Warp/Weft: Agnes Martin, Textiles, and the Linear Experience

Ariana Yandell
Georgia State University

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WARP/WEFT: AGNES MARTIN, TEXTILES, AND THE LINEAR EXPERIENCE

by

ARIANA YANDELL

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond, PhD

ABSTRACT

This essay is a study of Agnes Martin (1912-2004), a Canadian-born and American-based contemporary artist, and her earlier painting practice including, but not limited, to her work *Falling Blue* of 1963. The exploration of this piece and others frames Martin’s early work as a process of material exploration analogous to weaving and fiber art. This framing is enhanced by the friendship and professional exchange between Martin and artist Lenore Tawney (1907-2007). The textile lens, as explored in this paper, has been undeveloped compared to other approaches to Martin’s early work and practice.

INDEX WORDS: Painting, Textiles, Contemporary Art, Grids, Buddhism, Abstract Expressionism, Lenore Tawney
WARP/WEFT: AGNES MARTIN, TEXTILES, AND THE LINEAR EXPERIENCE

by

ARIANA YANDELL

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DEDICATION

This essay is dedicated to the memory of my father, Aldo Yandell, who was always a source of kindness and laughter. I also dedicate this essay to my parents Lisa and Andrew Campbell, for their constant and loving encouragement.
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I would like to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Susan Richmond, Dr. Maria Gindhart, and Dr. Audrey Goodman, for their expertise and support, academic and otherwise.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 AGNES MARTIN REVIEWS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 PEDAGOGICAL LEGACY</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 ART AND SPIRITUALITY</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 MATERIALS, SPIRIT, TEXTILES, AND PAINTING</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Agnes Martin, *Falling Blue*, 1963

Figure 2: Lenore Tawney, *The Queen*, 1962

Figure 3: Lenore Tawney, *Lekythos*, 1962

Figure 4: Agnes Martin, *White Flower*, 1960

Figure 5: Agnes Martin, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden*, 1953

Figure 6: Lenore Tawney in her Chicago studio, 1957

Figure 7: Lenore Tawney, *St. Francis and the Birds*, 1954

Figure 8: Agnes Martin, *Homage to Greece*, 1959

Figure 9: Hasegawa Tohaku, *Pine Trees*, 16th-century
1 INTRODUCTION

Agnes Martin’s *Falling Blue* of 1963 (Fig.1) is an oil and graphite painting purchased by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1974. This large painting (approximately 71 by 72 inches) contains the grid-like structure Martin is known for in her overall oeuvre. A square lies within the canvas, comprised of thinly painted blue horizontal bands, with alternating graphite lines in between. Behind these horizontal structures, three evenly spaced vertical graphite lines create four columns. The viewer is confronted with both the irregularity of the painterly line and the underlying draughtsman-like structure of the graphite. The architecture of the grid imparts a sense of delicacy and an almost unattainable materiality. While I am not limiting my exploration to *Falling Blue* alone, this work serves as a pertinent case study to examine the nature of the grid in Martin’s work.

To simplify the structure of *Falling Blue* is to align it with the grid. The emphasis and scholarship on the grid in Martin’s work is divided into two periods, her work before 1967 and after 1973 (she decidedly quit painting between 1967 and 1973). While the grid became a more definitive archetype in Martin’s post-1973 work, her pre-1967 work involved a heavy amount of experimentation regarding line and grids. During the 1960s, her work on paper and canvas is indicative of a visually defined linear experimentation, deviating drastically from her production of art in the 1950s, which contained landscapes and abstracted, non-geometric forms.
Scholarship about Martin’s early artistic career—the 1940s and 1950s—discusses her experimentation and artistic production primarily in terms of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.¹ Scholars writing on Martin’s work from the 1960s on, in terms of Minimalism and various painterly forms of Modernism, have theorized the origin or use of the grid. The artist’s elusive interest in spirituality, her personal history of mental illness, and regional ties to New Mexico have also colored accounts and added a sense of mysticism about Martin and her evolution as an artist invested in the grid. Instead of continuing the discussion of the etiology of the grid in painting alone, I will focus on Martin’s early work and the grid in terms of another medium: textiles. While her friendship with textile artists such as Lenore Tawney, an artist resident of The Coenties Slip, is referenced in scholarship, scholars rarely moves beyond loose notions of inspiration or a biographical reference point.

The Coenties Slip became a locus for artists in the late 1950s up until 1965.² Located at the southernmost tip of Manhattan, The Slip was rich with nautical history as part of the city’s earliest surviving harbors. It held a sort of romance of New York’s seafaring past and is referenced in well-known literary works by Walt Wittman and Herman Melville. By the time artists arrived in 1956-57, the abandoned sail lofts of The Slip were attractive—not to mention cheap—living quarters and studio spaces. The artists who inhabited The Slip include Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Jack Youngerman as well as Lenore Tawney and Ann

¹ Abstract Expressionism is a term that used Martin to describe herself throughout her entire career. Before the 1960s, Abstract Expressionism was a prevailing style used to talk about artists using non-representational forms in painting. Likewise, Surrealism shows up as a lens for Martin’s early work in Taos and discussion of Martin’s early painting such as The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (1953). See Christina Bryan Rosenberger’s analysis of Marti’s early maturation of work in relation to Taos. Christina Bryan Rosenberger, Drawing the Line: The Early Works of Agnes Martin, (Oakland: The University of Californian Press, 2016), 48-55.
² From this point onward, I will be using The Slip and The Coenties Slip interchangeably.
Wilson. The unlikely access to seafaring nature, as the apartment-studios were roughly three-quarters surrounded by seascape, was strikingly different from the urban containment deeper into Manhattan and experienced by other artist communities. A significant body of literature exists over how artists at The Slip experienced a simultaneous exchange of ideas, materials, and seafaring references during this time. As opposed to romanticized account of the artist community, however, relationships were not overtly collaborative but personal and often one-on-one through conversation and informal studio visits. Artists here were untied more by what they were not interested in versus what they had in aesthetically in common: They were against the overarching goliath of Abstract Expressionism’s intellectualization. Precedence exists for how most artists at The Slip either used nautical references in work during their stay at The Slip or dock-side material for art objects. In relation to Martin, literature often focuses on how Ellsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin’s frequent breakfasting together accelerated Kelly’s practice. However, attention to how fiber artists, such as Lenore Tawney, may have affected Martin’s work is lacking. How was this relationship beneficial in determining the artistic production of Agnes Martin in the 1960s?

To further the associations of textiles, spirituality, and the grid, I will compare the work, mutual flow of inspiration and methodological similarities between Lenore Tawney and Agnes Martin throughout this essay. First, I identify instances of textile language used in exhibition reviews and exhibition catalog essays about Martin’s work. Secondly, I examine the pedagogical influence on Martin and Tawney’s work, including the Bauhaus legacy in textiles and pedagogical training in painting. Following this analysis, I will examine how both artists used similar language based on spiritual terminology and allusions to discuss their artistic production.

often citing ideas of purity, essence, and/or spirit. I demonstrate, through a Hegelian reading of Kandinsky’s art writing, how the linguistic choices of Martin and Tawney relate to ideas of inner necessity (Innere Notwendigkeit) and World-Spirit (Weltgeist). Lastly, I examine the material relationship between textile and painting that Martin utilizes through an exploration of material, concepts, and process like Tawney. Overall, the purpose of this thesis is not to imply a derivative association between Martin and Tawney, but to assert an approach that challenges the teleological history of the grid in painting through consideration of the warp and weft, a grid-like structure inherent to textiles and canvas.

A grid can be defined in graphic design terms as a plane of intersecting lines, often serving as a foundation upon which to build. In geometry, the grid can be a tool for plotting coordinates and even a genre of paper for mathematicians and designers alike. In histories of modern art, grids have been a mainstay, hardly in need of an introduction. Among the first art historians to elaborate on their significance contemporaneously, Rosalind Krauss mentions Martin in her seminal text “Grids.” Krauss seeks to locate a framework to completely assess the history of the grid in 20th-century painting away from a sequential and structuralist history embedded with myth-making. Likewise, Lucy Lippard’s catalog essay for the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art in 1972 tackles the teleological history of the grid in art history with a nod to Martin. Lippard posits that the grid serves as a means to an end for most contemporary artists and delves into the various approaches towards grid work used by artists including Sol Lewitt, Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns and Agnes Martin. Lippard allocates

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4 In Modern art, the grid became a frequent compositional element dating back to cubist works by Pablo Picasso, George Braque, Marsden Hartley, etc., but has additional origins in terms of its organizational presence in perspective, such as studies by Uccello and Albrecht Dürer, dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth century. See Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, 9, (1979): 51.

Martin's grids as "linear tensions" that exemplify an "unrepetitive use of a repetitive medium." In most cases, this analysis of the grid stems from dialog centered around drawing, painting and more recently sculpture. But importantly, a grid can also take the form of warp and weft, the fabric of the canvas, and further, textiles themselves. What of this connection to Agnes Martin’s early grid paintings and drawings?

