

BRICE MARDEN: PRINTS, 1973-2010



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To cover a 37-year span of Brice Marden prints in a private gallery is not easy. The selection of the painter's etchings and woodcuts at Barbara Krakow Gallery through January 21st connects fewer dots than one might wish along his curve of artistic maturation. The pressure at mid-life which produced Marden's sea-change from hard-edged minimalist to latter-day abstract expressionist must nearly be taken on faith.

Still, these close-knit works, both intimate and subtle, are gratifying as well as instructive. And given MOMA's inexplicable exclusion of his prints from the artist's 2006 retrospective, consideration of this missing link is indispensable. For Marden's dedication to printmaking is neither convenience nor afterthought, but an oeuvre in itself and an essential early pathway for thought confirmed later in his painting.

If ever an artist were hemmed in by a "signature style," it was Marden in the late 1970s. Yet, viewed solely in terms of his paintings, his about-face appears unaccountable. For two decades he had mapped the perceptual phenomena at the surface and edges of his monochrome canvases and modular panels. What makes one break from such close focus into an ecstasy of visual, bodily and coloristic flux?

Marden's calligraphic "Cold Mountain" paintings of the early 1980s had both non-painting antecedents and study aforethought -- family up-

heaval, Asian travel, a passionate encounter with Chinese poetry and writing, and a yearning to meld both the spiritual and the real in nature. Discovering a new matte painting solvent also freed him from his commitment to turgid, wax-imbued oil surfaces.

While fluidity and drama effervesced for years in his direct drawing and workbooks, it appears the printer's studio was where Marden could experience the optimal risk for processing new stimuli. Etching, as he stated to Pat Steir in a 1991 interview, was "something between drawing and painting," involving "more physical resistance" than drawing. It offered a safe intermediate space in which to explore and practice. As he acknowledged, "Things have happened in the etchings that go back into the paintings."

The "Adriatics" series (1973) offers a window into Marden's evolution. In these vertical rectangle-over-rectangle aquatints, resembling paintings of the time, Marden references a marine setting by delineating a horizon between lower and upper blocks. In two of the prints, thin ruled grids in different scales texturally contrast these sections. In one, the wider-spaced grid knits the upper plane while the narrower grid locks down the lower plane. In a companion print, the over-under relation is reversed. Three other prints explore a more dramatic value contrast, with a white upper panel opposing a black one below. The inking retained by repeated applications of acid biting into the plate is

further intensified by incised lines. To distinguish the upper rectangle from the surrounding blank sheet, Marden outlines, smudges and scratches it, even dragging diagonals across. Like his scraped and built-up monochrome paintings of that decade, these panels are not mute but hum with presence.

As a young father in the late '70s, Marden's irregular passions were emerging everywhere, even as the paintings lagged. In works on paper, prints and even marble slabs, Marden was relenting about the primacy of the edge. His modular paintings begin to reference the post-and-lintel architecture near his summer home on the Greek isle of Hydra. His prints echo these images, yet push further. In the five miniscule (4" x 4") "Focus" etchings (1979), Marden claims a tiny space in which to rest, resist and hope. Each image divides and frames two adjacent panels, vertical rectangles that read as twin doorways or potential figures. In successive images, the dark boundaries expand inward against the contracting white panels. Yet, alive and olive-green, this swelling shadow does not entirely efface the two shrinking spots of light. Its earth tone ("terre vert") breathes against the beige of the un-inked paper, and with greater compression the two bright spots paradoxically gain in drama. Perhaps what began as opposition is being reframed as symbiosis.

In skipping a decade, the exhibit drops us on the far side of Marden's makeover. By 1992, a new spirit born of calligraphic freedom is past doubting.

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By Elizabeth Michelman

The six vertical images of the "Han Shan Exit" series present crouching caryatids and preening demoiselles who revel in a swank, curvaceous sweep. In the following "After Botticelli" suite, seductively intertwined figures press against the frontal plane -- Maenads, Muses and Venuses fathered by a vast sea of studies and paintings. Each cluster conveys a distinct linear energy. Some are poised and delicate, others vibrate like dervishes and dancers contorted in unlikely arabesques. In several prints, hatching, scratching, dots and gouges overrun the ground; the figures preside in niches against the dark tone of the contained rectangle, or pulse like a network of veins beneath the surfaces, translucent according to their length of sojourn in the acid bath.

Leaping ahead another 18 years, the exhibit concludes with a pair of woodcuts from 2010. "Zen Prints #1 and #2," considerably larger than most of the other prints, reach freely like drawings toward the edges of the sheets. Figurative, like the "Han Shan" forms, these shapes appear to derive from Marden's reverence for Zen garden landscapes and "scholar stones." The nubby, earth-toned tracings drift lazily across the creamy kozo paper. The challenge of these late prints is deceptive; the ground of six or seven blocks must be gouged out to bear as many colored inks, all impressions must be kept in register, and only a few surface lines remain to bear the ink for imprint. Marden's grace comes only with great effort.

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