

## The Artist in the Desert. Agnes Martin: Notes on Art and Solitude

Salvador Jiménez-Donaire Martínez<sup>1</sup>

Recibido: 26 de diciembre de 2022 / Aceptado: 16 de mayo 2023

**Abstract.** In the past few years, a growing mythology has aroused around the figure of influential, highly praised post-war artist Agnes Martin. Her stripped down, reductive, and completely abstract paintings reveal nothing of her persona. However, her latest retrospectives at Tate Modern and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (2015 and 2016, respectively), have sparked a new curiosity about the artist's biography, which is often uncertain and full of contradictions. Her decision to leave New York in 1967, just when her career was becoming internationally acclaimed, and her retreat in the deserts of New Mexico, where she lived almost ascetically (for long periods she didn't have electricity, telephone, or running water) and in relative isolation until the end of her life, have contributed to the mythification of the artist, who is frequently referred to as "priestess of abstraction," "mystic," "icon," "sage" and even "saint." This text examines Martin's writings, notes, and letters, as well as her spoken statements recorded in documentaries made a few years before her demise, in order to find links between the alienated and contradictory figure of the artist and her aesthetic purpose. Never before was Martin as prolific as when she irrevocably embraced the tranquility of the desert. Solitude turned out to be a creative prerequisite for an artist determined to reach "mental clarity," an imperative state for executing her refined work.

**Keywords:** Agnes Martin; artist and myth; painting; solitude; desert

### [es] La artista en el desierto. Agnes Martin: notas sobre arte y soledad

**Resumen.** En los últimos años, hemos asistido a una creciente mitología en torno a la figura de Agnes Martin, la influyente y alabada artista de posguerra. Su pintura despojada, reduccionista y completamente abstracta no revela nada de su persona. Sin embargo, sus recientes retrospectivas en la TATE Modern y el Museo Solomon R. Guggenheim (2015 y 2016, respectivamente), han despertado una nueva curiosidad por la biografía de la artista, a menudo incierta y llena de contradicciones. Su decisión de abandonar Nueva York en 1967, justo cuando su carrera comenzaba a ser aclamada internacionalmente, y su retiro en los desiertos de Nuevo Méjico, donde vivió de forma casi ascética (sin electricidad, agua corriente o teléfono durante largos periodos) y en relativo aislamiento hasta el final de su vida, han contribuido a la mitificación de la artista, que es frecuentemente referida como "sacerdotisa de la abstracción", "mística", "icono", "sabia" y hasta "santa". Este texto examina los escritos, notas y cartas de Martin, así como sus declaraciones habladas en documentales grabados pocos años antes de su muerte, al objeto de encontrar vínculos entre la figura alienada y contradictoria de la artista y su propósito estético. Jamás fue Martin tan prolífica como cuando abrazó de manera irrevocable la tranquilidad del desierto. La soledad se configuró como prerrequisito creativo para una artista determinada a alcanzar "claridad mental", un estado exigido para ejecutar su refinada obra.

**Palabras clave:** Agnes Martin; artista y mito; pintura; soledad; desierto

**Sumario:** 1. Introducing Agnes Martin: Opening up to Inspiration. 2. "Being an Artist is a Solitary Business". 2.1 Walking on the Edge: Success and Turmoil. 2.2 Seeking solitude and quietness:

<sup>1</sup> Universidad de Sevilla, Departamento de Dibujo  
E-mail: [sjimenezdonaire@us.es](mailto:sjimenezdonaire@us.es)  
ORCID: 0000-0003-3713-2755

back to the invisibility of the deserts. 3. “The best things in life happens when you’re alone”. 4. Conclusions. 5. Conflict of interests. 6. Support. 7. References.

**Cómo citar:** Jiménez-Donaire Martínez, S. (2023) The Artist in the Desert. Agnes Martin: Notes on Art and Solitude, en *Anales de Historia del Arte* n° 33, 187-209

## 1. Introducing Agnes Martin: Opening up to Inspiration

In a 1979 conversation with Pace Gallery’s director Arne Glimcher, her friend and dealer, Agnes Martin exposed: “I want to be myself and have a true life and only then can I unfold.”<sup>2</sup> Certainly, she followed a singular, challenging yet triumphant, life path.

Born Agnes Bernice Martin on March 22, 1912, in Macklin, Saskatchewan, Canada, the future painter was the third child of Scottish immigrants, Margaret and Malcom, who arrived in North America following the allocation of inexpensive farmhouses by the British government, in an attempt to find colonist control. Her father departed when she was only three years old, and the family was left to an uncertain future. Agnes’s early years, much so like the rest of her existence, were erratic and circuitous. It is believed that Margaret left Macklin with her children and settled in Calgary, moving briefly after to Lumsden. In 1919, the Martin family transferred once again, this time putting down roots in Vancouver, where Martin would spend her youth. There, Margaret established a real-estate business, earning money from renovating and reselling houses. On the Pacific Coast, Martin showed great interest in water sports, qualifying for the Canadian Olympic swimming team in 1928. Her passion as a swimmer can be read as an early proof of her strong determination and rigor, both features that would later shape her artistic career. Also, being one of the most solitary athletic sports, even when competing in teams, swimming instilled a sense of ambition and independence in young Agnes, which she would sustain until her latter days.

The northern country’s infinite prairies and the loneliness of her roaming existence are considered to have had a great impact on her trajectory as an artist. In an interview for a documentary recorded when she was in her eighties, Martin reminisced about how extensive and far-reaching the landscape was to the gaze: “I do remember it. It was so flat you could see the curvature of the earth. When you saw a train at 9 a.m., it was still leaving at noon.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, the gridded North American lands and spaces have been read as an early reference to what would later become her preferred pictorial composition: soft divisions of graphite lines and horizontal and vertical bands of pale acrylic colors. Martin herself was very vehement in her rejection of any reference to the landscape or the natural surroundings in her work. However, according to Martha Tuttle, “How we map physical space affects our understanding of the world, of what can be internalized as true, timeless and right”<sup>4</sup> and therefore the development of the grid in modernism and the following North American abstraction should not be separated from its cartographic use

<sup>2</sup> Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin: Paintings, Writings, Remembrances* (London: Phaidon, 2012), 115.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Lance, *Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World* (Corrales, New Mexico: New Deal Films, 2003), DVD.

<sup>4</sup> Martha Tuttle, “I Question the Innocence of the Grid,” in *Agnes Martin: Innocence of Mind*, edited by Chelsea Weathers, (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2022), 62.

from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. Whether this early exposition to rectangular sections of the Canadian land had a subconscious impact on the artist's aesthetic inclinations or not remains unknown. But the stern Scotch presbyterian context in which she was raised did certainly shape her attitude and inclination to restrain in life. Martin has often portrayed her mother as someone severe and authoritarian who acted out of cruelty: "She's a fierce, fierce, woman. She enjoyed seeing people hurt."<sup>5</sup> Many of the artist's friends have testified to the harsh relationship between them. Yet an indelible impression of strictness and a bold sense of duty was made on Agnes by Margaret's disciplinarian character, something that turned useful not only while working as a teacher through her thirties and early forties, but also – and perhaps even more resolutely – in her journey as an artist.

