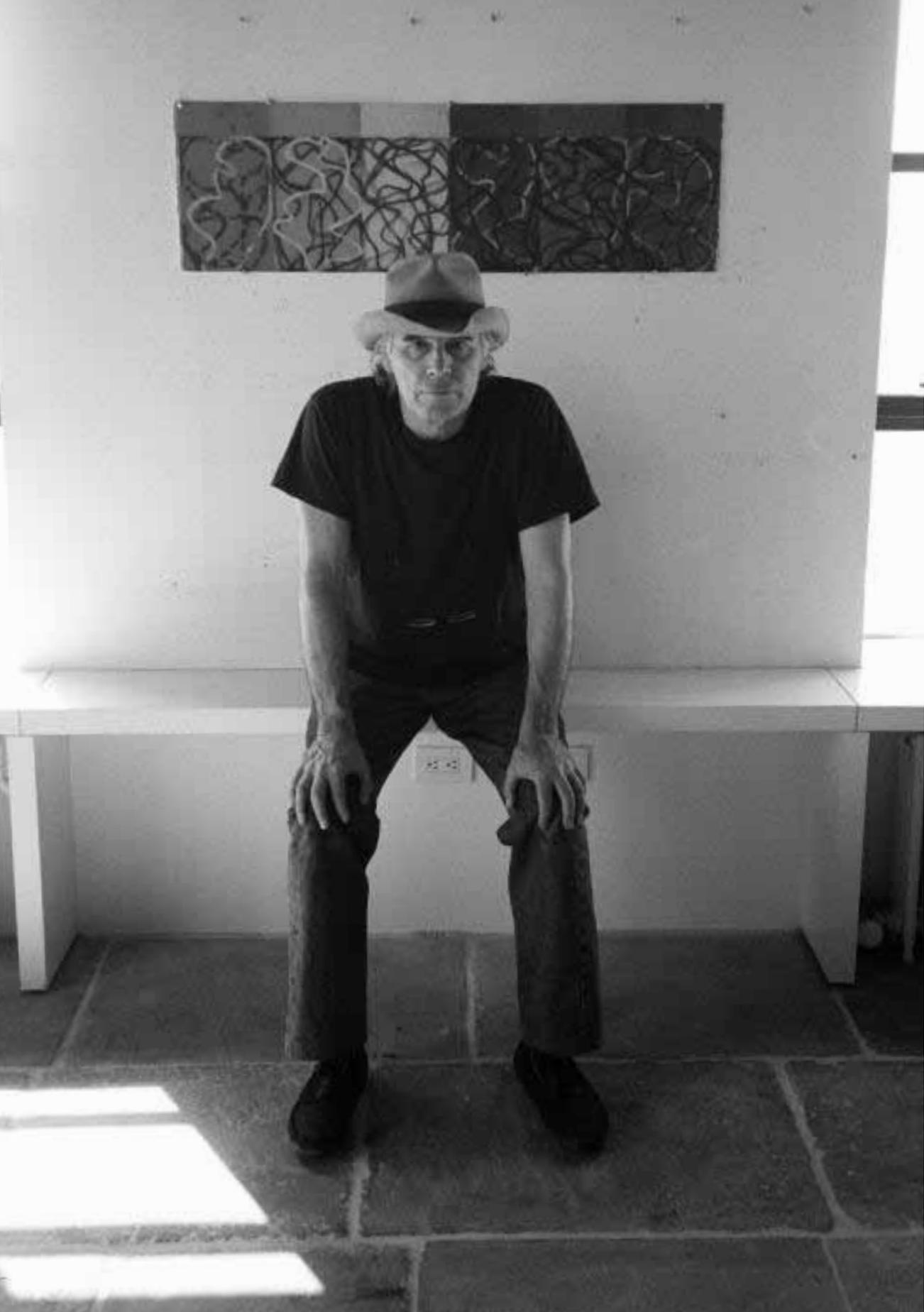


---

5	BEYOND VISUAL REALITY
7	DISCOVERING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM
23	NEW YORK: ARTISTIC IMPACTS
33	FOCUS ① THE GRID
36	FOCUS ② THE INDEX
39	OIL PAINT AND BEESWAX
54	FOCUS ③ WAX I
56	FOCUS ④ PORTRAITS
65	THE MEDITERRANEAN
70	FOCUS ⑤ THE GROVE GROUP
74	FOCUS ⑥ ART HISTORY: PLANING THE IMAGE
79	A SHIFT IN DEVELOPMENT
88	FOCUS ⑦ DRAWING WITH STICKS
92	FOCUS ⑧ SHELL DRAWINGS
95	LOOSENING THE RULES
110	FOCUS ⑨ COLD MOUNTAIN
115	CHINA-THEMED WORKS
138	FOCUS ⑩ THE PROPITIOUS GARDEN OF PLANE IMAGE
142	CHRONOLOGY
145	FURTHER READING, LIST OF WORKS

---



## BEYOND VISUAL REALITY

In 2006 on the occasion of his retrospective exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Brice Marden (b. 1938) was hailed by critic Peter Schjeldahl as 'the most profound abstract painter of the past four decades'. Among many extraordinary accolades, the MoMA show marked a particular landmark for Marden, who had explored its legendary collection when he was a teenager. Marden first gained attention in the mid-1960s with his much-admired series of intensely worked, monochromatic canvases with their sensuous surfaces of oil paint mixed with beeswax and their complex, muted colours.

There were also his early grid drawings that evolved into solid squares of rich black graphite, made all the more lustrous through alternating layers of wax that the artist carefully rubbed into the paper. Midway through his career, in the early 1980s, Marden began to introduce brighter colours as well as a greater sense of transparency into his paintings and drawings. He next invented forms based on Chinese calligraphy, which he continues to make variations on today in paintings that have become even more vibrant and further energized by serpentine-like bands that loop and weave within the confines of the rectangular canvas.

Remarkably, throughout the course of his illustrious career, amid the continuous arrival of new art forms such as Minimalism, Pop, Conceptual art, body art, environmental art, video art and installation art – styles in which artists deliberately sought to eliminate any trace of emotion in their medium – Marden never wavered from his commitment to making