



Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art

Nancy Princenthal

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Over the course of a career that spanned fifty years, Agnes Martin's austere, serene work anticipated and helped to define Minimalism, even as she battled psychological crises and carved out a solitary existence in the American Southwest. Martin identified with the Abstract Expressionists but her commitment to linear geometry caused her to be associated in turn with Minimalist, feminist, and even outsider artists. She moved through some of the liveliest art communities of her time while maintaining a legendary reserve. I paint with my back to the world, she says both at the beginning and at the conclusion of a documentary filmed when she was in her late eighties. When she died at ninety-two, in Taos, New Mexico, it is said she had not read a newspaper in half a century. No substantial critical monograph exists on this acclaimed artist the recipient of two career retrospectives as well as the National Medal of the Arts who was championed by critics as diverse in their approaches as Lucy Lippard, Lawrence Alloway, and Rosalind Krauss. Furthermore, no attempt has been made to describe her extraordinary life. The whole engrossing story, told here for the first time, Agnes Martin is essential reading for anyone interested in abstract art or the history of women artists in America."

Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art Details

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Author : Nancy Princenthal

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From Reader Review Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art for online ebook

Robert Vaughan says

A gripping book about a formidable, and important modern artist, Agnes Martin, and her path as a painter/artist and the many places she lived and created. I was very touched by the deft hand of the author who took on such a private and unusual subject, and as biography often can, made Martin's choices and struggles come to light, much like Martin's paintings do. I loved the wide scope of the art scene as backdrop, both the New York art scene as well as Taos, where Martin spent many of her later years. It's also nice to see this book receive the awards and merits that I feel the subject matter merits.

Elisa says

Absolutely awful. More writing about other artists and nothing about her personally...reviews were amazing so I requested it for library to purchase it and I feel just awful what a waste.

Brian says

i think i would rather give this a 3.5 star rating. i do love Agnes Martin, and that alone made the book worthwhile. that said, i do feel the author didn't hold up to the subject. she frequently references the difficulties of Martin's mental health, but doesn't offer much information as to how this played out in her life. and at times, it gets bogged down in art world gossip. regardless, a great book, and totally looking forward to seeing the retrospective when it arrives in New York!

Richard Derus says

Rating: 5* of five

Martin wasn't an unknown toiler in the vineyards of art. She was likely held back from stratospheric fame by her own demons...but I suspect that her being a woman in the old boys' club of 1950s New York-centric art didn't make her life one whit easier. My review is live now.

MaryJo says

I find Agnes Martin's large abstract/minimalist paintings compelling. Viewing one of them can be a meditative experience. My interest in her is enhanced by what I know about her remarkable presence as a woman in the 20th century New York art world, and her unusual biography. Martin was born in Saskatchewan in 1912, and died in New Mexico in 2004 at 92. She moved to Washington State as a child when her father died, and supported herself in lots of ways, often having to do with teaching. She ended up

with a degree in art education from Teacher's college of Columbia University. She spent time in New Mexico in the 1940s, then moved to NYC where she was friends with and exhibited with Abstract expressionists and minimalists. In 1967 she left New York and moved back to New Mexico where she spent the rest of her life. She lived for 10 years on Portales Mesa, 6 miles for the nearest person with no phone or electricity. She built most of the structures on the site with adobe brick she made herself, and lived without a lot of comforts. Her sexual relationships were with women. She also suffered from mental illness, diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenia. She spent periods in mental hospitals, and received shock treatments in the era before the discovery of pharmaceutical treatments. A lot of the descriptions of her ways of being to me reflect a certain western independence. We can also read her story in terms of her gender nonconformity. At one point when someone called her a woman artist she said she was not a woman. She was a very private person, and, when she did speak, what she said often contradicted what she said at other times. She is a difficult subject for a biographer. No surprise that the author resorts to descriptions of common practices at the time, when she can't actually access the specifics of Martin's story. At one point, near the end when I was feeling frustrated by this, Princethal told a very sweet story about writing to Martin when she was doing research for an undergrad paper. Martin wrote back "the artist uses only the primary awareness because the intellect draws on knowledge from the past which leads us in a circle. The response in primary awareness is in feeling. The response to art is feeling not intellectual (knowledge) or emotional love, anger, etc, but pure feelings such as you would have at the beach--freedom, joy, gratitude, innocence, harmony, content, the sublime, all positive feeling." To explain her working method, Martin wrote, "I paint from an image that comes into my mind because I want it." Princenthal wrote that Martin "wanted it understood that desire itself was primary. . ." There was something very generous and lovely about this story. In New York Martin was friends with feminist art critics like Jill Johnson and Lucy Lippard, both of whom wrote about her work, yet their project was not hers. She was in the major shows and written about by all the big name reviewers. She is collected by DIA Beacon, as well as major and minor museums throughout the country. At the end of her life, Martin began to make 5x5 works, rather than the 6x6 painting she had been doing. As she entered her 90s, the larger paintings were too difficult for her to manage. The images of her from this period--photos and film-- show her active, painting these still very large works; I imagine her still motivated by her desire for those basic feelings of joy, freedom, innocence, harmony and gratitude

