

Tiempo y percepción en las pinturas maduras de Agnes Martin

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Time and perceptibility in Agnes Martin's mature paintings

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Resumen

Agnes Martin, una de las figuras más singulares de la segunda mitad de la escena artística estadounidense del siglo XX, creó un cuerpo de trabajo cohesionado basado en una abstracción cromáticamente **pálida**, iterativa, geométrica pero lírica. Su obra, poética y sutil hasta el punto de no ser fácil de reproducir **fotográficamente**, sólo recientemente ha ganado popularidad internacional. Tensada por las relaciones entre el dibujo y la pintura, lo natural y lo abstracto, la espiritualidad y el racionalismo, la subjetividad y la objetividad... su obra impresiona tanto a la crítica como al público vernáculo. Este texto analiza las pinturas maduras de Martin en relación con las nociones de tiempo y percepción. Para ello, se analizarán las notas y escritos de la propia Martin, así como transcripciones de entrevistas y memorias de galeristas y críticos cercanos a la artista. En última instancia, este artículo plantea la experiencia perceptiva y temporal como factor decisivo en las propuestas pictóricas de Martin, que exigen una mirada atenta y despaciosa para poder ser comprendidas en su totalidad.

Palabras clave: Agnes Martin; Tiempo; Percepción; Pintura; Abstracción lírica; Siglo XX

Abstract

Agnes Martin, one of the most singular figures of the second half of the 20th Century American art scene, created a cohesive body of work based on pale-colored, iterative, geometrical yet lyrical abstraction. Her oeuvre, poetic and subtle to the point of being not easily photographable, has only recently gained international acclaim. Tensioned by the relationships between drawing and painting, the natural and the abstracted, spirituality and rationalism, subjectivity and objectivity... her work awes both critics and the vernacular public. This text dissects Martin's mature paintings in relation to the notions of time and perception. In order to do so,

Martin's own notes and writings, as well as interviews transcriptions and memories by close gallerists and critics are analyzed here. Ultimately, this article poses the perceptive and temporal experiences as decisive factors in Martin's pictorial proposals, which demand the attentive, slow gaze to be fully grasped.

Keywords: Agnes Martin; Time; Perceptibility; Painting; Lyrical abstraction; 20th Century

1. INTRODUCTION: BECOMING AGNES MARTIN

A reserved exhibitionist, Agnes Martin remains an oxymoron: the outline of her life “suggests a struggle between the desires to efface and to distinguish herself” (Prince, 2015, p. 27). Revered as one of the greatest figures in American 20th Century art scene, Martin's work and persona are still surrounded by a sense of mystery and enigma. To a certain extent, this was instigated by the artist herself. For starters, she destroyed her early works and those which she felt unworthy, so we can only examine her production partially. Arne Glimcher, close friend of the artist and her gallerist from 1974, tells that Agnes, even on her deathbed, worried about two unfinished paintings on her studio and asked him to destroy them.

A mystique exists that Agnes painted very few works but, in actuality, she painted almost daily (...). However, only a relatively small amount of works exists from such a long and productive life because she destroyed most of the works she produced. Probably no artist has ever been a better editor than Agnes Martin. The rejected paintings were shredded with a mat knife (Glimcher, 2015, p. 203).

When unsatisfied with a painting, she would repeat it over and over until she was pleased with the result, sometimes discarding up until nine versions of the work. In addition to the relentless level of discernment in the validation of her paintings, Martin took pains to defend the privacy of her personal life (including her sexuality and her struggles with mental illness) so that the work would take precedence. Often contradictory and evasive in interviews, mostly given at an advanced age, Martin didn't make it easy to gain a comprehensive understanding of her work or simply establish a clear biography (Bell, 2015, p. 21). For an artist of international projection, she lived an unusual life, even when her work rose to prominence.

Born on March 22, 1912, in the rural plains of Macklin, Saskatchewan, western Canada, Agnes Bernice Martin was the third of four children. Of Scottish Presbyterian descent, her family immigrated to the country around 1875, first settling in Mount Forest, Ontario, then moving to the Prairies. When her father died in 1914, Agnes' family moved to Calgary, Alberta, and then Vancouver, British Columbia. Hence, Martin was surrounded by nature's beauty from a very early age: Canada's wide-open, flat prairies and rocky bays were the scenario she grew up in. The hardship and solitude experienced in the never-ending plains of her native country, as writer and researcher Henry Martin suggests, would later inform her practice and personal

life (2018, p. 37). Certainly, the connection with the vastness and extensiveness of the fields could have had an influence in the lightness and openness of her pictorial spaces, as well as her predilection for living in the plains of New Mexico's desert later in her life.

Martin first moved to the USA at the age of nineteen. She arrived in Bellingham, Washington, to help her sister Maribel, who was pregnant. The artist elucidated: "My sister married an American and she became ill and I came down to take care of her. Then I noticed the difference in American people and the Canadian people and I decided I wanted to come to America to live, (...) to (...) actually become an American" (Campbell, 2015, p. 96). Whilst in Washington, she would graduate from high school and study to become a teacher. About this career decision, she explained in an interview: "I couldn't come to the United States unless I had a profession, and I thought the easiest profession I could acquire would be to be a teacher" (Simon, 1995, p. 87). On June 10, 1937, Martin obtained a teaching certificate, which allowed her to work in elementary and junior high schools. This she did, for the following four years, at various schools in rural Washington. That pattern of lonely, itinerant, uprooted life would be sustained for many decades in Martin's story.

