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FILM

RECENT | ARCHIVE

- Courtney Fiske on Agnes Martin's *Gabriel*
- Sarah Nicole Prickett on *Lovelace*
- Ben Parker on "Watch That Man: David Bowie, Movie Star"
- Melissa Anderson on *The Brontë Sisters*
- Melissa Anderson on *The Servant*
- Melissa Anderson on *Only God Forgives*



NEWS | DIARY | PICKS | SLANT

Newest Headlines

- Smithsonian American Art Museum Receives Gift of Irving Penn Works
- Ruth Asawa (1926–2013)
- Nicholas Fox Weber Named to France's Order of Arts and Letters
- Hnatyshyn Foundation Visual Arts Awards Go to Marcel Dzama and Marie-Josée Jean
- Detroit Hires Christie's to Appraise Art Collection
- Caroline Douglas Named Director of Contemporary Art Society
- Oceanside Museum of Art Granted \$150,000
- Jud Yalkut (1938–2013)
- Karen Kemp Named Director of Albany Museum
- Pablo León de la Barra Named Guggenheim UBS MAP Curator

Off the Grid

08.09.13



Agnes Martin, *Gabriel*, 1976, 16 mm, color, sound, 78 minutes.

WHAT THEY WERE ABOUT, Agnes Martin would never quite say. Up close, their surface resolves in iterated lines that skim or settle into the canvas's tooth; at mid-distance, their right-angled spread becomes a quivering moiré; a few steps further back and their flutter freezes in an aquarelle plane. Abstract nouns like "beauty," "perfection," "surrender," "happiness," and "freedom" thread through the artist's sibylline statements, which less cohere than uneasily coexist, hinting at a grand, overarching significance while never settling on a singular meaning. There is a cadenced, continual slide between opposed poles: flickering and stable, hazy and material, congested and spare.

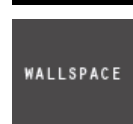
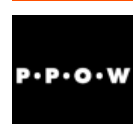
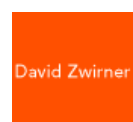
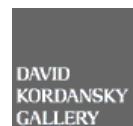
"They" are, of course, grids, Martin's great subject, rendered in subtle permutations of graphite and paint. Her decision in 1976 to make a film thus seems a digression, an eccentric footnote to a body of work singularly obsessed with line. It was her only foray into the medium; a later attempt to stage an epic about the Mongols' conquest of China ended only in reels of destroyed footage. Martin's choice to take up a 16-mm camera came just two years after her storied return to painting, following a seven-year hiatus and a flight from Coenties Slip to Cuba, New Mexico. Yet Martin insisted that *Gabriel*, screening this Sunday at Anthology Film Archives in a vivid new print, plumbed the same themes as her canvases. "It's about happiness," she announced in *Art News* the year of its release. "Exact thing with my paintings. It's about happiness and innocence."

Gabriel follows its titular protagonist, a ten-year-old boy who lived near Martin on the mesa, as he ambles through an untouched landscape of hushed meadows and softly banked streams. A picturesque vista of purple-gray mountains furnishes its opening shot. The camera's frame is fixed but ever so shaky, betraying the presence of Martin's hand behind its lens. Cut to a medium shot of water swelling and ebbing along a pebbled shore at a legato lilt. The title intervenes atop a stretch of sand, then Gabriel appears before the sea, perfectly still, his back turned to the camera. Sand, water, and sky divide the frame into six stretches of color: mauve, dimmed purple, spumy white, slate, turquoise, and slate again. Bach's *Goldberg* aria plays, its notes pleasantly trilled by the record player's needle. Motion slows, the air wafts: a perfectly lovely day.

