

FIG. 2 Study for Epitaph Painting 1, 1996, ink and collage on two sheets of paper, 40 1/4 x 60 inches overall

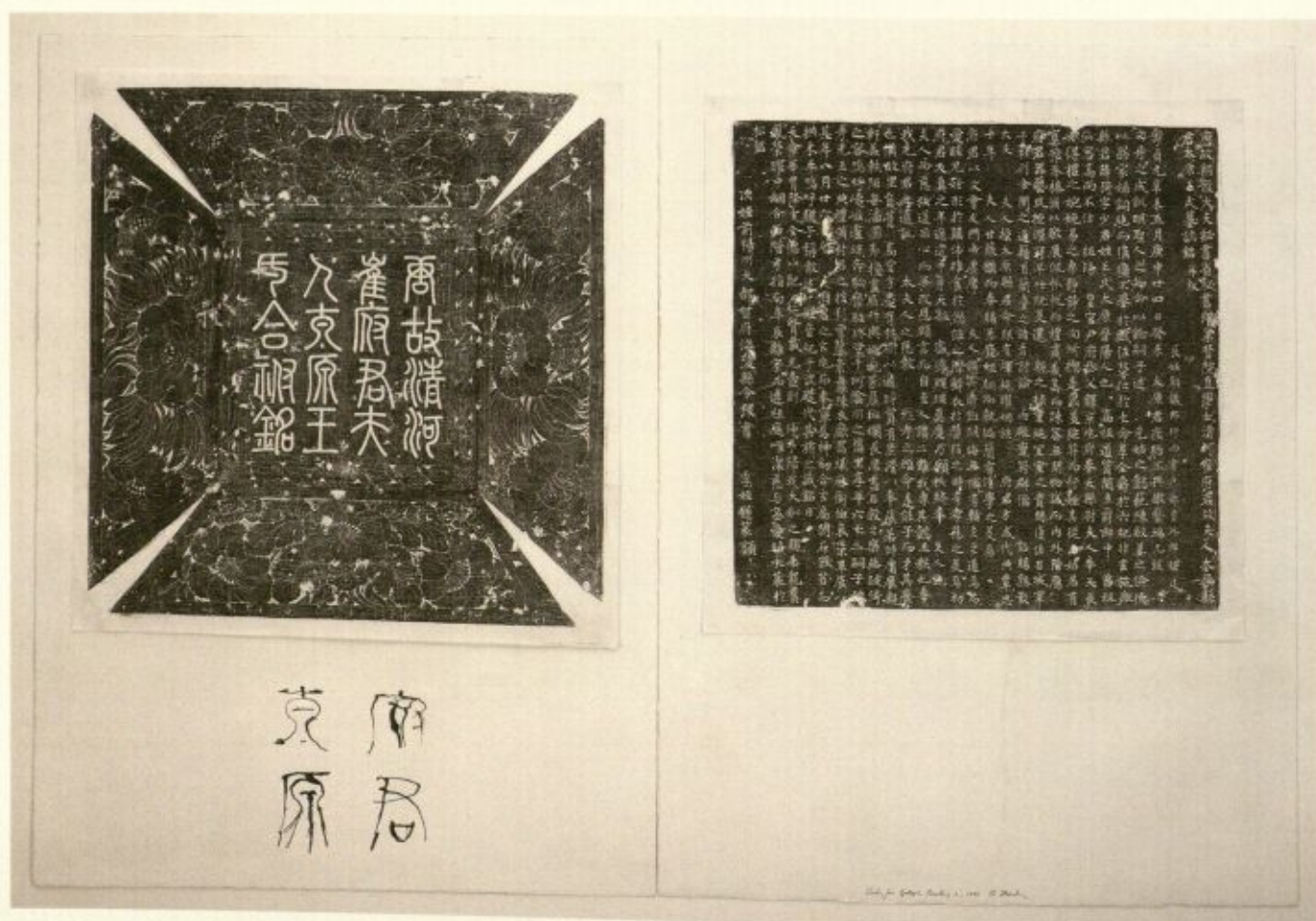


FIG. 3 Study for Epitaph Painting 2, 1996, ink and collage on two sheets of paper, 40 1/4 x 60 inches overall

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRICE MARDEN

The interview that follows originated in a chance encounter at a lecture on Chinese calligraphy: an exchange about the productive resistance of unorthodox materials and tools in calligraphy and painting. My own expertise is in Chinese art history, and I accepted the invitation to interview Brice Marden knowing little about his work. Though it was perhaps naive on my part, I hoped that this ignorance, through the clumsy questioning to which it was bound to lead, might serve as a kind of productive resistance for the artist's articulation of his ideas. The first part of the interview shuttles back and forth between questions of Marden's physical working process, and his gradual definition of image in his paintings. The second part sketches a history of Marden's involvement with Asian art since the early 1980s, and delves into the artist's subjects and the personal significance he attaches to them. The two *Epitaph Paintings* of 1996-1997 are less the subject of the interview, therefore, than the catalyst for a much more wide-ranging discussion.¹

JH: What kind of brushes do you use for painting?

BM: I use long-handled brushes.

JH: Long is what? Three feet, two feet?

BM: Three feet. I have two theories about it. One is vision, at middle-age your eyes go, you get farsighted—it's nicer to be a little bit further away from the thing you're making, you see it better. There's also the physical factor. When you're working with a long brush, it has an effect on the image that you end up with. The whole movement of your body is involved with the structure of the image.

JH: How do you work the ground in the paintings?