In 1941, Agnes left Washington for New York to continue her academic training: "When I found that I could work my way through college, I asked everybody what was the best college [sic]; I thought I'd go for that. They said Columbia University. So I went to New York". There, she would enroll at Teachers College in a master's degree in modern art, where she stayed for a single academic year. It was during this time that she also contemplated the possibility of sustaining herself as an artist: "I thought if I could make a living painting, that's what I would like to do" (Simon, 1995, p. 87).

As already pointed out, Martin was merciless in shattering artwork that she considered immature, so none of her student production from Teachers College is known to exist, making it hard to envisage what she was exposed to or absorbing (Princenthal, 2015, p. 36). In any case, Martin didn't manage to stay long enough in New York, one of the reasons being presumably financial hardship. Later in her life, when requested by the Guggenheim Museum to release her biography in 1980, Agnes simply wrote a compendium of all the jobs she had ever taken. She sent a letter to her gallerist asking him to find someone to type the list and forward a copy to the museum: "This biographic material will not be all they want. No amount would be enough. I consider this to be all that is relevant. Please publish all or none" (Glimcher, 2015, p. 242-43). The eclectic enumeration includes working as a cashier, a receptionist, a tennis coach, a baker's helper, a waitress many times, a janitor, in a parking garage, a factory, a hamburger stand, raising rabbits and ducks, running an elevator, on school buses... The list also includes working as a dishwasher three times; she later revealed in an interview: "Whenever I was really starving I always washed dishes because I got closer to the food" (Campbell, 1989, p. 7). This

extensive range of jobs presented as her biography serves as proof of the economic difficulties she had to overcome before being fully recognized as an artist, how little she was willing to share about her personal life, and the importance that discipline and hard work had throughout her existence. Nancy Princenthal suggests that the disciplinarian nature of Martin's work life translated to her oeuvre, strict in terms of composition and visual grammar: "Connecting the impulse to her working methods, to her character, and above all to her mature work, is irresistible; the geometries of her paintings are nothing if not firmly governed – with the lightest possible touch and with absolutely unrelenting vigilance" (2015, p. 46).

In 1946, Martin left New York and moved to New Mexico, where she would stay intermittently for more than a decade. The relative inaccessibility of this state and its striking environs turned New Mexico into a magnet for artists and writers. It is during this time that she produced the first works that have survived to this day, despite her efforts to suppress them. Her life as an artist was slowly beginning.

2. CREATIVE MATURATION: COENTIS SLIP, NEW YORK AND THE TURMOIL

According to Barbara Haskell, Martin "escaped some of the routine cruelties of the art press because she patiently waited until she was producing a mature body of work before she attempted to expose her art to the critics' gaze" (1992, p. 132). Unusual in the trajectory of an international artist, Martin was in her mid-forties when her career turned serious and truly commenced. A fortunate encounter in 1957 with Betty Parsons in Taos, New Mexico, ignited the spark. The avant-garde, prominent gallerist would become a pivotal figure in Martin's career. For their commercial relationship to begin, Parsons established one condition: for Martin to go back to and live in New York. The dealer and gallery owner facilitated the move by purchasing some of Agnes' paintings. Parsons also helped Martin to settle in by introducing her to other artists who helped find a place to live and work. That place was Coenties Slip, lower Manhattan's seaport area, nowadays considered one of the most important artistic enclaves in 20th Century American scene. The Slip sheltered a wide range of painters and creators (fig.1), including Jack Youngerman, James Rosenquist, Ann Wilson, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Indiana... and close neighbors Jaspers Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Chrysta and composers Morton Feldman and John Cage, among others. Barnett Newman also lived nearby. In this vibrant, edgy environment, Agnes started to flourish:

In New York, Martin's work changed quickly. As evident from a number of surviving large paintings, biomorphic images were replaced with larger more abstract forms and geometric shapes such as rectangles, squares and circles. Her surfaces became flatter and were presented more frontally, a direction that perhaps suggests the influence of Kelly, among other artists with whom Martin was coming into contact (Bell, 2015, p. 25).

In her new home, Agnes found the context and courage to explore more radical possibilities in her working methods and approaches:

I thought I was on my way in Taos, but I never felt that I was doing exactly what I wanted to do, not until I was in New York. It's pretty hard out West, the pace in New York is so much faster, I mean the pace of living. Out West you have to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Everybody else is leaning on walls. When I got to New York, I really flew at it; I worked hard in Taos, but in New York I just painted and threw them away and painted and threw them away, but I finally got at the place where I felt I was doing what I should (Witt, n.d.).



Fig. 1. (From right to left) Agnes Martin in 1958 on the rooftop of her new home, the Coentis Slip building, with Jack Youngerman, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Indiana and Delphine Seyrig. Photograph by Hans Namuth.

Back in the early 70's, art historian Stephanie Barron identified a series of tendencies in the group of artists working under the Slip's cover, including a mute palette to emphasize problems of form and the interest in found objects prevalent in the neighborhood (Barron, 1975, pp. 80-4): Agnes Martin, Jasper Johns, James Rosenquist and Robert Rauschenberg scrutinized the shoreline and its surroundings

in search for items they could make art with. Metallic pieces such as nails or brass stencils, as well as abandoned wooden pieces, like boat spikes or beams, among other materials, were picked up by these artists and included in experimental artworks. Martin's *Little Sister* (1962) or *Blue Flower* (1962), both made of pinned nails and wood, serve as triumphant examples of this material exploration (fig. 2).