abstract yet frankly personal paintings. At a time when many in the art world were pronouncing painting 'dead', Marden was one of a few young painters who kept it alive. He is the rare artist of his generation who, like the Abstract Expressionists before him – against whom many of Marden's contemporaries in the 1960s and 1970s were reacting – sought to convey his *sense* of what inspired him rather than a factual illustration of that person, place or thing.

For some, Marden's work may appear blank, inaccessible and inscrutable. They may assume that it takes knowledge of theory or aesthetic doctrine to understand his seemingly single-colour paintings, his grid drawings or the more recent canvases with their 'squiggly' lines. Yet Marden's art requires no special knowledge. It simply invites onlookers to stretch their understanding of how a painting or drawing can speak of something in the world, sometimes through colour alone and often in a tint or shade we did not know existed. We are challenged to recognize that shapes and forms can register meaning even when they do not look like anything even vaguely concerned with visual reality.



---

## DISCOVERING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Brice Marden was born in 1938 in Bronxville, New York, and grew up in Briarcliff Manor, a small suburban town on the Hudson River north of Manhattan. At one point, impressed by the famous American hotelier Conrad Hilton, he entertained the idea of going into hotel management. When he was at high school a gift subscription to *Art News* from his best friend's father, Fred Sergenian – an art director at New York's leading advertising firm, Young & Rubicam, who encouraged Marden's earliest interest in art – changed all that. The art magazine introduced him to the work of the leading Abstract Expressionists – Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), Franz Kline (1910–1962), Barnett Newman (1905–1970), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970), whose work primarily insisted upon the importance of self-expression and the act of painting. This convinced him that he wanted to be an artist. As he later recalled, 'I just thought Abstract Expressionism was great. I loved it.'

