

## Brice Marden (b. 1938, Bronxville, New York)

by Rachel Federman

In a conversation about his process Brice Marden once said: “This was repainted. I say repainted, meaning erased.”<sup>1</sup> In paintings like *Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)* (1989–91), whose surface he systematically built up and scraped away, he holds these two seemingly incompatible concepts—erasure and creation—in balance, and demonstrates their improbable reconcilability on the canvas. Marden developed the term “plane image” to describe his work, which he views as a synthesis of the picture plane and the image: “You just got the image closer and closer to the plane. . . . finally, the image *was* the plane.”<sup>2</sup>

Beginning with the monochromes that he exhibited in his first solo show, at New York’s Bykert Gallery in 1966, Marden’s paintings have made demands on viewers. In SFMOMA’s *The Dylan Painting* (1966/1986), named for musician Bob Dylan, color appears not as an effect laid onto the surface, but as surface itself, and an ungraspable one at that. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl once suggested the following exercise: “Approach them slowly from a distance, attempting to keep the surface in focus. At a certain point your eyes will give up. The surface eludes them.”<sup>3</sup> Marden himself described *The Dylan Painting* (named for musician Bob Dylan) as “gray with very strong alizarin undertones. It tends toward purple. But then you look away, and you look back, and it’s gray again. . . . It’s more complicated than just gray.”<sup>4</sup> He layered his monochromes with oil paint mixed with beeswax and turpentine—a formula he favored until the early 1980s for its matte finish—and worked them over with a palette knife and a spatula. Traces of these tools remain as surface variations embedded in the paint, yielding what Schjeldahl has described as “tender surfaces” that “suggest vulnerable flesh.”<sup>5</sup> This corporeal dimension of the work is underscored by a temporal one: A narrow band at the bottom of each canvas was left bare to collect drips during the painting process. Each strip became, in the artist’s words, “the history of the painting, or the history of the making of the painting”<sup>6</sup>.

History, and the history of art in particular, is of central import to Marden, whose influences range from classical antiquity, seventeenth-century Spain, and nineteenth-century France to the work of twentieth-century artists such as Jackson Pollock and Carl Andre—whom he considers “one of the best sculptors around” and to whom he once dedicated a painting.<sup>7</sup> Jasper Johns’s gridded compositions, complex grays, and tactile encaustic surfaces (sometimes with drips at the bottom<sup>8</sup>) also clearly had an impact on Marden, who was a guard at the Jewish Museum, New York City, during Johns’s first retrospective there, in 1964.<sup>9</sup> Having recently earned a master’s degree from Yale University’s prestigious School of Art and Architecture, where fellow students included Richard Serra and Robert Mangold, Marden was struck by Johns’s “ability to create such a convincing unity of shape and painted subject.”<sup>10</sup>

Marden has been inspired as much by places as by people. Gary Garrels has noted that after the artist began making regular excursions to the Greek island of Hydra in 1971, “a subsequent shift in his work is palpable—colors intensify, surfaces become lusher, canvases grander and bolder.”<sup>11</sup> Among the works that register this shift are the *Grove Group*, five single and

multipanel paintings in complex blues and greens. Poet John Ashbery has aptly described Marden's colors as "meaningful,"<sup>12</sup> and with the *Grove Group* Marden communicates his conviction that "nature is correct. If we look at nature we understand what is real in the world."<sup>13</sup> Marden was likewise deeply affected by his travels in India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand in 1984. Shortly thereafter he visited the exhibition *Masters of Japanese Calligraphy, 8th–19th Century* at the Asia Society and Japan House Gallery in New York City. Together, these experiences sparked a profound and enduring engagement with Asian—and especially Chinese—poetry, calligraphy, and landscape painting.