The location of Coenties Slip, in the East River's waterside, had an additional effect on the group of artists: "Although none of the serious artists do marine scene—they consider themselves abstract painters—they feel that living near the waterfront has a definite influence on their work" (Hammel, 1957, pp. 4-5). Ellsworth Kelly's *Atlantic* (1956) or Lenore Tawney's *Dark River Wall Hanging* (1961) come to mind. In the case of Martin, several titles of her paintings from this period also reveal a fascination with or gravitation towards the neighboring body of water, such as *Harbour I* (1959), *Milk River* (1963), *The Wave* (1963), *Night Sea* (1963), *The River* (1965) or *The Sea* (2003).

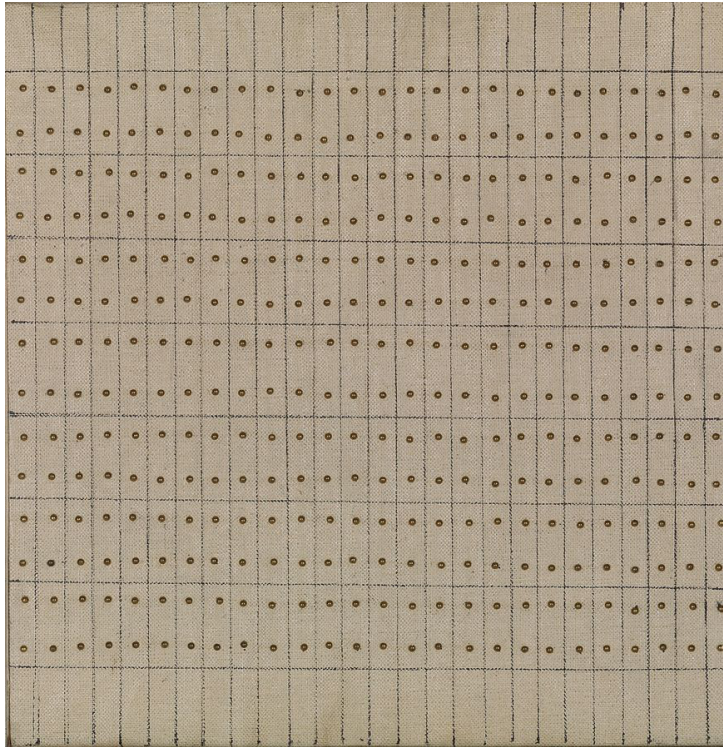


Fig. 2. Agnes Martin, *Little Sister*, 1962, oil, ink, and brass nails on canvas over wood. 25.1 x 24.6 cm. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Martin arrived to her "signature style", a restrained, geometrical yet lyrical abstraction, around 1963. The austerity of her pictorial proposals led her to be at

times linked to Minimalism, a movement that matured simultaneously as she did. About this association, Agnes would firmly declare:

The Minimalists were a bunch of young men who claimed that they were influenced by me. I don't believe in influence, but I thought I would show with them just for fun. Ever since, I've been called a Minimalist. (...) But I'm not, you see, because the Minimalists didn't believe in any personal feelings. You're not supposed to get emotional about minimalist painting. I consider that there is emotion in my work and I expect an emotional response. (...) That makes me an abstract expressionist (Spranger, 2002).

Martin, indeed, saw herself as the last abstract expressionist, a group ruled by artists she deeply admired, like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, and whom she was close friends with, like Ad Reinhardt¹. Agnes' enthusiasm when talking about the work of other painters, especially those belonging to the New York School or abstract expressionists, was vehement: "They were the greatest ones. They freed painting from space and let paintings become things. In the big black paintings of Still, the black isn't a passage of space, it's a thing. Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning, Newman all liberated painting from the space of a room" (Glimcher, 2015, p. 69).

For Anna Chave, Martin's work accords with the exaltation of emotions and spiritualism imbued in Abstract Expressionism, "but their anxiety-driven and heroic ambitions (to render 'tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on') differed sharply from her humble aims" (2004, n. p.). Indeed, Martin focused on positive emotions, such as joy and happiness, not the dramatic intensity pursued by the group she venerated.

Martin was more than a decade older than the group of artists she was a part of in Coenties Slip, as well as more spiritually inclined. This somehow left her in middle ground² between the recognized generation of painters she looked up to and the impoverished, still relatively unknown artists she lived with who sought to distance themselves from the uptown world of Warhol and the New York School. Both collectives were interested in exploring the possibilities of pictorial abstraction, but aside from that there weren't many other stylistic affinities. In fact, the macho camaraderie of "chain-smoking, whiskey-drinking, womanizing, chauvinistic, tormented, brawling, philosophizing, gifted men" was antagonistic to the "sexually alternative community with women and gay people at its heart" (Martin, 2015, p. 125) that Coenties Slip shielded. The younger generation strived to supplant Pollock et al. Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning drawing* from 1953 comes as a bold

1 Ad Reinhardt was a firm advocated of Martin's work and he played a critical role in her maturation as a painter during the early sixties. Both artists were close friends and Reinhardt's death in 1967 is said to have contributed to her decision of leaving New York (Cooke, 2011, p. 14).

2 In 1973, Douglas Crimp wrote in an essay: "[Martin's paintings] seem to contain within them a totality of the aspirations of two generations of American painting" (1973, n.p).

statement in this regard. Rauschenberg bought and carefully erased a piece by the most celebrated and lauded artist at that time, a gesture that Henry Martin sees as a “small victory won for Rauschenberg as a queer artist” as well as a “small defense of women”, for many critics and artists, including Agnes, considered de Kooning’s work to be misogynistic (2018, p. 127).

