

Agnes Martin

15 May – 11 July 2010

Kettle's Yard Teachers' Notes

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"I would like [my pictures] to represent beauty, innocence and happiness. I would like them all to represent that. Exaltation."

Art Monthly, Issue 169, Sept 1993, Interviewed by Irving Sandler

ARTIST
ROOMS

KETTLE'S YARD

ON TOUR WITH



Supported by



AGNES MARTIN at KETTLE'S YARD, Cambridge
15 May – 11 July 2010

ARTIST ROOMS on Tour with The Art Fund

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, presents a rare display of paintings by the American painter Agnes Martin (1912-2004). This spring, in collaboration with Artist Rooms, Kettle's Yard brings together the largest group of paintings by Agnes Martin to be seen in the UK for over 15 years.

Following the success of 2009, 21 museums and galleries across the UK in 2010 will be showing 25 ARTIST ROOMS exhibitions and displays from the collection created by the curator and collector, Anthony d'Offay, and acquired by the nation in February 2008. *ARTIST ROOMS on Tour with The Art Fund* has been devised to enable this collection held by Tate and the National Galleries of Scotland, to reach and inspire new audiences across the country, particularly young people.

The exhibition will include the recently created Artist Room of works by Agnes Martin, together with additional loans from a private collection. The paintings date from 1991-2002, and highlight the scope of Martin's late practice, which embraced an increasingly tactile handling of paint and broader range of hues. During this period, after many years of leaving her works untitled, the artist also reintroduced titles to her work to convey emotional states of euphoria and memories of past happiness. In contrast to the large grid-based works made during the 1960's, these later works are slightly smaller in scale and composed of horizontal bands of luminous colour that marry the harmony of ordered geometry with the imperfections and irregularity of hand-drawn pencil lines. The artist regarded this inherent inconsistency as a metaphor for the human condition. She has written: "I hope I have made it clear that the work is *about* perfection as we are aware of it in our minds but that the paintings are very far from being perfect – completely removed in fact – even as we ourselves are."

Martin's pure, abstract style was often aligned with Minimalism, although the artist refuted this, maintaining that her concern was with the inner, emotional world - which explains her kinship with abstract expressionism. For most of her career, Martin worked in isolation, inspired by her reading of ancient Chinese Tao philosophy and by the bare desert landscapes in New Mexico where she resided from 1967 until her death in 2004.

“I want people, when they look at my paintings, to have the same feelings they experience when they look at landscape,” Martin once said.

Kettle’s Yard, with its intimate galleries filled with natural light, will be a unique place to experience at first hand the ethereal beauty of Martin’s paintings.

The exhibition will also include rarely seen film interviews with the artist and a photographic portrait of the artist by Diane Arbus. In conjunction with the exhibition, we are organising two events at Lucy Cavendish College: a symposium on Agnes Martin (14 June) that brings together leading scholars Jonathan Katz, Briony Fer and others to present new research and lead discussion about the context and scope of Martin’s work. There will also be a special screening of Martin’s 1976 film “Gabriel,” in which the artist chronicles a boy’s relationship to nature and abstraction on a mountain odyssey. This film was first shown in Edinburgh in 1999. This will be its second UK screening.

To find out more information about ARTIST ROOMS on Tour please visit www.artfund.org/artistrooms. To see the full ARTIST ROOMS collection please visit www.tate.org.uk/artistrooms and www.nationalgalleries.org/artistrooms

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The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the UK’s leading independent art charity. It offers grants to help UK museums and galleries enrich their collections; campaigns on behalf of museums and their visitors; and promotes the enjoyment of art. It is funded from public donations and has 80,000 members. Since 1903 the charity has helped museums and galleries all over the UK secure 860,000 works of art for their collections. Recent achievements include: helping secure Titian’s *Diana and Actaeon* for the National Galleries of Scotland and The National Gallery in February 2009 with a grant of £1 million; helping secure Anthony d’Offay’s collection, ARTIST ROOMS for Tate and National Galleries of Scotland in February 2008 with a grant of £1 million – and providing an additional £500,000 for the collection to be toured throughout the UK in 2009 and 2010; and running the *Buy a Brushstroke* public appeal which raised over £550,000 to keep Turner’s *Blue Rigi* watercolour in the UK. For more information contact the Press Office on 020 7225 4888 or visit www.artfund.org . The Art Fund is a Registered Charity No. 209174

Key themes

Perfection

“...besides trying to make [my pictures] all perfect, I have wanted them to illustrate the sensitivity of perfection. When I say I want perfection, I don't mean a sheet of perfect work. I believe that life is perfect. We have an ego orientation, and so we are far from perfect. But everlasting life is perfect, and it is that perfection, a transcendental perfection, that I want in my painting. We can't have it because we are in nature but you can hint at perfection. It's enough to make a painting live.”

