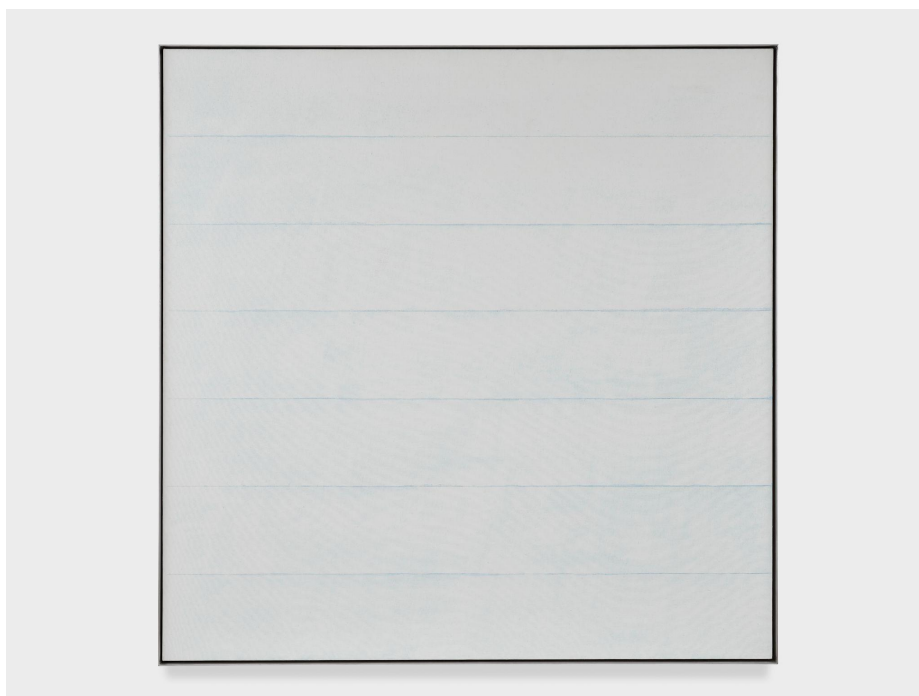


## Agnes Martin's 2001 *Tranquility*

Ruby Lang



Agnes Martin, *Tranquility*, 2001. Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 60 x 60 in (152.4 x 152.4 cm)

One component of Agnes Martin's work that remains ambiguous is whether 'the self' is implemented in it, or if notions of the self are even valuable to her as an artist. Though she explicitly rejected self-expression, claiming that self-expression was 'the defiance of life' (Glimcher), she also identified as an abstract expressionist. One of the valued tenets of this movement was personal expression, particularly an inclination to gesture and an incorporation of 'the body' into the work. Upon close inspection of Martin's art, one of the essential parts of it is human gesture—Martin's hand. *Tranquility* (2001) features her gesture in the dramatic horizontal lines that delineate the canvas. The work displays the artist's dedication to self integrity and absolute emotion, maintaining a tenacious energy.

*Tranquility* (2001) was executed with acrylic paint and graphite pencil on canvas. Before applying paint, Martin would prime the canvas, but would not sand between layers, providing a bumpy texture (D'Augustine, 0:29). This texture would later be integral to the work because it influenced the forming of her lines. Martin often washed down the acrylic paint and would apply 8–10 layers. Initially the color of the paint could be described purely as white, but the layers create a luminescence, and the light from the color seems to radiate. For her, horizontal lines “provoked certain feelings... like you’re expanding over the plane” (Martin 1972). Perhaps Martin used expansion to cultivate an emotional experience. Her lines appear controlled from afar, but are imperfect, almost tremulous. “She valued the hand’s insinuation, however subtle, of the self into the work.” (Chave p. 1). This imperfection gives evidence to the observer that Martin's hand is a part of the process, a part of the painting. In this sense, her paintings stray from Minimalists, who insist on a lack of gesture.

The five graphite lines that delineate the canvas are each emphasized by a wash of watered-down blue. Martin carefully layers the pigment on each line. The color and order of the graphite and blue is disjointed but also harmonious, as the graphite lines appear to be straight, but the wash of blue is thicker and more irregular, and the two contrast each other. This produces a subtle dissonance between order and disorder within Martin’s painting. There is an energy and power in the simplicity of her lines. This piece has a feeling of Martin's emotions, not only from how evident her process is within it, but also from the way that it forces the observer to look more clearly at it. Martin is deceptive, as almost every painting she produced looks drastically different upon closer inspection.

When looking at *Tranquility*, there is no one way to characterize the space that it takes up. The way that the lines are composed guides the observer to question the shapes that are

formed. Although Martin disclosed little about what her work truly intended, in one interview from 2002, she said “I am simply painting concrete representations of abstract emotions such as innocent love, ordinary happiness. I do want an emotional response. And I paint about emotions, not about lines.” Though Martin claims she does not interject the self into her work, her hand is the instrument through which she stimulates an emotional response. *Tranquility* is a work that depicts a certain quality of Martin, its bareness is honest, and the bareness also allows others to respond to it freely.

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