In my analysis of Martin’s grid paintings from the 1960s, her work easily elicits three different viewing experiences: up close, at middle distance, then slightly far away. From a distance, a passerby might register Martin’s painting as being color solids, almost Rothkoian but lacking his definitive dry-brushed edges. From a middle-distance, the linear element slowly emerges, the subtle breakage of color is acutely felt at this distance. Up close, the eye struggles to keep up with the brevity of Martin’s visible lines, with their leaps and bounds, the hand exposed in their construction. From this close vantage point, the delicate balance of color tonality within the canvas field—formed by two to three applications of paint and/or gesso—with graphite lines deepens the visual experience. In *Falling Blue*, the weave of the canvas is doubly emphasized: First at the middle distance with the carefully banded blue horizontals and graphite lines intersecting three vertical graphite lines, and secondly, upon close inspection with the lightly applied paint, exposing the bordering weave of the canvas.

Simply put, when one views a grid painting like *Falling Blue* by Agnes Martin, one cannot stand still to completely take it in. By this I do not imply that there is one physical stance required to get it and that getting it has one achievable format like a mechanical transaction, but that the viewer quite literally needs to move to enact the experience of viewing implied by the piece. This may seem like an average observation but in consideration of Martin’s emphasis in

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the 1960s on the experience of nature and art—and more importantly the nautical life at the Coenties Slip—it is so important that it needs to set the tone for a proper observation on the type of optical effects happening in the canvas.\(^7\) *Falling Blue* can be perceived as one oceanic reference from Martin’s time at The Slip.\(^8\) Nature for Martin became of elemental importance for abstracting an experience of confronting nature. When we see her use of line, we can relate the undulating horizontals to the vast and breaking lines within a calm sea. Martin’s most recent traveling retrospective brought to light sculptural works using dock materials and a gamified version of the ocean that seemed very uncharacteristic of the artist, but also reifies the experimental period Martin experienced in reaching a painterly grid structure.\(^9\) Sculptures included in *Falling Blue*, while the viewer both senses the structure of the grid from the middle and far distances, up close—say two feet away—exposed is the hand’s irregularity with no moment of rest for the eyes. This subtle fluctuation—this fluttering of a persistent hand—creates a sense of movement or pulse that can only occasionally be observed while the vast periphery of one’s vision is acutely felt. *Falling Blue* in fact may very well express the impossibility of

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\(^8\) “When people go to the ocean they like to see it all day...They don’t expect to see, to find all that response in painting...It’s a simple experience, you become lighter and lighter in weight, you wouldn’t want anything else...I want to draw a certain response like this.” Interview with Ann Wilson, “Linear Webs,” *Art and Artists* 1, no.7 (October 1966): 246, In Nancy Princenthal, *Her Life and Art*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 131-132.

\(^9\) Pieces of note in the Guggenheim iteration of the traveling Agnes Martin retrospective from 2015-2016 are: *The Wave* (1963) made of plexiglass, wood, and beads; *The Garden* (1958) made of found objects and oil on wood; *Burning Tree* (1961) consisting of wood and metal; *Dominoes* (1960) consisting of oil on paper then mounted on canvas. Nautical themes are brought up in the paintings of Martin and fiber work of Tawney. For Martin, this includes *The Dark River* (1961), *The Islands* (1961), and *Night Sea* (1963). For Tawney, a similar experimentation with found objects include *Dark River* (1961). Such examples are viable references for how environment and access to materials affected Martin’s production at The Slip.
confronting the ocean, where Martin once mentioned containing form loses a sense of its own meaning.\textsuperscript{10}

More analytically minded viewers might find themselves fixated on the numerical frequencies of the vertical and horizontal elements, even cataloging the intersections and cells to reveal some sort of innermost harmony. If Martin were ever to confront the viewing practice of one such individual, no doubt, she would scoff. In a conversation over Martin’s life, artist Richard Tuttle, with whom she was close during her lifetime, relayed an anecdote in which both artists looked up at the sky. One night outside in an open field with Martin, Tuttle stated that he enjoyed the stars and Martin stated quite bluntly that she enjoyed the spaces in between.\textsuperscript{11} This anecdote also echoes published lecture notes by Martin describing how to overcome feelings of defeat when painting by making oneself available to inspiration: “To penetrate the night is one thing. But to be penetrated by the night, that is to be overtaken.”\textsuperscript{12} By acknowledging the in between spaces of stars and the idea of being overtaken by the night, Martin’s rhetoric includes a glimpse of the work in mentally constructing a relationship with an art object. The experience is both a mental and physical one. But to further the physicality of both Martin’s art and its perceived materiality, it is also useful to approach a social element of Martin’s early practice.

Brendan Prendeville makes the claim in his analysis of Martin’s work that through a combination of factors such as the performative space created through Abstract Expressionism, Martin’s rejection of the impersonal approach of Minimalism, and the importance of friendship

\textsuperscript{10} Princtenthal, \textit{Her Life and Art}, 131-132.
\textsuperscript{12} Agnes Martin, \textit{Agnes Martin} (Munchen: Kunstraum Munchen, 1972), 48.
at the Coenties Slip, the social element of her early work is an important element to consider. Before the complete institutionalization of Jackson Pollock’s drips, these gestural splatters were innovative in their mark-making tracery of Pollock’s movements, imprinting the dance between the canvas and artist. While we could elevate the emotive power of machismo drips, this dance between canvas, artist, and the final product as a record of this dance, has a personable and performative element. The social element implicit in the performance of work and the mark-making of the hand is catalyzed by the sense of movement required of the viewer interacting with Martin’s canvases. In textiles, the social element is implicit in the legacy of tapestries as an object-occupant of a living space as well as its participatory need of in-the-round inspection as an art object. To extend this conversation towards defining a textile process suggestive in Martin’s early practice, it is pertinent to introduce fellow Slip resident Lenore Tawney as an integral reference point. The performative encounter implicit in the work of viewing Martin’s early paintings and drawings has a parallel in the object-occupant encounter of Tawney’s fiber art objects.

Artist Lenore Tawney shifted from weaving to drawing and collage in 1964, making forms that mesh and press lines into space, converging to a sharp point. In the same year of Martin’s *Falling Blue*, Tawney exhibited in a group show titled *Woven Forms* at the then Museum of Contemporary Crafts, now Museum of Art and Design in New York City. These woven forms of Tawney, for which the exhibition was named, produced an innovative approach to weaving that breached the walls of tapestry and delved into the territory of site-specific installation. Her woven forms were immensely vertical woven structure with a variation of negative space created by vertical slits, lightening the overall structure of her weavings. A 1969

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exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art titled *Wall Hangings* acknowledges the variant avenues of weaving bringing forth an era of lightness. I term this notion as material-levity: a focus on material weightlessness both implied and actual taken up by artists in their respective medium used. For weaving, this takes the linear parameters of a dense, interlinked rectilinear plane and disperses the warp and weft to a thread-bare, or sketch-like presence. For painting, material levity implies a veiling of the material presence of a canvas through a consistent and structured framework of line and color as well as a light application of said elements.

Specifically, in *Wall Hangings* what was claimed was that weavers were leaving the impression of a tapestry versus the grandiose wall hangings related to the tradition of tapestries.\(^{14}\) The airy gaps implied in material-levity are of a certain centrality in Tawney’s works such as *The Queen* (Fig. 2) with an open warp weave combining solid sections of weaving. The weightlessness of the sculptural piece can be likened to the exposed weave of Martin’s canvases, where the material base of the canvas is in dialog with the levels of opacity of colors used and in delineations of line. To a more extreme opacity of linen and sculptural conformity, Tawney’s woven form *Lekythos* (Fig. 3) looks barely tethered to its monofilament bar, with the open warp becoming the central, slit-forming agent. Lines of threadbare linen both cascade from the monofilament and blend into a veil, collapsing the piece to a two-dimensionality suggesting the drawings of Paul Klee. While the *Wall Hangings* exhibition hailed the sketch-like qualities derivative of the American weavers included in the exhibition, a firm conclusion separated their innovations, including Tawney’s, from technological innovations taken up by contemporary painters. This painterly innovation included the stripping of and reimagining the object-presence of the canvas. Painters were increasingly interested in assemblage and found materials, especially at

The Slip with dockside materials available in the plenty. For Tawney, found materials were more frequent to be sure but conceptually, her focus in 1964 to 1966 was explicitly with drawing, taking the mechanism of the jacquard loom as an instrument of inspiration. In her drawing, an implied sense of space came from an interest in the manipulation process behind the jacquard loom, a manipulation that began though the exploration of loom construction and by spontaneous dropping of materials into the warp/weft of a tapestry.

