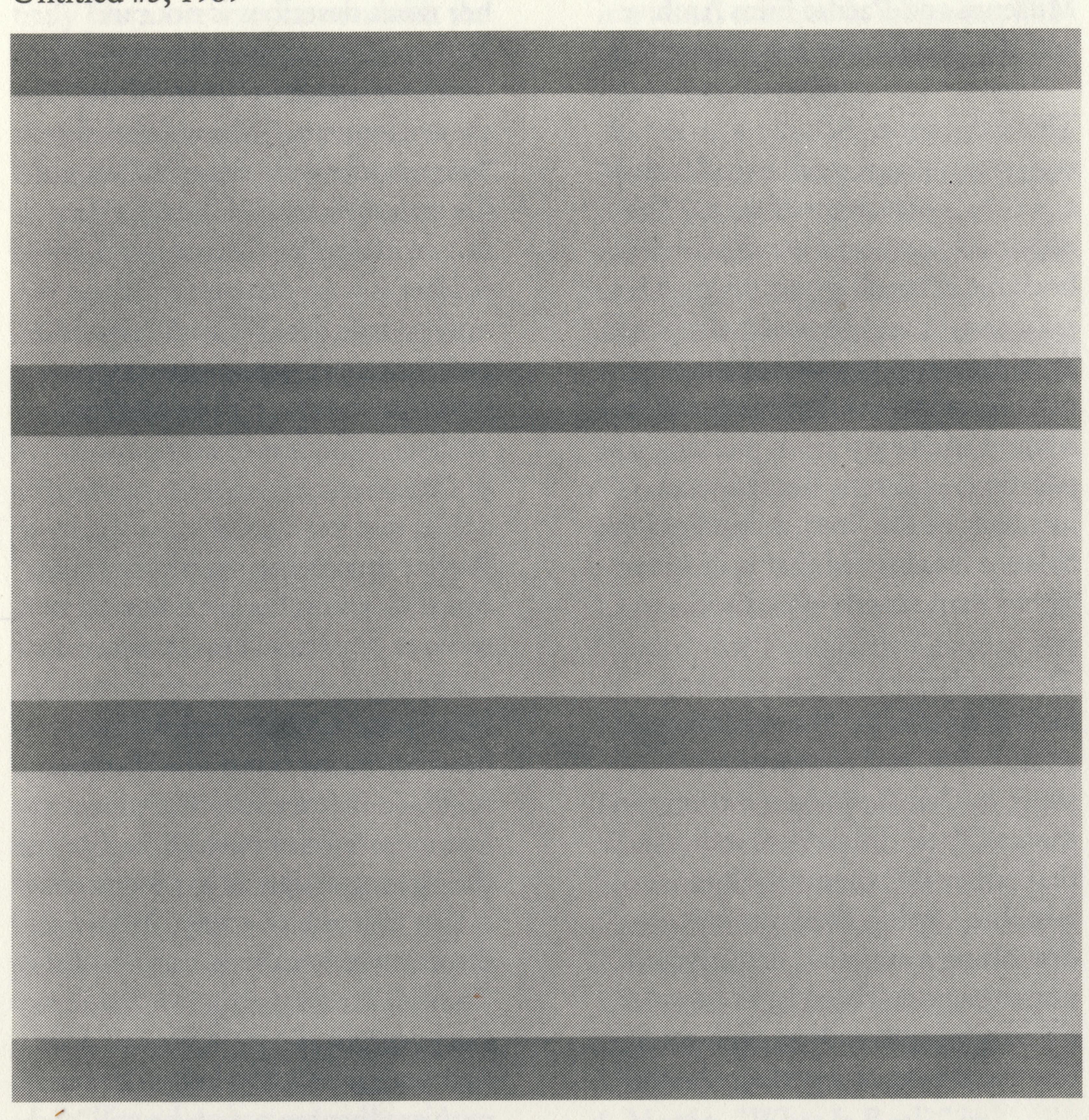
Agnes Martin
MATRIX/BERKELEY 166

University Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive mid July - late September 1995

Untitled #3, 1989



Agnes Martin was born in 1912 in Maklin, Saskatchewan, Canada. She moved to the United States in 1932 and subsequently became a U.S. citizen. From 1957 until 1967, Martin lived in New York City, and has since lived and worked in New Mexico.

