Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field, installed in a remote area of the high desert in western New Mexico in 1977, is composed of four hundred 20-foot-high (6.06 m) polished stainless-steel poles situated 220 feet (66.73 m) apart in a 1 x 0.62 mile (1.6 x 1 km) grid. De Maria’s intent is for the viewer to experience the “field” of this expansive land project both temporally and physically, preferably during the peak of the monsoon season, when one is most likely to encounter a thunderstorm. Given the project’s title and now well-known photographic documentation, the visitor eagerly anticipates a decisive moment when lightning strikes along the vast horizon, momentarily connecting this sculptural intervention with the mercurial forces of nature, but in reality this occurs rather infrequently. What one discovers, however, in watching the distant sun rise and set against the dark silhouetted hills and primordial plateaus, or in closely observing the field by walking among the poles, is that the most significant aspect of De Maria’s project is not the sudden spectacle of lightning, but the more subtle and utterly sublime quality of the constantly changing light.

In an essay on New Mexico, Libby Lumpkin discusses how many modern artists have been attracted to the sublime light and landscape of the state. While some arrived as early as the 1880s, when the Santa Fe railroad was built, it was in the 1920s that writer and art patron Mabel Dodge Luhan (Sterne until 1923) began hosting artists and painters at her home in Taos. Agnes Pelton first visited her in 1919; D.H. Lawrence arrived in 1922; and Andrew Dasburg, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Georgia O’Keeffe came in 1929. Inspired by the dramatic and desolate mesas, according to Lumpkin, these “cosmopolitan colonizers adapted Modern form to the desert and desert to Modern form.”¹

This desert environment captured the attention not only of O’Keeffe but also of Agnes Martin and Florence Miller Pierce, both of whom lived a good portion of
their lives in New Mexico. Similarly, after visiting New Mexico, Pelton spent thirty years in the equally arid and spare Southern California desert. As we shall see, these four women originated from very different locations and lived in several places before ultimately settling in the desert. Each developed a distinctive vocabulary employing varying degrees of abstraction, but all four artists shared an interest in making paintings that drew their inspiration from nature, evoked a keen sense of place, and used illumination to convey transcendence and spirituality.

O’Keeffe and Pelton were both born in the 1880s, Pelton in 1881 in Stuttgart, Germany, where her expatriate parents resided, and O’Keeffe in 1887 in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Pelton was raised in a religious environment and derived an early sense of spirituality from her strict Christian upbringing. Likewise, O’Keeffe was raised in a Protestant household and attended the Chatham Episcopal Institute, in Virginia, where she would later teach. Both women went to New York City to study art and were influenced by a renowned teacher of the first generation of American Modernists, Arthur Wesley Dow, whose classes at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn involved using Asian art to teach students about composition, spatial relations, and color theory. Pelton began her studies with...
Dow in 1895 and after 1900 continued private art studies with both him and another Pratt instructor, Hamilton Easter Field. O’Keeffe commenced her studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1905–06 and then, in 1907–08, enrolled at the Art Students League in New York City, where she studied with William Merritt Chase. In 1908 she took a course taught by Alon Bement, who introduced her to Dow, of the Montross Gallery and the Whitney Studio. She lived primarily in Greenwich Village but spent her summers at Field’s studio in Ogunquit, Maine, where she met Walt Kuhn, the organizer of the 1913 New York Armory Show. At Kuhn’s invitation, Pelton became one of a few women to participate in the now-historic exhibition, showing two works: Stone Age (1912), a rocky seascape with sunbathing figures, and Vine Wood (1913), depicting an allegorical figure in a dreamlike landscape.6 A few years later she began to paint wall murals for domestic interiors, such as Room Decoration in Purple and Gray (1917; fig. 3). Clearly inspired by the sinuous linearity of Art Nouveau, this large painting presents a naturalistic female figure surrounded by diaphanous, layered veils of light that prefigure Pelton’s early abstractions from the mid-1920s.

