID flared up, they settled in Upstate New York, north of the

American metropolis, and that's where she prefers to be. Taking her dogs for a walk in the fresh air in the morning, seeing a few friends, and working.

'Art is something you want to see for yourself, and you hope that others will want to see it too. The most important thing it gave me is a perspective on the world, a condensed energy. Brice once said, 'I work for myself, I work for my wife Helen, and for anyone who wants to see my work.' I like that. I have, who knows, another 18 years left? I can simply work. The mystery of life fascinates me.'



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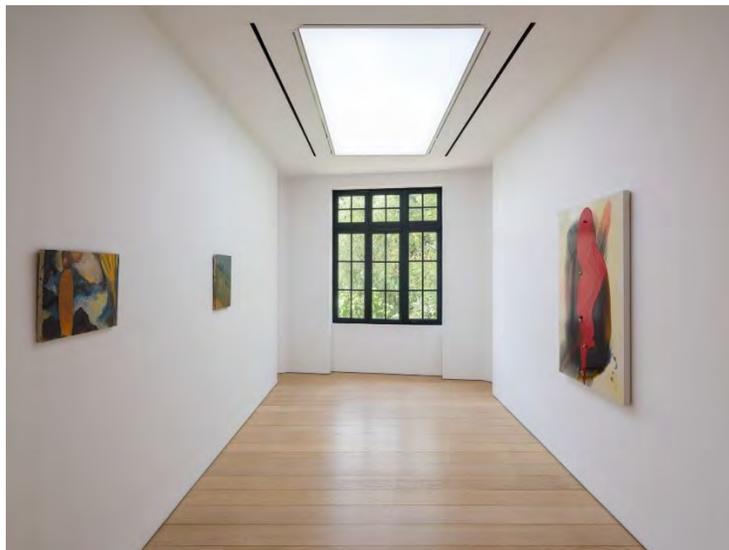
INFO:

Helen Marden, Agape/Αγάπη

Gagolian, 22 Anapiron Polemou Street, Kolonaki, 210 3640215

Until: October 21, 2023

Opening hours: Tuesday-Saturday: 11:00-19:00, Thursday: 11:00-20:00



*Helen Marden, Agape/Αγάπη, 2023, installation view © 2023 Helen Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo: Stathis Mamalakis Courtesy Gagolian*



Helen and Mirabelle Marden, 1977 ©Kurt Markus, courtesy of the artist and Gagosian