Of particular significance to Marden are the poems of the legendary Tang Dynasty (AD 608–906) poet Han Shan, or Cold Mountain, which Marden found transcribed both in their original Chinese characters and in an English translation by the poet Red Pine.<sup>14</sup> The poems recount Han Shan's escape from civilization to Cold Mountain, the place from which he took his name, in the sacred T'ien-t'ai mountain range.<sup>15</sup> The calligraphic form of the texts became the basis for Marden's abstract "glyphs." He paid homage to Cold Mountain in a series of six monumental paintings (1988–91) that bear the poet's name. In these and other paintings, drawings, and etchings, Marden claims the expressive potency of calligraphy for abstraction.

His early monochromes and works on paper, which often incorporate grids, have been linked with the austere and impersonal forms of Minimalism. But his translation of what he viewed as the grid-like structure of calligraphy in work of the 1980s and beyond suggests a different point of view. As he explains: "Calligraphy is very personal because it is very physical. It's not a technique or an ideology; it's a form of pure expression. Each time a calligrapher makes a mark, it will be distinctive because he has a particular physicality. . . . Paintings are physical. So is the act of creating them. This physicality should be emphasized."<sup>16</sup>

As with his monochromes of the 1960s, process is tantamount in the *Cold Mountain* paintings. Here, in a further elaboration of his idea of the "plane image," Marden worked with thinned oil paint, sanding the canvas after each layer of pigment was applied so that, as curator Brenda Richardson has observed, "in contradiction of logic, the paintings seemed to resolve on the plane, cohere, and grow *less* layered as their webs of drawn paint became more abundant."<sup>17</sup> These canvases, most of which Marden worked on simultaneously over two years, are riddled with what the artist has referred to as "corrections," "cancellations," or "erasures"—thin, light-colored paint laid over darker lines so that the original marks become "ghost figures."<sup>18</sup> These figures are both "the history of the making of the painting" (as Marden once described the strip of canvas at the bottom of his monochromes) and a metaphysical haunting of the present by the past—a reminder that we rarely look forward without looking back.

This theme emerges most profoundly in a group of paintings Marden began in the early 1990s after purchasing a rural property in Pennsylvania that reminded him of his father's love of the outdoors. In its scale—measuring nine feet high and fifteen feet across—and its silvery, green-blue palette, *The Muses* (1991–93) evokes the grandeur of the landscapes his father had admired ("My father was a real Hudson River freak," he once told an interviewer).<sup>19</sup> The mythological

origin of its title—the nine muses were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who personified memory—and the work’s complex interplay of presence and absence underscore the relationship between art and memory. During this period the artist produced additional works inspired by his muses, both ancient (as in *Aphrodite* [1991–93]) and contemporary. The apricot and magenta glyphs of *The Sisters* (1991–93)—a reference to Marden’s two daughters—seem at first glance to resolve into figures. In the next moment, however, they are subsumed into the larger field of blue, gray, and yellow skeins of paint. The lines graze the edge of the canvas but remain within the picture plane, a playful dance of expansion and containment, spontaneity and restraint, that is characteristic not only of Marden’s young subjects, but also of his painting process. Describing the making of *The Sisters*, he has said: “I use long brushes. . . . So I get a better view of what I’m doing. And . . . then I go in and scrape the excess paint off with the knife. . . . So I’m close, and then I go far away. And then I go back. And then when I stop and look at it, I go much further away, so it’s like a kind of dance.”<sup>20</sup>

The deeply physical process of creation that Marden describes above matches his suggested pattern of viewing: “I like to look at a painting from the same distance away as it is high. And then to double that distance, go back twice as far, and look at it from there. And then to come in and look at it very, very close. And then I go back and repeat these steps. It’s like a little dance.”<sup>21</sup> Marden’s ungraspable paintings, with their Zen-like challenging of the binaries “something” and “nothing,” “being” and “non-being,” demand to be apprehended not with the eyes alone but with the whole body.