BM: I thin the paint with turpentine, which is a very strong solvent. It's a physical undertaking just to cover the whole canvas because you have to work while it's wet, and it has to be done in one go. I end up with dripping, because I'm working down, top to bottom. I'll rework the canvas, putting the paint on with a house-painting brush, and scraping the excess off with a knife because I don't want a lot of buildup. And when I scrape down, because of the nature of the solvent, it dissolves some of the layer underneath.

JH: So you're working with transparency for the layering—up to a point, no?

BM: I'll lay down a color, and then go over it with another color, knowing there's a transparency. But it doesn't read so much as transparency, it reads as an opaque color. Because the turpentine is such a strong solvent, I can put a yellow over a green, and when I come back the next day the colors will have mixed, because the bottom color bleeds up.

JH: How long does the whole process take? For example, the paintings in the present exhibition, how long were you working on any one of those?

BM: I started them in November of 1996 and finished them in April of 1997. I only worked these two paintings. That was the real concentration. I usually work on a group of paintings over a longer period, but this time I just concentrated on these two. In my work



FIG. 4 *Epitaph Painting 1*, 1996-97, first state

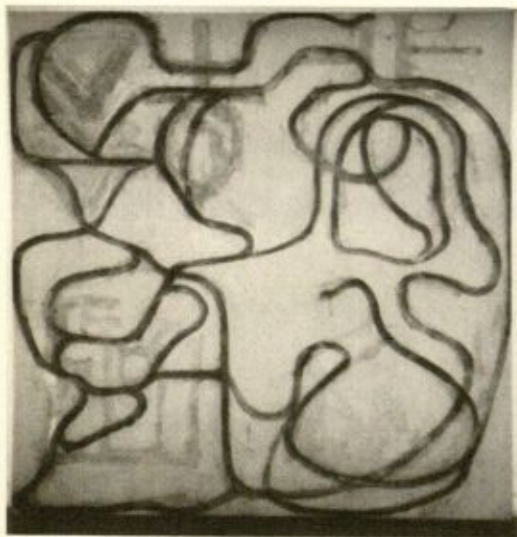


FIG. 5 *Epitaph Painting 1*, 1996-97, second state

it seems that the image has to evolve: not that you figure it out, but it has to grow in some way. I don't start with something in mind. Basically I begin with a spontaneous gesture, but it's an educated spontaneous gesture. I'm always drawing. Sometimes there are concentrated periods of drawing, and then I go into painting. What you start with is what you just finished. It's a continuation. I still consider myself a modernist in the sense that I am always trying to continue or improve what was there before.

JH: One thing that struck me in the *Epitaph Paintings*—there's a slowness—the slow movement.

BM: It's much more spontaneous right at the beginning. Then I start to refine, making corrections and changes. I add to the drawing and take things out, put on another coat and work back into it. I work into the image, repeat a line, go over it. I put the paint on with a brush, then I scrape the excess off and rework it with a knife. There's a kind of give and take. You're working from a distance, and then you're working very close up. The more one works those lines, the gesture disappears and it becomes much more about the shapes. I'm really concerned with the edges and how the edge meets the line. It slows you down.

JH: That particular effect of slowness has all sorts of connotations for the body, as well as being culturally resonant. I'm wondering what kind of resonances it has for you.

BM: My painting has to do with the presence of the image. It's about stasis. A painting is something that is there, that you can look at—and it stays, it's this moment that you can always return to. Remembering it is unimportant. I have no visual memory. I mean, obviously I have some visual memory, but I don't look at a painting so I can remember it when I'm not looking at it. I like to be right there with it. It's about presence. It resonates. But this is not a conscious working practice—I don't *try* to achieve it.

JH: You mentioned the extreme care with which you gauge the relationship of the elements that comprise the image: the individual lines, the forms within the painting, and the intense respect that you have for the edge. I'm particularly interested in this, because it is not a characteristic of Chinese painting in general. With the exception of certain painters and schools, Chinese painting tends to be somewhat cavalier with the edges. The idea is that what you're seeing is a fragment of something that continues on either side, or beyond the edge. And somehow, in Western painting, even in the most abstract works, there is, ultimately, some sense that the edge, the frame, is a necessary condition of the painting.

BM: I accept the rectangle as an abstraction. I think it's a great invention. Western picture-making—not all of it, there's the caves, but so much of it—is involved with the idea of the rectangle. The rectangle becomes the beginning of the separation from nature, it's an abstraction. I have always worked from a given rectangle.

JH: Is that one of the first decisions you make?

BM: The first drawing for these paintings was a page recording the measurements of the stones. The canvas shapes are blowups of the shapes of the stones. The two drawings in the show went right up onto the canvas (FIGS. 2 and 3). I did the drawing from the stone, and then the initial drawing on the painting from that (FIGS. 4 and 6). What happened

with *Epitaph Painting 2*, the red, yellow and blue one, is that somehow I was more on top of the drawing, so I put it on with all this space around, and I drew a rectangle around the extremities of the drawing. The next time I worked on it, I went beyond it, and I kept redrawing that rectangle. In the end, I painted the rectangle out because it had become irrelevant (FIGS. 7 and 8). I wanted to get the image out to the edge. I had much more trouble with the drawing for *Epitaph Painting 1*, and so it expanded to the edge right away (FIG. 5).

JH: By the time I saw the paintings and drawings together, I didn't even guess that there had been such a close relationship. I was looking closely at the paintings, and I couldn't see that you had actually transferred your drawings to the canvas.

