

# Overview

## PAT STEIR AND AGNES MARTIN

### No Pretensions

*An excerpt from a memoir in progress*  
by Kathan Brown

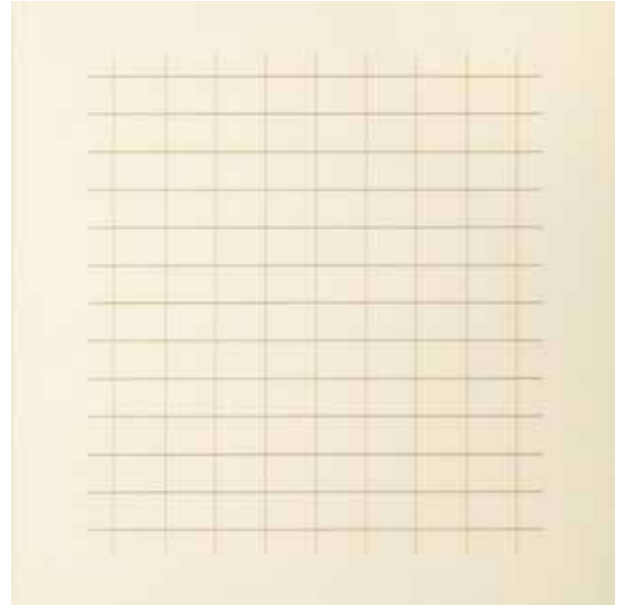
On a winter afternoon in 1972, I was talking with Bob Feldman in his New York office when a big-boned woman with short gray-streaked hair walked in, and Bob introduced me to Agnes Martin. I had heard the Agnes Martin legend and, like all the artists I knew, admired her paintings: horizontal stripes, wavering lines, or grids in soft pure colors. The paintings had been in exhibitions, but Martin herself had been absent from New York for the previous five years.

Agnes Martin had moved to New Mexico and built a house with her own hands. Then she built a studio. Just as she was ready to begin painting again, she had received a letter from Bob Feldman inviting her to make prints. He suggested etchings—he was going to send her to Crown Point—but she had a particular problem she wanted to solve. She wanted the printer to straighten out her lines, which she said she could never paint straight enough. She had seen some silk screen prints she liked, and that was the medium she wanted to use.

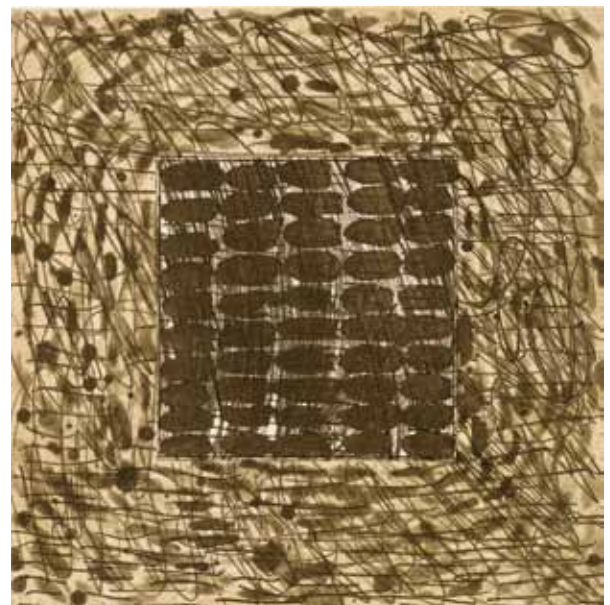
When I met her, she had already made thirty drawings in squares all the same size using grids, lines, and bands in light gray ink. These were maquettes for the print portfolio eventually titled *On a Clear Day*. Feldman had sent them to Edition Domberger in Stuttgart, Germany, a respected silk screen printer, which had made proofs, straightening out her lines, and sent them to Bob. Martin was in New York on the way to Stuttgart to finalize the color and the paper, neither of which were right. Bob planned to fly with her and leave her there if necessary. He would have to return after just a day, he told me.