In relation to the use of line, Mona Schieren uses the term “web,” such as web movements “Webbewegungen” to compare work of Tawney to Martin.\(^\text{15}\) Tawney’s woven forms produce this webbing process twofold, first by the edges and containment of her weavings and secondly, through the actual intersections of thread and space. Likewise, Martin’s webbing takes form in *Falling Blue* as both the intersecting fibers of the canvas exposed by a thin interior border and through the density of intersecting graphite, paint, and negative space. Ideas such as space in-between and linear elements became the focus of experimentation in both artists’ work at a time when critical dialog around art practice was changing. The first encounter that factors into the disassociation of Bauhaus and design’s theoretical weight in the realm of fiber and textiles is the distance from painterly Modernism in a Greenbergian New York. In his preface analyzing clashing theories of engagement within Clement Greenberg’s and Josef Albers’ ideas on art leading up to the 1950s, Jeffery Saletnik notes “theoretical elision” may have undermined the Bauhaus’s role in conversation on medium specificity.\(^\text{16}\) Greenberg’s art criticism produced a

\(^{15}\) Mona Schieren, *Agnes Martin: Transkulturelle Übersetzung* (Munchen: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2016), 244.
passive relationship of art-viewing, Albers and the Bauhaus an active one heavily process-oriented. For Greenberg, the artistic process was a means to an end versus a Bauhaus means for exploration. Martin’s work became somewhat isolated to the realm of painting without much exchange while the opposite is true for Tawney’s critical reception. The legacy of Greenberg’s modernism, with the question of the differences between a disinterested and engaged viewer—the Kantian legacy within painting especially—is imbedded in the art critical dialog produced in the 1960s.

In the 1960s at The Slip, Martin was swept up in the Minimalist lens of exhibitions such as 10 and Systemic Painting, while Tawney had a widely-acclaimed exhibition with her newly created Woven Forms exhibition before changing direction altogether the following year. By taking note of critical dialog around Martin’s early work, we can identify the road blocks that have either helped or hindered the associations of site-specificity as a means of visual engagement. Material-levity implicit in Martin’s early 1960s grids are a connecting vantage point of how Martin’s process now may have converged with the likes of Lenore Tawney. Martin’s move to New York and initial gallery representation by Betty Parsons placed Martin in the shadow of Greenberg approved goliaths such as Mark Rothko and Robert Rauschenberg. In my defense of a textile process from Martin’s early years, what is overlooked in Martin’s work is the performative act of viewing, transculturation with spirituality, and the linguistic choices used by Martin in defining her practice in relation to a potential Bauhaus methodology. These vantage points imbue material-levity with a sense of intellectual agency that both Martin and Tawney were developing while in New York in the 1960s. While there is an exhaustive reservoir of information concerning painterly grids in relationship to order, form, and emotion, these relationships oft downplay if not ignore textile materiality as a conceptual tool to reach these
ideas. Beginning with Martin's arrival in New York, conflicting voices have claimed Martin's graphite grids to meet ends within the framework of group shows as a definitive stance away from Greenberg Modernism and its cultural associations with Abstract Expressionism. To further define language that either helped or hindered a potential textile process in Martin's grids, we must examine Martin's early reception and reviews in New York.

*Figure 1: Agnes Martin, Falling Blue, 1963, oil and graphite on linen, 71 7/8 x 72 in., Collection of The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, © 2017 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York*
Figure 2: Lenore Tawney, *The Queen*, 1962, Linen, 160. x 30 in., Courtesy, Lenore G. Tawney Foundation

Figure 3: Lenore Tawney, *Lekythos*, 1962 Linen; 50 x 31 3/4 x 1 3/4 in., Courtesy, Lenore G. Tawney Foundation
2 AGNES MARTIN REVIEWS

Through writings by critics and art historians concerning Martin’s early work, we can see glimpses of a potential textile approach seen in Martin’s practice. Nancy Princenthal infers that while Martin was in New Mexico before her move to New York in 1957, the artist remained influenced by European Modernism, but that native textiles out of the Southwest may have been a contributing influence when she resided in the state.\(^{17}\) The interest in Native American textiles and spirituality was in part fueled by the arts and literary community present in New Mexico since the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The theosophical atmosphere of New Mexico art colonies had been constructed not only by philosophers and writers, but also by artists before her. By the 1950s, lecture circuits were introducing Asiatic ideas to the New York art world. Martin’s early landscape abstractions from New Mexico aligned with emerging biomorphic forms like of Kenzo Okada, a painter of Japanese descent who had accompanied Betty Parsons to New Mexico in 1957 and 1958.\(^{18}\) Through various visits to New Mexico and slight encouragement by Okada, Parsons extended an invitation to Martin to represent her in New York. When Martin arrived in New York with Parsons as her gallerist, Martin was in the shadows of shows of Rothko and Pollock, championed by Clement Greenberg, whose expressionist authority dominated the New York art world in 1957. This artistic star-power often took form in the living location of artists such as Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg, and, alternatively, those arriving at The Slip. The Slip as an alternative artist-residence became a community associated with divergent practices and ideologies from mainstream Greenbergian Abstract Expressionism.

\(^{17}\) Nancy Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*, 62.
\(^{18}\) Nancy Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*, 63.
A lasting element of Greenberg ideology was the Modernist language of originality and the preference for “identifying key structural invariants” left little room for discussing the effects of viewing Martin’s work.19 The intensity of Martin’s application of the line in her grids, via graphite or gesso, were initially made insignificant by the compositional whole of grids in art criticism. Critical responses to Martin’s initial introduction to New York also aligned with a romantic image of the artist’s process with a poetic responsiveness that only began to give way to a different sensibility in the 1960s.20 Martin’s inclusion at an exhibition at Section 11 followed by a review by Dore Ashton framed Martin’s use of color as a “benign essence of the mesa country.”21 Dore Ashton was the first art critic/art historian to write about Martin upon her arrival in New York. A year later, in a review of Martin’s work, Ashton’s assertions of an intrinsic tie of Martin with the New Mexico landscape are more palpable. First articulated was a firm association of landscape as an active source represented in Martin’s work.22 Secondly, Ashton framed her American claims in painting to “Indian culture” and land, thus melding the association of the American west as per the legacy of O’Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, and others associated with New Mexico art colonies pre-World War Two.23 The experiential importance of her work paled in description compared to the figurative association of landscape. In the 1960s, art historians were inclined to first address the structural aims of recent aesthetic changes in the art world as in the case of Lawrence Alloway’s exhibition Systemic Painting, or as in the case of

Dore Ashton, affirm the poetics in Martin’s emotional affects.\(^{24}\) In her analysis of Martin’s reception in Europe, art historian Maria Müller-Schareck notes that it wasn’t until the early 1980s that art historians and curators were focusing specifically how viewers respond to work by Martin.\(^{25}\) In analysis of a spectrum of stances towards Martin’s work, Christina Bryan Rosenberger notes the pivotal moment Ashton was a part of one critical direction in Martin’s reception, where a Western mythology combined with answering to a “physical and cultural environment.”\(^{26}\) Rosenberger notes that this approach proved powerful in selling work, recalling the history of landscape paintings well-received in New York, and grounds Martin’s art in figurative representation, again an aspect of landscape iconography. While Ashton's reviews on Martin evolved over time, her initial writing set a tone often repeated in other criticism on Martin's work, that is decisively romantic. The second area of critical reception is entrenched in abstraction, with focus on the linear and geometric formations in Martin’s work. However, the gulf between both perspectives either privileged the expressive tendencies intrinsic to the physical and optical presence with her work or claimed the overarching schema, and repetitive system, by her use of both color and line. In terms of theoretical writings on schemas with formal standards produced a Classist stance. In one passage from The Untroubled Mind, Martin claims:

> Plato states that all that exists are shadows,
> To a detached person the complication of the involved life
> is like chaos


\(^{25}\) Müller-Schareck, “‘Out into the World’: How Agnes Martin’s Paintings Reached Germany and Western Europe,” 201.

\(^{26}\) Rosenberger, Drawing the Line: The Early Works of Agnes Martin, 118.
If you don’t like the chaos you’re a classist
If you like it you’re a romanticist27

In fact, Nancy Princenthal states in this instance that Martin was “Converting Plato’s lightless cave to a realm of clarity and freedom, [where] Martin infuses it with perfection, an inversion that may have resulted from compounding Plato with Buddhism.”28 In contribution to the second direction, in which a conversation concerning a more classist direction was furthered throughout Martin’s career, were critical responses from Lawrence Alloway, Rosalind Krauss and Donald Judd.

