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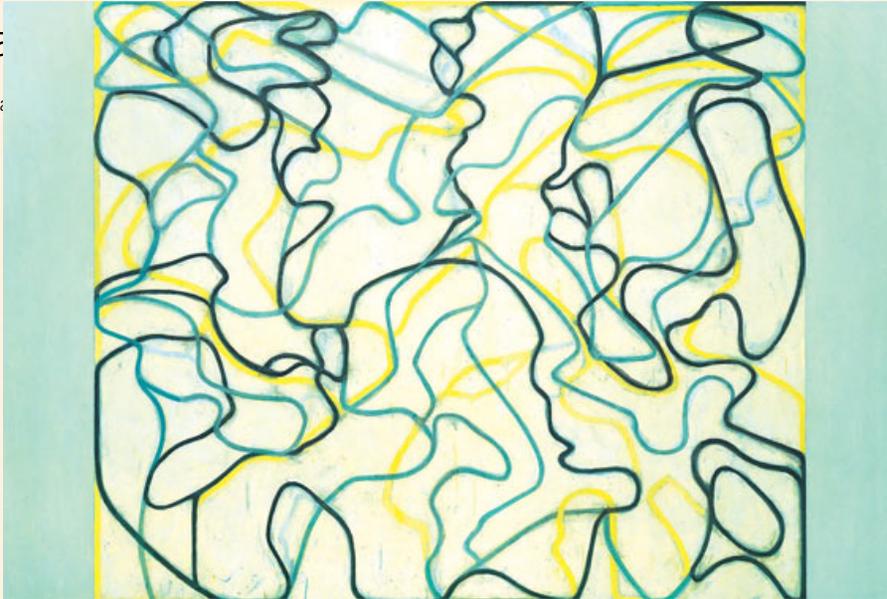
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## Brice Marden talks about his early minimalist works, his mid-career rebirth and why he's still trying to get better and better

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'Epitaph Painting I' (1996-1997)

At 6.15pm on a drizzly Monday, dozens of people are queuing in front of Tate Modern in London. Above, the rainclouds are swelling to a brooding, luminous pewter not dissimilar from the shade used by [Brice Marden](#) for his early monochrome paintings. Exhibited in mid-1960s New York, they set Marden on the road to becoming, in the words of New Yorker critic Peter Schjeldahl in 2006 “the most profound abstract painter of the past four decades”.

Certainly, he is an artist for whom you willingly wait in the rain. He is at Tate to launch the American Artist Lecture Series, a three-year cycle of talks organised by Tate and the US Art in Embassies programme, which borrows artworks to adorn those buildings. Hosting a crowd that ranges from art students to the US ambassador, Louis Susman, and his wife Marjorie, a collector of Marden's work, the packed auditorium is a snapshot of the art world at its most eclectic.

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No one straddles the divide between institutional power and imaginative liberty more beguilingly than Marden. As he takes the

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podium, his trademark black woollen hat tugged down over bitter-chocolate eyes, silvery hair curling over a black jacket and cobalt-blue shirt, he exudes Springsteen-like glamour. Little wonder Gap snapped him up for an advertising campaign in 2006.

Rock-star looks aside, Marden eschews cool. In an age where so much painting is purely about itself, he remains entranced by the landscape, light and colour of the world around him. Opening his talk with a litany of hues – “misty white blue, green, yellow green, dark warmer greens, jades, soft yellow white ...” – he segues into a lyrical description of a morning spent reading poetry with his wife in their garden on the Greek island of Hydra.

If more conceptually minded listeners are shocked by such romanticism, it doesn't show. At the end, following a Q&A with Tate director

Nicholas Serota, a posse of youngsters crowds round to pay homage.

The following morning I meet Marden in the bar of Claridge's, where he is staying with his wife Helen, who is also a painter, and daughter Mirabelle, a photographer.

Hatless now, and with his jacket exchanged for a faded hoodie, his shy charisma is undimmed. Settling back against the plum-velvet sofa, he orders orange juice in his laconic East Coast growl, clearly relishing the absence of further public speaking engagements. “I don't like to say much,” he murmurs, adding that a friend of his daughter's in the audience, “was shocked that I got up there and talked. She thought I was totally incapable of more than a sentence.”

Now in his 75th year, Marden has new work on show at the Matthew Marks gallery in New York. But his reputation was sealed by an acclaimed career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 2006, and in May 2008 his painting “Cold Mountain I (Path)” (1988-1989) fetched nearly \$10m at Sotheby's.

Though he considers himself “very much” an American artist, he moves between four residences located in the Hudson river valley, Pennsylvania, the Caribbean island of Nevis, and Hydra. Yet success has failed to erase a reticence that stems, perhaps, from his youth in a “very, very middle-middle-class family” in a “nice suburb” of New York where there was zero preparation for life as an artist. Teaching himself to draw from a book, he defied the Ivy League expectations of his father and won a place at the Boston University College of Fine Arts.

After completing the masters programme at Yale in 1963, where students included Richard Serra and Chuck Close, he moved to New York. Married to Joan Baez's sister Pauline, and with a baby son Nicholas, he lived with his family “in the depths of the lower East Side [on] \$50 a week”.

A spell in Paris resulted in separation from Pauline and his return to New York. “Your whole life changed,”



Brice Marden in his trademark black woollen hat at Tate Modern this

he recalls now, slipping, as he often does, into the second-person singular to distance himself from this painful time. Yet he never suffered the existential anguish that afflicted Jackson Pollock and [Mark Rothko](#). “I was never a tormented person. I mean, you have rough times. There was a lot of posing, sitting in bars, drinking.” He pauses. “I did a lot of drinking. We all did.”