I said he should stay as long as she did. I was pretty sure one day wouldn't be enough, and I thought that after being in New Mexico for five years without much company she would need support in Germany. Bob said I was right and asked me to go along. That was how Feldman did things. I hadn't even known he was working with Agnes Martin until I happened to visit on the day she arrived, and all of a sudden I was on the telephone getting my passport sent express from home.

In the years Agnes had been in New Mexico, she told me, she had been able to have conversation only occasionally with old friends who searched her out in the desert. She was disappointed to learn later that at least one couple returned to New York without finding her. Those were the days before cell phones, but even if her searching friends had had such things, Agnes had no phone.



Agnes Martin, *On a Clear Day*, 1973. From a portfolio of 30 screenprints. 15 x 15 inches. Edition 50. Printed by Edition Domberger. Published by Parasol Press.



Pat Steir, *Drawing Lesson, Part I, Line*, 1978. From a portfolio of seven sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with drypoint printed in brown. 11¾-x-11¾-inch image on 16-x-16-inch sheet. Edition 25.

When she wrote to me, later, she printed the words “no phone” beneath her return address.

In the desert, when she wanted to talk, she said, she had talked to a lizard that stayed unafraid at her building site. She had built the house truly by herself, only occasionally hiring a teenage boy from a nearby farm when she needed to set beams or do some other work that required two people. Not having had anyone to talk to for five years, she talked a lot to me in Germany. I started to think she could read my mind, because when it would wander, I thought she would alter the conversation to start talking about what I had been thinking about.

It was snowing in Stuttgart, and I was not dressed warmly enough. I can still visualize a country path we walked every day in the snow to get to the shop. The people at Domberger spoke English and were wonderful to us. Their method of operation was to trace artists’ drawings and cut them into film that they adhered on screens printed semi-automatically by a machine tended by people. There was no artist’s studio, but the director loaned Agnes his office so she could pin up proofs and look quietly at them. The only place to pin them was the back of the door, which occasionally opened, but it worked out all right.

The paper was the tricky part, but we ended up with a sheet that took the ink in the right way; adjusting the exact shade of gray was reasonably fast once Agnes had settled on the paper. We were there about a week. As we were leaving, both of us thanked everyone at the shop profusely, and Agnes, shaking hands, saying good-bye, added reflectively, quietly, “You are all such wonderful people. I can’t understand how you could have done those things to the Jews.” I said something different very quickly, hoping they hadn’t heard or understood the English. They didn’t act as though they had.

I, myself, have been told that “sometimes your mouth speaks without your brain’s involvement.” I think it happened in Agnes’s case because of spending a lot of time alone. It happens to me mostly when I’m heeding the “secret” of this chapter: no pretensions. Pretensions are the skins of second-guessing, and shedding them is not always advisable. But hasn’t nearly every thinking person (including every thinking German) at one time or another asked Agnes’s question, if only in his or her own mind? I showed an early draft of this chapter to Pat Steir and asked if she thought I should include Agnes’s question. “What the Germans did is so monstrous,” I said. “I don’t believe it could ever happen again.”

“We could do something like it,” she replied. “A lot of money right now is pouring into trying to develop a massive cult mentality here.”

When I began this chapter, I had intended to focus it wholly on Pat Steir, a mainstay of our Crown Point artist group and a long-term friend and influence on me. But when I began thinking about Steir, Agnes Martin came into my mind, and I started there. Pat often says in interviews that Agnes Martin, John Cage, and Sol LeWitt, all of whom she knew, are her three major influences.

Pat Steir was born in 1938 in Newark, New Jersey, with the name Iris Patricia Sukoneck. Her father’s parents were Jewish immigrants from Russia. Their children became lawyers and accountants, she says, except her father, who went to art school and ended up

with a business designing window displays and neon signs. Her mother’s parents were Sephardic Jews from Egypt. Steir married young and took her husband’s surname.