Beginning in the 1960s, critics were laying claim the innovative approaches of Martin and her contemporaries. First of import to markedly shape Martin’s presence was Lawrence Alloway. Between 1961 and 1966, Alloway wrote four catalog essays about Martin’s work, the last of which corresponded to his exhibition at the Guggenheim, entitled Systemic Painting.29 In this moment, terminology and criteria were being claimed country-wide for the newly emergent artwork that focused on structured, non-objective forms in painting. In Systemic Painting, Alloway clears out the storehouse of makeshift terms used to describe the marked shift to what is now primarily termed as Minimalism, as Systematic painting—in which a repeated system or organization structure is used. In condemning a Greenbergian “neglect of non-physiognomic art”

28 Princenthal, Agnes Martin: Her Life and Her Art, 192-193
and consolidating a proliferation of terminology\textsuperscript{30} used to describe geometric art’s newly reacquired prominence, Alloway emphasizes the variant benefits of repetitive systems as eliciting newfound meaning in art.\textsuperscript{31} Alloway also states that systems are a way of escaping from absolutes previously used to define ideas of order and, as he summarizes, “A system is as human as a splash of paint, more so when the splash gets routinized.”\textsuperscript{32} But where Alloway falters in his grouping of Martin within such a categorical term, is when he asserts that systemic painters have an end-result of a painting conceived before completion, a trait more intrinsically tied to Minimalism.\textsuperscript{33} As beneficial as this perspective of systems is to lending Martin’s early practice to a correlation to weaving as a system, which physically and ideological pushed against the mechanical in art practice, the systemic label proves to still isolate Martin’s work as painterly object. An object whose innovation serves as a means for itself in painting alone. Alloway began his notice of Martin’s work from a collective standpoint and it would not be until Martin’s solo exhibition in 1973 that Alloway’s observations became more substantive for a textile association versus collective painterly observation. A reaction against the constraints of labels concerning systems takes form in Martin’s “extended prose poem” turned artist statement in her \textit{The Untroubled Mind} printed in her 1973 exhibition at The Institute of Contemporary Art of The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia in which Martin’s term ‘inspiration’ becomes prevalent.\textsuperscript{34} Art Historian Francis Morris takes these two instances and notes that while both Alloway and Martin subscribe to minimizing the role of process and pre-planning in art making,

\textsuperscript{30} Terms include Hard Edge, Field Painting, Abstract Classicists, and One Image painting. See Lawrence Alloway, \textit{Systemic Painting}, 11-20.
\textsuperscript{31} Lawrence Alloway, \textit{Systemic Painting}, 17.
\textsuperscript{32} Lawrence Alloway, \textit{Systemic Painting}, 17.
\textsuperscript{34} Morris, “Agnes Martin: Innocence and Experience,” 63.
Martin held an opposition to the conceptual “idea and ego” understood by an initial reading of Alloway’s conceptualism.35

Morris also notes “Martin was not alone among her contemporaries in speaking of the creative process in terms of inspiration: From Barnett Newman to Lenore Tawney there were many in her ‘circle’ that downplayed personal agency in favor of revelation…”36 Revelation or inspiration would increasingly appear in Martin’s interviews and writings after 1973, being a term used as a tool in which Martin describes harnessing the essence of life, art, and art viewing. Inspiration and intuition would tactically serve Martin’s expressiveness in creating line in her gridwork, much in the same way that line became of meditative importance in Tawney’s exploration of the jacquard loom in drawings and woven forms. Notions of negative space as material and the philosophical negation of ego in the self—combined with the push against a romantic claim of genius or mastery by a passive claim of intuition—posits an alternative form of experience intrinsic to the art-object encounter. Important to this intuitive experience, as per Martin and Tawney’s practice, is the spatial role of art objects.

The concept of intuition as intellection, a term by Richard Tobin’s analysis of Martin’s work The Islands (1961), is present in Rosalind Krauss’ interpretation of Martin’s work.37 In her initial iteration of “Grids” in 1979, Rosalind Krauss insinuates two directions grids have served in art: spatial and temporal. The spatial grid favors the farthest pole away from imitation of

37 In my using of the term “Intuition as Intellection,” I am deriving this association from the analysis of The Islands (1961) by Richard Tobin in which he equates a similarity between Martin and Ellsworth Kelly’s usage of Mondrian’s grid. Tobin also traces Martin’s 1950s friendship with Ad Reinhart to “themes and literary allusions” from their mutual interest in “contemplative” traditions present within The Untroubled Mind. See Richard Tobin, “The Islands 1961,” in Agnes Martin (New York, Distributed Art Publishers Inc., 2015), 78-79.
nature, whereas the temporal grid is in line with nineteenth-century aesthetics that are seemingly ubiquitous and impervious to time.\textsuperscript{38} Familiar tones of the universality of Mind and Spirit are echoed from the legacy of Mondrian. Krauss notes that there is a sense of materiality and release when confronting Martin’s and Ad Reinhart’s work.\textsuperscript{39} Krauss concludes that the case of the grid needs an etiological investigation versus a historical investigation and echoes the concern for a search of originality in a grid. Donald Judd’s reviews of shows containing work by Martin, focused more on the effectiveness of material autonomy with individual art objects. For Martin’s case, her grids were indicators in and of themselves. Donald Judd, whose art criticism paved a definitive path for Minimalist art, reviewed Martin’s work, initially warning of its “plastic” qualities bordering close to the decorative.\textsuperscript{40} However, in subsequent reviews, Judd speaks favorably towards the “woven” field, in that Martin’s mark-making comes across as incised. For example, in \textit{White Flower} (Fig. 4), the wash of color on the canvas lays dormant while the strong horizontals of graphite weaves between the irregularities of vertical dots of white. However, additional reviews of Martin by Judd in the 60s appear brief, drawing attention to their “quiet” and “discrete” presence and graphic quality.\textsuperscript{41} If we take Judd’s woven field observation as an analogy, Martin’s success to Judd is related to capturing the likeness of a factory-produced linen over a hand-made alternative. While a mechanical or industrial conversation can open a slew of conceptual avenues worthy of investigation, this stance diverts from the sensory nature of line used by Martin in her 1960s grids. Alloway and Krauss would later complicate this stance in that

\textsuperscript{38} Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," \textit{October}, 9 (1979), 52-54.
\textsuperscript{39} Krauss, "Grids," 54.
\textsuperscript{40} Donald Judd, “In the Galleries,” \textit{Arts Magazine} 37, no.5 (February 1963): 48.
Martin’s exposed hand with her rectilinear framework provides a tactile reality with an alternative material relationship.

Alloway and Krauss later became active players in the construction of and writing for two separate retrospectives for Martin. Krauss would move away from terms of patterning and systems to ideas of the tactile and optical. And in 1973, when Martin had a retrospective to inaugurate her reentry into the art world, Alloway made an associative claim to Native American textiles that the artist found favorable. Likewise, as the moment of Martin’s first artist statement, it is decisive how Alloway and Martin converged in framing her 1950s and 1960s oeuvre. Alloway’s text over Martin here announces the concept of a material impression, a veil-like presence formulated by the “network” of coordinates, such as the white dots present in *White Flower*, that are far more elusive than is accustomed to grid representation. Likewise, Alloway notes that by 1964, Martin’s extension of the internal grid plane to the edges of the canvas make her art objects firmly occupy space versus time alone. Alloway leaves his readers with the openness of interpretation on Martin’s forms, briefly calling attention to women artists and their newly found interest in domestic textiles during the 1960s. It was not lost on Martin’s peers and colleagues that a surge of feminist artists were laying claim to territory concerning domesticity and gender, textiles included. Alloway states that Martin also can be seen using the textile “technique by repetitive forms that resemble stitching” and “motifs of Indian textiles.” This temporary expansion of interpretation provided some light on how Martin’s repetitive forms had technical qualities that resemble textiles, but perhaps the almost essentialism of women’s work

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43 Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Her Art*, 188.
46 “Indian” in this instance is a generalization of Native American presence in New Mexico. Alloway, *Agnes Martin*, 12.
and textiles threatened the position of Martin’s oeuvre as innovative and integral to the echelons of American painting. And after 1973, Martin’s paintings utilized fewer grids and more horizontal bands, diverting critical attention back to her optically charged surfaces and color usage.

For most Martin’s life, serious talk of Bauhaus tenets of design, which held the strongest weight in American design and textiles theory, did not exist. It is important to note that it was not until 2004, when Heinz Liesbrock brought Martin’s work to the Josef Albers Museum in Quadrat, that Albers work was thoroughly compared to Martin’s in relation to his active use of form. Additional factors include Martin’s international debut in Documenta V in 1972 which aided the artist’s revival into the art world, nationally and internationally, brought with it new viewers and art writers to react to Martin’s use of grids. It is also interesting to note that during the 1960s, Martin largely resisted exhibition catalogs concerning her work and rarely spoke on the matter. Aside from critical response to her work as discussed above, much of what we know that is usable to describe a textile methodology is preserved through the conversations with friends and colleagues, Martin’s lectures and writings, and Martin’s pedagogical training. While it is important to note the steps Alloway made for an interpretively textile approach, reception of Martin’s work also needs to be seen in terms of her affinity for spiritual allegory and artistic training. Both Agnes Martin and Lenore Tawney in their practice, borrowed heavily from spiritual allegory and references to imbue their process with experiential agency derived from notions of void and space created by rectilinear constraints. But before we examine philosophical

commonality between Martin and Tawney, noting the pedagogical background and training of Martin will provide insight towards the maturation of her work.

