

# ON SEEING: BANDS OF WHITE AND GRAPHITE

By Yvonne Rand, 1999

Objectivity, our seal of veracity, resides only in the concrete and measurable, it would seem. But everything is not concrete and measurable; far from it. Concrete facts and tangible data are only ingredients of truth, scattered in disorder until the subjective mind is allowed to bring them into cohesion. Truth, it has been demonstrated over and over, is what we make it, and the value of it to ourselves does not rest in a final absoluteness which is in any case impossible of attainment, but in the use we make of it.

—Edith Simon, *Luther Alive: Martin Luther and the Making of Reformation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968), 30-31.

## Some Tones of White and Gray

gray  
white  
ashen  
pearl-gray, pearly  
cinereous (= ash-gray)  
canescent (= becoming white)  
silver  
dove-colored  
slaty  
nacreous (= mother-of-pearl)  
creamy  
calcareous (= full of lime)  
bleached  
the color of mercury  
a mackerel sky  
leaden  
pewter  
milky  
opalescent  
opaline

Art often stimulates or jolts me into seeing what I ordinarily would only look at. The painting by Agnes Martin that is the subject of this essay is a case in point. The painting moves me to consider once again the differences between looking at and seeing. But what is looking at? What is seeing? Is looking at a process of not seeing, of looking while my mind is somewhere else, of not being present in the process of seeing?

A friend told me about her recent trip to Storm King Art Center in upstate New York. She reported not liking the sculpture there. She did not understand it. She thought most of it was ugly. She felt enormous resistance to being there. And yet, afterwards, she began to notice stacks of chairs. She began to see I-beams in roof structures. She began to see many things she had walked by, which she had looked at previously but had not seen in this sense of being present,

fully attentive, with no distractions. Truly seeing. For my friend, the ordinary world of chairs and buildings and cars came alive as a direct result of going to Storm King, resistance and all.

One late afternoon in September I drove to San Francisco to see an untitled Agnes Martin painting in a private collection. The painting is smaller than other works by Martin I have seen. And it is, as the title describes, a series of horizontal bands of white paint and graphite. The owner of the painting greeted me and showed me some of the art in his collection. After a brief visit he left me in a comfortable chair in front of the Martin painting. I sat there, alone, for close to an hour.

As I allowed my mind to quiet and to be worked on by the painting, the luminous, shimmering surfaces of the canvas gradually differentiated. The painting became an object of meditation in the sense that I intended to be fully with the surface of the canvas before me, open to whatever reflection and perception might arise in the moment. I experienced increasing calmness. I began to register the colors and surfaces of the painting. They kept changing and they began to glow. Light appeared to hover just off the surface of the canvas itself. I could see each band in its particularity, distinct and unlike any other. The longer I gazed at the painting, the more I could see the distinctive individual quality of each horizontal band. The bands looked alive, even and consistent, freely drawn, and strikingly unmechanical. As the natural light began to dim, the colors in the painting began to shine and individuate. I saw hints of pink and green. Was the sense of shifting color in my mind? Was it in the painting itself? As my eyes came in contact with the painting and the entire process of perception occurred, was there some activity or change or distortion in the arising of perception itself? I know, intellectually, that the new colors I was seeing were in my perception rather than in the painting. But I was seeing green and pink!

As I left the house I looked up into the early evening sky.

The sky was filled with layers of fog and clouds;  
small patches of blue showed  
and the last light of day lingered.  
The grayness was incandescent and the color and light  
mottled, layered, varied, changing.

The beauty of the evening sky elicited joy, and I knew that my seeing of that evening sky was a seeing directly made possible by my time seeing the Martin painting. In the months since that September afternoon, moments recur of clear, expanded, vivid awareness of pearly white, modulated light on and through clouds. A whole range of light and color and surface in the natural world, especially the sky, feels more accessible to me. Instead of viewing a gray and overcast day as one flat grayness, inevitably monotone, I now perceive distinct, separate, and discrete layers of fog and clouds and the light and color they reflect.