BM: What struck me as interesting about these paintings is that by appropriating characters they took on a completely different feel than my other paintings. I usually just walk up and spontaneously start, which results in a certain left-handedness; there's a predictable way something will happen on one side, as opposed to the other side. By appropriating, I had an empty center in these. It's almost as though there's the void, and all this stuff happening around it. I don't think that would have happened had I just spontaneously started the painting.

JH: So this gives you something to work against.

BM: Yes. Also I went to China in 1995, to Suzhou, and spent a lot of time looking at the gardens, the stones.

JH: The Taihu rocks?

BM: Yes. I was really impressed. You look at the scholars' rocks and you're beginning to get an idea of it. In the Garden of Lingering, where they have that *Cloud-Capped Peak* rock (FIG. 1), I said: 'Oh, now I get it'. The *Epitaph Paintings* are based on ideas about the flow of energy going through the stone. But then a lot of the figural thing, whenever it occurs in the work, really has something to do with dance. In the paintings I finished in 1996, I was thinking of Chinese dances—the ribbon dance. Specific ones from the caves at Dunhuang, that kind of movement: it's figural, and also you're painting it, with a long brush, so you're moving. In a sense it becomes a transference of your own dance to the canvas.

JH: When you move on to the next stage, how far away from the initial "hit" do you start?

BM: It's close. The first part stays on top in front, but then as it goes along, you make changes, and they start intertwining. The paintings can best be read in layers. They're drawn in such a way that the forms get much more volumetric. A lot of it is based on some of the things that happen in the scholar's rocks, or that happen in bones—natural references.

JH: When you introduce a new line, are you basically thinking in terms of the line's relationship to other lines? Or are you also thinking about the negative spaces that are being created?

BM: Both. That's why it's nice to have this distance from the canvas. You can think of it as flat, and you can think of it in terms of volume. Basically it starts with something, and then you put something else on that relates to it but isn't it. In the *Epitaph Paintings* there's

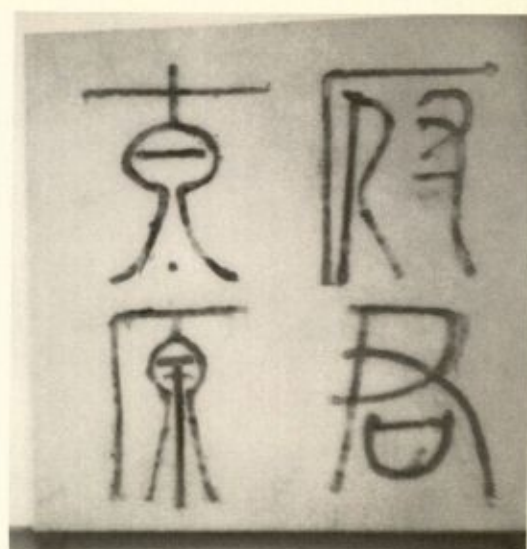


FIG. 6 *Epitaph Painting 2*, 1996-97, first state



FIG. 7 *Epitaph Painting 2*, 1996-97, second state

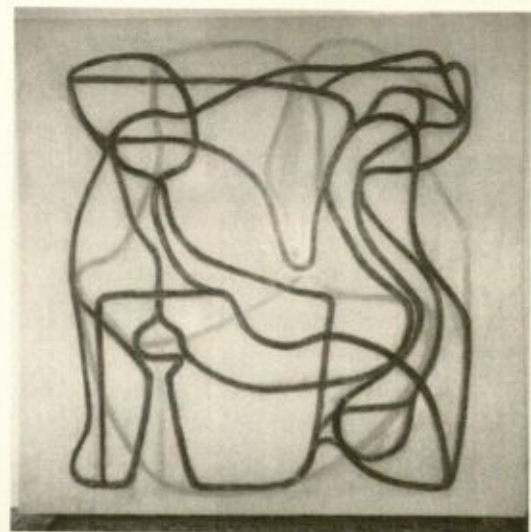


FIG. 8 *Epitaph Painting 2*, 1996-97, third state

a color for each layer; on one there are three colors, and on the other there's four or five.

JH: So it varies from series to series, and painting to painting.

BM: Yes. But then sometimes I'll reduce it. I'll take one of the colors out and incorporate it into another color. That's the meditative aspect—you can follow one line, you can follow a color through, and then you can follow the next. Usually, by the time you get to the third something else starts happening. When I was a student, I really liked Franz Kline, and I remember a teacher saying: "he really knocks you around the room." It's all about that impact. But the impact of my paintings is—instead of coming in and being hit with a shout, it's more like a hum. It's not intentional. I think of painting as expression, it's intuitive, it just comes out of you. What you end up with is a reflection of yourself and perhaps that's more the way I really am.

JH: Am I wrong in thinking that, in the figural aspect of *Epitaph Painting 1*, there's some sort of relationship to Leger or Biomorphism? Or is that just pure coincidence?

BM: I would say that's more coincidence. These are just stylized forms. They tend to become more stylized as you're working on them. I really like how the yellow and green relate to each other. And the dark green, it still stays so much in the corners.

JH: There's an openness in the bottom left.

BM: This was a decision.

JH: Well, it's extremely dynamic. And it gives this marvelous sense of poise, like a dance position—a movement which is about to turn into another movement. We were talking earlier about the void at the center of the calligraphy. And to me, the vestige or memory of that in the painting might be how each quadrant has a very strong yet different character. But on the other hand, one has no sense of the center as being weak.

BM: There's a different kind of definition, where the center doesn't seem to be as defined. But in terms of form it is very defined.

JH: Well, it's the pivot, isn't it?