[Notes]

1. Brice Marden, interview by Gary Garrels, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, February 20, 2007, unpublished transcript in the SFMOMA Department of Painting and Sculpture files, 14.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. Peter Schjeldahl, “True Colors: A Brice Marden Retrospective,” *New Yorker*, November 6, 2006, 130.
4. “Brice Marden: Looking at Paintings,” SFMOMA video interview, February 20, 2007, <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/270>.
5. Peter Schjeldahl, “Into the Rainbow: Brice Marden’s Abstractions,” *New Yorker*, June 3, 2002, 96. In fact, these surfaces *were* vulnerable; this discovery led the artist to abandon beeswax in the early 1980s, instead using terpineol to achieve the flatness he desired. Damage to *The Dylan Painting* led Marden to repaint it in 1986, resulting in the work’s dual dates of execution.
6. “Brice Marden on *The Dylan Painting*,” SFMOMA video interview, February 20, 2007, <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/269>.

7. "Oral history interview with Brice Marden, conducted by Paul Cummings, 1972 October 3," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-brice-marden-11908>.
8. Marden has recalled Johns's explanation of the drips as follows: "Well, you know, you get near the bottom and you're bending over, and you get a little tired and . . ." Brice Marden in Jeffrey Weiss, "In Conversation: Brice Marden with Jeffrey Weiss," *Brooklyn Rail*, October 8, 2006, <http://brooklynrail.org/2006/10/art/brice-marden>.
9. Marden dedicated a painting to Johns as well: *Three Deliberate Greys for Jasper Johns* (1970).
10. Klaus Kertess, *Brice Marden: Paintings and Drawings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 13.
11. Gary Garrels, "Beholding Light and Experience: The Art of Brice Marden," in *Plane Image: A Brice Marden Retrospective*, exh. cat., ed. Gary Garrels (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 19.
12. John Ashbery, "Grey Eminence," *Art News* 71, no. 1 (March 1972): 27.
13. "Brice Marden on *Grove Group II*," SFMOMA video interview, February 20, 2007, [http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/260?autoplay=true\\_](http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/260?autoplay=true_)
14. Cold Mountain, *The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain*, trans. Red Pine, revised and expanded ed. (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2000). Han Shan was a favorite among Beat-era poets; Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder produced their own translations of his work.
15. On the history of Han Shan and T'ien-t'ai, see Brenda Richardson, "The Way to Cold Mountain," in *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, exh. cat. (Houston: Menil Foundation, 1992), 25–85; and Red Pine, "Translator's Preface," 3–18, and John Blofeld, "Introduction by John Blofeld," 19–33, in Cold Mountain, *The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain*.
16. Brice Marden quoted in Garrels, "Beholding Light and Experience," 21. Although calligraphy plays an important role in the evolution of Marden's work, art historians Brenda Richardson and Yve-Alain Bois complicate this narrative. Richardson writes: "Marden's *Cold Mountains* do not look like calligraphy, not even at their earliest state when the glyphs were first drawn. In adopting the structure of Han Shan's poems . . . Marden was, at most, imposing on his work the uniquely explicit and evocative conjunction of form and content that characterizes calligraphy." See Richardson, *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*, 73. Bois argues that "all along . . . Marden has tried more to escape the calligraphic model than to emulate it." See Yve-Alain Bois, "Marden's Doubt," in *Brice Marden: Paintings, 1985–1993*, exh. cat., ed. Ulrike Loock (Bern, Switzerland: Kunsthalle Bern, 1993), 25.

17. Richardson, "The Way to Cold Mountain," 67.
18. "Brice Marden on *Cold Mountain*," SFMOMA video interview, February 20, 2007, <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/125>.
19. "Oral history interview with Brice Marden."
20. "Artist Marden's Abstract Paintings Evolve Over 50 Years," transcript of an interview with Jeffrey Brown, *PBS News Hour*, January 8, 2007, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment-jan-june07-marden\\_01-08/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment-jan-june07-marden_01-08/).
21. "Brice Marden: Looking at Paintings."