

How can the non-physical be represented without it being interpreted pictorially? How can 'nothing' be represented without producing 'something'?

John Cage was an advocate for the notion of nothingness; he investigated the reality of silence. "There is no such thing as silence,"[1] because once we stop in silence we suddenly become aware, an awareness only achievable when our senses are heightened to witness the fragility and impermanence of light and space. His concepts were simple, a process of removing anything of substance, a method of reduction and consequently creating a deeper level of thinking for the audience. 4'33", a composition for an orchestra where each instrument was instructed not to play, confronted the audience's perceptions of music and what the lack of noise was representing, how absence can allow an awareness of the qualities of silence, the eerie awkwardness, and the suspense of waiting for something to happen. Abstractions in art seem to constantly be challenging what we expect to see, what we perceive as real. We expect to understand an image, be able to relate it to the world around us. Cage exhibited a gallery, removing the artwork and filling the room with emptiness, exposing the white walls of the space, which were usually hidden. Here Cage allowed stillness and peace within the gallery and created a space for reflection by removing anything which might interrupt or influence this process, allowing the audience to move through the space and interact. This interaction was the only break in the emptiness. "I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry." [2] Cage's contradictions left the idea of nothingness in a state of flux, whether it was ever actually achievable.

The practise of Taoism teaches a higher level of silence. "Tao cannot be either words or silence. In that state which is neither speech nor silence it's transcendental nature may be apprehended." [3] Acting on a subconscious level the practise of Taoism allows the mind to be removed from the physical world. Spirituality influences artists who are interested in philosophical ideas of emptying the mind and creating paintings which intend to allow a space for this to happen in. Agnes Martin, a follower of Taoism, was concerned with creating space for emptiness within her work, a Zen like state, similar to Cage. "My works are contemplative. They're about stilling the mind." [4] The motion of painting works therapeutically for the artist; Martin's repetitive grids were a nullifying process. Martin intended for her audience to experience stilling of the mind through the perception of her paintings. The transition between artist and audience allows the feeling of tranquillity to be communicated. This effect of emptying has to be reflected in the minimal aesthetic of the painting, relying on linear forms to create a sense of space. Artists use the formation of grids or stripes allowing empty planes of colour to be a prominent focus.

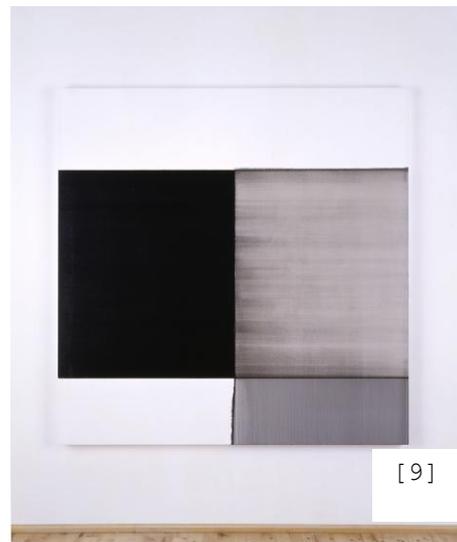
Creating paintings that are not read but sensed involves removing the figurative element, however it is within our human nature to project the real and familiar when presented with the unknown or confusing, so how far removed must a painting be to function completely abstractly. Simon Callery intended to make paintings that were perceived not understood and to slow down the experience of looking. "My ambition is to stretch open the moment at which the paintings are sensed physically and visually, and delay the speed at which they are captured and devoured." [6] This level of interpretation relies on inanimate senses, feelings and emotions, invisible states that project the mind and the depletion of what we already know. There is a momentary element to these responses, individual to each viewers mind. One person's momentary experience of perceiving what they see will never be the same as the next persons. It depends entirely on our schemas, memories and history, which build perceptions of the world around us. There is an important relationship between the artist and audience in work that is purely abstract. There needs to be a level of trust between artist and



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audience, so that the artist can feel confident in depicting nothing. Martin felt the importance of the observer's response to her paintings, the context of the work evolving past the point the paintings were completed. She did not want to project her own preconceptions about her work onto the audience. Instead she wanted to create space within the work for reflection and awareness. This adds another dimension to the work, a process of moving from a personal response into the public and eventually back to being privately responded to in that moment of each individual viewer.