My first memory is of the brightness of light—light all around.7 GEORGIA O’KEEFFE

In the fall of 1915, when O’Keeffe moved to South Carolina to teach at Columbia College, she produced her first group of abstractions in charcoal, the Special series (Ulitnith, 1995; fig. 28). She sent the drawings to her friend Anita Pollitzer, who in turn took them to Stieglitz. He included O’Keeffe’s work in an informal group exhibition at 291 in May 1916 without her knowledge.8 This was followed by her first one-person show at the gallery a year later and, when O’Keeffe returned to New York, Stieglitz photographed her for the first time, and they began a romantic relationship that would eventually lead to marriage in 1924. While teaching in Amarillo, Texas, from 1916 to 1918, O’Keeffe produced exquisite watercolors of light-drenched landscapes featuring dramatic sunsets, star-filled evening skies, and rolling hills, as seen in Light Coming on the Plains III (1917; fig. 42). She also continued to explore more abstract forms in small oil-paintings, such as Series I - No. 3 (1918; fig. 4). These works reflect her profound feeling for the Texan topography and demonstrate her facility in navigating between evocative realism and pure abstraction.9

For a short period around 1920, both O’Keeffe and Pelton maintained studios in Manhattan, but at this point their lives and careers took distinctly different courses. Pelton had a studio in Greenwich Village but continued to live in Brooklyn with her mother. After her mother’s death in 1911, Pelton, seeking a secluded rural environment, moved into the old Hayground Windmill in Water Mill, near Bridgehampton, Long Island (see page 166), where she managed to sustain herself by painting realistic portraits of wealthy patrons. As an antidote to her relative solitude, from the early 1920s she traveled extensively to exotic locations, including the Middle East, Greece, and Hawaii. Tall Ginger (c. 1925; fig. 51), one of the flower studies she made in Hawaii, exhibits a close-focus structure that is paralleled in O’Keeffe’s contemporaneous floral paintings and plant studies, such as Leaf Motif, No. 1 and Leaf Motif, No. 2 of 1924 (figs. 6 and 7). Both artists render these subjects in a highly schematized manner, using faceted patterns of overlapping elements yet retaining a semblance of recognizable organic forms.

In the solitary environment of the Hayground Windmill, Pelton kept journals that included her thoughts about art and spirituality. In the winter of 1916 she painted her first abstractions, including Extracts (1916; fig. 68), which shows a yellow lily bursting open into an array of angular forms. A diffuse light emanates from within, permeating the background. The work’s ethereality contrasts with the boldness of O’Keeffe’s floral paintings, such as Yellow Cactus (1925; fig. 53), in which a bright desert bloom bursts toward the picture plane, encompassing the entire frame. Pelton’s faceted flower appears suspended within an atmospheric ether, while O’Keeffe’s is concrete and stylized. Although both artists understood the Victorian associations between flowers and female sexuality and reproduction, they rejected erotic readings and instead embedded associations with beauty, growth, and creative potential.10

Between the mid-1920s and the early 1930s, Pelton and O’Keeffe painted nature and landscapes in lyrical canvases that hover between abstraction and representation, often incorporating strong sources of illumination. Early in her life Pelton read Helena Blavatsky’s Key to Theosophy (1889), a spiritual treatise that
Fig. 5
Agnes Pelton, *Tall Ginger,* c. 1925
Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in. (91.4 x 61 cm)
Private collection

Fig. 6
Georgia O’Keeffe, *Leaf Motif,* No. 1, 1924
Oil on canvas, 32 x 18 in. (81.3 x 45.7 cm)
Collection of Sandy and Harold C. Price, Laguna Beach, California

Fig. 7
Georgia O’Keeffe, *Leaf Motif,* No. 2, 1924
Oil on canvas, 35 x 18 in. (88.9 x 45.7 cm)
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Mary and Sylvan Lang Collection
attempted to merge principles common to all religions, combining aspects of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Light, a crucial symbol in theosophy, represented natural and supernatural phenomena and became a central motif for many modern artists. According to Nancy Strouw Shaley, Pelton’s canvases use illumination as a metaphor for these beliefs and can be seen as “personal statements with a universal statement—to bring light to life.”