From the first show at Betty Parson’s gallery in December 1958, Martin’s oeuvre attracted notice from the art world in New York, and the show was reviewed in the *New York Times* and *Art News*. Though the reception of her work was mainly positive, Martin hadn’t gain financial stability yet. Sales weren’t enough to support herself in the city, as proven by a letter from the gallery to Agnes on February 6th, 1959: Parsons had sold seven drawings and small paintings by Martin for a total of \$1183.35; the artist’s expenses raised up to \$630.14 (for advances, transporting, announcements, photographing of works and advertising) (Princenthal, 2015, p. 126). This left her with \$553.21: not even enough to pay her annual rent at Coenties Slip (which ascended to \$600). Thus, after much thought, in 1961 Martin decided to change galleries. Later, when interviewed, Martin showed appreciation for Betty and recognized her role in gaining credit as an artist: “I owed her a lot (...). She came to Taos and bought enough so I could get to New York and start up. She put me up until I found a place to stay”. But she also looked at her past relationship in a non-idealizing way: “Lots of artists are so anxious to show their work they put up with anything. Betty, she’d wait until you were starving, then reduce the prices and buy them up herself” (Euclaire, 1993, p. 17). Martin and Parsons had very different personalities, although it has been sustained that their relationship wasn’t only commercial but also romantic³.

After ceasing her association with Parsons’ gallery in December 1961, Agnes moved to a loft on South Street, overlooking the harbor and the East River (fig. 3). Martin was then introduced by Leo Castelli to the young, new art dealer Robert Elkou, who would become her gallerist until 1974.

3 Martin’s sexuality, like much about her persona and work, was all but open. Choosing New Mexico as her hometown many times during her life, a way more tolerant place in that period where single women were common and homosexuality was more acceptable than elsewhere, might have been strategical. However, despite having had long and stable relationships with women throughout her life (including artists Chryssa or Lenore Tawney), Martin was frequently conflicted about her sexual orientation.



Fig. 3. Agnes Martin working in her studio in May 1961. Photograph by Fritz Goro.

Despite fully maturing artistically during the years 1957-1967, this period in New York was difficult for Martin in terms of health. Diagnosed a schizophrenic, she suffered several episodes of catatonia and hallucinations⁴. Martin's friends were very reserved on the matter and respected her wish to keep her illness under the radar, so not much is known on the virulence of her mental crisis. In fact, it's uncertain when Agnes was first diagnosed, or how she dealt with early symptoms in her youth. Schizophrenia, which often develops later in women than men, could have shown any time from her mid-twenties onwards. It is not known how many times, but there is proof that during her time in New York Martin had to be hospitalized with relative frequency. In the 1960's, schizophrenia was treated aggressively: chlorpromazine (an anti-psychotic drug) and electroconvulsive therapy were common medical procedures. In 1967, Martin suffered the most violent episode, for which she was interned at the then-infamous Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital. She presented symptoms of amnesia (not knowing who or where she was), and she was physically restrained and forcefully sedated. Placed with severely disturbed patients and with no connection to the outside world, she was fortunately saved by a scrap of paper bunched up in her pocket, which contained the number for Robert Indiana (Martin,

4 Martin often referred to some "voices" in her head that would direct her work, instructing her in what to paint and how to do it. She obeyed them submissively. The restrained, zen-inspired, ordered, abstracted images produced by the artist have been deciphered as mental exercises to gain serenity and clarity of thought, especially as someone who suffered from mental instability.

2018, p. 159). Him and Lenore Tawney rallied to help, the latter organizing a show of Martin's work to help fund her treatment. Indiana contacted Arthur Carr, an art collector and psychiatrist he knew, and together they made possible for Martin to be relocated in uptown's Columbia Presbyterian, where she was given "crisp copies of The New York Times each morning, clean water glasses, freshly laundered sheets, prescriptions" (Johnson, 2020). Robert Indiana himself describes the incidence with sadness:

I went to visit her there and saw that a mouse sat under her chair – I wasn't impressed with the conditions at Bellevue so I called Arthur Carr, and he transferred her to a private institution (...). It was in Northwestern part of Manhattan and was a more pleasant accommodation. (...) It was one of the sad parts of Coenties Slip: everyone else had achieved a measure of success and Agnes became ill and had to leave (Princenthal, p. 272).

In her 1972 essay *The Untroubled Mind*, Agnes writes: "I am constantly tempted to think that I can help save myself / by looking into my mind I can see what's there / by bringing thoughts to the surface of my mind I can watch / them dissolve" (Martin & Dieter, 1992, p. 41). This narration illustrates her internal struggle for mental lucidity as someone who manifested psychotic episodes and had to deal with the trauma that came with them.

As Martin's paintings gained more recognition, her wellbeing and ability to work diminished. Agnes' mental ups and downs were becoming more and more extreme. New York's vibrant and stimulating scene had turned too turbulent for her mind to cope with. In the city, chaotic, expensive, and materialistic, Martin felt frustrated and lost. In 1967, at age 55, after finally obtaining some reputation in the art world, a long-aspiring goal of hers, she abandoned New York and stopped painting. She wouldn't return to the public life, nor to the medium, for seven years.

3. TIME AND PERCEPTIBILITY IN MARTIN'S OEUVRE: SUMMONING A VISION OF QUIET

In 1970, after three years of creative hiatus, Martin wrote: "A boy whenever he had a problem / He called this rock up out of the mud / He turned into a rock / He summoned a vision of quiet / The idea is independence and solitude" (Martin & Dieter 1992, p. 218). Curator and researcher Mona Schieran argues that the qualities of meditation, silence, and isolation are inextricable from Martin's paintings (2016). In this section we will discuss the seclusion and quiet that the artist sought for the last 40 years of her life, and we will examine the notions of time and perception as determining factors in experiencing Martin's mature works.