Agnes depicted various scenes of her mother's neglect towards her, concluding that she felt unloved. She recalls that at age of six she had her tonsils removed and was instructed by Margaret to get on the bus and travel to the hospital by herself, where she had to spend the night. The next morning, she returned home alone, too. Self-sufficiency and autonomy were expected from a surprisingly young age at the Martins house. On another depiction of her childhood (fig. 1), the artist recollects how her mother

Didn't like children, and she hated me, god [*sic*] how she hated me. She couldn't bear to look at me or speak to me... When I was two, I was locked up in the back porch, and when I was three, I would play in the backyard. When I came to the door, my sister would say 'you can't come in,' and shut the door. All day I was out, all day, till five o'clock. When I was four I was in the yard. When I was five, I started walking around the town. Six – when I went to school I didn't come home from school, 'cause I wasn't wanted.<sup>6</sup>

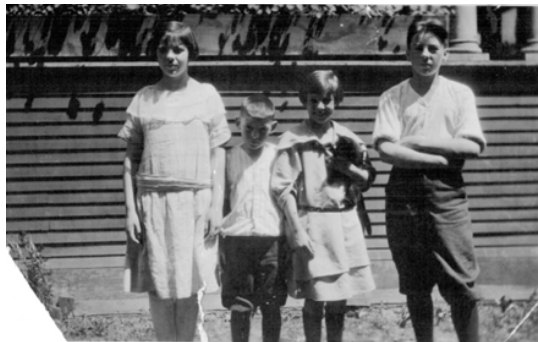


Figure 1. Agnes Martin, holding cat, with her siblings Maribel, Malcolm Jr., and Ronald, circa 1920. Photographer unknown. Collection of the Martin Family Archive, Via Art Canada Institute.

Agnes's upbringing was indeed lonely, but that aloneness was something she learned to embrace and treasure. Biographer Henry Martin describes little Agnes as "lost in daydreams, inventing stories or trying to remember the names of flowers and

<sup>5</sup> Benita Eisler, "Profile: Life Lines," *The New Yorker*, January 25, 1993, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Jenny Attiyeh, "Agnes Martin: An Artist On her Own," *Horse Fly*, May 15, 2001, 16.

weeds.”<sup>7</sup> In a reminiscence that somehow comes to justify her future predilection towards solitude,<sup>8</sup> she declared: “when I was a child I wouldn’t walk home from school with my brother and sister because that would distract me from my state of mind.”<sup>9</sup> This is an interesting statement, for it clearly links solitude and mental clarity, something the artist so exhaustively sought in benefit of her art, as it will be examined in the following sections. During a lecture at Cornell University in January 1972, Martin stated: “The little child sitting alone, perhaps even neglected and forgotten, is the one open to inspiration and the development of sensibility.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in her famous essay *The Untroubled Mind*, also written in 1972 and assumably drawing on her own experiences as a kid, Agnes insisted on how “The development of sensibility, the response to beauty / In early childhood, when the mind is untroubled, is when / inspiration is most possible / little child just sitting in the snow.”<sup>11</sup>

Martin started to paint unusually behind in life for an international artist of her category. Precocious manifestations of her interest towards art include saving pocket money at age 8 to buy postcard-sized prints of famous paintings, which she would copy. But it wouldn’t be until she was in her thirties that she would realize she wanted to become an artist. This would happen slowly and meanderingly. In 1929, Agnes moved to Bellingham, Washington State, to join and help her sister Maribel, pregnant at the time, who had gotten sick. Aged 21, and thanks to a student visa, Martin arrived in the USA, a place that she found more giving than her home country, educationally and otherwise: “I noticed the difference in American people and the Canadian people and I decided I wanted to come to America to live, not just to go to college but actually to become an American.”<sup>12</sup>

Aware that she needed a job to stay in the USA, she trained to work as an educator: “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.”<sup>13</sup> In 1941, she left Washington and moved to New York to study Fine Arts at Teachers College, Columbia University, to upgrade her teaching certificate to a bachelor’s degree. But even with that qualification, the Great Depression made it difficult finding a steady job. It is during this period in New York that she decided to become a painter, perhaps stimulated by the city’s avant-garde galleries and art scene: “I thought, if you could possibly be a painter and make a living, then I would like to be a painter. That’s when I started painting.”<sup>14</sup> After doing odd jobs and having difficulties in sustaining herself in frenzied New York, in 1946 Agnes’s drifting led her to New Mexico, where she would enroll in the art department of the Albuquerque University. She was then thirty-four years old. Martin would later justify her decision of professionally training to

<sup>7</sup> Henry Martin, *Agnes Martin: Pioneer, Painter, Icon* (Tucson: Schaffner Press, 2018), 34.

<sup>8</sup> In his book *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*, Phillip Koch defines this term as “consciousness disengaged from other people, the mind wandering along its paths alone” (Open Court Publishing, 1994), 49. This description accurately describes why Agnes gravitated towards aloneness throughout her life. The ideas of disengagement and detachment are, as will be proved in the following pages, central to the artist idiosyncrasy: a wandering, undisturbed mind was everything Martin sought and needed for making art.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 26.

<sup>10</sup> Agnes Martin, *Writings* (Berlin: Edition Cantz, 1992), 62.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Campbell, “Interview with Agnes Martin,” [transcript], *Archives of American Art* (May 15, 1989): 95.

<sup>13</sup> Joan Simon, “Perfection is in the Mind: An Interview with Agnes Martin,” *Art in America*, Vol. 84 (May 1996): 87.

<sup>14</sup> Eisler, “Profile: Life Line,” 73.

be an artist as a pragmatic one: “I went to the universities because... there’s a studio to work in and usually in the universities they let you work in the studio any time. And so, I would work at a job and save my money and go to a university when I took a year off to paint. It was the quickest way to get to be painting.”<sup>15</sup>



Figure 2. Agnes Martin painting outdoors in New Mexico, circa 1947.  
Photographer unknown. Peyton Wright Gallery, Santa Fe.

The scenery Martin found in New Mexico, despite the unavoidable desert sun and drought, was one full of colors and breathtaking vistas. There, she painted naturalistic, encaustic portraits and still life, as well as watercolor landscapes (fig. 2). The first surviving works from Martin are from this period,<sup>16</sup> even though she spent some time and energy later in life trying to gather and destroy all these early experiments. In truth, they are harsh paintings, still far from the more restrained, soft-palleted and subtle visual vocabulary she would later develop. It’s been pointed out that Martin thought “of this period as a kind of apprenticeship, a struggle to find her vision as an abstract painter. She says of her work during this time: ‘I knew that it was not what I was *supposed* to be doing.’”<sup>17</sup> This period corresponds to the first of three phases that Suzanne Hudson has identified in Agnes’s artistic developmental progress: the years of early experimentation (1940-1960), followed by the grid paintings in New York (1960-1967), and culminated by her striped compositions painted in a wider range of colors (1974-2004).<sup>18</sup>

According to Christina Byron Rosenberger, “Martin’s perch on a mesa outside Albuquerque ‘appears eccentric at best and, at worst, entirely irrelevant to the dom-

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, “Interview with Agnes Martin,” 102.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout her life, Martin burnt or shredded with a mat knife almost every work that didn’t meet up her expectations –at times iterating up to 10 times the very same painting until fully satisfied. Her dealer and friend Arne Glimcher has declared that “Probably no artist has ever been a better editor than Agnes Martin.” Glimcher, *Agnes Martin*, 181.

<sup>17</sup> Cindy Richmond, “Agnes Martin: the Transcendent Vocation,” in *Agnes Martin. Mackenzie Art Gallery* (Berkeley: University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive of the University of California, 1995), 27.

<sup>18</sup> Suzanne Hudson, *Agnes Martin: Night Sea* (London: Afterall Books, 2016), 15.

inant discourses of postwar American art.”<sup>19</sup> But New Mexico was an intensely productive hub for peculiar artists and creative people.<sup>20</sup> And it was in the deserts of rural New Mexico that Martin laid the groundwork for many of her most relevant formal innovations and pictorial solutions, including her turn towards abstraction. During this time, she built an adobe house in Albuquerque, the first of various houses that she would erect in this remote territory. By 1950, Martin had finally obtained the American citizenship. This allowed her to set the next goal: to find her way as an artist in the United States.