At this time Pelton painted numerous celestial landscapes, such as The Guide and Star Gazer (figs. 46 and 47), both from 1929, and Illumination (1930; fig. 1), using different types of stars as symbols of enlightenment, each with a particular significance relating to the cosmos, the divine, and the mystical.

In the 1920s O’Keeffe and Stieglitz divided their time between New York City and their country home at Lake George, in upstate New York. During this period O’Keeffe simultaneously made sharply focused precisionist canvases of New York architecture, such as City Night (1926; fig. 45), and also turned to nature for inspiration in such landscapes as Lake George, NY (1926; fig. 9), in which strong moonlight is dramatically reflected on blue water. (This unique double-sided canvas has red poppies [1926; fig. 8] painted on the back.) The following year O’Keeffe painted The Red Hills with Sun (1927; fig. 37), which presents a more surreal apotheosis of light, with concentric bands of an intense white aura that radiates into pink then sepia tones.

These pictures are conceptions of light—the essence of fire, not as we see it in the material world, but as the radiance of the inner being.

—Agnes Pelton

Pelton pursued her interest in the spiritual symbolism of light into the 1930s after she met Dane Rudhyar, a Modernist artist, composer, and astrologer who was influenced by theosophy and by the writings of the philosopher Henri Bergson. In 1931 she began studying Agni Yoga, an esoteric offshoot of theosophy. Her paintings of this period include Mount of Flame (1932; fig. 36), which displays a fiery eruption within a yellow aura. Rudhyar introduced Pelton’s work to Raymond Jonson, a painter from Taos, New Mexico, and the leader of the Transcendental Painting Group (TPG). Founded by Jonson and Emil Bisttram in 1938, the group promoted abstract art, with a goal to “carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world through new concepts of space, color, light and design.” Pelton began a long friendship with Jonson and, in 1933, at his request, sent her paintings to the Santa Fe Fiesta exhibition at the Museum of New Mexico, which also included works by O’Keeffe. By 1938, when the TPG was formed, Pelton was a mature artist and the oldest member of the group, which dissolved in 1945.
Fig. 10
Agnes Pelton, San Gorgonio in Spring, 1932
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76.2 cm)
The Buck Collection, Laguna Beach, California

Fig. 11
Georgia O’Keeffe, Purple Hills, 1935
Oil on canvas, 16 x 30 in. (40.6 x 76.2 cm)
San Diego Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norton S. Walbridge
Both Pelton and O’Keeffe eventually left the East Coast when they were in their fifties, and made the desert their permanent home. Both women had maintained friendships with Mabel Dodge Luhan, who resided in New Mexico and had invited them to visit Taos. Pelton visited her in 1939, and O’Keeffe in the summer of 1939, spending her first full winter in New Mexico later that year. At this point, however, the two women’s lives diverged dramatically. In 1939 the windmill Pelton inhabited was sold, and she finally left New York and moved permanently to Cathedral City, a small California desert town outside Palm Springs, in 1932. For the next thirty years she worked in relative isolation, supporting herself by painting highly realistic desert landscapes to sell commercially, such as San Gorgonio in Spring (1932, fig. 20), while simultaneously pursuing her true passion for visionary, luminous abstractions. It was clearly an economic imperative for Pelton to create these two separate bodies of work, while O’Keeffe was able to integrate her interests in abstraction and representation throughout her œuvre.

