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Text: Front Row Interview with Brice Marden

Voiceover: From the likes of Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, Brice Marden emerged as one of the stars of the New York art scene of the early 1960s. Unlike many of his pop peers of the time, Marden made his name with abstract works, in particular large, austere monochrome paintings. Five decades on and those who made their art in derelict warehouses are now hung in national galleries and collected by billionaires. Last night, Brice Marden delivered a lecture at the Tate Modern, part of the Art in Embassies program organized by the American government. This morning I met him at the official residence of the U.S. ambassador where Brice Marden's hang alongside Warhols and Rothkos. He told me about the inspiration behind those early monochrome paintings.

Marden: The first monochromatic paintings I made, I had just returned from Paris. And they were cleaning up Paris and I would spend hours watching them re-stuccoing walls. Start at the top, work down to the bottom, there would be this accumulation of splashes at the bottom. I came back to New York, I was painting, I was trying to make grid paintings and they never quite were working so I would paint out half of it and one night I just painted the whole thing out and I had a monochromatic painting. And it's related to the walls that I was watching them—I mean, you'd see them working this, so you'd know that there was like this physical involvement, and then you're thinking, you know, is this valid? Is this a picture?

Interviewer: But you say there you were interested in the physicality, you were looking at these men painting on a large scale and thinking back to that time when you emerged and those kind of artists that you were working alongside in New York, the work of Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg and Rothko and a lot of people, there was a lot of physical of physicality to the painting that was happening at the time, wasn't there?

Marden: Well yeah, but all of those guys, you weren't working with them, they were like the—

Interviewer: No, but there was a shared aesthetic (laughter) among all those very different painters, different artists.

Marden: There was a shared aesthetic, but you were trying to set up your own aesthetic. And Jasper was a huge influence on my work, you know. I was a guard at the Jewish Museum, I was guarding the Jasper Johns retrospective. I was in the room with the big white painting all day long and with all his all these earlier works so I really knew the work. It was real. I'm not considering it as pop art, it was realism. And I thought what I was making was just as real but it didn't represent anything.

Interviewer: But let me take you back to being a guard at the Jewish Museum and sitting in that room for hours on end with Jasper Johns paintings—

Marden: I had to stand (laughs) You didn't sit, you had to stand.

Interviewer: Did you know him, did you get to know him?

Marden: He came in one day and he was cleaning the white flag, started dusting it off. But you know you don't just like walk up and chat with Jasper. (laughs) You know? I mean, I was quite intimidated.

Interviewer: But you got to know because you were working for Robert Rauschenberg so was he, again, very different artist, what did you learn from him as his studio assistant?

Marden: Well, Rauschenberg was just brilliant. I'd come in in the morning and make coffee, you know, cleaning up after the dogs.

Interviewer: You didn't actually sit down and make art together, you didn't help him—

Marden: I worked on one... my job basically was to make it to have everything the way that he needed it to make stuff. And he usually worked at night and I worked during the day. But there is this thing that's kind of a tradition you know where you're doing okay, you hire younger artists to work for you and it's just good for them to be around the stuff. It's not that you're teaching them or anything, it's not the apprentice system.

Interviewer: Of course you then had success, you had acclaim, you had your own shows, you made your mark and people associated you with those big dramatic monochrome paintings. And then there was a very dramatic change in your style and you had the cold mountains series of paintings which were more gestural, free flowing, series of lines on canvas, again monumental in size. That was influenced by Chinese calligraphy, then?

Marden: Yeah, yeah. Because I'd been trying to get more drawing into the painting. And it had to do with you're making a monochromatic panel and I was drawing very severe straight strokes with I use a big sort of pallet knife, it was like a cooking spatula. It just wasn't reading, and I wanted more drawing in the painting. And the calligraphy was a way to do that and I just had to figure out how to do it. And this was from the first show that I had with Mary after I went through that change.

Interviewer: Now you're pointing to a painting on the wall. We're sitting in Winfield House, which is the American ambassador's residence, and we're sitting here with Marjorie Susman who is the ambassador's wife who curates the art in this house and there are a lot of artists, American artists, great names, and your painting, the one that you're pointing to, is hanging here in the state dining room. So this is an early example of the cold mountain series. First of all, could you have imagined when you were first painting, scratching around in lofts in New York, several decades ago, that your painting would be hanging here in the American ambassador's residence?

Marden: No, not really (laughs). Well, you have these sort of things, well, what could happen, but you know, you don't plan on it (laughs).

Interviewer: But proud that it is here?

Marden: Oh this is great! Proud, you can't get proud, it's dangerous—

Interviewer: Pride is dangerous.

Marden: But no, I never would have expected this and I'm very happy that it's here.

Interviewer: This is Marjorie Susman. This is one of your favorite paintings, isn't it, it hangs—

Susman: It's one of my favorite paintings from one of my favorite artists, so I am proud that it is hanging here. We put this collection, the whole collection together with the Art in Embassy program of the State Department, with pressure on some of my special friends to help and one, a woman named Agnes Gund, said come to my house and take whatever you want, and I took four pieces and the first thing I grabbed was this Brice Marden painting. And it was probably bold to put it here, I think one of the things I worried most about was what would Brice Marden think if he saw his painting hanging in this room with all this gilt paint and crystal chandeliers—

Interviewer: Well we should just set the scene because there is exactly the gilt lining everywhere. A beautiful long, what is this a mahogany table?

Susman: Right.

Interviewer: Very long, with about eight chairs at either side, carpeted. And the first thing to say about the painting is it does chime with the color scheme in here because predominantly there are muted greens some grays and some red lines within those geometric predominantly triangles that Brice Marden has created on there. But that's really the only thing that chimes with the style, isn't it?

Susman: Well, actually, it had nothing to do with the color, I guess these gray blue walls they were here and there was no changing them. But I think the great moment for me was when we hosted a return state dinner, a state dinner for the Queen, Her Majesty the Queen, when President Obama and Mrs. Obama were here visiting. They were all dining under this magnificent Brice Marden painting. And it was just an incredible moment for me.

Interviewer: We should ask Brice what he thinks about this, because you weren't here to share this moment were you, your painting was, you were represented by your work. Did you know about that, have you heard that story?

Marden: I heard, Matthew told me, my dealer told me about it. You know, this kind of political power, this financial power, because also art has power. Quite often you get the financial system, the political system, really tries to negate the power of art. And it's really great to have a painting in some sort of position where it's allowed to try to do its work.

Interviewer: So sitting in this room you've had presidents, prime ministers, heads of state—

Marden: Yeah I don't think anybody went home and said "I'm going to change the world" (laughs)

Interviewer: But they couldn't avoid it, though, they couldn't ignore it.