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He did a lot of thinking too. His favourite haunt was the Park Avenue bar, Max’s Kansas City, a legendary hang-out for artists, musicians and photographers where the patron would let “you run a tab or pay with a work of art”. In long conversations over pitchers of wine with Park Place artist David Novros – “still a very good friend” – and Carl Andre – “just beginning to make really great work ... smart, well-spoken, unbelievably instructive” – Marden nourished the vision that would lead to his breakthrough monochromes.

Shown in the Bykert gallery in 1966, their mute, matte skins saw him hailed a minimalist. Yet such clues as the expressive titles betrayed him as only a distant relation to, say, Frank Stella, who famously declared, “What you see is what you see.” His true inspiration was metaphysics. “The Spaniards depicted reality and then they tried to go beyond it,” he recalls, referring to the Old Masters for whom he had developed a passion. “What I loved about Zurbarán was that he would paint these silks and they would become like steel ... Jasper Johns, who was a big influence, was doing a very similar thing. There was this whole question about what’s real.”



\*The Propitious Garden of Plane Image, First Version (2000-2005)

Despite his questing imagination, for the next 20 years Marden rejected gesture in favour of smooth chromatic panels. By the 1980s, his vision trapped within geometric surfaces that recalled the sealed portals of Greek temples, critics were accusing him of mannerism. Searching for new ideas, he travelled to Asia. There, he discovered the tools – Chinese poetry, scholars’ rocks, Zen gardens – that would deliver him from his painterly endgame. “It was like a rebirth,” he recalls.

Inspired by the graceful, visual rhythms of eastern calligraphy, he started to cover large canvases in loops and lattices, scrubbed, scraped and obsessively re-inscribed until they resembled radiant, sheared-off slabs of marble. This time, critics applauded him for proffering a subtle, exquisite alternative to the macho posturings of neo-expressionist painting.

Given the vital, mineral-like energy of his later canvases, it comes as little surprise that Marden endows painting with supernatural power. “Walking into the Acropolis museum, watching the light streaming in [hitting] these sculptures, this smooth marble that’s supposed to be flesh ... ” he hesitates, dark eyes darting this way and that. “One of the things you always think is that you could make a sculpture that would become alive. Or a painting that would cure diseases.”

Before dismissing this as new age mysticism, it’s worth remembering that Marden emerged out of a generation of abstractionists, from Yves Klein – who was also influenced by eastern philosophy – to [Mark Rothko, for whom art was a gateway to transcendence](#). It was an era, too, when artists felt a John-Berger-like duty to bite

the hand that fed. “I used to say, ‘Art has power and energy and the reason that rich people want to buy it is because they want to control that power. [That’s why] they put it in museums, behind glass.’”

Today, you sense that he struggles to reconcile a still-rebellious soul with his status as abstraction’s éminence grise. “You start out as a radical in some Lower East Side dump in front of a painting that seems to have arrived from nowhere,” he sighs remembering the heady, early days when “no one really gave a damn” what he was doing. “Either they ignore you or they over-accept you.”

With a career that spans art’s seismic shift from cottage industry to investment market, he is intensely conscious of the dangers of selling out. “You can just go for the money!” he gives a hoarse bark of laughter as if facing down a fierce, inner black dog. “I can do more shows, use more assistants. But I am too old-fashioned.” His refusal to “churn them out” sees his most recent painting, a 37ft, five-panel canvas entitled “Moss Sutra”, a year in the making and “still not happening”.

Simultaneously patriarch and revolutionary, he is torn between the desire to make work that will assure his legacy as one of the modern greats, and provide for his family. “My wife says that my mantra is, ‘I’m not getting enough work done and we don’t have any money.’ There’s this whole thing about late work. Some guys just blossom. Titian is the great example, he just got better and better. You just have to keep trying to do that.”

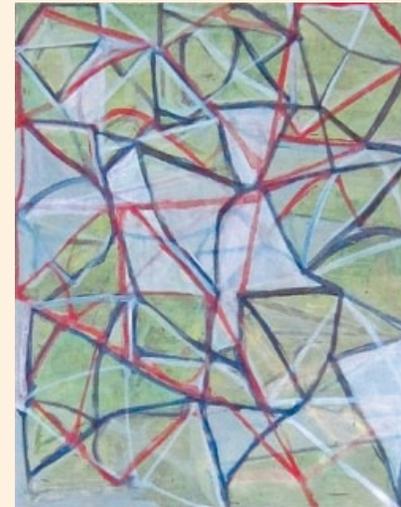
It seems an appropriate moment for a blonde-haired embassy official to shepherd him away for his next appointment. He gives me a shy smile then pats his head and dashes upstairs, appalled that he has ventured out in public without his hat.

That night, I attend a reception at Winfield House, the US ambassadorial residence in Regent’s Park. Four works by Marden – two oils, two drawings – shine among a spectacular collection of American postwar paintings by artists such as Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Ad Reinhardt. Particularly lovely is a work on paper by Marden that belongs to the Susmans themselves. A briar-like tangle of red and black ink, it shimmers above the stately dining-room table like a timeless, deliquescent icon. Perhaps Marden is right and power is, essentially, always at odds with art. If so, he should be proud that here at least, the competition is too close to call.

*The next in the American Artist Lecture Series will be the Chinese-American sculptor Maya Lin, at Tate Modern in October 2012*

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‘Untitled 3’ (1986-1987)

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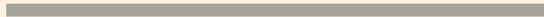
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