Using the practise of painting artists rely on the forms of colour, surface and texture to physically respond to the personal states of their unconscious, which they are unable to express verbally, the practise acts as a therapeutic outlet. Agnes Martin said, " It is commonly thought that everything that is can be put into words. But there is a wide range of emotional responses that we make that cannot be put into words." [7] Therefore artists use this process of mark making, responding to colour and texture to uncover feelings they are unable to communicate. The painter Callum Innes said, "grey paintings evoke their respective moods through a meaning that is enshrined within the individual viewer." [8] Colours can take on this role of expressing a mood because of our in built preconceptions of them, muted colour palettes act neutrally and are used to express sensitivity and allow emptiness.



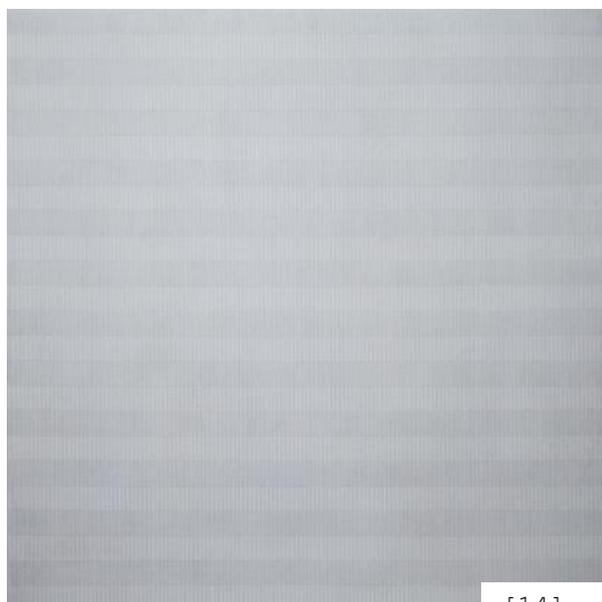
The physicality of a landscape is used to suggest an abstract emotional state because of the atmospheric quality it can encompass. *Landscape* can be defined as an extensive mental view or an interior prospect, suggesting a more metaphorical or abstract state than what we normally associate with a physical landscape. The physical landscape is familiar and universal, used as an entrance into understanding something unknown and personally specific, there is a slippage between the physical and inanimate. It has



fragility, playing on the idea of impermanence. Martin used memories of her childhood to project ideas of joy, beauty and happiness, moments she saw as brief and fleeting within life. She had a utopian vision. Born in Saskatchewan and growing up in Vancouver, nature played a key role in Martin's approach to painting. She often titled her grid formations as landscape forms for example *Mountain*, allowing the abstract forms to be grounded as well as alluding to the idea

of
struggle
and
tension

between the mind and physical. Originally painting figuratively she strove for a more symbolic significance to her work. Recreating the real was not enough; it could never do the memory just. The idea of perfection and the remembering of a perfect moment or place is a retrospective fiction. Nostalgic for the places of her childhood Martin had a hunger for space. "What I wanted was to get more abstract. And when I got the grids, and they were completely abstract, then I was satisfied." [11]