In 1939 O’Keeffe traveled to New Mexico with artist Rebecca Strand and then began to spend her summers making landscapes of hills and canyons, with palettes ranging from the pale hues of Soft Grey Alcide Hill (1929/30, fig. 61) to the stronger rust and violet tones of Purple Hills (1935, fig. 11) and Part of the Cliffs (1937, fig. 62). As Barbara Buhler Lynes has observed, these apparently “realistic” landscapes of the 1930s and 1940s are in fact quite subjective, as O’Keeffe used such formal devices as precise contours, nonlocal color, and dramatic shadows and light in her landscapes.17

In the late 1930s O’Keeffe traveled to Hawaii, where she painted tropical landscapes, such as Waterfill, End of Road, Iao Valley (1939, fig. 73), and Waterfill, No. III, Iao Valley (1939, fig. 26), depicting a verdant mountain peak and cloud-filled canyon, both employing dramatic contrasts of light and dark. Whether they show lush island landscapes or dry, craggy canyons, the works from this period refer to precise, identifiable locations and topographical formations, yet they reveal O’Keeffe’s continuing commitment to abstraction.18

Just as Pelton continued her engagement with abstraction in the late 1930s and early 1940s in such visionary paintings as Memory (1937, fig. 76), Alchemy (1937–39, fig. 71), and Challenge (1940, fig. 77), O’Keeffe also pursued a surreal, visionary vocabulary in the 1940s and 1950s in her paintings featuring skulls and bones, such as Pedernal – From the Ranch I (1936, fig. 63). Both artists continued to paint their respective desert environments into their mature years, and their later abstractions and landscapes bear striking affinities as their work became even more expansive and visionary. Pelton’s Future (1941, fig. 12) shows an open doorway, resembling a gate that once existed in Cathedral City, with a strong white light emanating from behind, described by the artist as “a mountain of vision, above which open by degrees, windows of illumination.”19 This idea of an abstracted gateway recalls the series of large architectonic paintings that O’Keeffe made at her home at Abiqua, New Mexico, such as White Patio with Red Door (1960, fig. 13), although compared with Pelton’s this aperture is flat and solid.

At the end of her life Pelton revisited an earlier theme of a glowing orb suspended in a vertical beam, in Light Center (1960–62, fig. 14), one of her last paintings and perhaps her most direct evocation of the great beyond. An even closer visual analogue may be found by comparing Light Center with paintings from O’Keeffe’s late series, From a Day with Juan (1976/77, fig. 15), in which trapezoidal beams of light shoot up into the heavens. Even in these very late paintings, each artist managed to create a symbiotic relationship between what she observed in nature and what she envisioned in her mind, never fully abandoning representation within abstractions animated by light.

Angus Martin and Florence Miller Pierce were born in the 1910s. Martin in Mackin, in Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1912, and Florence Miller, as she then was, in Washington, D.C., in 1918.20 Raised in a Scottish-Canadian Protestant farming family, Martin moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1939, then relocated to the United States at the age of twenty-one to attend Western Washington College of Education, Bellingham, from 1934 to 1937. In 1941 she went to New York to study at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she majored in fine arts and art education, like her predecessor Georgia O’Keeffe.

Pierce, born Florence Miller, came from a conservative Presbyterian family and began her formal training in 1935, at the age of seventeen, at the Studio School of the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington, D.C. While studying at Phillips she learned of Emil Bisttram’s Taos School of Art, and traveled to New Mexico to attend his summer school in 1936. When she returned to Washington, D.C., Miller studied for six months at the Corcoran School of Art, where she met the artist Auriel Besisser and his wife, who had trained with the English philosopher Annie Besant, a student of Helena Blavatsky; the founder of theosophy. Miller returned to Taos to enroll in Bisttram’s school in 1937 and remained his student for two years. While studying in Taos, she met and later married another painting student, Horace Towner Pierce.