3. 1. Running to the desert. The search for “The Untroubled Mind”

For someone who wrote: “Ascetism is a mistake” (Martin & Dieter, 1992, p. 39), Agnes certainly lived in monastic conditions for decades – and at an advanced age in her life. After the tumult and excess that New York brought together with recognition, Martin stopped producing artworks and embarked on a trip in search for serenity. After a year and half trip driving around Canada and USA’s East Coast, she settled in Cuba, New Mexico. Modest in proportions and with no running water or electricity, she built an adobe house with her own hands. To the deserts where she had lived more than a decade before she then returned and embraced an austere, isolated lifestyle.

In 1971, art historian Douglas Crimp visited her new home. About the long, detached drive to the remote location where she had established her residency, Crimp later wrote: “It was (...) obvious from where we were and how we got there that Martin had no social life; she surely passed days and even weeks with only her own thought as company” (2011, p. 64).

For Agnes, the life of an artist had to be “inspired, self-sufficient and independent (unrelated to society)” (Glimcher, 2015, p. 123). She recognized what an unconventional life it was. And a lonely one, too. But she was firm in the conviction that an artist should direct all their attention towards their work. From Martin’s writings, it is clear that she saw seclusion as a prerequisite for making valid paintings: “In solitude there is consolation / thinking of others and myself, even plants / I am immediately apprehensive / because my solitude has been interrupted / solitude, inspiration” (1992, p. 43). Martin had to block every thought and presence, even annihilate her sense of self in order to be mentally prepared for working: “When I paint, I actually see myself standing in the way – if I even think of myself or someone else, I’m distracted. I have to be not there, not thinking at all and only then I paint the truth and bliss and divine” (Glimcher, 2015, p. 118). As pointed out before, Agnes’ paintings have been interpreted as an attempt for achieving –and evoking– clarity of mind. The artist announces in her writings: “The future’s a blank page / I pretended I was looking at the blank page / I used to look in my mind for the unwritten page / If my mind was empty enough I could see it” (1992, p. 38). For Martin, that mental lucidity equaled vacuity of thought. In a 1997 interview with Chuck Smith, Agnes is asked about the role that meditation had in her processes. At the age of 85, she answers:

I used to meditate until I’ve learned to stop thinking. Now I’ve stopped thinking – I don’t think of anything. You – before you train yourself to stop thinking, it’s just all kind of stuff going through your mind. Not anymore. Nothing goes through my mind. (...) I have had a hard time giving up some of them, but I managed. (...) I don’t have any ideas myself, I don’t believe anybody else’s, so that leaves me a clear mind (Smith, 2009, 6m43s).

Ann Wilson recalls Agnes' firm purpose to embrace blankness during her visits to New Mexico: "She said her voices tell her not to own property and to keep cutting back. The first thing she got rid of was obsessive thinking. (...) Agnes figures you keep cutting back until there is nothing there" (Alloway, Delehanty & Wilson, 1998, p. 27). Similarly, Pace Gallery director remembers a comment made by Agnes during one of his visits in New Mexico: "I do wish I could have a strawberry patch but the voices forbid gardening" (2015, p. 110). Both remembrances serve as an example of how determined she was in shutting herself off from the surrounding world and her own desires, sometimes to an extreme point. So much so that, when Martin died in 2004, one obituary reported that she had not read a newspaper for 50 years (Castle, 2011, pp. 136-7). For Martin, inspiration was only accessible from a stripped mind. In the desert plains, she lived completely by herself with the most severe of restrictions, mainly imposed by the voices in her head, doing everything she could to grasp inspiration. She believed that was her duty as a painter: "Art restimulates inspirations and awakens sensibilities / that's the function of art" (1992, p. 39).

Due to all the above, the remote location of her studio and her decision of leaving the buzzing city of New York to embrace seclusion translates as a creative need rather than an outrageous impulse. As an artist, she needed to turn her back to the bustling world of the city. In this regard, Emeritus Professor and researcher Richard Reed argues that, surely, turning one's back on the modern world means turning the other front somewhere else, in Martin's case the New Mexico natural scenery and her studio abstracts (Read, 2019, p. 178). Indeed, many voices have seen in the openness and worn colors of the desert plains a link to Martin's visual idiom. Although Agnes herself denied any connection between her paintings and the realm of the concrete⁵, New Mexico's light has been said to have a "remarkable brilliance and clarity" (Princenthal, 2015, p. 48) that has somehow been transferred or reflected in the luminous, singularly radiant canvases signed by the artist.

In any case, what seems undeniable is that the separateness that her new home provided was particularly helpful for Martin's return to painting. "In the stark of New Mexico landscape she found a spiritual clarity unmarred by material entanglements" (Castle, 2011, p. 136). In spite of the area's austerity – or precisely because of that, in 1974 Agnes resumed the production of her work high on the mesa. During the four decades that she stayed in New Mexico, she built herself three houses with adjacent studios. These constructions, despite their humble proportions and lack of commodities, seem to have had an important role in Martin's work. As Joanna Weber suggests, the first sanctuary is domestic space (2018, p. 36), and for Agnes, her place for living⁶ and studio were a place of solace and solitude – a deeply intimate shelter

5 Agnes insisted on how her work was detached from reality: "My work is anti-nature" (Martin, 1992, p. 35); "this work is not about the world" (ibid, p. 37).