BM: Yes. The image almost reads as a large Olmec head. I had a neutral gray ground worked out. I went to west Texas in the spring; there was a succulent cactus in the desert. That's where I got this color for the paler of the green lines from, because before I left on that trip the original color of that line was so green I figured I would make the ground more red. Then I made all these adjustments to it after I came back. I painted over the whole thing, and then repainted the greens and the yellow. The ground looked very lavender, so I had to make adjustments to cut that. But I like to do that—have the color be a certain way—and then pull away from it. I think it gives an additional tension to the picture, this mystification of the color.

JH: I wanted to ask you about the relationship of the pictures to the surrounding space, and the floor. For example, the height of the hanging.

BM: My tendency has been to hang the paintings low. The standard is to have the middle of the picture at a hypothetical eye level. I don't like that idea because when they get up higher, they're more like a "picture". They sit on the wall, and relate to the wall in a

certain way that I usually like to avoid. When I did the monochromatic paintings with three panels that were more figural, you could stand there and have an empathetic response. So my tendency is to hang them lower.

JH: I wanted to ask you about maps. As the eye follows the lines about in *Epitaph Painting 2*, it's reminiscent of traveling long distances. I'm thinking of you looking at a road map.

BM: I tend to follow the lines, and in a way it's like a journey. The red image can be read as a head, an animal head. It also can be read as a kind of canyon or a landscape image. But I also see it as one of these ancient Chinese courtiers. The greener of the two blue lines is like a seated figure.

JH: Yes, there's what look like legs coming down in the bottom center. And in the upper left there's a shape that looks a little bit like a head.

BM: And then the yellow is very abstract. If you read the form of each color, they really don't have anything to do with each other in terms of associative forms.

JH: In *Epitaph Painting 2* there are also some straight lines.

BM: They are right out of the original calligraphy. Whereas in some places I changed it, in other places I thought it was best to stick with it. You make up a set of rules, but you don't have to adhere to them. I see *Epitaph Painting 2* as more structured than *Epitaph Painting 1*, which has a constant movement.

JH: Well, that's certainly the effect it creates for me. Whereas *Epitaph Painting 2*, as you say, seems to have a very dense structure—a little bit like a sculpted head, or something like that. It has a sense of containment, partly because of the red line at the top, and the way the blue line comes along the bottom, and the green on the other side.

BM: I kept thinking I should bring the red down to the bottom edge, and there was no way I could figure out how to do it, so I didn't. The green doesn't connect to the bottom edge either, but it does go out to the right edge. The yellow starts sitting on the top. There are these decisions which are arbitrary, to a point. I thought it made for more of a tension to have the red image stay in the upper part of the painting.

JH: I'm struck by how when you did your version of the calligraphy you left out the linear quadrant, and the edge. Given that the edge is so important for you in the paintings, it's interesting that you kept only the image there.

BM: It wasn't a conscious decision, but it makes a huge difference. I had just read somewhere that the central four characters were the important characters.

JH: It's the name of the person.

BM: Well, I guess that's important.

JH: These are very big paintings. Not as big as some, of course, but they're certainly big enough to create in the viewer a sense of being surrounded. Paradoxically, in that particular space there is a certain sense of extension. Which then brings in a whole different viewing experience from what one has in relation to, for example, a Taihu rock, where the point of focus is much more concentrated. As soon as the visual field opens out and becomes environmental, then I think that landscape, in the very broadest sense of the term,

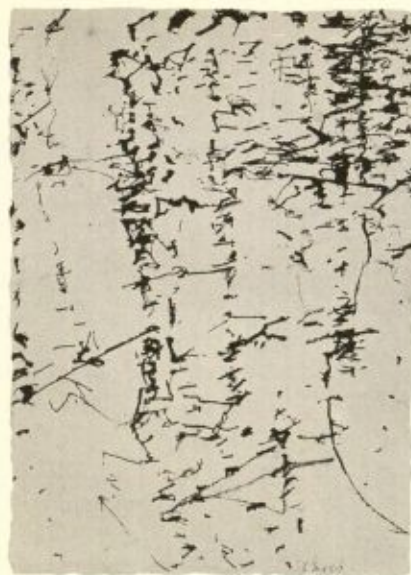


FIG. 9 *Shell Drawing 3*, 1985-87, ink on paper, 11 7/8 x 8 inches



FIG. 10 *Shell Drawing 4*, 1985-87, ink on paper, 11 7/8 x 8 inches



FIG. 11 *Shell Drawing 8*, 1985-87, ink on paper, 11 7/8 x 8 inches

seeps in as a point of reference. There's another way of looking where the painting has a diagrammatic quality, which brings to mind a kind of bird's-eye perspective, a sense of looking down on a landscape. It's like seeing a pattern of roads, a pattern of pathways, fields, or maps, which are simply a formulaic way of representing that kind of thing.

BM: Sometimes I see where the lines converge in a certain place, and it's almost like an incident occurs: this could be where the little guy is riding the donkey over the bridge. So there are incidents occurring. Sometimes they occur spatially, or they just occur as drama.

JH: You've mentioned that it was your wife who was more interested in Asia than you, originally. But you have a strong interest in Asia now, so there must be a history to that.

BM: Helen is a traveler. In the sixties she went to Turkey, drove through Afghanistan, and down into India. She always thought that I should go see this. I always said I was a Western painter and was very adamant and stubborn about that. I was involved in Western art, and was studying it to the point of almost purposely neglecting any kind of Eastern art. Then I saw an exhibition of calligraphy in 1984 and it really threw me.² It was a drawing response. We took a trip to Thailand shortly after and stayed for two or three months, moving around.