Pat Steir received a B.F.A. from the Pratt Institute in 1962, the same year I started Crown Point Press. She had quick success in art, being included in an exhibition that year at the High Museum in Atlanta and, soon after, 1964, in a show called “Drawings” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She was barely out of school when, in 1964, she had a one-person show at a respected gallery in New York. Then, in 1966 she got a job as an art director for the book publisher Harper and Row. She arranged flexible hours, was able to continue painting, and became an active member of the New York art scene.

Until the mid-1970s, Steir contributed to the feminist art movement by being on the editorial board of the journal *Heresies*. She says she did not make feminist art, but in her art she was trying to escape isolation. “I wanted to be seen simply as an artist, I wanted to be a contender, an equal,” she said in a 2011 interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, a youthful free newspaper for art and culture. “I think my existence and survival in art, along with other women of my generation, has political implications beyond the personal.”

Pat Steir met Agnes Martin a year before I did. In 1971 art critic Douglas Crimp, a friend of Pat’s, had rounded up some Martin paintings for an exhibition at the gallery of the School of Visual Arts in New York. The show was reviewed favorably, and Crimp received an invitation from Martin to visit her in New Mexico. He took Pat along, and for the next thirty-three years she continued to visit Martin frequently, her last visit being a few weeks before Martin died at the age of ninety-two in 2004.

I met Steir in 1975. Sol LeWitt was doing a project at Crown Point for Parasol, his third, I think. Feldman’s artists stayed at the hotel in Oakland, the Leamington, except Sol who stayed in our guest room. Since he had worked with us when Crown Point was in our basement, my son Kevin and I saw him as different from everyone else.

One day near the end of the project, Sol said to me, “I’m expecting someone. I hope it’s OK if she joins me for a couple of days.” This is Pat’s version of the story: Sol was working on a wall drawing at a museum in Los Angeles. She was temporarily teaching there. Sol invited her to go to Italy with him, with a stop in Berkeley on the way. The school term was just ending. She packed her bags and, as he instructed, showed up at our house. She didn’t at first even know why Sol was there, but when she saw what we were doing with etching, she told me later, she started trying to figure out how she could work with us.

Two years after that, in 1977, Pat Steir arrived at Crown Point Press to make a print to be given by a museum to its contributors. Pat and I had liked each other right away, and though I was still working mainly for Parasol Press, I was glad to have an opportunity to take that small job. Fortunately for me, it didn’t turn out to be small. “I did many prints,” Pat told Constance Lewallen in a 1991 interview for *View*, “and I was on the telephone calling other print publishers, trying to get somebody to publish the other prints, and Kathan told me she would publish them.”



Pat Steir in the Crown Point studio, 1987.

Actually, it wasn't so many, only seven: one fairly large, one small, and five even smaller and bound into a book. They are restrained in color, mostly a kind of golden umber, and beautiful. All Steir's work has a tactile beauty slightly at odds with the restraint of her contemporaries. The following year she came back to do many more prints, also published by Crown Point Press. These included a dozen in burnt sienna, some of them accented with bright primary colors, in a series called *Drawing Lesson*. In the years since 1977, we have published more than a hundred prints by Pat Steir. She is the artist with the largest number on our list.

Although Steir's art has always seemed to me to be romantic and sensual, she makes clear in every interview that she does not think of it as expressionistic. "The self is like a bug," she said in 1989. "Every time you slap it, it moves to another place." In an interview for *View* in 1978, she told Robin White that making art is "a desire to transcend the limits of a single human being. The urge for art, for me, is the urge for language. I start with a mark, and the mark is a universal desire to speak or communicate."

In that period, a lot of ideas floating around New York were derived from the French philosophers of deconstruction, who wrote of language, signs, symbols, codes, and the impossibility of finding Truth. For years, Steir incorporated words into her prints, and she still does occasionally. She has also done paintings and prints, including self-portrait prints, which deconstruct work by great artists of the past. Most of her Crown Point titles through 1981, when she did a large three-panel etching called *Abstraction, Belief, Desire*, refer in one way or another to what I think of as her intellectual side. In her recent work, Pat seems to escape intellect, but, in fact, intellect is part of her nature. At one point in her life, she was actually a practicing intellectual, an editor for a magazine called *Semiotext(e)*.