6 Significantly, Martin wrote about the spaces she inhabited in aloneness in the following terms: "The silence on the floor of my house / Is all the questions and all the answers that have been

that needed to be protected. In one of her diaries, she wrote about the importance of safeguarding a creative atmosphere in an artist's studio:

You must clean and arrange your studio in a way that will forward a quiet state of mind. This cautious care of atmosphere is really needed to show respect for the work. (...) You yourself should not go to your studio in an indifferent or fighting mood (Popova, 2016).

From these affirmations, we can understand better how Martin desperately sought unobtrusive, serene working spaces, for they would allow her to enjoy an *untroubled mind*. The fact that she took the time and made the physical effort to construct herself these spaces is the decisive proof of how important that quiet atmosphere was in the production of her oeuvre.

Ultimately, her decision of running to the desert to find reclusiveness and embrace a spartan existence contributed to her growing status as a mystic (Laing, 2015), a wise eremite or ascetic:

In one sense a continuous line could be traced from Martin's turning of her back on the world in her Mexican desert studio and Christopher S. Wood's account of the combined Renaissance enthusiasm for the hermit's wilderness retreat and the scholar's studio – that curious link between remote places and sequestered interiors embodied in Renaissance stories of Giotto and other precocious artists (Read, 2019, p. 182).

Martin's hermit-like lifestyle and commitment to renunciation (including company) had a lot to do with her interest in Buddhism and the idea of egolessness and self-effacement. In interviews, she would often demand the journalist not to make *her* –her persona– famous: it was only the work that mattered – which she didn't take credit for. "We can't take credit for anything ourselves –all the 'I, I, I', and 'me, me, me' (...). The ego is a terrible thing" (Glimcher, 2015, p. 118). Ancient Asian doctrines, in which the sense of self or individualistic cognizance is eradicated in favor of a collective consciousness, had a profound impact on her, both in how she approached painting and how she led her life. In a letter to David J. Clarke, dated December 31st, 1983, Martin mentions several Far Eastern authors that had influenced her:

My greatest spiritual inspiration came from the Chinese spiritual teachers, especially Lao Tzu... My next strongest influence is the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng. My copy is translated by A. F. Price (...). I have also read and been inspired by the sutras of the other... Buddhist masters, and Chuang Tzu... who was very wise and very amusing (1988, p. 231)

known in the world / The sentimental furniture threatens the peace / The reflection of a sunset speaks loudly of days" (1992, p. 16).

In her notes and writings, Martin displays a wide range of references, from classical philosophers such as Plato to mystical Christian texts such as Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila. Other formative figures for the artist were English and American writers of the nineteenth century persuaded by “Orientalist thought”, including William Blake, Walt Whitman, or John Keats.

As already noted, Eastern philosophies and spiritual ideas of dispossession and renounce were central to the *clear state of mind* pursued by Martin. In an open letter to the Whitney Museum of Art written on February 6, 1981, Agnes noted: “To live truly and effectively the idea of achievement must be given up. To insure inspiration we must live as modestly in every way as we can” (Glimcher, 2015, p. 120). Thus, settled in her humble, distant new home in New Mexico, Martin managed to produce an inspired, quiet yet exuberant body of work for the following four decades.

3.2 Embracing time, enabling perception

“All I want is greater awareness” (Glimcher, 2015, p. 92), manifested Agnes Martin. That she knew she couldn’t find in the midst of New York’s avid rhythms and dizzying distractions. “I came to a place of recognition and confusion that had to be solved. I had to have time and nobody’s going to give you time where I was. So I had to leave” (Horsfield & Blumenthal, 1976). And so, she left in search of solitude and in pursuit of time. In the desert plains, she found the separation from distractions she longed for. She also encountered a new sense of freedom: completely by herself and unchained from any commitments to others, she discovered an unrestrained time. This was particularly important for her mental processes and working methodologies: “You have to see what you have to do in your mind’s eye. You have to give it time” (Martin & Dieter, 1992, p. 119), she recognized. Her approach to art practice involved detention and concentration – and time was a central premise for reaching both states. In an essay titled *On the perfection underlying life*, Agnes wrote:

I want to recommend the exploration of mind and the adventures within in the mind. It takes so much time, that is the difficulty. It is so hard to slow down to the pace where it is possible to explore one’s mind. And then of course one must go absolutely alone with not one thought about others intruding because then one would be off in relative thinking (ibid, p. 71).

In these affirmations, Martin shares the efforts that her working strategies demanded of her. In order to produce work, she needed to enter a certain mental state, which required solitude, as pointed out earlier, but also patience and time. So did the execution of the paintings, whose grids, stripes and lines were painstakingly drawn by hand (fig. 4). Her thorough process of painting and drawing will be analyzed in more depth later. For Agnes, getting inspired, that is, reaching clarity of mind, necessitated time. “Inspiration is about sitting and waiting” (Spranger, 2002), she

asserted. On another essay titled *Beauty is the mystery of life*, Martin underlined this more boldly: “You can see that you will have to have time to yourself to find out what appeals to your mind” (ibid, p.156).



Fig. 4. Agnes Martin, *Untitled #3*, 1981, gesso, acrylic and pencil on canvas. 182.9 cm x 182.9 cm. Timothy Taylor Gallery.

On interviews, she revealed that when her mind was clear enough she could see an image, at a small size, and then she would make calculations to scale it up and render it on the canvas:

I have a vision in my mind about what I’m going to paint before I start... When I make a mistake, I make a mistake in scale, then it’s no good at all... See, I have a little picture in my mind and I have to make it into a six-foot canvas (Princenthal, 2015, p. 93).