JH: Did you go to the temples? They have a strong mural-painting tradition.

BM: Yes. What really struck me in Thailand was that there didn't seem to be any kind of concept about art. I mean, they just didn't care. (Laughs) It was all the Buddha, just the image. And the image had this tremendous power. You could have a piece of kitsch, or you could have a really great sculpture—it didn't make any difference. That just really blew me away. I mean, I'd never *seen* anything like that before in my life.

JH: That could be quite threatening.

BM: Yes, I thought I would see art but I ran into a totally different concept. We went south and I started collecting seashells at the beach. These old women were selling shells they had collected and cleaned. We were at a place called Krabi, in southwestern Thailand, and it was quite beautiful. I began to draw the shells, or draw the marks on the shells, and I had one that looked like calligraphy. I made lots of drawings of that shell; I was drawing a lot in Thailand. It was based on ideas that I had gotten from looking at calligraphy, and trying to make my own kind of language (FIGS. 9, 10, and 11). A thing that intrigued me about calligraphy was that the form doesn't exist in the West. I still don't understand it. I know a lot more about it than I did ten years ago. Now, when I look at calligraphies, I just look at them as though they're paintings. They seem to me as distinct from each other as the styles of Western painters would be.

JH: By now you probably recognize the major names?

BM: Some of them. Not many. If I see Wang Xizhi³—you get that after a while (FIG. 12).

JH: But you have presumably a strong sense now of the different script types. One of the things that's most difficult, I think, for non-Chinese or non-Japanese when they first learn to write Chinese—not even speaking about calligraphy—is the fact that you have to follow a particular stroke order. And for the same character, that order is not at all the

same in, say, cursive script and standard script. They're completely different. You might start out in standard script on the right, but in the cursive script—much more abbreviated—you might end up starting on the left or down at the bottom: somewhere completely different. But even though it looks so free, cursive script is every bit as codified as the standard script.

BM: Yes, I try to follow how a character is made. You get a completely different reading when you do that. You get much closer to the real energy of it—the complexity and the control—and this is when it really starts soaring. After we were in Thailand, we went to Sri Lanka. I thought the sculpture was much better there. We went to Anaratnapura and Polonnaruwa where there was really beautiful sculpture.

JH: So you had a concentrated period of exposure to Asian art, after a long period of keeping it at a distance. And that sort of broke the dam, did it?

BM: It really did. That would be the best way to put it.

JH: How many China-related projects, or series, have you worked on?

BM: Basically, there was a time when I just stopped and said: I am not going to do this kind of painting anymore—I am going to do *this*. And then I had to figure out what *this* was. It happened shortly after returning from Thailand. When I came back I tried to figure out what was going on in the drawings. I was trying to decide what I wanted to do in the painting. I had a lot of books and work books set out in the studio. In one of them the author gave a couplet and translated the characters and told of all the complex ways that it could be read: snow, mountain, pine, wind.⁴ I started to do my own couplets; and I began diagramming them—different possible readings—and as I diagrammed them a different kind of aesthetic emerged. Out of that came a small group of paintings called *Diagrammed Couplets* (1988-89) (FIG. 13). They were the first paintings you could call "China-related." That was the idea that I worked with in those paintings. The epitome were the *Cold Mountain* paintings (1989-91) (FIG. 14). Up until that point, I was trying to figure a lot of things out. That's usually what I'll do. I'll have something I'm working on, and I'm trying to figure it out. Then, when I think I'm getting close to figuring it out, I do a larger project where I force myself to try to sum up the position. Usually in doing that, something else presents itself.

JH: The *Cold Mountain* series came out of the drawings you made in Thailand?

BM: No, the earlier gestural calligraphic-style paintings did, the ones from 1985 to 1987. The *Cold Mountain* paintings were the summation of a couple of years of working with those ideas.

JH: In looking at the *Epitaph Paintings* I felt quite strongly that there are reminiscences of the body built into the image. And I wanted to ask you whether it's simply coming out of the movement of painting itself, or whether, at some point, you also started to think representationally? Did you bring in some sort of representational element because the idea had come up?

BM: There's been an evolution. One of the things that I took from Chinese calligraphy

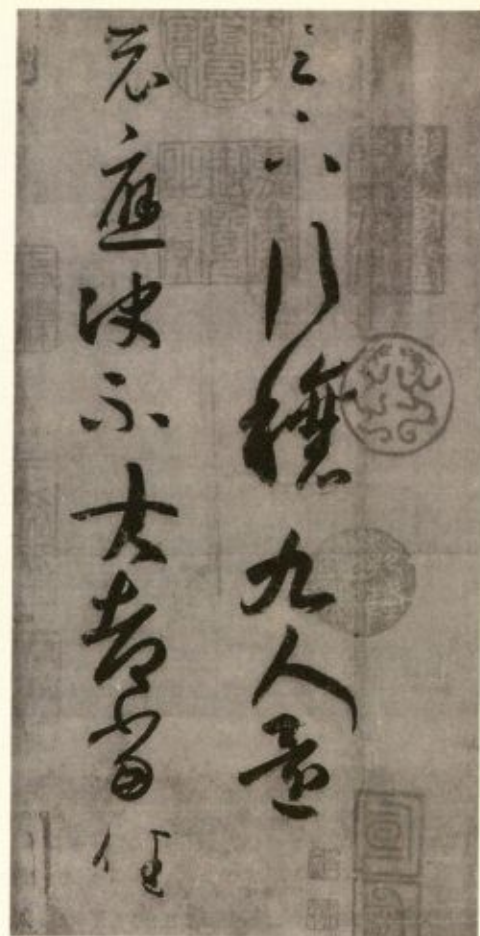


FIG. 12 Wang Xizhi *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, ink on paper, 9½ x 3½ inches



FIG. 13 *Diagrammed Couplet II*, 1988-89, oil on linen, 84 x 40 inches

is the structure of starting on the right with a character and going top to bottom and working left. When I did the *Cold Mountain* paintings, I noticed by using the couplets that figures started to appear. Mainly because you have a column of glyphs or characters, and you start joining everything together—it starts to suggest figures. And as I worked the paintings that way, I thought I would pursue, to an extent, the figural idea.

