



FIG. 1 *Cloud-Capped Peak*, Garden of Lingering, Suzhou

New York, May 1997: In an upper-floor gallery, two large abstract paintings of roughly square format hang low on the two walls perpendicular to the windows, and diagonally across from each other. They share the space of the room with several slabs of limestone, also square, but much smaller and lying flat, close to floor-level. These slabs, densely inscribed with decoration and writing, are epitaph tablets from Chinese tombs. The visitor to the show needs help with the puzzling gap between the paintings and the stones. It is discreetly available on the wall opposite the windows, where there are framed ink rubbings taken from two of the slabs. In the space under each rubbing, the painter has awkwardly copied the characters at the center of that particular slab.

This unusual show in which Brice Marden's paintings confronted, and formally responded to, Chinese epitaph tablets of the sixth to ninth centuries, was not the first time the artist sought to establish such a dialogue. In a 1991 exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the artist had already hung his own works together with a wide range of other artworks of his choice, many of them Chinese.<sup>1</sup> The 1997 show, however, was resolutely uneclectic: it was an intense, sometimes piercing, sometimes puzzling dialogue between two paintings and five ancient Chinese funerary monuments.

Stone epitaph tablets such as these were placed in the tombs of wealthy Chinese over many centuries. In all but one case the early examples exhibited in the show follow the standard model of two separate square slabs, one covering the other.<sup>2</sup> In small regular characters the epitaph text itself was carved into the polished surface of the lower slab. The underside of the top slab was also polished, and when the composite tablet was placed inside the tomb at its symbolically central position, the epitaph text was entirely hidden. It was thus protected from physical damage, while still remaining accessible to the spirits who were its intended readers. The sides were often decorated with astrological images (sometimes extending onto the beveled top of the cover) which reinforced the geomantic centrality of the tablet. And at the center of the top of the cover, on a flat square surface echoing the larger square of the tablet as a whole, the name of the deceased was carved in large characters, using an archaic, highly formal script. For these inscriptions, as for the epitaphs underneath, the families of the deceased probably called upon the best calligraphers at their disposal. The calligrapher would have first written out the name on paper in slowly-constructed characters. Part of the carver's art was to preserve a sense of the energy flow in the original calligraphy, although the passage into stone inevitably flattened it out. Marden's paintings specifically respond to two of these formally calligraphed names, which he began by copying, or re-interpreting, as an ink drawing on

paper using a stick, based upon rubbings of the original inscription. This and later stages of the genesis of the paintings are discussed in the interview that follows.

*Epitaph Painting 1* (1996-97) and *Epitaph Painting 2* (1996-97) follow directly from a group of four paintings which Marden painted in 1995-1996, whose titles reveal a shared Chinese theme: *Tang Dancer*, *China Painting*, *Suzhou*, and *By the River of the Swirling Eddies*.<sup>3</sup> Those works, roughly six foot high by two foot eight inches, are scaled to the human figure, and as such belong to a family of Marden's works that can be traced back into the 1960s. By contrast, the new paintings are larger—roughly eight feet square, and belong to a different family of works, deliberately monumental, having its origins at the beginning of the 1970s. Although this square format finds its immediate explanation in the model offered by the square epitaph tablets, it also partakes of a broader and more personal association, as Marden explains in the interview: vertical works he thinks of as figure paintings, horizontal ones as landscapes, and square ones as abstract. While not intending these categorizations to be taken too literally, the artist does seem to suggest that his square paintings escape (or perhaps exceed, since both figural and landscape references remain in play) the alternative modes of viewing offered by figure painting and landscape, pointing as they do in opposing directions of confrontation and envelopment.

The slow, meandering lines that structure the two *Epitaph* paintings are a feature that first quietly appeared in Marden's painting around 1988, in the series titled *Diagrammed Couplets* (1988-89). Whatever else this meander may connote, it also marks a second stage of the artist's response to East Asian calligraphy, following a first stage (starting in the mid-eighties) dominated by his use of the "glyph"—an apt name employed by the artist for a family of images that remained strongly angular, even geometric. At first, as in the *Diagrammed Couplets*, the meander inhabits a glyphic universe, which it inflects in the direction of a more elastic structural field. In subsequent works such as *Picasso's Skull* (1989-90), *The Studio* (1990) and *Kalo Keri* (1990), the meander retains this secondary role. But already by 1990, in other paintings, the glyph was coming to be consumed—ingested into an organic field of skeins, traces, and expanding/contracting spaces. The pivotal group of works in this regard was the *Cold Mountain* series (1989-91), and this reversed situation of glyphic vestiges within a now meander-dominated universe would continue to operate through 1993, for example, in *Aphrodite* or *Uxmal* (both 1991-93). As for entirely glyph-less paintings, their structure wholly generated from the meander, these began around 1990 with the group of paintings entitled *The Muses* (on which, significantly, Marden continues to work), followed by such 1991-93 works as *Virgins*, *The Sisters*, and *Vine*. As the dates show, the development is not a linear one, more an exhilarated shuffle. But by the time of the China-theme paintings of 1995-96, the shift was complete. In the process, the line itself had mutated into an even trace, stripped of gestural energy; there had been, in fact, a displacement of energy, from the constituent lines into the structural weave. The result, confirmed in these