## 2. “Being an Artist is a Solitary Business”

### 2.1 Walking on the Edge: Success and Turmoil

The 1950’s were crucial years in Martin’s creative journey. From 1951 to 1957, she moved between New Mexico and New York, where she would enroll again at Teachers College, this time attending the Master of Arts program. Lectures by Jiddu Krishnamurti and D.T Suzuki would later deeply influence her code of ethics, and Martin became interested in Zen philosophy and East Asian thought, especially Taoism. This is noticeably reflected on her writings as well as in her quiet, distilled mature art.

Nonetheless, Martin’s life wasn’t exactly tranquil or serene during the years of her artistic maturation. After completing her masters, Agnes moved to Taos, New Mexico, and then to La Grande, Oregon, to work as an art teacher. Following her characteristic errant life path, she re-entered Columbia University in 1954, only to return to Taos a few months later. There, in 1957, the prominent art dealer Betty Parsons sees Agnes’s new paintings, by then more abstract and biomorphic. Parsons offered to represent Martin’s work on the condition that she moved again to New York. This was a pivotal choice in her career. She agreed and packed her things once more, settling in one of the city’s oldest streets: Coenties Slip, in lower Manhattan seaport. Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Indiana, Robert Rauschenberg, Ann Wilson or Jack Youngerman, among others, were all part of this buzzing enclave of emerging artists, which Martin became a relevant part of.

MoMA’s editor Prudence Pfeiffer has described this historical hub as a place of “collective solitude,”<sup>21</sup> and Martin herself talked about the shared sense of alienation that came with working as independent artists: “Painters must live together because other social contacts are barred to them. When you paint, you don’t have time to get involved with people, everything must fall before work. That’s what’s so wonderful about the Slip – we all respect each other’s need to work.”<sup>22</sup> Reminiscing on their

<sup>19</sup> Christina Bryan Rosenberger, *Drawing the Line. The Early Drawings of Agnes Martin* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 14.

<sup>20</sup> The long list of acclaimed artists residing in the area include Georgia O’Keeffe, Bruce Nauman or Richard Tuttle, among many others.

<sup>21</sup> Prudence Pfeiffer, “The Historical Present: Collective Solitude at Coenties Slip,” *The Brooklyn Rail*. (July-August, 2022)  
<https://brooklynrail.org/2022/07/art/The-Historical-Present-Collective-Solitude-at-Coenties-Slip>

<sup>22</sup> Fahyer Hammel, “Bohemia on the Waterfront: Serious Writers and Painters are Creating New Shangri-la at the East River’s Edge near the Tip of Manhattan,” *The Lookout* (March 22, 1958): 17.



time in Coentis, Youngerman described it as an opportunity for artists to get intellectual stimulation and cultural exchange whilst having “this great need for daily aloneness... There’s no opposition there. They actually go together.”<sup>23</sup>

Agnes understood very early on that, in creation, solitude was to be embraced: focusing on the work had to take precedence over everything else. In her essay *On the Perfection Underlying Life*, Martin emphasized: “Being an artist is a very solitary business. (...) Artists just go into their studios everyday and shut the door and remain there.”<sup>24</sup>

The remoteness and seclusion guaranteed by the deserts of her previous home in New Mexico suited her crave for a serene life. “Solitude and freedom are the same,”<sup>25</sup> the artist stated. In 1957, the same year she accepted Parsons’s offer to move to NYC, she titled a painting *Desert Rain* (fig. 3), perhaps an homage to her yearned, detached rural lifestyle.



Figure 3. Agnes Martin, *Desert Rain*, 1957. Oil on canvas. © Estate of Agnes Martin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

During the decade she remained in New York, Martin worked hard to establish herself as a relevant painter. It is in this period that she reached her signature style: 6 feet squared canvas covered in hand-drawn lines. Her first grid paintings, the ones she became known and praised for, are from the early sixties<sup>26</sup>. Being at the center of the art world allowed Martin to get the recognition that her work deserved, but success came with personal struggle. The dizzying vivacity of the big city, as well as the responsibilities and pressures that fame brought, destabilized the artist’s mental

<sup>23</sup> Pfeiffer, “The Historical Present,” n.p.

<sup>24</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 71.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Although earlier gridded works are dated in 196, Martin usually referred to *The Tree* (1964) as her first grid painting, the forefront of her formal vocabulary. Acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, it became the artist’s first work to be purchased by a major New York Museum –which might explain why Agnes alluded to it frequently.

health. Her yearning for a solitary routine was justified: Martin suffered from schizophrenia throughout her entire adult life. Coinciding with her time in New York, various episodes of aural hallucinations, catatonia, and amnesia took place.<sup>27</sup>

Only in recent years, the link between Martin's mental illness and her art has been discussed, for Agnes vehemently tried to hide her medical condition. Only her closest friends knew about her psychotic episodes, and they assisted her when she most needed help.

Peter Schjeldahl has termed the grid as a "screen and as a shield," and element Martin needed for "concealment and for control," "an urge to distill positive content from the oceanic states of mind that she couldn't help experiencing."<sup>28</sup> As she got older, the symptoms of her illness abated. Donald Fineberg, the psychiatrist who treated Martin with talk therapy from 1985 to 2000, has stated that, despite being perhaps on too much medication, she was remarkably productive: "What makes her unusual is the depth and sensitivity with which she was able to make art in the face of a disorder that for many people would be devastating."<sup>29</sup>

Agnes used to refer to the "voices" in her head, inner thoughts and meanderings telling her what to do. Artist Harmony Hammond, after visiting Martin with Anne Wilson, stated: "She had to do what her voices told her to do, even if it seemed wrong. And sometimes they were wrong."<sup>30</sup> On her part, Wilson recalls the numerous restrictions that those mental voices imposed to Agnes:

Her voices told her that when she had worked too long she needed to take a trip. She told us about her sailboat on the Mackenzie River in northwest Canada, and how when she boats on the Mackenzie, she goes where there is no help, where she is beyond the reach of human beings. She says her voices tell her not to own property and to keep cutting back. The first thing she got rid of was obsessive thinking. Then she dropped the things that she did not like about herself. Agnes figures you keep cutting back until there is nothing there.<sup>31</sup>

Residing on the margins of society seems to have been Martin's most desired – and required – way of existing. New York became too much for her to bear with. In 1967, she burnt some unfinished works, packed her stuff, and stopped painting. In addition to the aforementioned pressures of fame, Martin felt shaken by Ad Reinhardt's death, her friend and mentor since arriving in NYC. Moreover, the demolition of Coentis Slip due to the area's gentrification left her feeling out of place in the city. She had had enough.

<sup>27</sup> In these years of the early 60's, it is well documented that Martin was stopped by the police wandering in the streets of New York, unable to remember her name, and was taken to Bellevue Hospital to be treated with electroshock therapy –one of the many terrifying proofs of her struggles with the disease.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Agnes Martin: A Matter-of-Fact Mystic," *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/agnes-martin-a-matter-of-fact-mystic>

<sup>29</sup> Princenthal, *Agnes Martin*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> Harmony Hammond, "Meetings with Agnes Martin: Harmony Hammond," in *Agnes Martin: Works on Paper* (New Mexico: Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico, 1998), 37.

<sup>31</sup> Anne Wilson, "Meetings with Agnes Martin: Anne Wilson," in *Agnes Martin: Works on Paper* (New Mexico: Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico, 1998), 27.