As I worked with the more figural ideas, the paintings became much more about the

movement of the body, making the gesture. This led into the group of paintings and drawings about the Muses, with nine figures. The first painting, *The Muses* (1990-93) was a *Cold Mountain* painting, except that it was three feet longer. I started it with characters—my faux characters—spontaneously, in exactly the same way as the *Cold Mountain* paintings, except with one more couplet. In the *Cold Mountain* paintings there were four couplets, and *The Muses* started with five. I'm still working through those paintings. It's been going on for years. I thought I had them finished and at one point I actually showed two of them—they were in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. After the show I sent one back to Greece, and one to my studio in Pennsylvania, so I could continue to work on them.



FIG. 14 *Cold Mountain 6 (Bridge)*, 1989-91, oil on linen, 108 x 144 inches

A lot of my Greek mythology comes from Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*. There's a historical aspect to what he presents; then there's the legend aspect; and then there's the metaphysical aspect. I just delight in it. I like when he talks about the Muses as maenads, these Bacchanalian women wildly dancing in the mountains. That's what I was working with in *The Muses*. Just a group of figures dancing, the Peloponnesian landscape, Dionysian madness...

JH: At the time you started *The Muses*, had you come across those Han dynasty dancing figures yet?

BM: No, not yet. At that time I was still looking at calligraphy. I was only beginning to get some sense of Chinese painting. One of the interesting things to emerge from the *Cold Mountain* paintings was how they started out looking as if they were based on calligraphy, and ended up looking as if they were based on Chinese painting.

JH: Gradually I've been trying to establish a timeline of your interest in Chinese art as reflected in the various series that you've worked on. We've reached the first *Muses* painting (1990-1993), after which you worked on a series of works on a more classical theme: *The Virgins* (1991-93), *Aphrodite* (1991-93). Where does it go from there?

BM: Well, I'm still working on two of the Muses paintings. Those are followed by the nine paintings that I showed in 1995.⁵ I stopped working with the character idea, and started working on the whole canvas (FIG. 15). In the beginning these works had a lot to do with the Pollock painting *Scent*, but they ended up not having very much to do with it at all. There's a certain phenomenon in Pollock where something starts in the inside and then reverberates towards the outside. It gets very codified by the time he reaches the vertical outside edges. It's also very much involved with the idea of the image coming up out of the painting, as opposed to the painter applying the image onto the canvas. To me the latter seems like a very Western idea: you put the figure *there*. The way I work is to apply something, but then, at the same time, you pull back, and then you allow it to speak to you in its own way. Then you work in relation to that. It's a real give-and-take process where you let the painting grow, not necessarily by building it but by working with it.

JH: When you think of Chinese painting, do you think particularly of landscape painting?

BM: Very much so—the whole landscape aspect, the rocks and the gardens. Of course all this time I was reading the poets. I was fascinated with this whole idea—these guys go sit in the landscape and they write poetry and they paint. My friend David Novros told me about a book, *Chinese Pavilion Architecture*, which has things in it that he is quite involved with—site-specific things.⁶ This got me very excited about the gardens, about Suzhou, and I started to get interested in scholar's rocks. Somehow that was enough of a connection for me to believe that I could finally go to China. I was offered a trip to Japan because I was in a show there and I decided to go on to China afterwards. I had also been reading the *Tao-Te Ching*, and studying the *I Ching*. For years I would throw the *I Ching* every day—which forced me to read it, and begin to absorb some of the thinking. None of this is a specifically goal-oriented type of thing with me. It's more like wandering into another atmosphere and trying to figure it all out. I find all of this very helpful with the painting. I've also been reading *Empty and Full* by François Cheng, which is wonderful.⁷ It has many translations of Shitao, who wrote a famous manual on painting.⁸

JH: Speaking of this kind of book, did you ever come across George Rowley's *Principles of Chinese Painting*?⁹

BM: Yes, I went through that one very carefully: it's all underlined and annotated. I spent a summer reading it. That was very helpful.

JH: To this day Shitao's treatise is still tremendously influential among Chinese artists. You could go over to China and hang out with artists in Shanghai or in Beijing, and we could be having this conversation. And they'd be saying: "Of course!" and would launch into a long discussion of Shitao's treatise.