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‘I hope I have made it clear that the work is *about* perfection as we are aware of it in our minds but that the paintings are very far from perfect – completely removed in fact – even as we ourselves are.’

‘I would like my work to be recognized as being in the classic tradition (Coptic, Egyptian, Greek, Chinese), as representing the Ideal in the mind. Classical art cannot possibly be eclectic. One must see the Ideal in one's own mind. It is like a memory of perfection.’

'Agnes Martin: Writings' Edited by Herausgegeben von Dieter Schwarz, Cantz © 1991

Lines of questioning

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato argued that because we can conceive of a perfect circle, but never actually experience it, there must be another plane of existence where perfection is possible. Martin's views are inspired by this idea.

- What do you consider perfect?
- How would you measure perfection?
- How would you express this perfection in a drawing?
- In what ways are Martin's works perfect and imperfect?
- What is the difference between how you imagine an artwork in your mind and then how it looks when you make it? Why do these differences occur?

The Ideal was a key concept in Italian Renaissance art, which in turn took its inspiration from Greek and Roman statues and architecture. The human form was 'perfected' by artists such as Michaelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

- What is considered a 'perfect' body shape today? Compare this with paintings and sculptures from different times and cultures – what has changed and what remains the same?

Key themes

Abstract Expressionism / Minimalism

For more information on Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, including a definition and examples, please refer to the Teachers' Notes for the Modern Times exhibition (Jan-Mar 2010) on the Kettle's Yard website.

"I have great respect for their [Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko] work and philosophy, their transcendentalism. They gave up so many things. They gave up line, they gave up form, they gave up organic form. They created an undefined space. I think that was so important. The abstract expressionists found that you can have an entirely objective reality that may be totally abstract. That's revolutionary. And they had so many different expressions."

"You can't draw a perfect circle, but in your mind there is a perfect circle that you can draw towards. You can't be a perfect man, but in your mind you can conceive of a perfect man. That's the Greek ideal. And the minimalists were the same, working towards that perfection in the mind. But they insisted more than I did on being impersonal. They wanted absolutely to escape themselves and wanting to express something. They didn't even allow people to put their names under their pictures."

Art Monthly, Issue 169, Sept 1993, Interviewed by Irving Sandler

Lines of questioning

Martin exhibited once with the minimalists but felt her work to be more akin with the abstract expressionists.

- What does Martin's work have in common with minimalist artists such as Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd?
- What does Martin's work have in common with Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko?
- *When making these comparisons, consider how the work looks but also what the artists were trying to achieve and the relationship between the artist and the creation of the object. Minimalists wanted to remove the hand of the artist and create work that appears mass produced and anonymous. Abstract expressionists wanted to remove any subject matter but retain the sense of personal expression.*

Martin liked to use grids because she felt they were 'egoless' and she felt the rhythm and repetition of the rectangles to be calming.

- What impact does the size and shape of the grids have on your response to the work? Are there some ratios you prefer to others? Why?

Key themes

Taoism

Taoism promotes:

- achieving harmony or union with nature
- the pursuit of spiritual immortality
- being 'virtuous' (but not ostentatiously so)
- self-development

“I used to meditate until I learnt to stop thinking... before you train yourself to stop thinking, there's just all kinds of stuff going through your mind. Not any more. Nothing goes through my mind... I don't believe what the intellectuals put out. The intellectuals, they discover one fact and another fact and another fact. They say 'from all these facts, we can deduce so-and-so'. No good – that's just a bad guess. Nothing can come of it but inaccuracy, never will you learn the truth about life... I don't have any ideas myself and I don't believe anybody else's so that leaves me with a clear mind.”

Interview, 1997

Lines of questioning

Martin had a broad range of interests and influences that fed into her work. She was particularly drawn to the Tao, which originated in 4th century BC China, and Buddhism, which originated in Nepal and has spread across Asia and into Western countries. Martin placed emphasis on learning to 'not think' as a means of allowing inspiration to direct her drawings and paintings – an approach akin with meditation. She also spent long periods of time in almost complete isolation in the New Mexican landscape, fostering deep reflection on her relationship with nature and humanity.

Time to slow down and look properly is important.

- What is your first impression of Martin's work?
- Spend 10-20 minutes with one painting. Do the lines and colours change the more that you look at them? What do you think about – the image, the making of the work, or something else?
- Does your opinion of the work change, the more time you spend with it?

How can we stop thinking? What sort of drawings do you create when your mind is distracted (such as doodling when talking on the phone)?

What happens when you focus on the space between objects rather than objects themselves – how can you express that space via line and colour?

