

Closeness: Agnes Martin's Methods of Art-making

Some of Agnes Martin's delicate works were on view at Tate Modern, London in 2015 before travelling internationally. Their nuanced surfaces entice viewers to move closer. So light in touch and finely measured are the iterations of graphite, paint and ink that, as visitors leaned in to inspect the surfaces, alarm wires repeatedly sounded. Her ruled lines, which are never exact and which were preceded in her early work by wires pulled tight over wood, were lightly drawn in sections across wide canvasses, creating slight tonal variations. Strokes of graphite and ink are fractionally uneven. Paint is not quite contained within the boundaries set down by the artist, adding to the sense that these paintings are not only the result of careful deliberation, but also inclined to the fragility of the handmade. They are imperfect attempts at perfection.

Recently, art historian and contemporary art writer Roger Cook recalled his impression when, in 1966, he saw one of Martin's six feet square canvases, *The City*, a grid of blue lines on gesso. He wrote of being "drawn to the containing quietude" of that painting, and described the time and space of viewing as an "intimate rendezvous" between the painting and its beholder.¹ To better understand the contemplative experience offered by Martin's paintings, I have given my attention to her careful methods, enabling me to make similarly quiet artworks in a present-day context. This required my thoughtful inspection of her surfaces, as well as consideration of her meditative attitude towards artwork.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Martin experimented with materials found close to her studio in a former shipbuilding area at Coenties Slip, New York. Like many other artists in that neighbourhood, she retrieved these from the demolition of buildings that cleared the way for high-rise buildings along Wall Street. Martin assembled constructions of wood, together with other found objects, and she transcribed into abstract form the landscapes seen in her early years: wheat fields around her childhood home in Saskatchewan, Canada, and the mountains and plains of New Mexico experienced in young adulthood. She also recalled lines of uprooted trees and rows of planted crops on her uncle's farm. In their place, she set nail-heads within pencilled grids, as in the 12-inch square painting *Little Sister* (1962), with their points driven through the canvas surface. Between 1958 and 1959, objects were replaced by painted circles, surrounded by a ring of graphite to mimic the shadows.

At the Tate exhibition, my attention was held by one of her

paintings entitled *The Islands* (1961), a six-foot square painting with a central grid containing touches of paint that resemble tufts of cotton pulled through a weave. There are 32 vertical columns with pairs of painted marks on a light brown surface the colour of unpainted linen. The cream-white dashes of oil paint do not fully extend across the pencilled grid, so that there is a mesh of empty pencil lines protruding around its outer edge. A wide margin surrounds the composition, enclosed within a thin cream-white painted line. My eye travelled to the area just within the canvas-edge, and was fixed by small dark puncture-like dots aligning the grid.

Through my own work, I responded to the elements that drew my attention in Martin's refined paintings between the late 1950s and her death in 2004. Interior limits of a small composition framed within a larger piece. Stitched lines cut from book bindings sit alongside ruled graphite lines, pale colour is pencilled on old discoloured paper removed from discarded books and impressions are made through the surfaces by a pencil or sharp pointed implement. The artworks are small in scale and available for others to hold. Layers of paper and card permit the viewer to look beneath flaps or open pages to reveal subtle detail beneath. I have retained the qualities that I have seen in Martin's tranquil surfaces, and sought to recreate the sense of intimacy between artwork and spectator that her paintings provide.

¹ Roger Cook, 'Doorknob in the Desert: Agnes Martin's Queer Becoming', *Journal of Contemporary Painting*, vol 2, no 1, 2016:22.

This research forms part of a PhD thesis by Sharon Phelps, titled *Agnes Martin: Painting as Making and its Relation to Contemporary Practice*, for completion in Spring 2017. It draws from the following resources:

- Agnes Martin, exhibition, Tate Modern, London, 3 June – 11 October 2015.
 Agnes Martin, 'On the Perfection Underlying Life', in *Agnes Martin, Writings*, Schwarz, D ed, Ostfildern: Cantz, 1991.
 BrionyFer, *The Infinite Line, Re-making Art after Modernism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
 Agnes Martin, quoted in Ann Wilson, 'Linear Webs: Agnes Martin', *Art and Artists* vol 1, no 7, October 1966.
 Christina Bryan Rosenberger, 'A Sophisticated Economy of Means, Agnes Martin's Materiality' in Cooke, L, K Kelly and B Schroder ed, *Agnes Martin*, New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011.



Sharon Phelps, *Untitled 2*, Pencil on book cover, 20.5 × 14cm, 2015.