For the film's remaining seventy-odd minutes, Martin's camera loosely observes Gabriel's hike. His journey appears in fragments—here he advances up a hill, there he idles in a grove—interspersed with fleet shots of nature—flowers ruffled by the breeze, lily pads patterning a pond—that fail to cohere in space or in time. In a recurring sequence, Martin cuts between various views of flowing water, each held long enough to arrest our gaze without letting it linger. Purling streams and sun-specked riverbeds appear



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in swift succession, each a non sequitur to the image that precedes. Martin approaches these shots as she might a painting, her fixed framing recalling the obdurate dimensions of her signature 6'-by-6' canvases. (Tellingly, at *Gabriel's* close, she credits herself not with direction but with "camera composition.") At moments, she films in slight outfocus, abstracting tussling waves into a turquoise haze. Such effects seem less nurtured than accidental. For an artist who thought in graphite and gouache, the camera must have seemed a foreign object, and Martin handles it awkwardly. As Gabriel traverses the frame, she zooms in, then rapidly retracts the camera's focus, as if unsure how best to render movement in a space removed from the canvas's plane.

While point of view shots occasionally intrude—the boy looks skyward and a single, wispy cloud fills the frame—*Gabriel's* economy remains doggedly external: a translation of Martin's desire to make painting "as unsubjective as possible" to celluloid. While she lavishes nature with repeated close-ups, Gabriel's face is never privileged with the same. Martin prefers to capture him from behind, her camera steady as he recedes. No motive is offered for his hike, and he expresses little, if any, emotion, doing no more than impassively, dutifully walk—often, it seems, at Martin's express command. Sketched in the vaguest of contours, Gabriel becomes a symbol: "innocence," writ large. His ruminative detachment suggests an "untroubled mind": that vacant yet focused state which Martin so exalted, and which she associated with children.

"Classicists are people that look out with their back to the world," Martin averred in a series of statements published in 1972. Her words summed the tradition with which she insistently identified her art. Yet, while Martin aligned classicism with the exultant emotions elicited by nature, she denied that her canvases were abstracted landscapes: mappings of the fields of her father's wheat farm or the fluent flats of the Southwest. Never mind her suggestive titling (*White Flower*, *Falling Blue*, *Leaf in the Wind*), or her intimation of the grid's connection with the plain. Recall the shot of Gabriel stilled at the water's edge, and you'll see the bands of muted color that characterize Martin's paintings from the mid-1970s onward.

"It is not a work Martin herself gives any indication of wanting to bracket away from the rest of her art. Yet it should be," Rosalind Krauss cautioned in her catalog essay for the artist's 1992 Whitney retrospective. Her fear was that *Gabriel* would congeal Martin's grids as "crypto-landscape[s]," the subtleties of their facture lost in the drive to identify this field or that parched expanse. Krauss wanted to claim Martin as a modernist of the classical sort, her paintings an inquiry into the objective ground and subjective experience of perception. Yet, while *Gabriel* does not concern vision in the abstract, it does deal with a certain perceptual attitude: "a patience to look and look again," as photographer Zoe Leonard described. It is that same sensitive, iterative gaze that so defined Martin's paintings. Faced with *Gabriel's* nature montage, one cannot help but see Martin behind the lens, her hand lightly trembling as it did when she drew graphite across canvas.

The isolated figure, back facing the frame, is not simply the classicist turned away from "the turmoil" (to use Martin's phrase), but the *rückenfigur* of Romantic landscape painting. When Gabriel stands at the shore, we see not only Martin's banded canvases, but Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, 1809. Martin's classical pursuit of "order," "rightness," and "structure" was tinged with a romantic longing for dissolution: "merging," "formlessness," and "breaking down," as she divulged. For all its emotional cool, *Gabriel* evokes the sublimity that dwells in the everyday: William Blake's "To see a world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower." Rather than an aberrant, and potentially harmful, addendum to an otherwise faultless oeuvre, Martin's film illumines the contradictions that structure her art and the anxiety (both the artist's own and that of her interpreters) that attends its relationship to nature. It's a film, like her paintings, at once elusive and concrete, that interests us precisely because it is irreconcilable.

— Courtney Fiske

"White Cube / Black Box: Agnes Martin's Gabriel" runs Sunday, August 11, at 7:30 PM at *Anthology Film Archives* in New York.

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