The described vision would only manifest through “the disciplined emptying of her mind by interrupting conscious thought, ignoring critical reason, and operating at some remove from the meaner distractions of the sensible” (Hudson, 2011, p. 120). Martin acknowledged that the arrival of these epiphanic images to her mind were not

immediate: “Sometimes, I stay in bed until about three the [sic] afternoon, without any breakfast. (...) I have a visual image. But then to actually accurately put it down, is a long, long ways from *knowing* what you’re going to do...” (Princenthal, 2015, p. 93).

Martin’s mental preparation for work required awaiting. Executing her paintings, as already noted, demanded time, too. For starters, she gessoed her always squared canvas, which made the fabric to exhale a singular and characteristic luminosity. Mistakes were not forgiven, even during preparation: if the gesso layer resulted thicker than desired, she would slit the canvas with a box cutter and start again. From the 70’s on, bands of pale, joyous yellows, light blues and soft pinks appeared frequently in her work. Although the grid constituted her signature artwork in the early 60’s, it was the band paintings that Agnes was most satisfied with (Martin, 2018, p. 269). Over the diluted, vibrant brushstrokes and thin layers of washed painting, she would trace manually horizontal and vertical pencil lines – most frequently the first ones. She took precise measures and calculated exactly the distance between the pencil-contoured stripes of color (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, 1978, watercolor and colored ink on transparentized paper. 22.9 x 22.9 cm. MoMA.

This repetitive, meticulous working method involved perseverance and endurance – and we must keep in mind that, by the time Martin resumed her

painting activity in 1974, she was 62 years old. No alteration was introduced in her processes and methodologies as she grew older. When she got to an age when she could no longer carry herself the 189,2 cm side canvases, she simply reduced their format to 152,4 cm. The reiteration of bands and lines in Agnes' paintings create a certain sense of musicality. There seems to be a temporary rhythm to them. "Highly instrumentalized, (...) repetition is Martin's goal. Durance becomes her chief value" (Katz, 2011, p. 190). Positively, the line, Martin's main graphic resource and the backbone of her imagery, is a visual trace of an action carried out in time. In a poem titled *Homage to Agnes Martin*, American writer Edward Hirsch states: "A horizontal line is a pilgrimage / A segment of devotion wrested from time" (Rifkin, 2002, n.p).

In Agnes's oeuvre, time is other and immense, uninterrupted, decelerated, dilated. "Agnes Martin's paintings call for a certain kind of attentiveness. The paintings take time, and time seems to slow down in the viewing of them. Without grabbing our attention, they make us *want* to spend time with them" (Newman, 2011, p. 199). For artist Zoe Leonard, Agnes' best works contain a temporal lapse: "There is time (...) for my mind to wander, to make connections, to think whole other thoughts, and still be standing here, looking at the paintings" (Leonard, 2011, p. 90). Indeed, our attention and perception are both challenged and amplified by the apparently simple, formally distilled paintings. The American photographer expresses her astonishment when looking at Martin's paintings:

I find I cannot look at these paintings in any way that I know how to look. I cannot quite read them left to right, line by line. They are too wide for that and have many lines. I can step back, to where the lines merge and become a haze, a field of color. But then I always want to move back in closer to see the bumps and the blips of each line as it was drawn on canvas. So I am held. Here. In the act of looking. Not stuck. Or trapped. But held. Here. In the middle. And in that suspension, my mind wanders (Leonard, 2011, p. 85).

Paradoxically, Martin's economy of means results in a sophisticated, complex aesthetic experience. The surfaces of her paintings, often so subtle they are hardly photographable, play with the viewer's gaze and is revealed different depending on the observing distance, as Leonard suggested above. Critic and theorist Jaleh Mansoor analyzes the artist's works in the following terms: "Up close, it is reductive and ascetic, an analysis of the physical limits of painting. From a distance, the paintings evoke a hazy infinity" (2011, p. 157).

Therefore, in reference to perceiving the work, the level of commitment and concentration in Martin's working process calls for the same implication from the viewer: "Agnes Martin's paintings have always demanded a committed viewer: her grids and bands are so faintly etched on canvases so nearly blank in their whiteness or paleness that the paintings seem to hover on the brink of invisibility" (Chave,

2015_2004). Perceptibility is, in fact, tensioned in Martin's mature paintings, sometimes to a point that worried the artist herself. In a note to her gallerist written in the early 90's, Agnes expresses her concern about her works being shown on the downtown art scene:

I have only one worry in the world! It is that my paintings will show downtown and fail there. They will fail because they are non-aggressive – they are not even out-going in a competitive environment, with big display of aggressive artwork. (...) I am deeply concerned [sic] about this. What I want is so far from the downtown scene. Just a little room, just a few paintings contemplated quietly (Glimcher, 2015, p. 136).



Fig. 6. Agnes Martin, *Untitled #9*, 1988, gesso, acrylic and pencil on canvas. 182.9 cm x 182.9 cm. Christie's.

Martin delicate and elusive “non-aggressive” paintings (fig. 6) escape the hasty gaze and, as she stated above, demanded silent contemplation. In a famous statement by the artist, she made explicit the need to remove every obstacle or noise –both mental and visual, such as the “aggressive, big displays of artwork” she didn't want her paintings to compete with– in order to fully perceive and appreciate her imagery:

My paintings have neither object nor space nor line nor anything - no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down form. You wouldn't think of form by the ocean. You can go in if you don't encounter anything. A world without objects, without interruption, making a work without interruption or obstacle. It is to accept the necessity of the simple direct going into a field of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean (Martin & Dieter, 1992, p. 7).