The following essay is reprinted from the exhibition catalog published by the University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

This exhibition includes a group of square paintings, each broader than a person's outstretched arms. The only compositional elements are horizontal bands of uninflected gray and, at regular intervals, pencil lines that stop just shy of the canvas's edge. As the width and hue of the bands vary from painting to painting, so do the number and intensity of the lines. A kind of balance is achieved that is intuitive rather than strictly measured.

The similarity of these paintings' radical simplicity—the repetition of scale, color, and composition—suggests that they share a common theme. Their differences indicate that either this theme itself is mutable, or that the artist is describing a singular, if elusive, phenomenon. There is, in any case, a beautiful rightness to each work, like the sound of a perfect chord.

The relationship of the works to one another appears less like the relationship among individual works of art than like the variety of interpretations a musician might give to a single composition. To follow this analogy, the simplicity of the song allows us to be more aware of the subtleties in its rendition. Much like Glenn Gould's inspired playing of Bach's Goldberg

Variations, a series of compositions originally intended as practice scores for a young pupil, Martin eschews the demonstration of technical virtuosity in favor of breathing life into the commonplace.

Despite the abstraction of her work, Martin does not intend to refer to anything particularly esoteric. Which is not to say the experience her work describes is not rare. Rather, it is just this: she seeks to recall "moments of perfection." "In these moments," Martin observes, "we wonder why we ever thought life was difficult." Clearly, this is not an everyday state of mind, but neither is it an experience accessible only to mystics. We may have had only one such experience in our lives, but we carry this experience with us, as a kind of compass, in our memory.

Rather than being simply aesthetic, Martin's paintings are intended to serve as directional tools. Instead of orienting us in the material world, however, they help us find our bearings in the inner world of the mind, so that we may to recover lost memories of perfection. One of the strongest signals her work gives is that to make our way in this direction, we must not try too hard. To find our way does not require that we master new skills or amass new bodies of knowledge. It simply requires that we pause, be still, and be aware. Admittedly, to pause, be still, and be aware is often not easy. Perhaps the extreme simplicity, even severity, of Martin's work is necessary to catch our eye, to arrest our attention by its contrast with the chatter of the common visual field.

Martin herself has lived for decades in virtual solitude; she has turned

her back on entertainment, politics, even friendship, in order to cultivate an atmosphere conducive to her art. It is this physical isolation of hers, and nothing intrinsic to the work itself, that has led some critics to see her paintings as an expression of profound solitude. Although some have compared her paintings to Casper David Friederich's images of individuals isolated against vast natural panoramas, Martin's work truly has more in common with the achingly understated still lifes of Giorgio Morandi-arrangements of simple bottles and jars that, like Martin's delicately poised lines and stripes, seem to hug one another out of sheer existential empathy.

Although Martin has spoken out against the mixture of art and politics, there is a sense in which hers is an activist art. "Moments of awareness of perfection and of inspiration are alike," she has said, "except that inspirations are directives to action."2 Martin's art transforms a static, purely meditative spirituality-typical of a mystical attitude-with a rather more productive and social approach. If the former echoes the teachings of Taoism and Zen, the latter may have Biblical roots. As Luke recalls, Jesus said to the paralytic not only "your sins are forgiven," (5:22), but also "rise... and walk home" (5:24). "There is the work in our minds," Martin has said, "the work in our hands and the work as a result."3 Behind Martin's successive attempts to grasp the fleeting passages of the spirit through the mind is the profoundly social desire to craft a means by which to inspire others.