In 1941, after completing her studies at Columbia, Martin moved to Taos and began a decade of transition between New Mexico and New York, initially studying and teaching at the University of New Mexico from 1946 to 1949. She painted representational landscapes and portraits and had her first exhibition at the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos. She then returned to New York in the early 1950s to earn a master’s degree at Teachers College. Her paintings of this period were primarily abstract but referred to nature. In The Bluebird (1942, fig. 46), for example,
Fig. 12
Agnes Pelton, Future, 1942
Oil on canvas, 30 x 26 in. (76.2 x 66 cm)
The Buck Collection, Laguna Beach, California

Fig. 13
Georgia O'Keeffe, White Plate with Red Door, 1960
Oil on canvas, 48 x 84 in. (121.9 x 213.4 cm)
Courtesy Curtis Galeries, Minneapolis
Fig. 14
Agnes Pelton, Light Center, 1960–61
Oil on canvas, 36 x 26 in. (91.4 x 66 cm)
Euphrat Museum of Art, De Anza College, Cupertino, California; Gift of Cornelia Sussman and Irving Sussman

Fig. 15
Georgia O’Keeffe, Untitled (From a Day with Juan), 1976/77
Pastel on paper, 25 x 19 in. (63.5 x 48.4 cm)
The Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation, Abiquiu, New Mexico, 1993
a blue, birdlike form emerges from biomorphic shapes floating on a charcoal-gray ground. After years of financial struggle Martin reached a turning point in 1957, when Betty Parsons, the owner of the renowned Betty Parsons Gallery, purchased five of her paintings and promised to handle her work if she would relocate to New York. Martin agreed and moved into a studio at Coenties Slip, where she became associated with other Parsons artists—including Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Lenore Tawney, Ann Wilson, and Jack Youngerman—who represented a younger generation of Abstract painters.

Pierce also became associated with a group of Abstract painters when, in 1938, she joined the Transcendental Painting Group (TPG), becoming its youngest member. In 1942 Pierce, her husband, and their young son moved to Los Angeles. The work she produced during this period was influenced by both her affiliation with the TPG and Surrealism. In such works as her untitled painting of 1942 (fig. 17), she used the Surrealist technique of automatic drawing, and employed biomorphic forms that predate but compare with those in Martin’s early abstractions. While in Los Angeles Pierce also appeared in Maya Deren’s and Alexander Hammid’s short experimental film Meshes of the Afternoon (1943). The following year Horace Pierce was drafted, and after the war they returned to Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 1949 the family moved to Albuquerque because of Horace’s poor health, and following his death in 1950, Pierce was forced to curtail her artistic activities for a decade because of financial difficulties.

My paintings have neither object nor space nor line nor anything—no forms . . . They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down forms.

AGNES MARTIN

In the 1960 Martin began working in what would be considered her signature style. When she had her first solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1956, all elements of figuration had disappeared from her work. By early 1960 she was producing spare, geometric abstractions in a square format with her characteristic hand-drawn grid lines, most often using uniform formats of 12-inch (30.5-cm) works on paper or 6-foot (1.8-m) canvases. Rain (Study) (1960; fig. 18), composed of light and dark floating gray squares imbued with atmospheric light, recalls the chromatic Abstract Expressionism of Mark Rothko, although it was Ad Reinhardt’s reductive, programmatic serial black monochromes and his interest in Eastern art and mysticism that most profoundly influenced Martin. In other works, such as Untitled No. 5 (c. 1961; fig. 19), Martin made grids on paper impeccably rendered in delicate pencil, gouache, and subtle washes of color. Although she participated in the exhibition Systemic Painting at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1966, she adamantly rejected the Minimalist label. Martin associated Minimalism with an impersonal, mechanical means of production, but regarded her own work as expressionistic because of its subjective and emotive qualities. She noted that she had chosen a reductive vocabulary specifically to express light.

In the late 1960s, after a long hiatus from art-making, Pierce returned to painting and discovered the vehicle for her own expressions of light: she accidentally dropped some liquid resin on to a piece of aluminum and observed a shimmering, translucent quality. She began to experiment by pouring resin on to mirrors to achieve a highly reflective surface, as seen in her untitled work of 1968–69 (fig. 20), a small, shimmering free-form abstraction that she called a “lucamorph” or “luciform,” or light body. In the early 1970s Pierce also experimented by placing rice paper over moistened stones and then tracing their forms with different colors of sumi ink to produce unusual, ethereal patterns, some of which hark back to her earlier watercolors and transcendental paintings from the 1940s (fig. 54).