Key themes

Landscape and Nature

“A lot of people say my work is like landscape. But the truth is that it isn't, because there are straight lines in my work and there are no straight lines in nature... But I want people, when they look at my paintings, to have the same feelings they experience when they look at landscape, so I never protest when they say my work is like landscape. But it's really about the feeling of beauty and freedom that you experience in landscape. My response to nature is really a response to beauty. The water looks beautiful, the trees look beautiful, even the dust looks beautiful. It is beauty that really calls.”

“I think our culture is orientated towards ego, and winning and overcoming and all of that. Our culture is so chaotic and materialistic. So I decided to experiment with simple living. I went up on top of a mesa that is eight miles long and six miles wide and there was nobody up there and the nearest house was six miles away. There was no electricity and no telephones. I stayed up there for years and became as wise as a Chinese hermit. Then I decided that that is not a natural human way of living, to be so isolated, so I came back down. But it is tempting, isn't it, when you get out in nature, just to give way to natural living?”

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Lines of questioning

We experience the natural world with more than our eyes. As either a drawing or a writing exercise, sit outside and attend to your other senses.

- What can you hear, smell, taste and touch?
- Express how these sensations *feel* without describing them literally. How would you express them via colour or texture or line? Via adjectives or nouns or verbs?

What associations do you make with the natural world when you look at Martin's work? Why do you think those ideas come to mind?

Martin lived for periods of her life in the busy city of New York and the wide-open spaces of New Mexico. Comparing photos of each, how would you express each using only straight lines?

Quotes

“I think that personal feelings, sentimentality and those sorts of emotions, are not art but that universal emotions like happiness are art. I am particularly interested in the abstract emotions that we feel when we listen to music... People are not aware of their abstract emotions, which are a big part of their lives, except when they listen to music or look at art. These are the emotions that align with art.”

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‘When we go to museums we do not just look, we make a definite response to the work. As we look at it we are happier or more sad, more at peace or more depressed. A work may stimulate yearning, helplessness, belligerence or remorse. The cause of the response is not traceable in the work. An artist cannot and does not prepare for a certain response. He does not consider response but simply follows his inspiration. Works of art are not purposely conceived. The response depends upon the condition of the observer.’

‘Classicism is not about people
and this work is not about the world
We call Greek classicism Idealism
Idealism sounds like something you can strive for
They didn’t strive for idealism at all
Just follow what Plato has to say
Classicists are people that look out with their back to the world
It represents something that isn’t possible in the world
More perfection than is possible in the world
It’s as unsubjective as possible’

‘What you do is get rid of everything
freedom from ideas and responsibility
If you live by inspiration then you do what comes to you
you can’t live the moral life, you have to obey destiny
you can’t live the inspired life and live the conventions’

‘I want to recommend the exploration of mind and the adventures within 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 in 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.’

‘My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in art work which is also wordless and silent.’

‘Agnes Martin: Writings’ Edited by Herausgegeben von Dieter Schwarz, Cantz © 1991

Biography

- 1912 Born in Maklin, Saskatchewan, Canada; childhood in Vancouver
- 1931 Moved to the USA
- 1941-42 Attended Teachers' College at Columbia University, New York
- 1946-47 Studied at University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, taught painting there the following year
- 1950 Became an American citizen
- 1951-52 Returned to her studies at Columbia University (MA)
- 1954 Moved to Taos, New Mexico
- 1957 Moved back to New York, lived in Coenties Slip, Lower Manhattan - two blocks of artists' lofts, where she met other painters such as Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Indiana and James Rosenquist.
- 1958 First solo show at the Betty Parsons Gallery
- 1967 Moved to New Mexico and focused on her writing, stopped painting
- 1974 Returned to painting, new interest in vertical lines instead of the horizontal
- 1975 Joined Pace Gallery in New York
- 1976 Produced the film Gabriel
- 1989 Inducted as a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York.
- 1991 Retrospective exhibition organized by the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; travelled throughout Europe.
- 1992 Major retrospective organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
- 2004 Died in Taos, aged 92.

Web links

- **Interview with Agnes Martin (1997)** 8mins, 34 sec
This short extract gives an interesting insight into Martin's process - clearing her mind and allowing inspiration to take its course. It is also insightful to see Martin herself speaking about her work.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JfYjmo5OA
- **Museum of Modern Art**
A good general introduction and selection of her works.
www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=3787
- **Taoism**
Martin was very influenced by Taoism in her approach to making her art. There is a strong philosophical/spiritual strand to her work and even a light understanding of Taoism is a useful way of engaging with her paintings. This BBC site offers a useful, quick overview.
www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/taoism
- **New Mexico**
Martin spent many years of her adult life in New Mexico and the dramatic landscapes are well documented on this site (a travel log including many photographs).
<http://photo.net/photo/travel/new-mexico>