*Epitaph Paintings* of 1996-97, is paintings that are slower and clearer, both tight and tough.

In line with this structural shift Marden's virtuosity as colorist has moved toward intricate relationships among several colors. Hindsight imposes a sense of evolution in this regard. From the starting point of the monochromes of the sixties, through the paintings combining different panels and color fields and beyond, a gradual process of increasing differentiation seems operative. The artist's first experiments with color relationships between line and ground came in the *Window Paintings* (1983) and subsequent related works of 1983-85. But by 1986 the introduction of the glyph opened the way to a working process in which different layers/interventions would be associated with distinct colors. Marden's subsequent refinements of this procedure have gradually brought about a simplification that is at the same time an enrichment of the coloristic complexity of the painting. At various times he has used and abandoned (at least for the moment): filled-in areas of color; local tonal variations introduced by gestural fluctuations and unevenness in the lines or ostentatious dripping; and a kind of localized smudged darkening of the ground. What is left (since 1995) is a tremendous clarity that functions at both local and general levels of the picture surface with almost precisely the same demand on the eye, so that there is a constant oscillation and tension between the two. Because this color-field structure is brought into alignment with the underlying armature of the meander (no mean task), the paintings become dense presences: in each case a tangled and tangible dynamic that sustains repeated viewing. In Marden's terms, the painting becomes a "meditative object."

*Epitaph Painting 1*, with its relatively dark ground and its note of slightly sour yellow against the grays and greens, has no very close parallel in Marden's recent work, although grays and greens are in themselves a constantly recurring element in his practice. The darkness of the ground may be a response to the dark ground of the ink rubbings of the epitaph tablets, or to the gray of the limestone from which the tablets are carved.<sup>4</sup> The brighter *Epitaph Painting 2*, meanwhile, belongs to a clear and long standing sub-genre within Marden's work: the red-yellow-blue painting. It is a theme first explicitly addressed in three works from 1974, *Red, Yellow, Blue I, II, and III*—conceived in part as an homage to Mondrian. Yet when *Epitaph Painting 2* veered too closely to previously explored territory, Marden abruptly shifted the color scheme by dividing the blue values into red-blue (purple), and green-blue: "then they started reading in relation to each other," the artist noted, "as well as to the yellow and the red."<sup>5</sup> Although initially conceived of as two works in a larger group of five, one for each epitaph tablet, the two paintings nonetheless operate as a pair. But their dialogue as complementary opposites only begins in the domain of color, extending into the thematic dimension through figural and other references which are discussed by the artist in the interview.

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For the person who works professionally with Chinese art, talking with Brice Marden is an unexpected pleasure. One discovers an artist for whom inter-cultural experience is the very ground of his artistic practice. In this respect he has (despite his lack of contact with them) much in common with leading contemporary Chinese artists, whether they live in China, or inhabit the limbo between third world and first world New York. Like them, he can no longer imagine a practice of painting that would engage only the tradition from whence it comes, nor one that, alternatively, would feed off exoticism for reconfirmation of the cultural distance between Euro-American and East Asian art traditions. Like them, he has dual, even multiple cultural loyalties, and like them, he is effectively displaced. Of course, given the privileged role of Western culture in globalization, the difference is that Marden's displacement is rather more of a willed choice, rather more of a self-displacement. The measure of the resistance that this choice inspires is perhaps best taken from Yve-Alain Bois' important 1993 essay, "Marden's Doubt," which discusses the artist's work since 1985, when his interest in the "glyph" was getting under way.<sup>6</sup> Bois puts the artist's fascination with Chinese art in perspective (the Western metaphor is not inappropriate), arguing that the paradigm of formal structure offered by Chinese calligraphy is often distracting and misleading, despite its accreditation by the artist. Bois proposes instead the "corporeal metaphor" of the body's internal structure, for which he provides a plausible and well-documented case. Marden, one might say, is reeled back into a modernist frame of reference, updated for the nineties through the problematic of the body.