In 1958 Marden enrolled at Boston University's School of Fine and Applied Arts. Although he was drawn to abstraction, the university offered very traditional, academic courses in painting, drawing, printmaking, design, lettering and the study of anatomy and perspective. He learned to draw from the model. He supplemented his art education by visiting the local museums and their superb collections of art from all ages. *Self-Portrait* is a synthesis of his early training and aspirations. Marden himself served as model, but he also fashioned himself after the German Expressionist Max Beckmann in his *Self-Portrait in a Tuxedo*, which he had seen at Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum. Like Beckmann, Marden used strong and expressive colour and divided his face into patches of light and shadow. Yet Marden also introduced a more contemporary take on the artist-hero; instead of a formal suit he wears a blue work shirt. It was the artist's uniform of the time, made popular by de Kooning. The Dutch-American Abstract Expressionist had risen from working-class beginnings in his native Rotterdam and maintained an 'artist-as-blue-collar-worker' identity throughout his life in reaction to that of the 'fine' artist and in recognition of his roots. Beckmann, dressed in a tuxedo with one arm akimbo and the other dangling a cigarette, looks more like an industrialist or a banker. He portrays himself as a commanding figure, and, indeed, he painted this self-portrait when he was at the height of his fame as one of Germany's leading avant-garde painters. Marden's gaze is as intent and unwavering as Beckmann's, and conveys a similar gravitas. As a result, this early self-portrait exudes a cool confidence and its expressive effect foretells an artist who would achieve as great a standing as that of his model.

[9]

[1]

[2]



1  
Max Beckmann (1884–1950)  
*Self-Portrait in a Tuxedo*, 1927  
Oil on canvas  
138.4 × 95.8 cm  
(54 ½ × 37 ¾ in)  
Busch-Reisinger Museum,  
Harvard University, Cambridge,  
Massachusetts

### EARLY COLOUR EXPLORATIONS

Marden studied the work of seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century masters including the French Realist Édouard Manet, who was one of his favourites. He spent a great deal of time contemplating Manet's provocative painting *The Street Singer* in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Marden later remarked that this 'was the painting I was looking at when I really started learning about colour'. *The Street Singer* depicts Manet's favourite model, Victorine Meurent, emerging from a café carrying a guitar and a cluster of red cherries wrapped in a yellow sheet of paper from which she brings a handful to her lips. The painting is cast in a soft, blond grey marked by a masterful blending of black and beige. The folds of Victorine's costume match the shadowy interior from which she emerges, giving a sense of unity to the entire composition. Marden described this painting as his 'first real colour experience', and the unusual colour registers he absorbed from looking at Manet would cause some later critics to describe his colours as 'unnameable'. Spanish painting had had a profound impact on Manet and so it deeply impressed Marden too, particularly the work of Francisco de Zurbarán. Zurbarán imbues a narrow range of colours with such emotive value that his images of monks, saints and martyrs exert a powerful effect on the viewer. Marden once remarked that the Spanish master had the ability to 'take subject matter and go beyond it in a mystical sense ... The way he would paint silk. I always imagined that he got so involved with painting the silk, he must have looked at it and painted it so carefully, so intensely, that he went beyond it and made it into something that was actually really felt or was being felt on different levels.' Zurbarán achieved what would become one of Marden's chief aspirations, which was to make his paintings highly experiential and contemplative while evoking a response from the viewer. Marden also admired the dark, dramatic colours of works by Francisco Goya (1746–1828)

[3]

[4]

2  
Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)  
in a workshirt in 1950



as well as the alternately warm and cool browns and blacks of paintings by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660). These artists greatly informed Marden's palette.

At Boston, Marden took a course on the colour theory of Josef Albers (1888–1976), which was taught by a professor who had studied with Albers at Yale University. This had a significant effect upon Marden's early colour explorations. Albers was a German-born abstract painter who, in the 1920s, taught at the prestigious Bauhaus school. He developed an exacting colour theory and teaching method that influenced generations of European and American artists. The theory was primarily concerned with how colours visually interact with one another and how colour changes in relation to its surroundings and the condition of the viewer. For Marden, whose innate understanding of colour had always been largely intuitive, Albers's theory proved too scientific for him to fully embrace. Instead, he turned to Reed Kay,



3  
Édouard Manet (1832–1883)  
*The Street Singer*, c.1862  
Oil on canvas  
171.1 × 105.8 cm  
(67 ⅜ × 41 ⅝ in)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

a highly regarded painting instructor at the university. Even though Kay was not receptive to abstract art, Marden later recalled that he had been ‘a tremendous influence’. Kay specialized in teaching centuries-old techniques of European painting, including a process whereby the artist superimposes multiple layers of paint to produce luminosity as well as other unusual chromatic effects. This technique, practised by Jan van Eyck (c.1395–1441), El Greco (1541–1614) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), among others, would become integral to Marden’s painting practice.