Figure 4: Agnes Martin, White Flower, oil on canvas, 1960, 71 7/8 x 72 in., The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, © 2017 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
3 PEDAGOGICAL LEGACY

The pedagogical legacy I will be referring to in this section delves into two ways in which Agnes Martin’s early work and training align with Bauhaus and fiber art: Her training as an art educator and artist and her exploration of materials with her grids. Agnes Martin’s work from the 1940s and 1950s is vastly experimental but serves as a crucial breeding ground for ideas that would become distilled and matured in the 1960s. Martin, who avidly claimed to be an Abstract Expressionist, carried on the pedagogical legacy of The Teacher’s College at Columbia University and the Modernist beginnings of her artistic career.48 In Martin’s time at Teacher’s College, though various sketches and paintings by the artist as seen in The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Fig. 5), she was exposed to and emulated work by Picasso and Klee. Some of the more formative studio pedagogical moments leading up to Martin’s use of the grid in the 1960s, were on-site visits to The Museum of Modern Art and seeing a retrospective of artist Paul Klee in 1941-42.49 In The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden we see exposed outline of the bodies of the figures, where the taut balance of figuration and abstraction is contained. While still painting, this early work moves to the graphic quality of Klee’s works on paper. Thinking of Klee’s emphasis on the mechanics of mark-making proves to be a valuable tool in observing Martin’s language used to describe her own work. Klee experimented with the emotional potency of color, but more than that alone, the graphic and flattening nature of Klee’s work from the 1920s has a similar veiling affect to Martin’s thin application of gesso, paint and graphite line. Most of this experimental evidence in Martin’s pre-1960s work is lost and presents a challenge for art historians in constructing a past oeuvre to delineate her maturation. However, through early patronage and the sculptural art

48 Rosenberger, Drawing the Line, 166.
49 Rosenberger, Drawing the Line, 33-43.
objects remaining from the 1960s, we are able to construct some pedagogical precedence for her work.

Despite a lack of a definitive chronology of Martin’s early paintings—caused by her penchant for destroying “immature” work—evidence is present in the influence of progressive faculty and programming within Teacher’s College in the 1941-42 academic year.\(^5\) For example, Elise Ruffini, an arts faculty member at Teacher’s College, was a connection between Ad Reinhart and Martin’s time at Columbia. Martin would have likely had Elise as a teacher in 1941 but also was trained within the Art Education program via instructional booklets co-authored by Ruffini.\(^5\) Beginning language used in the instructional material parallels a Bauhaus pedagogical format through an exploration of materials, bringing design properties to the fore.\(^5\) Also in mind with art education, when Martin’s seminal 1973 exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Philadelphia and the Kunstraum München published Martin’s recent lecture notes, there was an decisive emphasis on experience and personal training, which calls to mind the legacy of Josef Albers’ writings on art as pedagogical objects.\(^5\) Albers’ emphasis on practice before theory pushed students at the Black Mountain College to experiment with paper before paint and pay special attention to impressing an eye for color in the mind, without the ease of oil paint experimentation. Likewise, through the language structure for lectures, and published notes leading up to her 1973 exhibition at the Kunstraum München, Martin spends a significant portion of time describing a way to obtain an ideal state of mind, to both receive and act upon inspiration.

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\(^5\) This includes *New Art Education* volume 9 of 1947. See Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*, 40.
\(^5\) Princenthal lists included subject matter of the booklet such as textile design, painting, and color. Language used in this booklet also describes design in painting as well as emphasizing the essential elements of painting balanced with emoting a certain feeling. Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*, 40.
to which is then translated to her work. When we approach Martin’s work in the guise of pedagogical objects, which are instructional in their formation of individualized emotional responses from viewers, Martin’s theory and outlook towards art becomes likened to that a role of craftsman-designer. Anni Albers, Bauhaus-weaving figurehead and wife of Josef Albers, describes such a role as having reached a state where the intellectual performance of indirect formation “graphically and verbally” and the elimination of the authorial presence in work has taken precedence for modern designers. Anni Albers’ observes the state of designing as a climate stuck in the increasingly specialized world, where intellectualization widens a gap between direct and indirect experience with materials. To resolve this, Albers then prescribes the need for artists to directly engage with their materials while simultaneously creating an anonymity between artist and art object. The simultaneous ideas of eliminating the self in work yet allocating a space for intellection of the art-object experience through direct object-engagement bridges a conceptual problem introduced in formal design training to Martin’s practice.

Lenore Tawney’s studies provide a glimpse of the pedagogical climate for contemporary weavers and fiber artists that affected her practice upon arriving to New York and is likely usable for Martin’s practice. Tawney studied at the Institute of Design in Chicago under Bauhaus figurehead László Moholy-Nagy. When Tawney arrived, Moholy-Nagy was still present at the school and Tawney learned weaving under the direction of Marli Ehrman and sculpture and drawing under Alexander Archipenko. It is worthwhile to note that the Bauhaus instructional

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legacy provided two fundamental ideas that were compatible with the language used around Tawney’s work, of her and by her. First, Moholy-Nagy’s *Vision in Motion* (1947), a written work which articulates his curricula for the Chicago Institute of Design, stressed the importance of both a mechanical and emotional literacy. By the language of ‘mechanical’ and ‘emotional,’ Moholy-Nagy enforced the artistically expressive relevance of design by emphasizing its relationship to the seemingly ‘mechanical’ production of textiles. To assert the intellectual labor that goes into both art and design, the mechanical reality of design was equaled with, if not outweighed temporarily, by emotional intelligence. Often, it is the emotional connectivity that became the primal reference point in discussion of Tawney’s production of woven forms, tapestries, and drawings. If we reconsider the argument made by Lawrence Alloway in his exhibition *Systemic Painters*, painters who are utilizing repetitive systems to express meaning are operating on parallel terms: Weavers, deviating from the rectilinear constraints of the mechanics of the loom, painters, relying on the nuance of geometric repetition. When minor deviations are made to the structural body of artwork, the viewer must be attuned to the internal configuration and thus more materially-sensitive towards the works of art. Martin explains in her maturation with line that her art reaches “an interior balance” and that “People see a color that’s not there/ our responses are stimulated.”\(^57\)

In a poignant statement on the emotional intelligence required of artists, Moholy-Nagy states primarily, “The artist unconsciously disentangles the most essential strands of existence from the contorted complexities of actuality, and weaves them into an emotional fabric of compelling validity.”\(^58\) Moholy-Nagy’s metaphor initially acknowledges the place of the artist in manipulating material optimized by a learned intuitive response from the artists to create. But

\(^{57}\) Martin, “The Untroubled Mind,” 132.  
secondly, the association of weaving as a final accumulation of an art-object recalls the process-oriented term of weaving as it pertains to Bauhaus teaching. Moholy-Nagy’s curriculum focused on a similar aspect of Josef Albers’ teaching in sensory communication and the perceptual fundamentals within a termed Material/Materie exercise. This then encompasses material as an exploration of one’s chosen material’s properties and materie, which shifts towards comparing properties of multiple materials.\textsuperscript{59} Both exercises are a staple of design pedagogy, yet, keeping the ideology of Moholy-Nagy in mind it is useful to examine the visual and emotional balance present from said curricula in Tawney’s earlier work. To see this idea of emotional fabric, Tawney’s pattern-making involved an expressive level of chance. While drawing a cartoon for a design, she did not use a traditional color-indicator to inform the growth of the woven piece but instead enforced the idea that color and structure develop spontaneously.\textsuperscript{60} Such training is more palpable in Tawney’s tapestries and is aptly framed in a studio portrait of the artist (Fig. 6). The bursts of purples and oranges in \textit{St. Francis and the Birds} (Fig. 7) are indicative of this process, adding emotive levity to her figuration. This breakage of formal constraints of weaving connotate the innovate emotional intelligence promoted by Moholy-Nagy, but also calls to mind weaving contemporary Anni Albers and her heralding of Peruvian textiles and the idea of woven pictures. Woven pictures in this sense derived both from the constructed nature of tapestries and textile as well as the exposure of the weaver’s hand in his or her material application in the warp/weft structure.

Importantly in relation to Martin’s undulating use of line, implied or incised, is this additive process of weaving exposing the artists’ hand within the loom. Also in relation to the

\textsuperscript{59} Saletnik, "Pedagogic Objects," 92-94.
\textsuperscript{60} Margo Hoff, “Lenore Tawney: The Warp is Her Canvas,” \textit{Craft Horizons} 17, no.6, (1957): 17-18.
exposed hand of the artist is the haptic nature of Martin’s nailed paintings, such as *Homage to Greece* (Fig. 8), that have iterations both to her use of the repetitive dots within *White Flower* as well as Tawney’s woven forms, of which has an intrinsic tactility. *Homage to Greece* is collaged white cloth to a canvas, with one singular band of nails creating a firm line atop the materials, a decisively physical approach to implied line and special effects. This approach in *Homage to Greece*, of which Lenore Tawney purchased from Martin, is unexpectedly more akin to collage than painting. The surprisingly tactile and physicality of the piece claims a space in Martin’s oeuvre that details her experimentation with the material implications of line, which later transforms into material-levity, via the collage construction of the canvas.