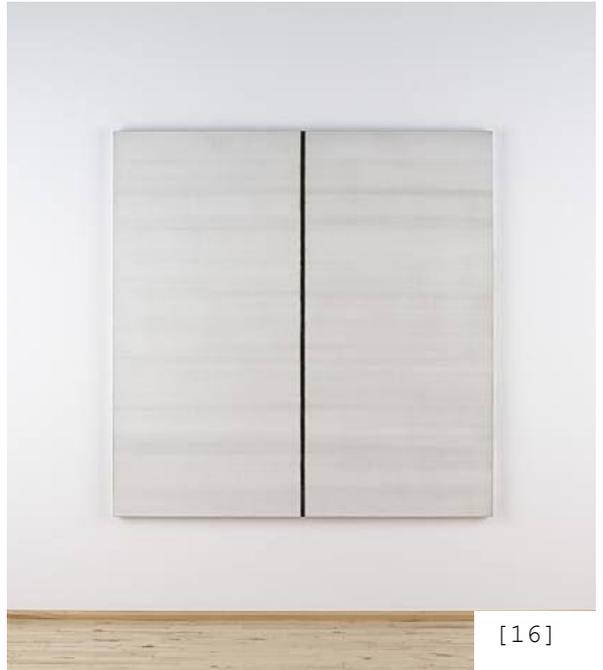


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"My paintings have neither object nor space nor line nor anything - no forms... They are light and lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down forms." [12] Form is defined as the shape and structure of something, distinguished from its material content. Formlessness suggests that these qualities are absent, a state of nothing. Plato's theory of forms suggests that ideas (or forms) are perfect and copies are imperfect. We have an ideal and when this ideal is realised it is no longer a perfect form. "Intellectual truth is more true than physical truth." [13] Therefore when painting something to recreate an image, the ambition to make a perfect replica will never be realised. Martin suggested her paintings were formless however there is a strong structure to the grid formations. It is within the repetitive process of making the paintings that formlessness appears. Martin became lost in the process of making her grids therefore emptying her mind of any other interruptions that may alter this process, successfully stilling the mind.

When taking on a minimalist aesthetic the expressionistic quality of painters such as Agnes Martin and later Callum Innes showed attentiveness to emotion whereas more minimalist processes fell short becoming impersonal and empathetically empty. Sean Scully said, "people tend to think of abstraction as abstract. But nothing is abstract: it's a self-portrait. A portrait of ones condition." [15] When responding emotionally through painting projections of the artist's personalities are inevitable, they're mood at that particular moment in time reflects onto the canvas. Both Martin and Innes formed a structure to their process of making, a way of controlling the outcome and removing the artist's hand and personality, allowing generalness and openness. Stripes and grids are used as a way to structure and create a pattern. Giving a structure to the way in which they work ensures the removal of the figurative from the work and minimizes the chance of the audience associating the images with anything real. The emptiness of the grid formations creates an eerie silence to the paintings.

Callum Innes uses the technical process of removal in his paintings, dissolving the image and collapsing the idea of the abstract even further. He uses the physicality of the canvas and a process of removing paint from the surface to respond to the idea of trace. Trace suggests the history and memory of what has gone before, the movement and mental process to arrive at an outcome. Innes controls the movement of the paint by masking off sections of the canvas, determining where colours meet. The place where the paint meets creates a moment of clarity revealing the layers. The space where the colour has been removed has ghostly presence acting as a memory of what was there before; they have an absolute state, the finality of the end of a process. This reduction of the components of a painting shows Innes opting out of creating any functioning image. This is an extreme form of abstraction where the process takes over from any figurative relation. A strict and premeditative process can confine a painting to the most rigorous abstract state allowing the artist to communicate something which isn't real.



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Martin and Innes, as well as Scully and Callery, show refinements of process decades apart which aim to create emotionally charged paintings with sparse fundamental elements. This abstract expressionist style has not disappeared since its post war beginnings because artists are always striving for a way to represent feeling successfully. Painters will always challenge themselves to remove as much as they can from painting, pushing the boundaries, to find the point where its ability to be perceived is completely lost. The ambition to create the non-painting is always present.

Representing the non-physical through painting requires a level of removal by the artist from the work, to allow them to fully empty it of the physical recognition and create something intent on expressing emotion. It may seem naïve to think that this can be achieved, that we can manipulate an audience to empty any physical reference they may have to the work focusing only on how it affects their senses. But without this ambition the art of painting cannot develop. Is it best to be stuck in a monotonous process of recreating what we see, or strive to actualise something so intense it cannot be understood? Why does there have to be understanding, is there something more mysterious in not knowing, to having to rely on something we cannot control? It ultimately comes down to the element of trust between artist and audience: the artist leaving part of the work to be done by the audience, who enter the space the artist has created and allow themselves not to see, but to feel.

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