Marden travelled regularly from Boston to New York, where he had more opportunity to see Abstract Expressionist exhibitions. As much as he liked their work, however, he claimed that he did not always understand what he was looking at, ‘I would be standing in front of these paintings trying to figure them out, and I realized that what I liked about Abstract Expressionism was that it didn’t pay to get terribly analytical about it. It was better if you just went with the painting.’ Under the spell of a new influence, Franz Kline, another important member of the New York School of Abstract Expressionists, Marden made *Quaquaversals* in the summer of 1961. It is one of his earliest abstract paintings. With its bold and energetic black brushstrokes cast upon a bone-white background, Marden’s *Quaquaversals* evokes any number of Kline’s celebrated black-and-white paintings, which he had become famous for in the 1950s. The young artist readily intuited Kline’s ability to marshal an internal force that not only drives the composition, but displays the vitality of the gesture. In December of that year he saw Kline’s *Zinc Door* at the famed Sidney Janis Gallery during one of his trips to New York, which made such an impression on him that he later responded with a series of five charcoal drawings directly inspired by the painting.



4  
Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664)  
*Saint Francis*, c.1640–5  
Oil on canvas  
207 × 106.7 cm (81 ½ × 42 in)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

5  
Franz Kline (1910–1962)  
*Zinc Door*, 1961  
Oil on canvas  
235 × 172.1 cm  
(92 ½ × 67 ¾ in)  
Private collection



### PAINTINGS TO BE FELT

In the summer of 1961, just after he graduated from Boston, Marden was among the few young artists invited to attend the highly selective Yale Summer School of Music and Art, in Norfolk, Connecticut. There he was able to devote himself to painting whatever he felt without any restrictions. Marden was an inquisitive student and he looked to a variety of sources as he honed his talent. Like many artists before him and since, Marden was greatly influenced by the French Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, who was obsessed with the idea of infusing his work with personal expression – as he famously said, ‘I paint as I see and as I feel, and I have very strong feelings.’ At Yale Summer School, Marden completed a number of Cézannesque paintings including *Norfolk*. Like Cézanne – who painted *Mont Sainte-Victoire* over sixty times – Marden would never stop painting from nature, be it a still life, a portrait or a landscape. Yet for both these artists, the aim was not to portray an exact likeness of what they were seeing, but rather to convey, as Cézanne put it, his ‘sensations’ of what he was seeing. The way in which Cézanne avoided representational painting was by recording the pictorial equivalents or visual aspects of his sensory impressions. ‘To paint after nature is not a matter of copying the objective world, it’s giving shape to your sensations,’ he claimed. His landscapes, while manifestly natural, arouse profoundly abstract sensations. Similarly, Marden would describe his paintings as ‘highly emotional ... not to be admired for any technical or intellectual reason but to be felt’. While his art is personal, it beckons the viewer to reflect upon his or her own perceptions, knowledge and experience.

In the autumn of 1961 Marden began Yale University’s prestigious graduate programme at the School of Art and Architecture, where, under the direction of broad-minded teachers, his work became increasingly more abstract. He later said, ‘Eventually I just gave up painting the figure; I think I started



6  
Paul Cézanne (1839–1906)  
*Rocks in the Forest*, 1890s  
Oil on canvas  
73.3 × 92.4 cm  
(28 7/8 × 36 3/8 in)  
The Metropolitan Museum  
of Art, New York

one self-portrait [at Yale] and then I just stopped.’ Yet Marden’s work had become so closely aligned with that of the Abstract Expressionists, especially Kline and de Kooning, that a teacher at Yale challenged him to break with their style. Marden remembered thinking, ‘That’s really what it’s about, you’ve got to learn to paint like yourself.’