It is important to note the graphic qualities Tawney was increasingly more interested in via collage and linear drawings. When creating woven forms and tapestries, drawing was part of her draughtsman phase of planning her weaving. The grid, as a textile concept, remained a formal element which is unavoidably part of textiles creations, yet repeatedly, Tawney actively sought to push against the boundaries of the rectilinear structure of weaving imbued in her work. This break from material exploration to the medium of drawing and collage was a decisive move to reconfigure spatial relationships on a two-dimensional plane, parallel to ideas worked with by Martin. Tawney became fascinated by the mechanism of the Jacquard loom, by its ability to isolate individual threads and to map these threads on a two-dimensional surface. Likewise, Martin moved from biomorphic forms, to applying materials to canvas, and then the painterly grid structure. As such, the figurative association of Tawney’s *Lekythos* and Martin’s *Homage to Greece* should not be taken as mimetic so much as a referent to linear elements developing in the canvas to induce an emotive experience in the viewer. Both artists used a material exploration to enhance the qualities of the linear image into their practice. Conducive to linear ideas of void,
space, and structure materially explored by both artists, is the language they used to define their practice to frame an emotive or experiential presence with art objects.

Figure 5: Agnes Martin, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden*, 1953, oil on paperboard, 48 x 72 in., Private collection, © 2017 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Figure 6: Lenore Tawney in her Chicago studio, 1957, Photo: Aaron Siskind, Courtesy, Lenore G. Tawney Foundation
Figure 7: Lenore Tawney, *St. Francis and the Birds*, 1954, Wool; 32 1/2 x 17 1/2 in.,

*Courtesy, Lenore G. Tawney Foundation*

Figure 8: Agnes Martin, *Homage to Greece*, 1959, oil, canvas collage and nails laid down on panel, 12 x 12 in., Christie’s, © 2017 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
4 ART AND SPIRITUALITY

While Tawney was openly vocal about spirituality as a component of her work, Martin had a penchant for using spiritual language for universal feelings by using metaphor, prose, or analogy to further statements on her art practice. As with her introduction into New York as a Southwest artist, Romantic associations with the land and desert pervaded in language used to describe Martin’s work and background. Tied to this association were also deeply held spiritual connotations. One of the prevalent views of Martin over time was her aura as mystic-artist that was fed by Martin’s dramatic exit from New York in 1967 to return to New Mexico. The pilgrimage to see Martin in the desert became a sort of art-world rite of passage. However, it is important to define the differences within terms of religious, mystical, and spiritual when discussing how the artist used terminology to give agency to her work as opposed to others assigning a status or aura to her as an artist. “Religious” usually connotates a prescribed relationship with a specific religion, of which Martin never clearly associated with other than through the uses of analogy for personalized concepts. “Mystical” and “Mystics” are more in line with the spectacle of awe, fascination, and spiritual mystery. This classification robs Martin of a certain intellectual agency given to her practice and privileges spectacle over process. This terminology arose in Martin’s case over a combination of factors including her solitary choice of life, Spartan living habits, schizophrenia, and terse social mannerisms. She readily denounced any mystical associations to her work though she occasionally collapsed the terms of mystic and hermit.61 “Spiritual” can be related to a specific religious experience, but most importantly, the terms holds connotations of a broader human soul, spirit, and states of being. Martin often cites the importance of mind and will, mixed with associations of nature, the Bible, Buddhism, and

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Taoist sensibilities in order relay both her state of creating art and how to experience art. The importance behind these distinctions rests in how Martin used *spiritual* language to frame universalities and experiences imbued in art and life. Spiritual references and concepts furthered ideas of void and egolessness that operated parallel to Martin’s maturing use of line and color.

Spirituality in its philosophical distillation became an important component of crafts, textiles, and the avant-garde in the 1950s and 1960s. While each artist experienced different pedagogical approaches towards their separate art practice, it is important to discuss the relationship between Tawney and Martin’s studio practice in line with spiritual and interfaith concepts. For Tawney, spirituality was not only evident in her musings about her work as aiding abstraction in her art but also with her penchant for voraciously reading poetry and mystical writings. Martin, however, was involved in spirituality through reading, lecture circuits, and conversations. The notion of craft, as a creation process and spirituality, in its lending of terminology for contemporary art production, intersected with the increasing attention given to Buddhist thought in New York. While Martin was enrolled at Teacher’s College, D.T. Suzuki, a visiting lecturer and Buddhist scholar, became a fully appointed faculty member from 1952 to 1957. Rosenberger notes that his role as a visiting scholar at several universities across the West and East coast, introduced the United States to Buddhism and Buddhist thought. Taos, New Mexico had a thriving artist community circling topics of spiritualism mixed with interest in the land. Brought with the European-derived modernism of relocating artists and intellectuals was a distinct local interest in nontraditional spiritual practices. Such an interest established the Taos-based Transcendental Painting Group in 1938, which “under the influence of Wassily

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63 Rosenberger, Drawing the Line, 44-46.
Kandinsky, studied Theosophy…integrating various, esoteric, arcane Easter and Western spiritual traditions. The next generation of spiritual influence to take over the East coast, propagated by D.T. Suzuki, would have been far from unfamiliar to Martin by her arrival in New York in 1957 with this preexisting Taos legacy in mind.

Martin’s own statements concerning Buddhism specifically during her early career were more positive than her post-1973 reflections. Martin is on the record through conversation with friends and colleagues of praising Lao Tzu’s *Tao de Ching*, even recommending it as reading material. The Tao’s overarching notion that reality comes from nothingness and void was especially complimentary for Martin and ratifies her commitment towards the prerequisites to Buddhist paintings described by Suzuki which include being empty yet receptive. While Taoist philosophy is often incorporated into aspects of various Buddhist thought, Taoism was often conflated with Buddhism thus it is a vital aspect of the interfaith philosophic conversation, especially when paired with prevalent Christian themes.

Aside from the regional development of spiritual interest Martin expressed individually, it is worthwhile to acknowledge the Western interpretations of Eastern spirituality in America leading up to the 1960s. Initially, this included Transcendentalism through the writings of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose journal *The Dial* incorporated a translated version of the Lotus Sutra in 1844. Following an investigation of Transcendentalism, Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac rediscovered Buddhist sources and would begin to add to the cultural momentum that would go on to spark a termed “Zen Boom” among intellectual circles. Also, when talking about the initial Zen Boom in American pop culture and the avant-

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64 Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Her Art*, 49.
65 Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Her Art*, 106.
garde in the 1950s, what is emphasized is the importance of meditation and a mind-body relationship. These overarching themes are of import considering it is not until the mid-1960s that a significant body of Zen Buddhist institutions are thoroughly established, meaning that literature, word-of-mouth, and lecture circuits were primary sources of philosophical contact. It is in the macro meditative dialog that we see in Tawney and Martin, between their ideas concerning line and thread, notions of Zen Buddhist and interfaith philosophical thought are incorporated. Concepts of void, nature, and the mind become avenues of cross-material exploration. For instance, while Tawney’s earliest work concerns weaving, drawings became of significant importance to Tawney. In an interview, Tawney relates her drawing process with meditation and line:

I was just doing…some of these drawings…I have to be so concentrated in order to keep within my outline. I make an outline and then I do my drawing to go past the line, I have to be with this line…it’s like meditation, you have to be with the line all the time, you can’t be thinking of anything because if you think you’ll go right on outside your line.  

Also in relation to natural forms, as in the case of Dark River, a woven form that brought the artist much acclaim, Tawney stresses the elemental importance of natural elements over a possible direct presence in her work: “I don’t think of it as nature as much as water has other – you know [characteristics] water is fertilizing and water is dissolving and water is cleansing and water is life giving.” The elemental importance and emphasis on natural processes are in line with the macro phenomena of Zen Buddhist thought that was another crucial cultural focus point, and in part a carry-over of transcendentalism. For Martin, the process of the viewer experience

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66 Interview of Lenore Tawney, by Paul Cummings, June 23, 1971, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
weighs of specific importance. The ideal dialog between viewer and art object, as described by Martin, almost aims to locate her artwork into spaces of immutability, as more of a means to elicit an emotional response. Yet, out of the spaces of void and negation, through linear elements, grids became an increasingly important tool for Martin in the 1960s.

In terms of non-hierarchical structure, it is also important to note that ideas such as innocence felt satisfyingly realized after Martin came to working with the grid in her drawings and paintings. Innocence for Martin concerned linear and color factors to produce art which served as a vehicle for experiences. In 1992, Martin stated retrospectively:

It wasn’t until I found the grid, in New York in 1960, that I felt satisfied with what I was doing. When I first made a grid I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees. And I thought the grid represented innocence, and I still do. So I painted it, and I’ve been doing it for thirty years.\(^{68}\)

In a similar vernacular towards her grids within and experience of work, Martin also stresses an elemental level of importance, as per Tawney’s description of *Dark River*. In reception towards her work regarding titles or ties of her paintings to landscapes, Martin explains:

I want people, when they look at my paintings, to have the same feelings they experience when they look at landscapes, so I never protest when they say my work is like landscape. But really it is about the feeling of beauty and freedom, that you experience in landscape.\(^{69}\)

\(^{68}\) Rosenberger, *Drawing the Line*, 154.