“I thought I would experiment in solitude, you know. Simple living.”<sup>32</sup> And she did. For the following years, she disappeared from the public eye, driving around the USA and Canada, staying away from the art scene. It wouldn’t be until 1974 that Martin resumed her activity as a painter – and this would happen, once again, in the seclusion of New Mexico’s desert (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Agnes Martin Near Her House in Cuba, New Mexico, 1974.  
Photography by Gianfranco Gorgoni.

## 2.2 Seeking solitude and quietness: back to the invisibility of the deserts

In an elucidating statement, Martin wrote: “Say to yourselves: I am going to work in order to see myself and free myself. (...) I will have to be by myself almost all the time and it will be a quiet life.”<sup>33</sup> Agnes put her work first – to the point of negating herself a comfortable existence. She built herself an adobe studio and house – modest spaces without phone, electricity, or plumbing located far away from the nearest highway. During wintertime, the period when she was more productive, she would only eat bananas, walnuts, dried tomatoes, and hard cheese, for even cooking or deciding what to have for lunch would distract her from her painting activity. She experienced a rudimentary way of living. Not only would her work free her, as she wrote, but it would also free her *from herself*. It dissolved her. Her inner ghosts and struggles were downgraded when making art. It was a two-ways road – when Agnes suffered one of her episodes, she would never paint; when she painted, her mental state seemed to calm down. In his book of memoirs with Agnes, Arne Glimcher quotes her saying: “It was good to get back to my grids at last because they are a rest – they tranquilize me.”<sup>34</sup>

When asked in 1965 about the significance of her painting’s subject in relation to any special personal, topical, or symbolic reference, Martin stammered: “I don’t

<sup>32</sup> Eisler, “Profile,” 70.

<sup>33</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> Glimcher, *Agnes Martin*, 104.

know.”<sup>35</sup> Although she would later insist on the impersonal, non-referential, completely abstract nature of her work, it is tempting to conjecture that Agnes’s highly concentration-demanding process of working and visually soothing imagery might indeed have been helpful in keeping her mentally stable. This painting methodology, needless to say, must have been extremely difficult for her. Donald Woodman, who remained in touch with Martin from 1977 to 1984, has described her painting activity as a way of pushing back the noise in her mind to find solace and silence: “She was a remarkable artist who overcame what for most people is a debilitating illness: the near constant struggle to quiet the incessant voices that inhabited her head.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, when interviewed for *Before the Grid*, the 2016 documentary by Kathleen Brennan and Jina Brenneman, artist Marcia Oliver states:

One time, I mean, I asked her about being an artist and doing the work, and I asked her, you know, about choices and I remember how she said, “You don’t have any choice. You really don’t have any choice about it.” (...) I think her point was in order really to maintain some kind of balance and mental health, she had to do the work.<sup>37</sup>

As her fame grew, having to sweep under the carpet her schizophrenia added extra pressure to Agnes. Biographer Henry Martin justifies the secrecy around her episodes and symptoms, for “Not only do they play into the stereotype of a cartoon schizophrenic but also the classic stereotype of an artist as an afflicted eccentric, conversing daily with the muses.”<sup>38</sup> On this subject, in a review of Arne Glimcher’s book on Agnes for *Art in America*, Karen L. Schiff warns: “[Glimcher] risks reviving old stereotypes about artists and mental illness: simply to report that Martin painted what her voices told her to paint could make her sound like merely a puppet to madness.”<sup>39</sup>

Throughout her life, Martin also struggled to keep her sexuality off public exposure. Although the professional coterie known as the New York art world has long recognized Martin as a lesbian, says Jonathan Katz, few attempts to grasp the import of her sexuality have been made by scholars<sup>40</sup>. On Brennan and Brenneman’s documentary, artist Kristina Wilson, one of Martin’s known partners,<sup>41</sup> still finds herself unable to speak openly about the subject. “I can’t use that word very well,” says Wilson; the term she is referring to is ‘lesbian,’ and the fact that she wasn’t able to move past the sense of embarrassment around non heteronormative relationships, even in

<sup>35</sup> Princenthal, Agnes Martin..., 88.

<sup>36</sup> Donald Woodman, *Agnes Martin and Me* (New York: Lyon Artbooks, 2016), 151.

<sup>37</sup> Kathleen Brennan and Jina Brenneman, *Agnes Martin: Before the Grid*. (New Mexico: Harwood Museum of Art in Taos, 2016), n.p.

<sup>38</sup> Martin, *Agnes Martin: Pioneer*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Karen L. Schiff, “Slow Reveal,” *Art in America*, (June 10, 2013) <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/agnes-martin-paintings-writings-remembrances-62906/>

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, “Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction,” in *Agnes Martin* Lynne, edited by Cooke, Karen Kelly and Barbara Schröder (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), 175.

<sup>41</sup> Aside from Wilson, Martin has been romantically associated with other women artists, such as Greek light sculptor Chryssa and textile creator Lenore Tawney. Additionally, Mildred Kane and gallerist Betty Parsons are known to have been Agnes’s partners.

2016, is proof of the immense pressure hers and Martin's generation suffered to hide their identities. Wilson goes on to underline how

It was a forbidden subject everywhere, anywhere. Total. The one thing she did say to me one time is that there were no women, no lesbians (...) that have ever become famous, and I pointed out Gertrude Stein and she kind of sloughed that off. So, she was already thinking about fame obviously.<sup>42</sup>

Martin was determined to make it in the art world. She gave up so much in order to become an artist. And, certainly, this fear of rejection must have been another source of strife and inner turmoil for her, for it risked her place and recognition as an acclaimed painter. In this regard, Marcia Oliver reveals: "I asked Ag, you know, once – about how she spent time, her down time in the city. She said, 'We go to the clubs and dance,' and those were the gay bars then. They were called clubs. The shame and guilt if you find yourself involved in an alternative lifestyle, I don't think she ever got over it."<sup>43</sup> It must be underlined: until 1973, homosexuality was classified as a disease by the American medical profession. As Sarah Lowndes points out, "Although same-sex sexual activity was legal in some American states from 1962 onwards, it was not legalized across America until 2003, when Martin was 91 and just a year away from her death: therefore, her entire life was lived in a climate of discrimination."<sup>44</sup>

For all the above, her personal withdrawal from the spotlight of publicity proves to have allowed Martin to "manage to keep her unconventional private life as she wished it, principally in the shadows, whereas other successful female artists have been subject to ruthless objectification," says Anna Chave, "as their physical appearance and their intimate lives have become inextricably tied to the public's fascination with their art (one thinks of O'Keeffe and Hesse, or of Frida Kahlo)."<sup>45</sup>

In an essay about *Gabriel*, Martin's only film in her career, artist Zoe Leonard reflects on how she resists talking about Agnes in terms of female or queer – how she wishes to look at the works "on their own, in their own light, unencumbered."<sup>46</sup> She goes on to lament how she's tired of having that conversation:

I'd like, somehow, to be over that, past it. It comes up so often for me, in the work I make, in how my work is described in the world. Sometimes, I get tired and bored of being asked: How does being a woman affect your artistic practice? Do you consider yourself a gay artist? Sometimes, it makes me want to run for the hills. Just to get to a place of peace and quiet. To just work, as I work. Without explanation, without identity.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Brennan and Brenneman, *Agnes Martin*, n.p.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Lowndes, *Contemporary Artists Working Outside the City* (London: Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies, [Kindle edition], 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Anna Chave, "Agnes Martin: Humility, the beautiful daughter... All of her ways are empty," in *Agnes Martin*, edited by Barbara Haskell (New York: Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 137.

