



# Geese Flying

Anxiety, influence and the route to autonomy.

By Susan York

**I first saw** the artist Agnes Martin lecture in 1982 in Albuquerque. She said: “My paintings are not about what is seen. They are about what is known forever in the mind.” I thought she was speaking directly to me.

It took me a year to find the courage to call her. I wrote out a script of what I would say and laid my yellow legal pad with the dialogue printed in blue ink in front of me.

“Hello,” answered the plain, flat voice.

I couldn’t think of what to say. My heart began beating faster; the silence continued. Finally, I read from my paper: “Hello, Ms. Martin, this is Susan York.”

“Oh, yes, hello.”

“I sent you a postcard for a show I’m in,” I said, following my lines.

“Yes, I got it,” she said. “And I can’t decide.”

Can’t decide? I frantically scanned the yellow paper, looking futilely for the right words. “Can’t decide?”

“No. Can’t decide if you’re ready to be internationally recognized or not. Won’t be able to tell that until I see the work.”

I kept searching my page.

“Well, uh, would you like to come see the show?”

“No, never do that.”

I was trying to come up with a reply when she finally spoke.

“You can come for tea,” she said. “At 3.”

The next thing I heard was the dial tone.

The road to Galisteo cut across a wide mesa. In the distance, layers of blue mountain ranges rested behind clouds, trees and ancient petroglyphs. Agnes, in her early 70’s on that afternoon in 1983, stood in the doorway of her house. Her short salt-and-pepper hair framed red cheeks and blue eyes that sometimes seemed to be on the earth and other times beyond it.

The small home resembled a New Mexico tract house with a white generic interior. Everything was spare and tidy; three rocking chairs in the living room and one picture that looked like a Georgia O’Keeffe print.

As in her books, she spoke in absolutes. “Never have children. Do not live the middle-class life. Never do anything that will take away from your work.”

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Opening the door to her studio, she said, “Never let anyone in your studio.” It was a long, simple adobe building that Agnes had built by hand. She had no electricity in there and worked only from the morning until 3 p.m.

I was struck silent by a 6-by-6-foot painting composed of horizontal lines and washes of gray. Did she tell me it was geese flying, or did I dream it that night? Infinite washes of gray paint held by graphite lines, the painting made me think of the almost steady line of a child’s pencil meeting watery Japanese calligraphy.

She told me she wanted to preserve the work of the Abstract Expressionists. She asked me about the Zen center where I lived and had a studio. I had no way of knowing it then, but for the next several years I would meet her nearly every month for tea or dinner. I learned about the artist’s life from her, long before I had found my own. I was just a few years out of college, but I thought time was running out. “I didn’t get my first show until I was 45,” she said, fixing her penetrating gaze on me. “If I could tell you anything, I would tell you that you have time.”

Over the next decade, I continued making my art, but as Agnes often told me, I was frustrated. Something was missing in my work that I still hadn’t been able to grasp. She told me she had once worked as a dishwasher, saving enough money to spend an entire year solely in her studio. She thought I should do the same; instead, I entered graduate school.

In my work there, I sieved powdered pigment onto the floor, filling rooms with giant arcs and rectangles. Afterward I was pleased to have nothing left but a bag of swept-up pigment.

When I met Agnes the following summer, she thought the new work was ridiculous.

“How are you going to sell it if it ends up in a garbage bag?” she asked in that flat voice that sounded like the truth. And in fact, it was the truth.

But I knew this work held the missing piece: I realized that I wanted to distill thousands of miles into a single inch. Today, I cover whole rooms in graphite, rubbing the walls with my hand until the flat black carbon turns infinitely silver.

My hand was covered in graphite when I heard that Agnes had died. It was around this time last December, and I remember the world became quiet. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY BOB HAMBLY

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