You wouldn't think of the word intellectual if you watched her in the studio, though. She clunked around in high-heeled shoes ("I'm short," she said, "and I'm used to them") and posed for photos,



Pat Steir, *Self After Rembrandt #1*, 1987. Hard ground etching with drypoint. 11-x-11-inch image on 26¼-x-20-inch sheet. Edition 5.

sometimes making faces. Then, in later years, she started throwing paint at her plates. The printers put plastic sheets up strategically, but we still have a few drips and splats on our walls.

But what about Steir's influence from John Cage, and how does that fit with her involvement with Agnes Martin? Steir met Cage in 1980, through me, but before meeting him she had studied music and been engaged with his ideas. After that, she saw him sometimes in New York. Martin, on the other hand, resisted Cage. Here is a quote from an undated letter I got from her, probably in 1980:

Between you and me, Kathan, John Cage is still negative because although he has surrendered self direction to chance that does not make art work. He does not believe in inspiration, beauty, truth, reality but only chance. With chance one still must choose to act and he is back to intellect. Inspiration is possible when you say to yourself "I do not know what to do" and the answer comes to you. It is a command. If you ask for it you have to do it. It is the cause of effective action in this world and it is the path of life. Cage and others like him who move according to intellect are not on the path.

Of all the words on Martin's list, the only one I think Cage didn't believe in is truth (at least not in eternal or universal Truth). I'm not sure what he would say about inspiration, but he did receive it from nature and also from thinkers he admired—Henry David Thoreau, for example. I am sure Cage believed in beauty. "Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it marvelous?" is one of his expressions that I frequently joyfully quote. And he believed in reality. It was his primary material, and chance was a means of accessing it.

Consider Martin's sentence: "With chance one still must choose to act and he is back to intellect." It is true. Not only did Cage choose to act, but he chose the circumstances within which he would act. He set up parameters of action, then within those parameters cultivated a chance-directed plan. Except within tightly





Pat Steir, *Abstraction, Belief, Desire*, 1981. Color aquatint with soft ground and hard ground etching, spit bite aquatint and drypoint. 35¼-x-55¼-inch image on 42-x-61-inch sheet. Edition 35.

specified situations, he did not tolerate an “anything goes” attitude.

Did Cage want to escape intellect? He created scores that offered escape and opened unthought-of possibilities, then accepted whatever results he obtained from following the scores. But the scores, themselves, came from his mind. Martin’s escape from intellect through inspiration was of the purest kind, not intellectually constrained. If that circumstance were generalized, I would be wary of her word command. “If you ask for it you have to do it” is a refrain that too often has been employed in the real world with tragic consequences. In Martin’s world, however, setting aside intellect means appreciating the forces of nature.

“I really think it’s great to be alive,” Steir told me in a 1981 interview, at the beginning of the Reagan years. “No matter what. I hope that if I’m in a coma they do every operation they can to keep me alive, in case I’m thinking or something. I would live any way at all just to be alive. But it is a pessimistic time. I wish it were an optimistic time, but the final way to see art is as a political mirror, and...the new art is about the imminent end of the world.”

At this moment, in 2012, I find it difficult to remember the “pessimistic time” when I interviewed Steir. In 1981 a financial boom was in the making, but also a dramatic crash. After Reagan’s term and that of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, a Democrat, was elected president, and he wiped out an enormous national debt and created a surplus. That surplus was destroyed during the following Republican administration of George W. Bush, who hosted in 2008 another financial crash, bigger than Reagan’s, and left office with the national debt unbelievably high. In 2012 we have not recovered from that crash. We hear television talkers daily bemoaning “uncertainty” about “regulations” on business, and I wonder why the talkers think unregulated financial markets won’t again crash the stock market.