<sup>46</sup> Zoe Leonard, "A wild patience," in *Agnes Martin*, edited by Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly and Barbara Schröder (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), 98.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

Leonard herself acknowledges to be projecting all those thoughts onto Martin's figure. But the reflection, in all of its honesty, seems to resonate deeply with Agnes's life decisions. She literally ran for the desert hills. She desperately sought peace and quiet. She worked, as she claimed, with her back to the world – no self, no ego, no identity: “Night, shelterless, wandering / I, like the deer, looked / finding less and less / living is grazing / memory is chewing cud / wandering away from everything / giving up everything / not me anymore, any of it / retired ego, wandering / on the mountain.”<sup>48</sup> In another revealing statement, Martin wrote about her desire to take cover, to efface herself: “If you imagine that you're a rock / rock of ages cleft from me / let me hide myself in thee / You don't have to worry / if you can imagine that you're a rock / all your troubles fall away / It's consolation / Sand is better / You're so much smaller as a grain of sand / We are so much less.”<sup>49</sup>

In contrast with Leonard's opinion, writer, activist, and academic Sarah Schulman believes that “Whether Martin was a lesbian, a woman, and/or a man does not mean that feelings, desires, longings, refusals, experiences, conversations, silences, actions and repressions with women are not deeply and fundamentally relevant to her history.”<sup>50</sup> In fact, she believes that the content of those experiences, and denials of experience, are even more important than questioning Martin's sexual or gender category.

Refusal and negation are terms often employed when addressing Agnes's biography. On an awarded book about the artist's life, author Nancy Princenthal only addresses timidly her sexual identity, just a few sparse comments on the 300 pages long text. Princenthal writes: “Martin's romantic attachments, if that is the right term – she was not given to sentiment and preferred living alone – were largely with other women. But she refused the label lesbian (as she did the term feminist when it was applied to her). In her life, as in her work, renunciation was as important as embrace.”<sup>51</sup> The rejection of that label, for other authors, comes justified: Henry Martin portrays Agnes as “bisexual,”<sup>52</sup> and Donald Woodman reports that Agnes once described herself as “an old woman and asexual.”<sup>53</sup>

Such a depiction is sustained in other interviews, when Martin defends her conception of love as mental awareness, strictly separated from sexuality or the sexual act:

(...) they think that the genital reaction of making love is love, (...) It's 15 minutes of physical abrasion. (...) Love is really when you are no longer responding genitally, then you are able to be aware of love. And it's about your heart and your mind. (...) There are just as many women [as men] who think it's the drive of life. What gets me is it's the most monotonous thing in life. It's just the same thing over

<sup>48</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 19.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> Sara Schulman, “Making Lesbian History Possible,” *OutHistory*, June 6, 2016, <https://outhistory.org/blog/making-lesbian-history-possible-a-proposal/>

<sup>51</sup> Princenthal, *Agnes Martin*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Martin, *Agnes Martin: Pioneer*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Woodman, *Agnes Martin and Me*, 41.

and over. (...) I don't think that the sexual response is normal. (...) Making love is a destructive attack. (...) After you make love, you're just so dumb.<sup>54</sup>

This statement comes to advocate for celibacy and, once again, the denial of the body. In a famous quote by Agnes, she even stated: "I am not a woman, I'm a door knob leading a quiet life."<sup>55</sup>



Figure 5. Agnes Martin Near Her House in Cuba, New Mexico, 1974. Photography by Gianfranco Gorgoni.

Choosing to continue making work seven years after moving away from New York had two consequences for her career. On the one hand, it brought a renewed interest in her oeuvre, a reawakened curiosity for her paintings after such a long halt. In this regard, according to Henry Martin, her status as an artist was elevated: "In a sense she died. And when you die you get famous. And then she came back to life. She never made a mistake. Every move she made. It all led to building up this mythical being."<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, however, moving away from New York allowed her to remove her image and her own persona from the picture. It kind of rendered her invisible. Her escapist desire to hide into the deserts (fig. 5) might have had to do with her need for quietness due to both her schizophrenia and queerness – or the will to conceal these facts from public knowledge. Therefore, this tendency towards solitude can be also understood as a need for not only privacy but disguise – some opacity around her persona. In a 2013 interview, Arne Glimcher recalls a comment

<sup>54</sup> Attiyeh, "Agnes Martin: An Artist On her Own," 7-8.

<sup>55</sup> Jill Johnston, "Of Deserts and Shores," *The Village Voice*, September 13, 1977, 31.

<sup>56</sup> Martin, *Agnes Martin: Pioneer*, 194.

made by Agnes regarding this will to remain unseen by others: “[artist Louise] Nevelson was a flamboyant character in amazing clothes, and Agnes Martin was wearing her overalls and Indian shirts. But she said to me one day, ‘Nevelson and I are just alike. She dresses up so that nobody can see her, and I don’t dress up so no one can notice me.’”<sup>57</sup>

Within this framework, Martin’s move to the desert, which has been described as “a centerpiece of her legacy,”<sup>58</sup> can be understood as a form of vanishing not only from society but from her own self. A move towards invisibility.

### 3. “The best things in life happens when you’re alone”

In the previous section, we’ve argued that disappearing into New Mexico’s mountains and canyons granted Agnes a respite from social and market pressures, and perhaps a way to fulfill her need of veiling important aspects of her persona such as her paranoid schizophrenia and sexual identity. But just like Henry Martin suggested, it also contributed to the mythification of her figure. In conjunction with her insightful writings and positive emotion-inducing art, her withdrawal from society and modest, almost monachal existence ushered Agnes to be seen as “sage,”<sup>59</sup> “mystic” and even “saint.”<sup>60</sup> “To see her as this special being, a mountaintop mystic,” points out Jenn Shapland in a recently published essay, “is to see her not bogged down in human messes like the body, replete with sticky selfhood, identity, sexuality. It is a way to see her as artist, without also seeing her as ‘woman,’ as ‘lesbian.’ It is the comfort of a disembodied voice.”<sup>61</sup>

Positively, placing the work, and not the person, in the spotlight left Agnes at ease. From one side, her deep studies in Zen and oriental doctrines made her want to cut away the ego – the self, in actuality – and she often preached against egotism, or the *sin* of pride, as she called it: “we are blinded by pride,” she wrote, by “living the prideful life we are frustrated and lost.”<sup>62</sup> In a lecture at Cornell University, Martin claimed: “I have sometimes put myself ahead of my work in my mind and have suffered in consequence. I thought me, me; and I suffered.”<sup>63</sup> This detachment from her own persona was as profound as to reject recognition for her work, and for decades she opposed to having catalogs of her exhibitions<sup>64</sup> or giving interviews. Glimch-

<sup>57</sup> TATE Modern, “Agnes Martin: Arne Glimcher in conversation with Frances Morris,” (September 25, 2013), Youtube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAdCqj-wuww>

<sup>58</sup> Jenn Shapland, “Thirteen Ways of Moving to the Desert,” in *Agnes Martin: Independence of Mind*, edited by Chelsea Weathers (New Mexico: Radius Books, 2022), 107.

<sup>59</sup> In *Agnes Martin: Between the Lines*, Leon d’Avigdor’s 2002 documentary, artist Ellsworth Kelly, who Martin befriended during her time in Coentis Slip, is quoted: “Agnes was like Earth Mother. Sage, healer.”

<sup>60</sup> In 1998, Martin was included in the lists of artists that critic and academic Charles A. Riley II classified as “the Saints of Modern Art,” where she is referred to as “the Priestess of Perfection.” Other authors have written about her in similar terms, too. For instance, Olivia Lang’s article for *The Guardian*, published in 2015, is titled: “Agnes Martin: the artist mystic who disappeared into the desert;” On a previously mentioned article, Peter Schejdahl describes Agnes as a “matter-of-fact mystic.” This sort of narrative is frequently mentioned when addressing Martin’s figure.