#### BLATANTLY SIMPLE COLOUR SHAPE STATEMENTS

During his first year at Yale Marden turned to making paintings and drawings that relied solely on shape and colour. He later described these works as ‘blatantly simple colour shape statements’. He worked primarily with greys, as he would up until the early 1970s, not just because of his reaction to Albers’s method, but because this seemingly simple colour challenged him to explore and investigate its complexity. But ‘blatantly simple’ it is not, for Marden’s grey can take on many guises. There is dull and ghostly grey, snowy dusk-grey, slate, lead, and silvery grey. Grey can also be made into different colours, which as Marden later said, was what he liked about it – how you could make it be grey and also be red. Or how a grey could turn itself green. Working with different shades of grey allowed Marden to play with the idea of ambiguity (referencing the phrase, ‘that’s a grey area’). He found it especially appealing because ambiguity, which allows for a multiplicity of meanings, is central to much of Abstract Expressionism. De Kooning’s drawings and paintings of women, for example, can be read as either figurative or abstract. Grey offered Marden a way to remain committed to Abstract Expressionism, yet not look like de Kooning. Grey also suggests mystery, and this, Marden believes, is one of painting’s essential components.

As for shape, Marden worked primarily with the rectangle, which he divided vertically and horizontally into four individual quadrants. By limiting himself to the spatial and structural limits of the rectangle, Marden was free to concentrate on complex colour combinations and the effect of one shape

[13]

or colour meeting the edge of another. It was important for Marden to investigate the fact that a painting is a flat surface, as opposed to the age-old idea of a painting as a ‘transparent window’ through which one observes the world. Marden was striving for emotional intensity and formal simplicity rather than pictorial illusion. He became very involved with his materials, applying the paint in short, rapid strokes, using the size and the shape of the canvas to determine the length and width of his marks. He built up thick layers of paint or applied successive coats of charcoal or graphite to the paper so that his medium defined the surface in such a way that it emphasized the physicality of the art object. By asserting their materiality, he affirmed that his works were paintings and drawings rather than magic windows that transported the beholder elsewhere from what was actually visible: paint and canvas, or charcoal or graphite and paper.

#### EXPRESSIVE PRINTMAKING

Printmaking was to become an integral component of Marden’s artistic practice. He began making woodcuts and etchings at Boston University, many of which reflect his study of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Cubism, as well as his interest in Cézanne. At school Marden had encountered a reproduction of Cézanne’s *Bathers* in an art history book. A semblance of the image of *Bathers* first found its way into one of Marden’s early etchings, and it continues to intrigue him to this day.

Marden’s prints are as highly personal and expressive as his paintings and drawings. He primarily makes etchings, perhaps because the technique of printmaking – incising a metal plate with acid – allows him to exploit the unique physical properties and materials involved in the process. While etching is not a complicated technique, it is a highly exacting approach to printmaking and one that was relatively rare in the United States at this time. Marden was making sophisticated etchings as early as 1963. One of these is *Watsonville*, a print that takes its name from a small town north of Monterey,

[7]

[14]

[12]

[15]

7  
Paul Cézanne, *Bathers*, c.1894–1905  
Oil on canvas  
127.2 × 196.1 cm (50 × 77 1/4 in)  
The National Gallery, London



California, known for its great fields of artichokes that grow in a lush valley. Marden was driving through Watsonville at dusk en route to Carmel, where he was staying that summer with his sister-in-law, the folk singer Joan Baez. An approaching storm began to darken the sky and the atmosphere took on that strange glow that often appears just before a thunderstorm breaks. Amid the browns and greens of the artichoke fields and the peculiar light, Marden was transported back to a sensation he had felt in 1958 of actually being *in* a Mark Rothko painting, as he was in the Sidney Janis Gallery looking at *Browns*. Standing directly in front of the massive canvas, he felt enveloped by its earth tones and bathed in the glow of its radiant, yellow-white core. As a prominent collector of Rothko's paintings, Duncan Phillips (founder of the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC) observed, 'the weather [Rothko's] colours create can be ominous.'

*Watsonville* is as abstract as Rothko's canvas, and yet Marden captured a similar effect of changing atmospheric light and luminescence without the use of colour. Light appears to make its way through the dense mesh of black lines that crisscross the upper register, while tightly drawn lines fan out in the lower two rectangles like light rays. Light – how it affects him and how he interprets and translates it into his work – would become a dominant theme for Marden. Once again Rothko helped him realize its potential, 'If there was a "eureka" moment, it was in front of Rothko.'