To be sure, since he defines calligraphy as a practice shackled to a grid, to unilinear temporality, and to flatness, Bois has no difficulty in demonstrating that Marden's work systematically undermines such qualities by its dynamic dissociation of temporal and spatial readings of the picture surface. It seems to me, however, that the characteristics which Bois attributes to calligraphy have in each case been accompanied historically by an internal critique. I would even go so far as to say that the very practice of calligraphy is founded on the tensions between the grid and its decomposition, between unilinear temporality and a pictorial negation of that temporal order, and between graphic flatness and surface depth. Indeed, not the least pleasure in viewing Marden's work for me is seeing that the concept of calligraphy with which he engages is one that embraces this complexity of qualities. Confirmation of one sort can be found in the fact that, as mentioned by the artist in his interview, behind the ostensible reference to calligraphy lies another, undeclared reference to Chinese landscape painting. A different kind of confirmation might be seen in Marden's shift from the glyph to the meander, which freed his art up for a dynamics of the pictorial field much closer to the dynamics of the calligraphic field. A second type of objection to Bois' argument might also be ventured. Since 1993, Marden has in fact expanded his Chinese frame of reference much further, in directions which confirm that his engagement with the body (on which Bois is entirely convincing) cannot be dissociated from his involvement with Chinese art. For corporeal metaphors are fundamental to the other

Chinese art forms which have fascinated the artist in recent years: notably, painting, ornamental rocks, and tomb sculpture. Yet corporeal metaphors are equally fundamental to the calligraphy with which Marden started,<sup>7</sup> so are we to think that the artist was then unaware of their existence? Given Marden's passionate interest in books on calligraphy and Chinese art in general, and the fact that the role of such metaphors is a staple of scholarly and popular writing on calligraphy (and other forms of Chinese art), it seems unlikely.<sup>8</sup> By excluding the "corporeal metaphor" from Chinese calligraphy and from the artist's understanding of it, it becomes possible to single out the metaphor as an indice of the artist's deeper engagement with modernism. The Chinese frame of reference is reduced to that of a mere catalyst, a way back in to modernism from some unexpected point, as if refreshed. From this view, Chinese art is seen as irredeemably other, good only for productive misunderstandings. Alice Yang has recently written of the way in which successive twentieth-century critics have positioned Chinese art as one of the Others of modernism. For critics of Western modern art, she writes, "Chinese art comes to signify, by turns, the promise as well as the hazards of surrendering [the] task of representation" (understood in terms of painting's Renaissance inheritance).<sup>9</sup> Bois' essay joins in this critical tradition, to the extent that Marden's reference point in Chinese art is identified as calligraphy, and calligraphy is defined as essentially alien to the modernist enterprise. But what if an artist makes a serious attempt to correct this misunderstanding and succeeds not only in this correction, but also in incorporating this new understanding into his work?

How do we define modernism then? The point is not to deny Marden's other interests—for example, in bones, skeletons, or dance, not to mention late Pollock, all of them entirely relevant—but rather to account for the fact that these interests did not alone, or even primarily, take him to his present point. The artist cannot in the end be reeled back in, but continues to be self-displaced, at some in-between point. That this is part of what modernism has become today presents contemporary criticism with one of its most uncomfortable challenges.

1. Trevor Fairbrother, with Robert Creeley et al., *Brice Marden: Boston* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1991).

2. The exception is a single slab, equivalent to just the cover in a normal tablet, where the epitaph text is carved on to the notably uneven underside of the stone. Perhaps that family was limited in what it could afford.

3. *Brice Marden* (Zurich: Thomas Ammann Fine Art, 1996). The fourth title, *By the River of Swirling Eddies*, is from *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* by Li Po as translated by Ezra Pound in *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions Books, 1990).

4. In an unpublished part of my interview with the artist, he stated that the grey ground of another projected, but as yet unfinished, painting from the *Epitaph Painting* series was created with the ink rubbings in mind.

5. Interview with Brice Marden, June 1997.

6. Yve-Alain Bois, "Marden's Doubt," in *Brice Marden: Paintings 1985-1993* (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1993), pp. 13-67.

7. The most extensive writing on corporeal metaphors in Chinese art has been done by John Hay (no relation) in a wide-ranging series of texts. See, for example, "The Human Body as a Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy" in Susan Bush and Christian Murck eds., *Theories of the Arts in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) and "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" in Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow eds., *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

8. See the interview that follows.

9. Alice Yang, "Modernism and the Chinese Other in Twentieth-Century Criticism," in *Why Asia? Essays on Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).