<sup>61</sup> Shepland, “Thirteen Ways of Moving to the Desert,” 109.

<sup>62</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>64</sup> This refusal of the notion of achievement led Agnes to even cancel exhibitions: when Tom Armstrong, Director of the Whitney Museum wanted to put together a retrospective of her work, Martin refused to have a catalog. When Armstrong explained that they couldn’t present an exhibition without the publication, Martin insisted



er recalls an illustrated metaphor employed by Agnes for reasoning her extricating herself as the creator of her works: “A potato farmer stands in front of his harvest of potatoes and says, ‘The se are my potatoes’, (...) Well, they are no more his potatoes than these are my paintings. (...) We are merely the locus where it happened.”<sup>65</sup>

Only during the latter years of her life, she slightly opened up and became more public again. Still, the level of fame she gained due to the continuous exhibitions of her oeuvre throughout her life, in the USA as well as in Europe, certainly proves that Martin never truly turned her back on the market. But her distance to its daily mechanisms, as Shapland suggests, allowed her the mental freedom to work outside its demands and expectations<sup>66</sup>. “Being detached and impersonal is related to freedom,”<sup>67</sup> the artist would write.

From the other side, Martin’s implore for aloneness comes justified for someone who couldn’t bear distractions while working, as it has been exemplified before with her strict, reduced variety of diet. In addition to that and the renunciation to any companions, Martin would even give up listening to music, even though she considered it to be the highest form of art,<sup>68</sup> or traveling, even though she became very wealthy: “I’m restricted from having music – not even one little note, and travel, because it would interrupt my state of mind.”<sup>69</sup>

Agnes believed that artists worked by awareness of their own state of mind, and, quoting her words, “In order to do so he must have a studio, as a retreat and as a place to work. In the studio an artist must have no interruptions from himself or anyone else. Interruptions are disasters. To hold onto the ‘silver cord’, that is the artistic discipline. The artist’s own mind will be all the help he needs.”<sup>70</sup>

For an artist who so exhaustively sought isolation, it is no wonder that Martin’s studio became the ultimate place of withdrawal, of *retreat*. On a handwritten essay (fig. 6), Agnes details the utmost usefulness of privacy in an artist’s working place:

The most important thing is to have a studio and establish and preserve its atmosphere. You must have a studio no matter what kind of artist you are. A musician who must practice in the living room is at a tremendous disadvantage. You must gather yourself together in your studio all of your sensibilities and when they are gathered you must not be disturbed. The murdered inspirations and loss of art work [sic] due to interruptions and shattered studio atmosphere are unassessable [sic]<sup>71</sup>.

---

on her need not to obtain any credit for the paintings, and the project ended up not going on (Glimcher, *Agnes Martin*, n.p.).

<sup>65</sup> Glimcher, *Agnes Martin*, 121.

<sup>66</sup> Shapland, “Thirteen Ways of Moving to the Desert,” 111.

<sup>67</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 38.

<sup>68</sup> About music, Martin stated that “With just nine notes it expresses exultation most effectively and completely. It demands from us a full emotional response. It is abstract, not about anything objective.” Sharyn Rohlfson Udall, *Voices in New Mexico Art* (Santa Fe: Museum of Fine Arts of New Mexico, 1996), 51. Such a description coincides with her vision in art – which is completely abstract, non-referential, and is to be responded emotionally, not intellectually.

<sup>69</sup> Glimcher, *Agnes Martin*, 104.

<sup>70</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 93.

<sup>71</sup> Found in page number twenty-six and twenty-seven of handwritten notes by the artists printed in Glimcher, *Agnes Martin*, 16-17.

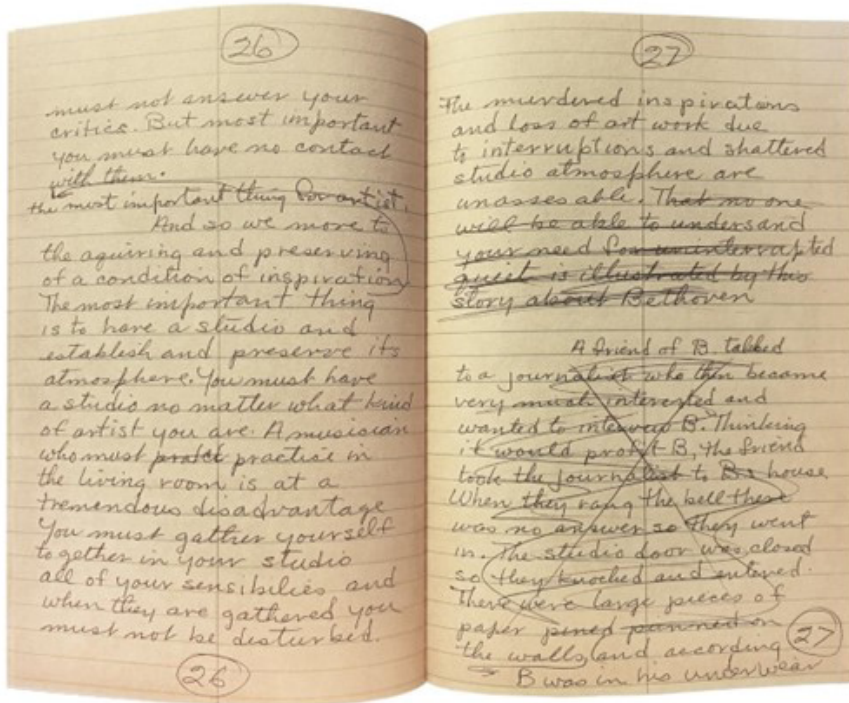


Figure 6. Undated notes by Agnes Martin, published in Arne Glimcher's 2012 book *Agnes Martin: Paintings, Writings, Remembrances*. Photography by the author.

Agnes alluded recurrently to inspiration, and sometimes it doesn't come easy identifying what she means by it. The clearest description she gave of the term is that it is "a happy moment that take us by surprise,"<sup>72</sup> and in order to notice them, Martin stated, one must cultivate a tranquil state of mind. In her quest for such a clear mind, the solitude of the studio was non-negotiable. "It is so much easier to respond accurately when alone,"<sup>73</sup> she exhorted. By *responding* she intended to be aware of reality: "Perception, reception and response are all the same. Sometimes we perceive, sometimes we receive and sometimes we respond but it is all the same. It is all awareness of reality,"<sup>74</sup> Martin declared. On a famous essay titled *The Untroubled Mind*, Agnes links solitude to inspiration, claiming the first a prerequisite for the mind to perceive – or receive, or respond to – the second: "In solitude there is consolation / thinking of others and myself, even plants / I am immediately apprehensive / because my solitude has been interrupted / solitude, inspiration."<sup>75</sup>

Many sources attest her surrender to seclusion when committed to her artistic practice. Woodman cites Martin talking about working in the studio in the following terms: "This is to be a period of isolation and single-mindedness. (...) Anonymity is

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, page number two of the manuscript.