In a later interview in 1989, Martin provided a more condensed and clarified explanation of what the concept of innocents in painting might mean by her response towards using titles:

…As a matter of fact I have titled my paintings, like when I thought of the innocence of a tree I called my painting, “The Tree.” But it was really about the innocence. And other titles that I have given, “Desert Flower” and “White Flower” and—it isn’t really about a flower, it’s really about a mental experience. It’s like Solomon in the Bible, you know, the Song of Solomon? That’s really a mental experience, the Song of Solomon, but everybody reads it as a [pause]—as erotic, really. It’s a heart/mind experience.70

By referring to the Song of Solomon, Martin emphasizes the importance of the dream element of the prose as well as its allegorical configuration. On one hand, the dream element of the woman present in the poem in Song on Solomon places the reader within the imaging process of the mind, and on the other, creates an elaborate scene which condenses to a feeling of love. Martin often speaks and writes with an allegorical intensity that parallels to teachings of theosophical doctrines and explains in part her disposition for words such as innocence. How do we resolve the idea of innocence in, say, Martin’s painting White Flower of 1960? Unlike her later works which remain largely untitled and thus require more experiential work of the viewer, having a nature referent tied to the non-representational grid might invoke the tracery of said concept as a key to encompassing the experience of a white flower.71 Through a Buddhist principle of seeking void and/or nothingness, an abstract process reveals the object without the figurative visual representation, connotations, and plastic reproduction to obtain a form likened to an experience. Through the structured screen created by the white grid and wash, the viewer is optically invited

71 It is important to note that after 1973, Martin decisively un-titled her work as a way to encourage a more expansive investigation toward the experience of the painting and to dispel landscape/nature essentialism with her work.
to actively participate with the idea of said flower by delving between the lines, confronting void, and structure.

To compliment these phrasings by Martin and Tawney, lectures and writings by D.T. Suzuki reveal fundamental universals of Zen that are absorbed by other cultures and into the arts. Suzuki notes the cultural influences of Zen Buddhist thought, both in a macro and micro sense, in six components, some of which apply to the methodology used by both Martin and Tawney. First, there lies the concept of the neglect of form as a universal characteristic within mysticism and spirituality. Zen, however, has a forcefulness to the idea on inwardness. Secondly, “the inwardness of Zen implies a directness of its appeal to the Human Spirit.” The visual analogy used by Suzuki to drive this point is that “When a syllable or a wink is enough, why spend one’s entire life in writing huge books or building a grandiose cathedral?” Third, Suzuki states that in Zen “Directness is another word for simplicity.” Bouncing off the idea of the visual example previously mentioned, directness is defined as discarding the paraphernalia in idea articulation. Through a confirmation of these conditions a general Zen attitude of thought is formed in life and can be translated in the arts through a Zen Aestheticism. Features of this aestheticism include “simplicity, directness, abandonment, boldness, aloofness, unworldliness, innerliness, the disregarding of form, free movement of spirit, [and] the mystical breathing of a creative genius…” In terms of art practice, Suzuki states that this criterion covers a breadth of mediums including, but not limited to, gardening, calligraphy, painting, and fencing.72

In translating the intricacies of Zen Buddhist thought, Suzuki describes the importance of sumiye ink painting, beginning in twelfth century Japan. Initially the components of the art used “ink made of soot and glue,” a brush of “sheep’s or badger’s hair” and extremely thin paper, the

combination of which limits the artist to quick singular movements. The precision of execution was not a byproduct of a logic and planning, but an act of spontaneous movement, where artist or brush moves without conscious effort. Suzuki states “There is no chiaroscuro, no perspective in it. Indeed, they are not needed in Sumiye, which makes no pretension to realism. It attempts to make the spirit of an object move on paper.”

In the later development of sumiye painting, which includes the fiftieth-century landscape by Hasegawa Tohaku, Pine Trees (Fig. 9), misty, delicate strokes reveal the likeness of trees but do not reproduce in excess. The character of the trees is revealed through the gesture, or implication, of trees being represented. As in Martin’s 1963 Falling Blue the unmarked canvas plays an integral role such as the defining negative space of mist in Pine Trees. Likewise, Martin’s reduction toward graphite lines with oil on canvas demarcate a material balance much like the ink and rice paper of sumiye. The thinly banded graphite lines reveal the hand of the artist while also relying on the flickering optical concentration through visual movement between color and line. Regarding sumiye, negative space either implied or actual inversely reveals only the essential strokes of paint. Like the limitations imposed by sumiye, materiality is both a confining and guiding facet. Tawney’s impression of a vase in Lekythos, uses threadbare linen, neutral in color, to capture the essential components of a vessel while simultaneously abstracting the textile gesture to line. For Martin, the delineation of her hand in graphite and brushwork carefully impose their constructed nature linear frame and their hand-crafted nature. Unlike the structural implication implied by a overall grid, the gestural graphite reveals the spontaneity likened to the sumiye ink painting method.

Adding to the spontaneity of mark-making, Martin was known to have pinned a thread to either

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73 Suzuki, Essays in Zen Buddhism, 351.
side of her canvas to delicately incise her lines. Likewise, Tawney’s interested in the linear webbing of thread, imposes a negative space of exposed material/void in *Lekythos*. Negative space is important real estate in the landscape of Martin’s canvas. The essential confrontation of nothingness to extract something akin to happiness is understood through optical/spatial movement, as is the relationship of the viewer to a sculptural woven form. In *Falling Blue*, the viewer when moving closer experiences a disarming confrontation of Martin’s rectilinear constraints as woven planes as visual order rendered soft and the canvas pliable. If thinking about Josef Albers’ stance on art as pedagogical objects, the viewer becomes self-conscious of their perception when confronting the canvas, a byproduct of the undulating blue against graphite against void in *Falling Blue*. This perceptive self-consciousness is the resting stop in which Martin declares mindfulness, albeit a conflation of theosophical philosophies in her writings, lectures, and interviews, as content.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 9: Hasegawa Tohaku, Pine Trees, 16th century, pair of six-folded screens and ink on paper, 61.7 × 140.2 in., Tokyo National Museum, © 2017 Tokyo National Museum*

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5 MATERIALS, SPIRIT, TEXTILES, AND PAINTING

We have previously identified the associations of spiritual ideology and linguistic choices made by both Martin and Tawney, which have a thread of significance in Buddhist concepts of void and innerliness, but it is pertinent to establish deeply entrenched ideas of spirituality in Modernist art theory and a correlation to textiles. Undeniably prevalent is the Hegelian dialectic which relies on a linear instance of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. A partial Hegelian approach used by Jonathan Katz concerns Martin’s supplanting dialectical model whereby instead of a *synthesis* related to her work, Martin persists to *resist* a solution and continue with an unresolved equilibrium:

Martin’s art generally, each instance of dialectical opposition is not resolved—cannot be resolved—so much as modeled again and again. As with Shiva's cycles of birth and destruction, there is no progress here, no escape through higher cognition: again, no resolution. There is only experiential duration, the acceptance of a permanent and irresolvable cycle. 75

While useful in defining Martin’s anti-ego as well as gender non-conformity, this perspective reifies the systematic painting approach and also assumes that experiential duration is where the viewer experience begins and ends. But if we reframe how Martin’s oeuvre consisted of compositional changes within *Homage to Greece* to *Falling Blue*, it is unfair to claim that social factors were not incorporated (or synthesized) into Martin’s gridwork in the 1960s. Alternatively, it proves more useful to return toward Hegel in a different light for a theoretical context that imbues the linear elements of both textiles and painting. First, there is a preexisting lineage of language around textiles and abstraction that is favorable to ideas of inner

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spirit discussed previously by an inwardness of Zen Buddhism. In Hegelian terminology, Geist is of importance. Geist, or spirit, has four definitive categories for Hegel: the intangible side of humanity, the spirit of the times (Zeitgeist), the intellect, or Weltgeist. Weltgeist, or World-Spirit is often interpreted as the concept of God, but less so of the Judeo-Christian sense and more so as a “transcendental and ultimately unknowable” where our “physical reality” is an object that through time, gradually begins to know itself.\textsuperscript{76} Hegel’s Geist and Weltgeist, combined with Kandinsky’s \textit{Concerning the Spiritual in Art}, produces an idea of spirit and soul in art is essential and that which does not derive from an inner necessity is a genre of formalism. To turn to Kandinsky’s influence on Abstract Expressionism is to glean the communicative importance within Martin’s work that dances with Hegelian terms such as inner necessity and Geist as an intellectually based metaphysic. Martin was a lifelong admirer of Mark Rothko’s use of color and inherited the appreciation of Kandinsky’s legacy while adhering to the identification of an Abstract Expressionist.\textsuperscript{77} Language used by Martin has an undeniable spiritual currency which imbues her lectures and discussion of her work and is visible in her prose in \textit{The Untroubled Mind}.