If you can surrender to unaltered contemplation long enough, the paintings singular powers do their trick, allowing you perceptual ability to identify minute variances of tone and texture subtly refined. This experience “inveigles Martin’s spectator into a passive state of oceanic feeling” (Read, 2019, p. 182).

From all the above, and as Mona Schieran suggests, we can infer that Martin’s perception practices and approaches to art relates to slowness (2018, p. 49), equally in terms of the artist’s execution of the work as the public’s reception.

In a recent essay by Yve-Alain Bois titled *Slow (fast) Modern*, the art historian proposes that some paintings explicitly force us to decelerate. The art historian includes Martin’s paintings among these sensitizer artworks: “one must notice the many inflections of Martin’s penciled lines in order to witness the transformation they enact of a cloud into a grid” (2011, p. 125). According to him, in the face of the growing desensitization of human subjectivity caused by digitalization, these artworks would become the “strongest agents of resistance”, as they defend “a sensibility and sensitivity to the fine-grained” (p. 126). But “How do some paintings deflect the ever-growing demand for speedy consumption?”, Bois questions. “What forces you to go at snail’s pace when looking at a small genre scene by Edouard Vuillard, a still-life by Giorgio Morandi, a monochrome wax painting by Brice Marden, a penciled grid by Agnes Martin, or certain Rothkos? (p. 125). The professor and art expert explains:

They put us in an either/or situation: either you proceed at the speed they require, or you’ll see nothing that is specific to the works in question, nothing specific to their medium. Sure, you might perceive the images they contain, but at such a low level of differentiation a photograph would do just as well as a painting (ibid.)

The former is true for Martin’s grid and stripes paintings, which cannot be grasped in a rapid glance, as suggested earlier. However, and certainly, not every artwork demands this prolonged observation, as Bois recognizes: “Nothing much happens if you slow down in front of an art book’s glossy page or a screen on which is projected the pixelated reproduction of, say, an “ultimate” painting by Ad Reinhardt” (ibid.). Artistic proposals like Martin’s require your physical presence, closeness in the viewing, attention – and time. In line with Bois’ theories, professor Arden Reed published in 2017 a sort of manifest titled *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrel*. Reed points out how, on average, American museum goers spend no more than ten seconds with individual artworks. On his

book, the author defines slow art in terms of encounters (2017, p. 15) rather than a glance over. Martin's paintings, we defend, are executed in and engender duration. As Reindhart wrote, "work creates its time, its own time, 'gives' content to its time, not 'expresses' time" (Rose, 1991, p. 99). Although Reed does not mention Agnes Martin in the compendium of artists that he relates to slow art, we believe that her paintings coincide with what the author categorizes as such: artworks that "prolong engagement by design, building into their structures a temporal unfolding" (2017, p. 36).

In this section we have analyzed Martin's creative methodologies and paintings in relation to time and perceptibility. As we have underlined, in the shelter of the desert's remoteness and sense of timelessness, she found the perfect conditions to produce her serene, tranquil images.

"In my best moments I think 'Life has passed me by' and I am content", Agnes wrote, "I wish the idea of time would drain out of my cells and leave me quiet even on this shore" (Martin & Dieter, p. 17).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this text we have dissected Agnes Martin's mature paintings, working methods and aspirations as an artist in relation to the notions of time and perceptibility. In order to do so, the artist's manuscript notes, statements, essays and thoughts have been examined here. Interviews transcriptions and anecdotes shared by close gallerists and critics have also been analyzed regarding Martin's life and oeuvre.

In sections 1 and 2, we have analyzed the pattern of errancy and solitude that Martin chose during her lifetime, as well as her disciplinarian character, which would shape her rigorous, restrained, and controlled signature style. In section 2 we have also surveyed her artistic maturation in Coentis Slip, where she gained recognition but also struggled mentally and financially. In New York, and thanks to Betty Parsons' help, Martin entered an art scene whose intensity proved both nourishing and ultimately unbearable, to the point of forcing the artist to halt her painting activity right when her career started to take off. After seven years of creative hiatus, her eventual settlement in the remoteness of New Mexico helped her gain back an unyielding commitment to her art. Isolation, as many notes and comments by the artist herself here gathered show, was an essential prerequisite for her pictorial visions to manifest.

Running away to the desert, as section 3 argues, was a necessary condition for her productive work to resume. Martin—this idea is underlined throughout the whole text—refused the claims of personal experience or biographic content in relation to her oeuvre. Sheltering in the desert was as much a solution to the instability that

New York caused her mentally as an impulse to erase her persona from the public's attention in favor of the limelight of the work. Section 3.1 addresses this, and links Agnes' predilection for carrying an egolessness life to her interest in Zen Buddhism, Taoism and other eastern spiritual doctrines. Section 3.2 scrutinizes Agnes' painting processes and explicitly addresses time and perceptibility as central elements in her mature pictorial proposals. It has attempted to evidence how the temporal experience is lodged at the heart of Martin's formula, and how perception is challenged in her hazy, delicate and lyrical abstraction, which demands focus and slowness from the viewer's gaze. As art historian Yve-Alain Bois suggested, Agnes Martin's are sensitizers artworks that catalyze detention and transformation. Experiencing them shows us the rewards of contemplation and quietness – a grasp from the greater awareness, absoluteness, and timelessness that Martin exhaustively pursued as an artist.

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