<sup>73</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 94.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

the word now – no friends, no visiting;<sup>76</sup> and describes how private she was about her pictorial progress and results, too: “As a painting progressed, she would sit for endless hours in a rocking chair and stare at the canvas, evaluating her work. She rarely allowed anyone into the studio to see work in progress – or even the finished paintings, which she kept stacked against a wall.”<sup>77</sup> In like manner, Harmony Hammond collects: “Agnes said that she works daily from eight to three or four. (...) Then, no visitors. She does not like distractions and views friendship as a distraction. Similarly, she doesn’t like teaching because the students talk too much and get you involved.”<sup>78</sup>

As her illness challenged the control of her brain, Agnes must have made huge efforts to keep that clear state of mind she considered essential for an artist. It is interesting to read how many reflections and passages of her writings she dedicated to the subject. “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.”<sup>79</sup> By this comment, Martin is linking awareness to absence of thought, noise, and distractions, something she claimed to have achieved: “The silence on the floor of my house / Is all the questions and all the answers that have been known in the world.”<sup>80</sup> In an interview with Chuck Smith in 1997, when the artist is asked about meditation, she declares:

I used to meditate until I learned to stop thinking. Now I’ve stopped thinking – I don’t think of anything. Before you trained [sic!] yourself to stop thinking, it’s just all kinds of stuff going through your mind. Not anymore. Nothing goes through my mind. (...) I had a hard time giving up some of them, but I managed. Evolution. I gave up the idea of evolution. All of them, the atomic theory. And then I don’t believe – I don’t have any ideas myself, I don’t believe anybody else’s. So that leaves me a clear mind.<sup>81</sup>

This statement exemplifies Martin’s level of commitment and strictness towards her working methodologies. Renouncing – here comes up the word again – the intellectual in favor of emotions is the final sacrifice she made in order to make art. In an essay titled *The Current of the River of Life Moves Us*, Martin summed it up like this: “To live and work by inspiration you have to stop thinking. You have to hold your mind still in order to hear inspiration clearly.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly, in the aforementioned interview, and aged 85, Agnes declared: “I’m an empty mind. When something comes into it, you can see it.”<sup>83</sup>

Thus, Martin’s approach to art required solitude, for it facilitated keeping an untroubled mind, and no distractions, in order to respond to inspirations. Those inspirations arrived to her in the form of tiny images that she was supposed to paint exactly

<sup>76</sup> Woodman, *Agnes Martin and Me*, 45.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>78</sup> Hammond, “Meetings with Agnes Martin,” 39.

<sup>79</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 41.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>81</sup> Chuck Smith. “Interview with Agnes Martin (1997/20:00),” *Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/agnesmartin>

<sup>82</sup> Martin, *Writings*, 137.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

as they were. Her only task, she claimed, was to scale them up to her standard 6 x 6-foot canvases – reduced to 5 x 5 when she aged and was no longer able to manipulate them by herself –, for which several complex mathematical calculations had to be made. In Mary Lance’s documentary *Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World*, finished only a year before the artist’s demise in 2004 at age 92, Martin insists on how “if your mind is full of garbage, if an inspiration came you wouldn’t recognize it anyway. So, you have to practice quiet, empty mind,”<sup>84</sup> and praises the benefits and satisfaction of having led a secluded life:

I think artists are very fortunate in that they can sit around and wait for inspiration, instead of – you know. There’s quite a bit of action in the rest – And the other people who are getting up, going to work, you know, talking to people all day. Of course, they think I’m unfortunate that I spend all day absolutely by myself. But... You just can’t be an artist if you can’t be alone. But if you’re alone, you focus on everything, you know? You’re just affected by everything – the sky and the wind and the air and... Nature – all of nature. You’re responding 100%. The best moments of my life were when I was alone – the most enlightening and therefore the happiest.<sup>85</sup>

This is a relevant testimony for it proves how much Martin truly appreciated her segregated existence. Additionally, it reveals an interesting factor of her conception of solitude, as she states that, when alone, one is influenced or affected by everything in nature: the sky and the air – and therefore the landscape, too. Although she persistently claimed that she painted with her back to the world, rejecting any interpretation of her work as abstracted nature<sup>86</sup>, this comment reveals that she was indeed “affected by nature – all of nature,” and “responding 100%.” In an essay titled *The Cloud*, art historian Rosalind Krauss objects: “It is one thing, however, to listen to Martin insisting, ‘My work is anti-nature,’ and it is another to hold this claim steady as one approaches her paintings.”<sup>87</sup>

Arne Glimcher’s son, Marc, has elucidated this conundrum very clearly in an essay published in the accompanying catalog to a recent exhibition of Martin’s paintings. He recalls an illustrating anecdote with her daughter Isabelle, who, during one of the family visits to the artist in Taos, asked Agnes about the meaning of her paintings. She grabbed a rose from a vase and asked the little girl if it was beautiful. When Isabelle responded affirmatively, Agnes hid the rose behind her back and then asked if the rose was still beautiful. Yes, Isabelle replied. My paintings are of this, Agnes concluded as she softly waved her hand where the rose had been. Isabelle, as well as Marc himself and the rest of the family, understood exactly what Agnes meant: at the heart of everything that Martin ever did was crystallizing the essence of beauty, of the things we yearn or feel content about. However, Glimcher informs,

<sup>84</sup> Lance, *Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World*, DVD.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Martin insisted on her paintings being not about nature nor what is seen but what is forever known in the mind. She claimed to paint positive emotions such as joy, happiness, innocence, or love.

<sup>87</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), 77.

Her fears were that the landscape and sky would pollute her paintings (which they did), that these tangible things would invade her vision with their earthbound forms. But the things entering her sight in Taos were so beautiful, they tricked her into depicting them. This, in many ways, drove her mad since it was like directly painting a rose – which was the opposite of what she was trying to do.<sup>88</sup>



Figure 7. Agnes Martin, *Desert*, 1985. Acrylic and pencil on linen.  
© Estate of Agnes Martin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Even if Martin attempted to separate her life from her work – which has been classified as “absolutely not true”<sup>89</sup> – it wasn’t impermeable to its context. In 1985, Agnes created two lush paintings (fig. 7 and 8), that she titled *Desert* and *Desert Flower*. The works are quintessentially Martin: luminous, horizontal bands of pale, acrylic color that repeat rhythmically and seem to expand over the canvas. The allusion to her home in the desertic New Mexico lands, as well as the sandy color palette, lucidly indicates that she was indeed influenced by the beauty that surrounded her. In an interview with John Gruen for *ARTNews*, Agnes outlined her fascination with the landscape:

One time, I was coming out of the mountains and (...) I came out on this plain, and I thought, ‘Ah! What a relief! (...) I thought, ‘This is for me!’ The expansiveness of it. I sort of surrendered. This plain... it was just like a straight line. It was a horizontal line. And I thought there wasn’t a line that affected me like a horizontal line. Then, I found that the more I drew that line, the happier I got. First I thought

<sup>88</sup> Marc Glimcher, “Walking on a Razorback Mesa with Agnes Martin,” in *Agnes Martin: The Distillation of Color* (New York: Pace Gallery, 2021), 13-14.

<sup>89</sup> TATE Modern. “Agnes Martin: Arne Glimcher in conversation with Frances Morris.”

it was like the sea... then, I thought it was like singing! Well, I just went to town on this horizontal line.<sup>90</sup>

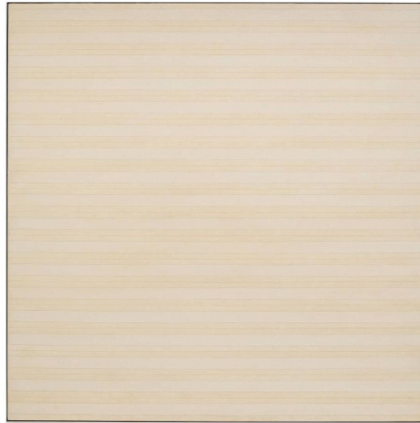


Figure 8. Agnes Martin, *Desert Flower*, 1985. Acrylic and pencil on linen.  
© Estate of Agnes Martin /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Martin gave up so much in her life in favor of her work, it's only reasonable that other things would come and enter: serene hues of color, the vastness of the horizon, space that finds no interruption, no incident, no disturbance – just like Martin's aims for her life and art were. "If someone makes a film of me, they would [*sic*] have the opposite of what I am. My life is nothing – there is no incident – it's as though I never existed."<sup>91</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

Throughout this text, we have examined the notion of solitude as one of the cornerstones of Martin's life, as well as her working methodologies and ideals of creation. Even though for some her isolative relocation amongst mountains and canyons had the opposite effect – fueling intrigue and arising questions around the hidden artist –, it is clear that Martin saw seclusion as a means to efface herself and remove her persona in favor of the paintings. Indeed, this craving for working alone, in spartan conditions and far from disturbances and the mental pollution that comes with big cities' stimuli, has contributed to romanticizing her figure. Her current status of "modern icon," mystic, and the aforementioned mythology built around the artist, is further evidence of that effect, further sustained by the Martin's notes on the duty of the artists – to throw themselves on the work, forsaking any physical desire, which she thoroughly endured, as exemplified before, from her restricted diet to celibacy. Thus, Martin noticeably incarnates that role of the creator as someone on the outskirts of

<sup>90</sup> John Gruen, "Everything, Everything Is about Feeling...Feeling and Recognition." *ARTnews* 75, no. 7, (September 1976): 94.