In Martin’s early 1950s abstractions and geometric paintings from the 1960s, the serial interconnection among paintings became integral to her work. Martin’s horizontal strata and Pierce’s geometric shapes prevail over spatial determinations. Martin began to set up serial relations, binding one work to another by loose (as distinct from strictly parsed) compositional permutations. This serial interconnection among paintings became integral to Martin’s work for the remainder of her career. She began to work with larger, more calibrated bands of color. A similar formal strategy is seen in her film Gabriel (1963), which begins with a young boy seen from behind, “staring into the vastness of sky, water, beach—six luminous horizontal bands of color,” as Rosalind Krauss observed. At the end of the 1970s Martin produced The Islands (1979), a single work composed of twelve individually sized canvases, with horizontal bands painted in white acrylic with slight tints of pale color. Pencil lines subtly differentiate the strata and visually align the series: one perceives the paintings as individual “islands” linked together in a chain. It was also in the 1970s that Pierce perfected the technique of pouring layers of resin on to mirrored Plexiglas mounted on plywood, a process that would occupy her for the rest of her life. In the 1980s she experimented with a series of shaped paintings—semicircles, fans, triangles, lozenges, and crosses—as seen in Cruciform #1 (1988; fig. 22), in which striations of poured resin create surface irregularities that shimmer and appear two-dimensional, depending on how light is reflected on the work. Martin’s horizontal strata and Pierce’s geometric shapes both reveal the hand of the artist, which counteracts the seemingly precise
Fig. 16
Agnes Martin, The Bluebird, 1954
Oil on canvas, 28\(\frac{1}{8}\) x 40 in. (71.4 x 101.6 cm)
Permanent Collection of the Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, New Mexico

Fig. 17
Florence Miller Pierce, Untitled, 1942
Oil on canvas board, 10 x 14 in. (25.4 x 35.6 cm)
Jonson Gallery, University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque, Gift of the artist
Fig. 18
Agnes Martin, Rain (Study), 1960
Oil on canvas, 25 x 25 in. (63.5 x 63.5 cm)
The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York, Gift of Mr. Robert Elkon

Fig. 19
Agnes Martin, Untitled No. 5, c. 1960
Oil, ink, and wash on canvas, 12 x 12 in. (30.5 x 30.5 cm)
Collection of Mary Patricia Anderson Pence
geometry of their works. Additionally, this slight imprecision elicits minute shifts in light that tend to dematerialize their apparent solidity.

In the 1990s, when both Martin and Pierce entered their eighties, they continued to reveal new surprises in their work. In 1994 Martin painted a suite of seven paintings for the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos, now permanently installed there, in the Agnes Martin Gallery, in an octagonal chamber with an ocular skylight. In this chapel-like environment one may contemplate her paintings both at very close range and as a total installation. After moving into a new studio in Taos at the age of eighty-three, Martin completed a series of seventeen paintings with what she called “wild brush-stroking,” expressing the idea of joy within minimal yet still expressionistic abstractions. The decade culminated with another major cycle of paintings, the Innocent Love series, eight 5-foot (1.52 m) canvases with horizontal pastel bands, commissioned by Dia Art Foundation (1999; fig. 53). In discussing this series, Michael Govan astutely observed, “Martin’s recent paintings . . . seem to emanate light rather than reflect it.”

The notion of light emanating from within is often used to describe the late paintings in which Pierce refined her practice of pouring multiple layers of resin over mirrored Plexiglas. By the 1990s she exclusively painted monochromes, like Martin using uniform square formats, which, in Pierce’s case, measure either 16 or 24 inches (41 or 61 cm) per side.

Color is emotionally lush, no matter what color you use . . . I am going as far away from the light without killing it, like the night sky.