Every once in a while a commentator, economist Paul Krugman, for example, says we would have been in a true depression, rather than the recession we experienced, if costly financial manipula-

tion by both Bush and his successor, Democrat Barack Obama, had not happened. Krugman thinks the government should have spent more, and should spend again now, and at the same time the Republicans in Congress are ranting against spending and trying to cut social programs. End-of-the-world speculations are coming from both ends of the political spectrum. Their roots are partly in the continuing unemployment crisis (with Europe suffering something similar, maybe worse) and partly in voguish medieval-like thinking: computer fantasy games abound and “social conservatives” assume a religious obligation to legislate moral activity for people other than themselves.

At the end of the sixties, I was thinking about the “imminent end of the world” because of the Cold War and the thermonuclear threat, a threat that lasted about twenty years. In the early eighties, Crown Point published the work of a young Italian artist, Francesco Clemente, who had been living in

India. One of Clemente’s images, *Not St. Girolamo*, shows a peaceful Japanese garden in the midst of a quiet sexual scene involving a man and two lions, the whole supported by a tortured figure frantically holding up pillars while the world caves in around him. “I’m not sure everything is under control,” Clemente said in *View*. “I’m afraid of the opposite. It’s like there is a huge evil thing coming. Not something that has to do with ideas, but really just bad people who overcome the good people.”

“The young people,” Steir said in my 1981 interview with her, “are not doing something kitschy—that was possible. They’re doing work with heavy emotional significance and doing it quite coolly.” What Steir and I did not know then is that thirty years later kitsch would be dominating the art world. Contrast Clemente’s statement with remarks Jeff Koons made in 2008 regarding his forty-foot-high topiary of a puppy: “I wanted the piece to deal with the human condition, and this condition in relation to God. I wanted it to be a contemporary Sacred Heart of Jesus.” Or by Damien Hirst about



Pat Steir, Robin White and Kathan Brown, 1978.



Pat Steir with Joost Elffers in the Crown Point studio, 1988.

his paintings of colored spots: “They are what they are, perfectly dumb paintings which feel absolutely right.” Or by Matthew Barney on a scene in a film he produced: “Metabolic changes related to the digestive process, from glucose to sucrose, to petroleum jelly, tapioca, meringue, and then poundcake, a complex carbohydrate.” All were reported by Calvin Tomkins, the dean of art writers, in *The New Yorker*.

In our 1981 published discussion, Steir and I talked about Andy Warhol, the forerunner of the new kitsch artists. Steir called Warhol “in a very real way the artist of our time because he took everything and made it his own. If you look at a picture of Marilyn Monroe, you think of Warhol. If you eat Campbell soup, you think of Warhol. If you see a picture of Chairman Mao—everything is Warhol!” I argued that Warhol wouldn’t last. I was wrong about that, but I wonder how people a hundred years from now, looking at a Warhol painting in a museum, will make sense of our time.

Oh my! (As John Cage would say.) We are far afield from the question of how Pat Steir is influenced in her art by both Martin and Cage. But if you believe, as I do, that Cage, Martin, and Steir will continue to be remembered in the future, it might be useful to see them in comparison to Koons, Hirst, and Barney, who came along a generation later and also, it appears, are destined to be remembered.

Thinking about Steir’s remark that “the final way to see art is as a political mirror,” I notice that the art of Koons, Hirst, and Barney is made in ways that parallel the structure of business and government today: it is constructed remotely, by artisans in factorylike situations, and is impossible to separate from its connection with money. A “spot painting” by Damien Hirst sold at auction in 2011 for just over a million dollars and on January 12, 2012 the “complete spot paintings,” 331 of them, went on exhibition concurrently at eleven branches of the Gagosian Gallery in New York and around the world. This kind of art, in addition to being about money, indulges personal obsessions that Cage (I think) would have thought of as “trivial and lacking in urgency.” Asked about his spot paintings when he was being interviewed on television, Hirst said flatly, “I like color,” and nothing more. I thought his answer typified an attitude also visible in the political mirror of our time.



Pat Steir, *Long Vertical Falls #1*, 1991. Soap ground and spit bite aquatints. 45-x-23-inch image on 53¼-x-30-inch sheet. Edition 20.