Ashlyn says

"The ability to recognize failure is the most important talent of an artist."

Bill Syken says

Martin is a fascinating character—I love her line, "I have no friends, and you're one of them." She's also a thought provoking painter. I also think Nancy Princenthal is a fine biographer, but the secretive and obscure Martin often didn't leave her much to work with, and so the book has long sections in which Martin all but disappears and the biographer is left to general descriptions about the worlds in which Martin was moving or the currents of art. After a point I found myself skimming these sections and moving to the parts where Martin returns. Which is why, even with a strong character and a strong writer/researcher, the experience is only satisfying in parts.

Susanne says

I am reading a biography about Agnes Martin, the american artist, who spent so many years in or close to Taos. I started reading it, shortly before I departed for New Mexico last August. That said, it is obviously, that it takes me an awful long time, to finish the book. So, this morning, I started to wonder, why that was the case, and the first answer was: this book is demanding. You can not just read it. It often reads like a scientists paper in art history. Many informations on places, she lived, the artists and circles, whom one could encounter there, pages and pages of descriptions of her paintings, which I would rather expect from a catalogue of a workshop, not from a biography. The book is often filled with knowledge, which did not help me personally, to understand Agnes Martin. Fact is: she grew more and more distant. Constructions considering her mental illness (schizophrenia), which probably are researched impeccably, but still, the artist remained distant, like somebody without feelings. It all read like theory. No life in this. Maybe, this has to do with her shyness. She didn't leave much for biographers to search through.

Yesterday evening though, I read the part about Agnes Martins own writing (she always wrote by hand, because she preferred a quiet and a very simple life, and a typewriter would have been noisy). I found this one sentence, which totally touched me, to which I absolutely could relate:

„Now I am very clear,
that the object is freedom.“

The rest of my review is here: <http://lobedentag.blogspot.de/2017/02...>

Luci says

Interesting discussions about theory, art criticism and from that perspective, not badly written...except I was not interested in reading about that. Perhaps some biographies should not be written. Best to read her writings and view her paintings...not read about them.

Stephanie Blair says

Favorite Quote: "It is better to go to the beach and think about painting than it is to be painting and thinking about going to the beach."

Bill Wells says

While I did end up enjoying this book, there were places that I felt like the author was stretching her material to fill in what was a very private life.

Pat says

A good source for a scholar studying this fascinatingly eccentric painter whose work mesmerizes me. However, it is a hard read with all its detail, and I still don't feel I understand what drove her to adopt her iconic style.

Sarah Schulman says

Beautifully written, very respectful and comprehending of the artist's conflicts and contradictions, except for sexuality and relationships. Martin's emotional, sexual, and interior life deserved as much attention as the psychology and emotionality of her artwork in order to reveal the connections or refusals between the two. I enjoyed reading the book and learned a great deal. Take away: Harmony Hammond's comment that Martin was "Right-Wing", and anti-abortion, and the author's insight that her reclusivity in the natural world was not related to environmentalism - one finishes the book feeling that Martin was disconnected.

Louise Silk says

great information about all of the artists of her time and what living an artist's life was like then. Also, interesting insight into her style of minimalist painting.

Renee says

A stunning exploration of Martin's life, influences, and art. A nuanced masterpiece.