Between 1967 and 1973, Martin completed only a single body of work, a portfolio of thirty prints titled *On a Clear Day*. Made

roughly twenty years before the eight paintings in this exhibition, this series of prints retains, in certain pieces, the signature grid of Martin's even earlier art. The grid fixes in place, while the horizontal line lays bare. Also contrasted in this series are works in which the edge of the square is precisely demarcated, and those in which the lines halt just short of the edge. Observing these subtle differences is a visual exercise in attention, like the Zen practice of focusing on one's own breathing.

There is something ironic, perhaps unintentionally so, in Martin's titling of *On a Clear Day*. Six years to describe a single day? This attenuation of experience resonates with the timelessness of the mind. It is a clue as well to the secret of Martin's life in art. As she has said, "The memory of past moments of joy leads us on."

Lawrence Rinder
Curator for Twentieth-Century Art

## Notes

- 1. Agnes Martin, "Reflections," in Writings, Schriften, ed. by Dieter Schwarz (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz-Verlag, 1993), p. 31.
- 2. Ibid., p. 32.
- 3. Martin, "On the Perfection Underlying Life," in Writings, Schriften, p. 67.
- 4. Martin, "What Is Real?" in Writings, Schriften, p. 93.

Works in MATRIX (all works are lent by PaceWildenstein Gallery, New York, unless otherwise stated):

On a Clear Day, 1973, portfolio of 30 serigraphs in gray on cream laid japan paper, 15 x15". Lent by the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Untitled #2, 1989, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72".

Untitled #3, 1989, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72".

Untitled #8, 1989, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72".

Untitled #2, 1990, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72".

Untitled #2, 1991, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72".

Untitled #3, 1991, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72".

Untitled #6, 1991, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72".

Untitled #5, 1992, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72".

## Selected one-person exhibitions:

Betty Parsons Gallery, NYC '58; Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles '65-'66; Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (retrospective) '73 (traveled to Pasadena Art Museum, CA; catalog); The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, On a Clear Day '73; The Pace Gallery, NYC, Agnes Martin: New Paintings '75; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands, Agnes Martin: Paintings and Drawings 1971-1990 (retrospective) '91 (traveled to Museum Wiesbaden, Germany; Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster, Germany; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France '91; catalog); Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Agnes Martin (retrospective) '92-'93 (traveled to Milwaukee Art Center, Wisconsin' 93; Center for the Fine Arts, Miami, FL '93; Houston Contemporary Arts Museum, Texas '93; Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain '93-94; catalog).

Selected group exhibitions:

Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Geometric Abstraction in America, '62 (catalog); Kassel, Germany, documenta 5 '72; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Biennial '77; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA, Twenty Americans '80; American Pavilion, Venice, Italy, Venice Biennale '80; Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Carnegie International '88 (catalog); The National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan, Minimal Art '90 (catalog).

## Selected bibliography:

Alloway, Lawrence. "Formlessness Breaking Down Form: The Paintings of Agnes Martin," *Studio* (Feb. '73), pp. 61-63.

Rubenstein, Meyer Raphael. "Reviews: Agnes Martin-Pace," ARTnews (Mar. '91), pp. 134, 136.

Cotter, Holland. "Art in Review: Agnes Martin," The New York Times (3 Jan. '92).

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Martin Eyes," The Village Voice (24 Nov. '92), p. 100.

Martin, Agnes. Writings, Schriften, ed. by Dieter Schwarz (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz-Verlag, 1993).

This exhibition was co-organized by the University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan. The co-curators for the exhibition are Lawrence Rinder and Cindy Richmond.

Support for this exhibition has been provided in part by Mrs. Paul L. Wattis, the National Endowment for the Arts, the LEF Foundation, the California Arts Council, the University Art Museum Council MATRIX Endowment Fund, Stanley M. Smith, Celeste and Anthony Meier, the Canada Council, and an anonymous donor.

Special thanks to Douglas Baxter and Pace Wildenstein Gallery.

Cover photo courtesy PaceWildenstein.