Florence Miller Pierce

Pierce’s first monochromes were white, tabulae rasae, but then she expanded to working in color and would mix metallic powders into the resin to exaggerate this sense of emanating light. By placing a sheet of vellum on top of the layers and removing it, Pierce would give her paintings a “final skin” according to Lucy Lippard: “I cannot think of Pierce’s work without visualizing that unique glow . . . Her monochrome resin squares create their own weather and for some viewers that weather in turn creates its own emotions . . . like the comings and goings of sun and clouds within the day.” Sometimes Pierce would paint a smaller square in the center, as in Untitled (Orange Pure) (1994; fig. 49), with its brilliant, vibrating metallic center. In discussing this work, Pierce revealed her interest in Zen and Tantric Buddhism: “I am plunging into the center of the square . . . I open up the space. There’s a little window in there . . . they’re like little mandalas.” When asked about her white monochromes, she said: “What comes to mind is a Zen word about the original mind, about
Florence Miller Pierce, Cruciform #1, 1988
Resin relief, 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm)
Collection of Jayne D. Murrel, Newport Beach, California

Fig. 22
Agnes Martin, Untitled #3, 1974
Acrylic, graphite, and Shiva gesso on canvas, 72 x 72 in. (182.9 x 182.9 cm)
Des Moines Art Center, Nathan Emory Coffin Collection.
Purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust, and partial gift of Arnold and Mildred Glimcher

Fig. 21
Agnes Martin, Untitled #3, 1974
Acrylic, graphite, and Shiva gesso on canvas, 72 x 72 in. (182.9 x 182.9 cm)
Des Moines Art Center, Nathan Emory Coffin Collection.
Purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust, and partial gift of Arnold and Mildred Glimcher
Fig. 23  
Agnes Martin, Untitled #10, 1995. Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm). Private collection; courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York.

Fig. 24  
Florence Miller Pierce, Untitled (Pale Pink), 1998. Resin relief, 16 x 16 in. (40.6 x 40.6 cm). Collection of Duncan and Elizabeth Boeckman.
emptying mind and space. My works are contemplative. They’re about stilling
the mind.”

Martin also often spoke in her writings of a blissful, egoless state, an
“untroubled mind,” which she tried to achieve in her art, an idea that stems from
her own interests in Eastern philosophy. Martin first encountered Buddhism in the
late 1950s in the lectures of D.T. Suzuki at Columbia University, and also became
interested in the writing of two Taoists, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, who advised that,
rather than looking at others, one should look within one’s own mind and soul. Late in their lives both Martin and Pierce focused on producing paintings that
facilitated a sense of calm and contemplation as a kind of emotional ballast. Each
artist approached her reductive mode of abstraction not in purely formal terms, but
as an expression of light that connoted transcendence and transformation, allowing
the works to become vehicles for philosophical and spiritual ideas.

Georgia O’Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce led
adventurous, accomplished, and atypical lives for women of their respective
generations. Studying with well-known mentors, each became associated
with other artists—O’Keeffe with the Stieglitz circle, Pelton and Pierce with
the Transcendental Painting Group, and Martin with the younger generation of
Abstract Expressionists—yet each maintained a fierce individuality and a particular
vision. O’Keeffe’s and Pelton’s Modernist paintings encompass
both realism and abstraction without completely rejecting either mode of
representation. Martin’s and Pierce’s early biomorphic abstractions evolved into
reductive, precisely executed nonobjective paintings with reverberating surfaces
that invite prolonged contemplation.

Having spent some part of their early lives in cities, all four artists eventually
chose to relocate to rural areas with few distractions and a sense of solitude. This
allowed them the time and space to contemplate their natural surroundings. They
shared a desire not only to represent the expansiveness of the desert landscape but
also to capture the consciousness that such an environment elicits.