<sup>91</sup> Glimcher, *Agnes Martin*, 104.



society – above the need for company and mundane impulses –, that is embedded in the collective imaginary.

Whatever the speculations derived from her decision to insulate herself and considering that she spent three decades actively painting in the deserts of New Mexico, there is no doubt that this location allowed Agnes to be the most productive of her career. And place, this text argues, was particularly decisive for the artist: “I think it is more important to figure out where you want to be than it is what you want to do. First you have to find where you need to be, and then you can do what you need to do,”<sup>92</sup> she concluded in an interview. It was in the midst of rural lands that Martin truly unfolded and established herself as one of the most relevant and visionary artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By the end of her life, Agnes, who believed in reincarnation, still rejoiced and defended her choice of solitude: “People feel sorry for me because I’m not married. But I tell them I’ve been born again and again, a hundred times. I’ve been married a hundred times, had hundreds of children. This time, I asked to be by myself. And so, I’ve been by myself... (...) all the time. And it’s really been very enlightening, and I’ve enjoyed it.”<sup>93</sup>

## 5. Conflict of interests

None.

## 6. Support

This article is the result of an ongoing investigation supported by the “VII Plan Propio de la Universidad de Sevilla”.

## 7. References

- Attiyeh, Jenny. “Agnes Martin: An Artist On her Own.” *Horse Fly*, May 15, 2001. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/221427944/Interview-with-Taos-artist-Agnes-Martin>
- Brennan, Kathleen and Jina Brenneman. *Agnes Martin: Before the Grid*. New Mexico: Harwood Museum of Art in Taos, 2016.
- Campbell, Suzanne. “Interview with Agnes Martin.” [transcript] *Archives of American Art* (May 15, 1989).
- Chave, Anna. “Agnes Martin: Humility, the beautiful daughter... All of her ways are empty.” In *Agnes Martin*, edited by Barbara Haskell, 131-153. New York: Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 1993.
- D. Katz, Jonathan. “Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction.” In *Agnes Martin*, edited by Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly and Barbara Schröder, 170-197. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011.
- D’Avigdor, Leon. *Agnes Martin: Between the Lines* (2002, Munich: Germany, Leon d’Avigdor Films), DVD.

<sup>92</sup> Ned Rifkin, *Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2002), 14.

<sup>93</sup> Lance, *Agnes Martin*, DVD.

- Eisler, Benita. "Profile: Life Lines." *The New Yorker*, January 25, 1993, 70-83.
- Glimcher, Arne. *Agnes Martin: Writings, Paintings, Remembrances*. London: Phaidon, 2012.
- Glimcher, Marc. "Walking on a Razorback Mesa with Agnes Martin." In *Agnes Martin: The Distillation of Color*, 9-16. New York: Pace Gallery, 2021.
- Gruen, John. "Everything, Everything Is about Feeling...Feeling and Recognition," *ARTnews*, 75, no. 7, (September, 1976): 91-94.
- Hammel, Fayeh. "Bohemia on the Waterfront: Serious Writers and Painters are Creating New Shangri-la at the East River's Edge near the Tip of Manhattan." *The Lookout* (March 22, 1958): 17.
- Hammond, Harmony. "Meetings with Agnes Martin: Harmony Hammond," in *Agnes Martin: Works on Paper*, 33-40. New Mexico: Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico, 1998.
- Hudson, Suzanne. *Agnes Martin: Night Sea*. London: Afterall Books, 2016.
- Johnston, Jill. "Of deserts and shores." *The Village Voice*, September 13, 1977.
- Koch, Philip. *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*. Open Court Publishing, 1994.
- Krauss, Rosalind. *Bachelors*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990.
- Lance, Mary. *Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World* (2003, Corrales, New Mexico: New Deal Films), DVD.
- Leonard, Zoe. "A wild patience." In: *Agnes Martin*, edited by Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly and Barbara Schröder, 78-101. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011.
- Lowndes, Sarah. *Contemporary Artists Working Outside the City*. London: Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies, 2021.
- Martin, Agnes. *Writings*. Berlin: Edition Cantz, 1992.
- Martin, Henry. *Agnes Martin: Pioneer, Painter, Icon*. Tucson: Schaffner Press, 2018.
- Pfeiffer, Prudence. "The Historical Present: Collective Solitude at Coenties Slip." *The Brooklyn Rail*, July-August 2022. <https://brooklynrail.org/2022/07/art/The-Historical-Present-Collective-Solitude-at-Coenties-Slip> [Consulted: 1 November 2022]
- Princenthal, Nancy. *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015.
- Richmond, Cindy. "Agnes Martin: the Transcendent Vocation." In *Agnes Martin. Mackenzie Art Gallery*, 26-29. Berkeley: University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive of the University of California, 1995.
- Rifkin, Ned. *Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond*. Houston: The Menil Collection, 2002.
- Rohlfen Udall, Sharyn. *Voices in New Mexico Art*. Santa Fe: Museum of Fine Arts of New Mexico, 1996.
- Rosenberger, Christina Bryan. *Drawing the Line. The Early Drawings of Agnes Martin*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.
- Schiff, Karen L. "Slow Reveal." *Art in America*. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/agnes-martin-paintings-writings-remembrances-62906/>
- Schjedahl, Peter. "Agnes Martin: A Matter-of-Fact Mystic." *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/agnes-martin-a-matter-of-fact-mystic>
- Schulman, Sarah. "Making Lesbian History Possible." *OutHistory*, June 6, 2016. <https://outhistory.org/blog/making-lesbian-history-possible-a-proposal/>
- Shapland, Jenn. "Thirteen Ways of Moving to the Desert." *Agnes Martin: Independence of Mind*, edited by Chelsea Weathers, 105-115. New Mexico: Radius Books, 2022.
- Simon, Joan. "Perfection is in the Mind: An Interview with Agnes Martin." *Art in America*, Vol. 84, May 1996.
- Smith, Chuck. "Interview with Agnes Martin (1997/20:00)." November 1997. Vimeo, 19:38. <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/agnesmartin>

- TATE Modern. "Agnes Martin: Arne Glimcher in conversation with Frances Morris." Youtube video, 1:18:20 (September 25, 2013). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAdCqj-wuww>
- Tuttle, Martha. "I Question the Innocence of the Grid." In *Agnes Martin: Innocence of Mind*, edited by Chelsea Weathers, 57-67. Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2022.
- Wilson, Anne. "Meetings with Agnes Martin: Anne Wilson." In *Agnes Martin: Works on Paper*, 19-28. New Mexico: Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico, 1998.
- Woodman, Donald. *Agnes Martin and Me*. New York: Lyon Artbooks, 2016.