I called Steir and asked her how Agnes Martin influenced her. “Agnes worked the way a bird sings,” she said. “The bird doesn’t think, ‘I’m making a beautiful song. I’m making a song that’s about this or that.’ You remember,” she went on, “how I used to wear those Wedgie heels? On my first visit, with Douglas Crimp, Agnes took us on a hike out in the desert. ‘You can’t walk in those,’ she said. And she gave me her shoes. The whole time I was thinking, ‘I’m walking in Agnes Martin’s shoes.’”

“And what about Cage?” I asked. We reminisced about the last few days of 1984 when, after a project of Steir’s at Crown Point, she and I and my husband, Tom Marioni, and her husband, Joost Elffers (they had just married), drove down the coast to see Hearst Castle. We spent New Year’s Eve at a barn dance that we stumbled on in a small town, Pat and Joost making up steps and everyone laughing with the out-of-towners. On the way home, we picked up John Cage in Santa Cruz, where he had been visiting a friend, and he started work at Crown Point on January 5 (he began almost every new year with us).

Although we normally focus our attention on only one artist at a time, Pat worked in the studio with Cage for a day. “John was free and buoyant and unbelievable,” she remembers. “He was a big thing flapping around—playful and funny and serious and hardworking.



Pat Steir, *Mountain in the Rain*, 2012. Color direct gravure printed on gampi paper chine collé. 21¼-x-30½-inch image on 31-x-39-inch sheet. Edition 20. Printed by Emily York.

He opened a whole new world.” I asked about his influence on her. “For my work now, I have set up a little system that involves chance,” she said. “Chance is like a partner, an amusing partner: we’ll make something and see what happens.”

In a review in the May 2011 *Art News*, Barbara Pollack describes Steir’s system this way: “a method of making a kind of art that, free of constraints, is liberating to experience. It is impossible to look at these magnificent new paintings without imagining the strength and tenacity of this artist, who every day climbs a ladder thirteen feet in the air, taking risks and relinquishing control.”

The system, Steir has explained, is one of choosing paint colors and dilutions, and then pouring these from the top of the canvas. “I can’t believe a seventy-year-old lady climbs up on a ladder and does that work,” a young person visiting the show was heard to say. I think both Pat and I learned from John Cage not to worry whether or not you can manage to do what you are doing. You might be “a big thing flapping around,” but in the next moment your engagement with the task at hand takes over and you find you are doing it seriously and with aplomb.

If Agnes Martin escaped the intellectual through inspiration and John Cage escaped it, temporarily, through chance, what about Pat Steir? Meditation? “Meditation, maybe, OK,” she said. “First the meditation, then the leap. But don’t forget about Sol.”

In any exploration of the art of our time, it is impossible to forget about Sol LeWitt. But I will save my thoughts about him for later and only remark here that systems were to him what chance was to Cage and inspiration was to Martin. Lewitt and Cage are closer to one another than it would at first appear; both differ fundamentally from Martin, the third of Steir’s influences, in attitude toward the mind. “I hope you have given up on the magazines,” Agnes wrote me in an undated letter.

The intellectual domination of the art field is a worry. I was invited to have a retrospective at the Whitney but when I refused to have a catalogue they withdrew the invitation. They think that what they have to say about my work and life is more important than showing the work. The intellectual in art work is even more hair raising. We have literally hundreds of thousands of artists in this country illustrating ideas. We could have an art renaissance if this were not so.

Oh, dear. I wish the Whitney Museum of American Art hadn’t waited until 1992 for an Agnes Martin exhibition (with a catalog), but I can’t agree with Agnes that the world would be better off if artists were not working with ideas, and I think Pat agrees with me. An influence from Martin helps Steir show, in all her work, that it’s great to be alive, no matter what. But at the same time, like Cage and Sol LeWitt, she holds ideas in high regard.

*In the Crown Point Gallery*

Pat Steir • Tom Marioni

April 5 - May 19

*In New York*

Sylvia Plimack Mangold:

Recent Works

Alexander and Bonin

March 16 - April 28

Rammellzee: The Letter Racers

The Suzanne Geiss Company

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Founded in 1962