You have these works called *Epitaph Paintings*. Formally they are a response to certain parts of the calligraphy on the stones. At the same time, these stones are funerary monuments—you've read the texts, and they're very touching. I couldn't help but wonder if there wasn't any residual influence from the content of these stones? Or was the fact that

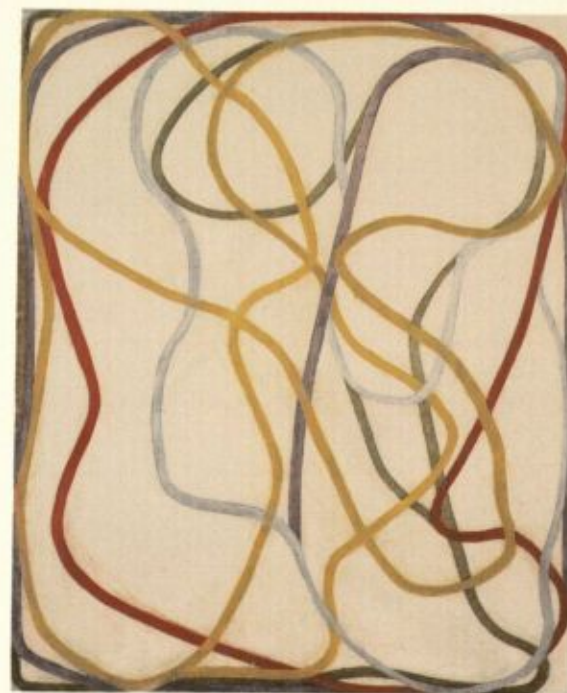


FIG. 15 *Skull with Thought*, 1993-95, oil on linen, 71 x 57 inches

the calligraphy was taken from tomb stones purely a coincidence?

BM: At a certain point, I had to consider that. I thought: I'm starting from these characters and I've read the translations... I can't ignore what they are saying. It's difficult to discuss because this whole subject of calligraphy has no equivalent in Western art. Sometimes I look at my Sri Lankan prayer flags. There's a message that's being carried just by its presence. I don't know specifically what the message is, but it's clearly a form of communication. In a similar way I felt at a certain point that just allowing myself to follow my own instinctual ways about going about making a painting was the right thing to do. These paintings could also just turn out to be a portrait of the person represented in the epitaph. I didn't make a self-conscious attempt of it, but that was some part of my thinking. Also, one seemed more masculine, and the other more feminine.

JH: What exactly did you have to work with, in terms of the epitaph tablets?

BM: I had photographs of the stones, I had copies of the rubbings, and translations from the texts. Not all of the texts. I think there were three of them.

JH: And how early on did you read the texts?

BM: I read them just before I started. I did not rely too much on what they said. There was a real decision to just appropriate the signs and go from there. One was a woman and one was a man and the male painting started out much more aggressively, so that they made some sort of sense. It seemed that, in a way, they could evolve into a kind of portrait of the dead person. One could deal with it in a more complicated way, which I chose not to. I basically wanted to get the painting and not get bogged down in the subject matter.

JH: There's one thing in the epitaph texts that reminds me of the paintings, which relates to their style. On the one hand, these inscriptions are written in a very formal language that's appropriate to the occasion, quite dignified. On the other hand, in some places you get details that are rather intimate. You really do have a sense of this person as somebody you might have met; somebody who had a particular personality, and for whom people had strong feelings of one kind or another. For example, the woman: "She always led a simple life, ate simple food and was good at sewing. Fujun liked to meet literary friends [of her husband]. There were always guests in their house. Madame cooked, no matter how early or how late."

BM: You're right there in the house.

JH: I was thinking that, especially with *Epitaph Painting 1*, I really have a strong sense of this combination of a monumentality that has a certain formality, and then a real intimacy. You're on the threshold of a certain intimacy with the subject of this "kind of a portrait," as you describe it. So in a way you left the text behind, and I understand that you did, but I feel as if something remained—the stories are very powerful.

BM: Well, we can tell he's a certain kind of Chinese gentleman and would have been interested in various things. That's part of the picture. I walked into this atmosphere, and these were almost like ghosts rising—apparitions. I guess the more you learn, the more real

everything will become. I'm still at the point where it's all pretty ghostlike. I didn't read these all that carefully and I didn't want to be too involved with the painting being a specific kind of portrait.

JH: This is an unusual event—to have these contemporary paintings side by side with archaic objects from another culture, the two in dialogue. Unusual to the point where the kinds of questions that are stimulated by it are hard to predict. One that particularly comes to mind is that the stone, the material that's used for these epitaph tablets, is all about permanence. In one of the texts, for example, it says: "Tombs may be eaten by worms"—meaning that if wood was used for the coffin, then everything could eventually disintegrate—"so the following epitaph should be carved." And then you have these paintings which are monumental in scale, and also have a particular balance of movement and slowness, which demands—I think we used the term "meditative" viewing. Which is about going back to things, spending time with the paintings, revisiting them over time. And that's also involved with, not exactly permanence, but something related.

BM: Well, it's about stasis. It's like something stopped in a certain way, so that you can always go back to it, back to that place where it stopped. There is also something about stones being gray, how they mediate with the earth and the sky. I also liked the limestone, which is a peculiarly beautiful stone, it has this grainy smoothness. I've always loved French medieval limestone sculpture—it's such a great material. Then there's the nature of the ideogram itself, suspended between writing and drawing. I remember in my first art classes, a sculpture teacher said: "Any time you get a chance, ask what form is." He told us: "When you asked Zadkine what form is, he'd slap the wooden wall, and then he'd slap the stone wall, and he'd say, That's form." And I always remembered that. It's a certain irrefutable thing about stone—it's really there.

JH: But you don't, yourself, work with stone.

BM: I have stones. I mean, I collect Olmec stones and things like that. I've made paintings on marble.

JH: So is something of that interest carrying over into your painting? Are you trying to find some kind of equivalent for the qualities of stone?

BM: Yes. It's this idea about form, and density. Like when you say "written in stone," that is a good standard to apply to a painting. Or when you see a Cézanne and it's like a stone.

JH: Epitaphs are immensely resonant. They take us into one of the most charged areas of our psychological life: they're about mortality, mourning, loss, finding ways of continuing. I was trying to put myself in your position, and I was thinking to myself that it would be very difficult for me, working on such a project, not to relate it to things close to me, in my own life—and I wondered if you had found that to be the case.