8  
 Mark Rothko (1903-1970)  
*Browns*, 1957  
 Oil on canvas  
 233.7 × 195.6 cm  
 (92 × 77 in)  
 Samuel and Ronnie  
 Heyman, New York

[8]

[15]



9  
*Self-Portrait*, 1959  
 Oil on canvas  
 86.3 × 61 cm (34 × 24 in)  
 Collection of the artist



10  
*Norfolk*, 1961  
Oil on canvas  
58.4 × 43.2 cm (23 × 17 in)  
Private collection



11  
*Quaquaversals*, 1961  
Oil on canvas  
83.8 × 61 cm (33 × 24 in)  
Private collection

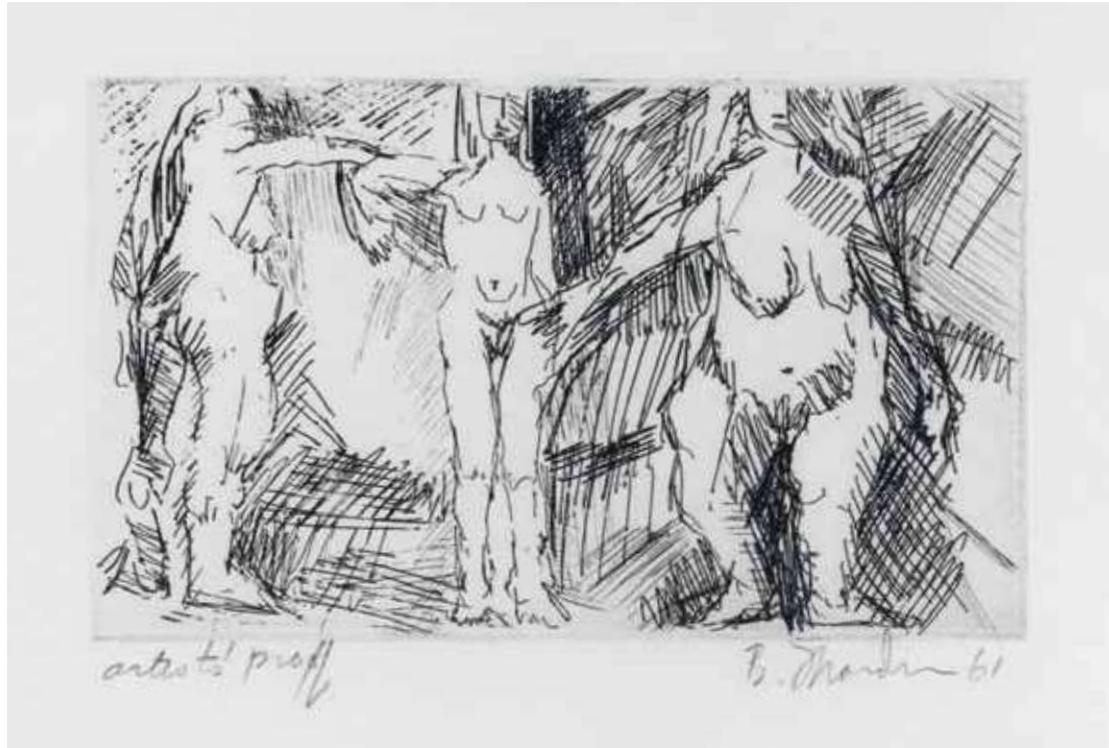


12  
*Number 1, 1962*  
 Oil and beeswax on canvas  
 45.7 × 57.1 cm (18 × 22 ½ in)  
 Collection of the artist



13  
*Untitled, 1962-3*  
 Charcoal and graphite on paper  
 36.8 × 46.4 cm (14 ½ × 18 ¼ in)  
 Private collection

Marden used compressed charcoal, graphite and a kneaded eraser to achieve rich yet subtle shades of black and grey in his early 'quartered' drawings. He regards his drawings, many of which are as gestural as his paintings, as artistic statements of themselves rather than a study or 'something on the way towards something else'.



14  
*Untitled*, 1961  
Etching on ivory wove paper  
12.6 × 18.1 cm (5 × 7 1/8 in)  
Private collection



15  
*Watsonville*, 1963  
Etching on ivory wove paper  
14.6 × 10.9 cm (5 3/4 × 4 3/16 in)  
Private collection