Wassily Kandinsky wrote about the influence of Theosophical societies within his work \textit{Concerning the Spiritual in Art}. Much like the rhetoric both Martin and Tawney use in describing mind and process, these mentioned Theosophical societies focus on the matter of spirit through exploration of inner knowledge.\textsuperscript{78} In his ideological defense of abstraction, Kandinsky cites the geometric relevance of the triangle in placing the role of the artist before his

\textsuperscript{76} Jeremy Elie Caslin, \textit{Kandinsky's Theory of Art: Hegel, the Beginnings of Abstraction, and Art History} (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1998), 85.

\textsuperscript{77} Rosenberger, \textit{Drawing the Line}, 12-14.

\textsuperscript{78} Wassily Kandinsky and Michael Sadleir, \textit{Concerning the Spiritual in Art} (London: Tate, 2006), 19.
transition towards color and form. First, he describes a pyramidal form of human progress towards the spiritual through the movement of above and below sections of the triangle. Secondly, he relays the pyramidal composition of figures in art towards a natural advancement towards the peak of the triangle, exalting the abstract ideal over naturalistic form. Kandinsky in attempting to capture a cosmos, or as art historian Bracha L. Ettinger claims, through a process of “cosmic catastrophe and cosmic renewal” discusses the relationship of social order and spiritual order, which become manifest in this instance his definition of artistic abstraction.\(^7^9\) Such a stance is reified in his discussion of color and form, and by extension mark-making practices, through metaphor and visual reduction. This mark-making practice appears first in his discussion of text to the act of drawing: “…repetition of the word, twice, three times or even more frequently…will not only tend to intensify the inner harmony but also bring to light unsuspected spiritual properties of the word itself…,” yet conversely, like the abstraction native to repetitive drawing, “…Frequent repetition of a word deprives the word of its original external meaning.”\(^8^0\) This process of negation is felt in various iterations of work by both Martin and Tawney in the 1960s. Through a similar material language used by Martin and Tawney, repetition of line and thread, makes their viewer acutely aware of the physical properties present in the work. And through the viewer’s capacity of visually surmising the whole of Martin’s canvases, we can use this Hegelian and Kandinsky approach to define a linear exploration of Martin by way of Tawney. Likewise, adding to the perception of Martin’s emerging process upon reaching the grid in the 1960s, Hegel writes of Spirit being revealed in the absence of [79] Bracha L. Ettinger, “The Art-And-Healing Oeuvre: Metamorphic Relinquishment of the Soul-Spirit to the Spirit of the Cosmos,” in 3 x Abstractions, New Methods of Drawing by Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, and Agnes Martin (New York: The Drawing Center, 2005), 212. [80] Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 30.
substance, or negativity “when the artist dwells with the potentiality of the negative” until a point of reveal is reached.⁸¹

In furthering the discussion of mobility on the triangular spectrum of Kandinsky, a socially-minded synthesis of artistic process, we can correlate a mastery of Hegelian spirit with Kandinsky’s criteria for self-mastery and awareness for artists. Kandinsky defines an inner need for the arts first, as the artist identifying a proficiency to create. Martin speaks of this in lecture and notes as identifying the need for creation and inspiration in all activities, artist, and laymen alike. Second, the artist is compelled by the spirit of his age (sometimes referred to as style). While I am decisively choosing not to blanket Martin in a style, the period in which multiple artists experimented with found objects and material at The Slip is no doubtedly a unifying agent for Tawney and Martin. And lastly, the artist excels the cause of art.⁸² A mutual exchange of both ideological backgrounds, philosophy, and studio practice is a pragmatic step forward in such a direction.

Another point of inspection is Martin’s claim for abstraction and Kandinsky’s commentary on the matter. Kandinsky posits that the artist’s selection process of material subject matter versus the abstract is influenced by the idea of inner necessity. Kandinsky even posits that true knowledge is observable in a rudimentarily constructed column in another country that holds a similar ‘spirit’ as to a work of art.⁸³ What is instructional in theory is implied through the subjective process of viewing both Martin’s and Tawney’s art objects. Martin’s proclaims

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⁸² All above points are referred to in succession in Kandinsky’s conversation over the variant properties of form and color and the mastery of each. See Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 28-34.
⁸³ Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 34.
perfection and innocence in her work, where *Falling Blue*’s perfection is the viewer’s act of approach, coming into the fold, and feeling the impossibility of containing the canvas. Tawney also achieves this impossible lightness, through the increasing negative space of the warp, to the point of almost obsolescence in thread-bare *Lekythos*.

While inner necessity may elicit romantic ideas of the plight of the artist, it is useful to see how such a term stands with the notion of material-levity used in work by both Martin and Tawney. Furthermore, the 1950s and 1960s showcased a need for artists and critics to both claim an authority for a newly emergent art and re-materialize a physical relationship with art-objects. For Tawney, by her New York arrival in 1957, this was an accompanied by both a desire for clarity in her practice and a way to “live her work.”84 In terms of their overall disposition, Martin and Tawney were both known to have a penchant for silence, thoughtful and philosophical conversation that parallels an innerliness of life and art-objects. Motivations by Tawney and Martin in their practice in the 1960s were not rooted in a direct form of communication, as one might deduct if approaching a mathematical analysis of Martin’s grid-to-canvas ratios.85 Instead, both artists were more interested in providing the viewer with an opportunity to participate in a communicative dialog with art-objects—such as the physical approach to *Falling Blue*, and the varying feelings and thoughts one confronts throughout the viewing process.

In material terms, this is the subtle confrontation of form is partial through the viewer second-guessing themself over the structure of art-objects. In Lenore Tawney’s *The Queen*, the density of the warp and weft bottlenecks at the top and bottom of the structure, and expands in size as the pieces develops downward. Simultaneously, increased is the number of vertical slits,

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85 A similar inspection is formed in Warren Seelig’s analysis of Tawney’s work. See Seelig, “Thinking Lenore Tawney,” 20.
piercing the solidity of the structure. This void is further complicated by the tendrils of linen left loose in the center body of the piece, calling attention to the exposed linear nature of the structure. In Martin’s *Falling Blue*, after considering the density of material in *Homage to Greece* and an implied use of line, Martin expands the canvas field by the subtle interplay of graphite line, gesso, and blue paint, the last of which feathers at the edges with its dry application. *Homage to Greece* has a sense of material stasis, in that its physicality does not get called into question. However, once Martin converts line to an optical warp and weft, the art-object then prescribes the participation of the viewer to move and interact with the canvas, to a capacity more implicit to tapestry. Material-levity, centrally configured around a warp and weft or grid, exposes an aspect of interiority to which blurs the structural integrity implicit in sculpture-to-textile and textile-to-painting dialog.
More importantly than merely mimicking the structures of philosophy, an interest in interfaith structures through language used by Martin and Tawney calls attention towards a cultural desire for unity—be it emotional, mental, or social. Far from encouraging the mystical/mythic dialog around Martin and Tawney, the former of which accelerated drastically since 1973, I have sought to reclaim the minutia of artistic practice through the controlled medium and/or material experimentation through the work of Martin, as it pertains to Tawney’s early work. By the repeated deviations from a warp/weft or a grid-like framework, Martin developed a practice that increasingly focused on the experiential relationship between the material presence of art-object to viewer. The calligraphic mark-making and essence-based discussion of creation are useful tools in comparing thematic closeness to Tawney and Martin’s methodological development, especially considering how each artist began defining her practice in New York at the same time. With metaphor and analogy to non-Western spirituality, both artists sought a language to imbue their work with experiential relevance. Curricula that involved developing emotional intelligence, medium exploration and mark-making are only furthered by a prevalent Zen Buddhist perspective which received accumulating interest in the United States during the 1950s onward. Specifically, both artists have similarly articulated processes towards the inner necessity of creating that spans the high and low spectrum of art production. Such ideas of inwardness and inner necessity are indebted to the theoretical framework constructed by both Hegel and Kandinsky. While contemporaneous pedagogy contained the legacy of Hegel and Kandinsky, who had impact in studio training from the ideological foundations of Abstract Expressionism to the American Bauhaus movement, I’ve used their writing to parallel the practices of internal inspection and a material lightness articulation with Martin’s early work.
While Agnes Martin proclaimed that she had begun painting once she developed the grid in 1960s, Tawney professed that she considered all versions of her work weaving, be it collage or assemblage. Both artists drafted a dialog on art making along themes of meditation, emptiness, and thoughtful action, theoretically defining a space beyond the main current of Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, and Fiber Art production by pulling from both their artistic training and environment. With deviations between applied materials to canvas, biomorphic shapes, and geometric ones as well, it is important to note the measure Martin took to discourage inspection of her early work, such as measures she took to discourage catalog texts and destroy work she found too immature. Through patrons and colleagues, of which Lenore Tawney was both, we begin to see how interpersonal exchanges inform and direct Martin’s gridwork.
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