The risk in looking at work with apparently repetitious elements is tending to a quick reaction, to a generalization, even before one is fully present with the work. Agnes Martin challenges our habitual ways of experiencing the world, be they in ordinary daily experiences, with one's breath, or in looking at a work of art. One can so easily think, "I have seen this before. Oh, I live in a repeatable universe." Are we afraid, perhaps, that we live in a repeatable universe and that we may become bored?

For a number of years I have been studying and practicing in the stream of what Buddhism calls mind training. Within Buddhist meditation there is a persistent focus on cultivating one's capacity to be present with things as they are, to cultivate one's ability to see each thing and each

being and each moment as though for the first time, to know exactly and in particular the characteristics of various states of consciousness. The home base in this tradition is awareness of particular sensations of the physical body and of the breath in all of its various and vast characteristics. With consciousness and substantial and consistent practice in the Buddhist mind-training tradition one may cultivate increasingly more and more refined awareness, both inner and outer. And a question like, "Oh, do I live in a repeatable universe?" typically becomes the focus of curiosity and inquiry and investigation. Agnes Martin herself comes from her own experience within the philosophical and psychological inner science of Buddhism. So I am not surprised to find that I am so drawn to her work in the ways I am describing here.

As American culture and life become more and more filled with almost continuous distractions (e.g., canned music in elevators and in stores, music playing through headsets of portable devices, music when we are put on hold on the telephone), our tolerance for experience that requires a slowed-down pace, a capacity to be present, diminishes. Our frantic, noisy, alienated culture challenges and erodes the capacity for stillness and quiet. Agnes Martin's paintings require the viewer to be still, to be present, to allow the mind to soften if any shifts into expanded and heightened consciousness are to occur.

Since that September afternoon I experience, often, brief moments that resonate with the consciousness that arose viewing Martin's untitled painting of bands of white and graphite. Thus, as I sit at my desk and write with a pencil, I see the gravely quality of the dark gray graphite on the paper; while I am walking in the garden, my eye falls on small pieces of white plastic electrical plugs and abalone shell that lie, side by side, in a bowl of water, glimmering, pearly, iridescent; I look up into the sky filled with storm clouds and I see white, gray, and near-black, modulated and varied and more beautiful than I have ever seen before. I have confidence in my ability to see gray and white fully now.

Some years ago I saw an exhibit of Agnes Martin's paintings in New York. But seeing them in the midst of a jostling throng, standing for only a few minutes before each painting, being pushed along by the crowd of people, moving too quickly from one painting to the next, I had only a foretaste of the impact of spending an entire hour with one painting, uncrowded, undisturbed. On the occasion when I was able to sit in front of one painting for an hour, her work dropped in to my physical body and consciousness profoundly, and the reverberations still ring on and on.

The process of looking at goes on all the time. True seeing is rare. What is the difference between the two? Do I really know, experientially, the difference between looking at a person as I pass her on the street and actually seeing her? Do I see more fully when I forget the name of the thing seen? Real seeing means making contact, without any prejudice or expectation or limitation; it means connecting free of judgment or reaction. I propose that real seeing is not conditioned or habitual but is fresh and unbiased.

These days my days and dawns and dusks are filled with more moments of joy, calm, and beauty. Since that overcast September afternoon when I sat with Agnes Martin's own experience of seeing, manifested in the shimmering bands of white and graphite on her canvas, I see much more than I can remember being capable of seeing before. Martin's work is so simple. And yet it is not easy. As life speeds up and complicates our experience beyond any earlier imagining, we should treasure any occasion to be still, to let the mind rest, to allow actually, to see them, I participate gladly and gratefully with the artist and her creation of what is new and unknown.

Agnes Martin works at the edge of experience,  
persistently asking

what is true?

what is so?

what is possible?

So might anyone who wishes to see with vivacity,

clarity,

and humility.

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