BM: It came up after the fact. I have this really good friend who died last year—William Kunstler, the lawyer. I thought a lot about Bill and how much I really miss him—have missed him—and how I didn't even begin to understand the closeness of our relationship when he was still alive. He has a stone epitaph. It's this big beautiful stone with a Walt

Whitman epitaph. Later, I made this bronze, *The William Moses Kunstler Award For Racial Justice*, and it's my epitaph for Bill. So it didn't seem unlikely to be working on paintings like that. Not that the *Epitaph Paintings* became a memorial to Bill. But I have done paintings for people that have died. When Otis Redding died I was in the studio working on a painting, and I just turned it into *For Otis* (1968). I've done a number of paintings which are dirges. There's a painting called *TKB* (1966) who was a friend of mine who died. And there's one for Janis Joplin, *For Pearl* (1970). There are a number of them. I have this belief that painting can be a real living thing.

I also have these real questions about how subject matter becomes somewhat debased in the twentieth century. One of my complaints about Picasso was that he reintroduced a kind of regressive subject matter. I don't complain about that anymore. But I used to feel that just when artists had gotten to the point of making painting very abstract, Picasso kind of copped out, started reworking older themes, reintroducing subject matter. He never really got away from it. He just reinterpreted these great themes in a twentieth-century manner. He updated it—reworked the whole canon in a twentieth century manner. I think I hedge too much on this issue of subject matter. How much of it is in the painting? How much of it is in the surrounding aspect? Some painters refuse to title paintings—they're just numbered, or "Untitled"—because they believe that a title leads you into it in a certain way, which is no good. I've always been very romantic about titles. I think about remembrance, and one of the things about visual art is there's a constant remembrance. One of the things I take great comfort in is the fact that I don't have to remember what I'm looking at—because I can always go back and look at it again.

JH: Because the epitaphs have to do with death, and because religion is one of the principal means by which we come to terms with our mortality, it seemed to me that the nature of the project almost inevitably would bring in religion, somehow. Also you have this thoughtfulness about the tradition of painting that you come out of. And when someone like myself, who works with Chinese painting, looks at the Western tradition, this great figurative tradition, the first thing that jumps to mind is that religious subjects are preeminent over many hundreds of years. Then I'm looking at your paintings, with reminiscences of figures, with their monumentality and pictorial ambition, and wondered if this figured into the equation at all. Are you engaging, in any way, with the tradition of religious figure painting that we have in the West?

BM: I always figure that my vertical paintings are figure paintings, and the horizontal ones are landscapes, and the square ones are abstract. When I used the panels, they were basically figures. Unless I did them horizontally, then they became landscapes.

Some critics saw the post and lintel paintings I did as a tall cross. The largest painting from this group, *Thira* (1979-80), is an inside-outside painting, with an interior and an exterior space, like the Piero *Flagellation*. One way to read it is basically as a crucifixion—like the crosses on the mountain. I have looked at a lot of crucifixions in my day. (Laughs) I used to make these pilgrimages to San Marco to see Fra Angelico. So it's definitely in me.

I was brought up in the Low Episcopal church. I was an altar boy and I was very much involved in the ceremonial aspect of the church. When I went to college and studied art history I had no idea about Catholicism, communion, transfiguration, and all those kinds of things. So much of Western architecture and art is based on this. It's all about what's supposed to happen mystically. I've always been very intrigued by that.

It's the same when you study Zen. These things are disciplines that take a lot of time and thought, and you have to be very specific, focused. I'm a painter: that's my discipline. I think a lot of these things are not so far removed from it. The idea of meditation, for instance: the idea that you could be made better through some sort of involvement with it. The idea that it could get better—the more you do it.

I don't know what comes out of religion. It's as if there's some unknown you can strive for, but you really have to stay on the path just to maintain the potential of this act. Say, if I'm drawn to Native American art—there's a religious aspect to that that I like and am fascinated by. I don't see the Renaissance painters as just painting this image because that's what they're told to paint. I would never want to make art that promoted a religion—but I understand the religious aspect of art—like Rothko. He really believed that paintings could affect you. I think he really believed in the chapel. And I understand it—I think it works, too.

1. The interview that follows has been edited in the interest of economy, clarity and the regrouping of related topics. I am grateful to Brice Marden, Matthew Marks and Raymond Foye for their help with the editing.

2. "Masters of Japanese Calligraphy. 8th-19th Century." (New York: Asia Society and Japan House, 1984). See the exhibition catalogue of same name.

3. Wang Xizhi (307-365 C.E.) was one of the first literati to develop calligraphy as an art of self-cultivation, his stylistic experiments subsequently occupying a central place in the canon of Chinese calligraphic art. His work survives today only in the form of later tracing copies, stone-carved facsimiles, and ink rubbings taken from these stone carvings.

4. Wan-go Weng, *Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, a Pictorial Survey*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1978).

5. David Riminelli, *Brice Marden*. (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1995).

6. Werner Blaser, *Chinese Pavilion Architecture: Quality, Design, Structure Exemplified by China*. (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, 1974).

7. François Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*. (Boston: Shambala, 1994).

8. For an English translation of Shitao's (1642-1707) treatise on painting, see Richard E. Strassberg, "Enlightening Remarks on Painting by Shib-t'ao". Pacific Asia Art Museum Monographs, Number 1. (Pasadena: Pacific Asia Art Museum, 1989).

9. George Rowley, *Principles of Chinese Painting*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).