At the core of their paintings is an interest in using light as both a vehicle to
represent specific atmospheric conditions and a signifier of memory and sense of
place. From her early abstract watercolors made in Texas in the 1910s to her paintings
of Lake George and New Mexico, O’Keeffe’s work reveals an astute understanding
of the topography of specific sites, often transformed by dramatic illumination.
Pelton’s terrestrial and celestial landscapes may begin with the natural world but
are imbued with a more ethereal symbolic light that embodies her metaphysical
interest in universal connections. As evidenced by the titles of her early works,
Martin too began with natural elements that are then transmuted through abstract
forms, which both emanate light and express emotional states. In her early
transcendental paintings and her fine-tuned experiments with resin, Pierce achieved
a sense of illumination that makes no particular reference to nature, but rather
relates more to her interests in meditation and mindful contemplation.

Raised in Christian homes, O’Keeffe, Pelton, Martin, and Pierce each became
interested in different forms of spirituality. Wassily Kandinsky’s Über das Geistige
in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art; 1911), published when O’Keeffe and
Pelton were art students, first introduced them and other young Modernists to
theosophy and the teachings of Helena Blavatsky. All four women were exposed
to Native American culture: O’Keeffe and Pierce became involved with Pueblo and
Navajo culture in New Mexico, while Pelton painted regularly at the Agua Caliente
Reservation in Palm Springs, California. Both Martin and Pierce became immersed
in Eastern philosophies, and used their practices of contemplation and meditation
as a calming, stabilizing force.

While developing distinct visual vocabularies, O’Keeffe, Pelton, Martin, and
Pierce each found inspiration in the harsh but beautiful desert, with its extremes
of hot and cold, drought and rain, light and darkness. Ultimately each artist
manifested her personal sense of place and spirituality—both formally and
conceptually—through illumination, using light to convey the mystical, ineffable,
and sublime qualities of nature.
27. Agnes Martin, a retrospective exhibition, was organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and traveled to the Pasadena Art Museum.


29. Rosalind Krauss, “Agnes Martin: The Cloud,” in Archives (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993). Krauss notes that the film constructs a reading of Martin’s work as “a crypto-landscape” that is part of the “abstract sublime conveying the immensity, the endlessness, the nothingness of nature.”

30. Ibid. Krauss believes that the interpretation of Martin’s work was largely superficial and repetitive until Koos Verkade’s more phenomenological readings in “Agnes Martin: An Appreciation.” Artforum 13 (June 1975): 72.

31. Martin, in Simon, “Perfection is in the Mind,” 82-89.

32. Michael Gover, essay in conjunction with the Agnes Martin exhibition at Dia Beacon, www.dia-beacon.org/exhibitions/martin-going/essay.html


Notes


5. Ibid.

6. Zakian, Agnes Pelton, 27, notes how Pelton exhibited with this group in a show titled Impressionist Paintings at the Knodler Gallery in New York City in 1937.

7. Ibid. 23.

8. O’Keeffe, quoted in Judith Zilczer, “Light Coming on the Plains,” Georgia O’Keeffe’s Sonnen Series,” Artforum, no. 23 (1990): 1. This article analyzes the origins and reception of this early watercolor series.


12. Ibid. 215.

13. Shelby describes in detail the meaning of each type of veil, as explained by Pelton.


15. Pelton completed at least seven paintings with a fire theme: Print of Fire, Print of Fire, Print of Smoke, Mount of Flame, Chalice of Fire, White Fire, and Print of Smoke. Ibid. 23.


18. Ibid.


20. Biographical information on Martin is from Joan Simon, “Perfection is in the Mind: An Interview with Agnes Martin,” Art in America 64 (May 1976): 80-89. Information on Pierce is drawn from Blankenship, Vision and Spirit. For additional biographical information on both artists, see the Chronologies in the present volume.

21. It was the sale of The Bluebird that enabled Martin to return to Teachers College to pursue her postgraduate studies. Special thanks to Andrew John Crail, formerly of the Rosewell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, New Mexico, for this information.


27. Martin, in Simon, “Perfection is in the Mind,” 82-89.