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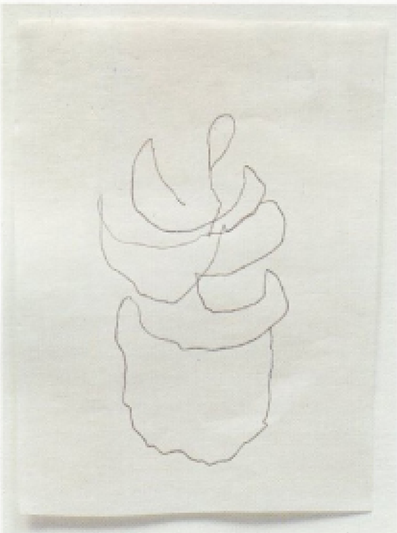
Agnes Martin: Works on Paper at Peter Blum Gallery, New York

The mere installation of this exhibition, spanning over forty years in the career of Agnes Martin (1912–2004), invites viewers to come up with narratives that might crack the code to the artist's defiant last drawing. With the works displayed clockwise chronologically—except for the 1973 print portfolio *On a Clear Day*, dazzling in the maximal effects of its minimal permutations, which is displayed on a large table in the center of the room—the exhibition culminates with Martin's 2004 untitled drawing of what appears to be a potted cactus. Unassuming yet suggestive in every regard, this doodle-like work consists of an uninterrupted curving line on a rectangular piece of paper measuring but 3 1/2 by 2 3/4 inches. Every one of this drawing's attributes—the surface's nonsquare shape, the continuity of the line, and, of course, the figuration—contests what came to be known as Martin's signature style.

Negation is not the part of the equation that comes to mind when thinking of Martin's Tao and Zen-inspired practice, yet, regarding the formats of her works, for instance, she wrote, "When I cover the square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power." Through a variety of other means, she consistently offset the rigidity not only of the square, but also of her own grids within square formats: By treating her surfaces with pencil, crayon, watercolor, and ink washes, she bestowed her drawings of organic textures, challenging her distinctively uneven yet unswerving lines and articulating an almost pulsating tension between the grids and their material supports. Moreover, the paper onto which she applied watercolor features random crinkles, pleats, and ruffles whose materiality, when contrasted with the grids' abstraction, hints at a sublime balance. It's hard to believe that the effect of Martin's deliberate mark-making on the paper surfaces themselves would pass unnoticed by an artist of her exceptional awareness.

If it's impossible to determine why Martin broke out of the grid she couldn't help but reinvent every time she set out to make an artwork, it's tempting to attribute her last, possibly self-effacing gesture to her constant interest in triggering dissonance and contradiction.

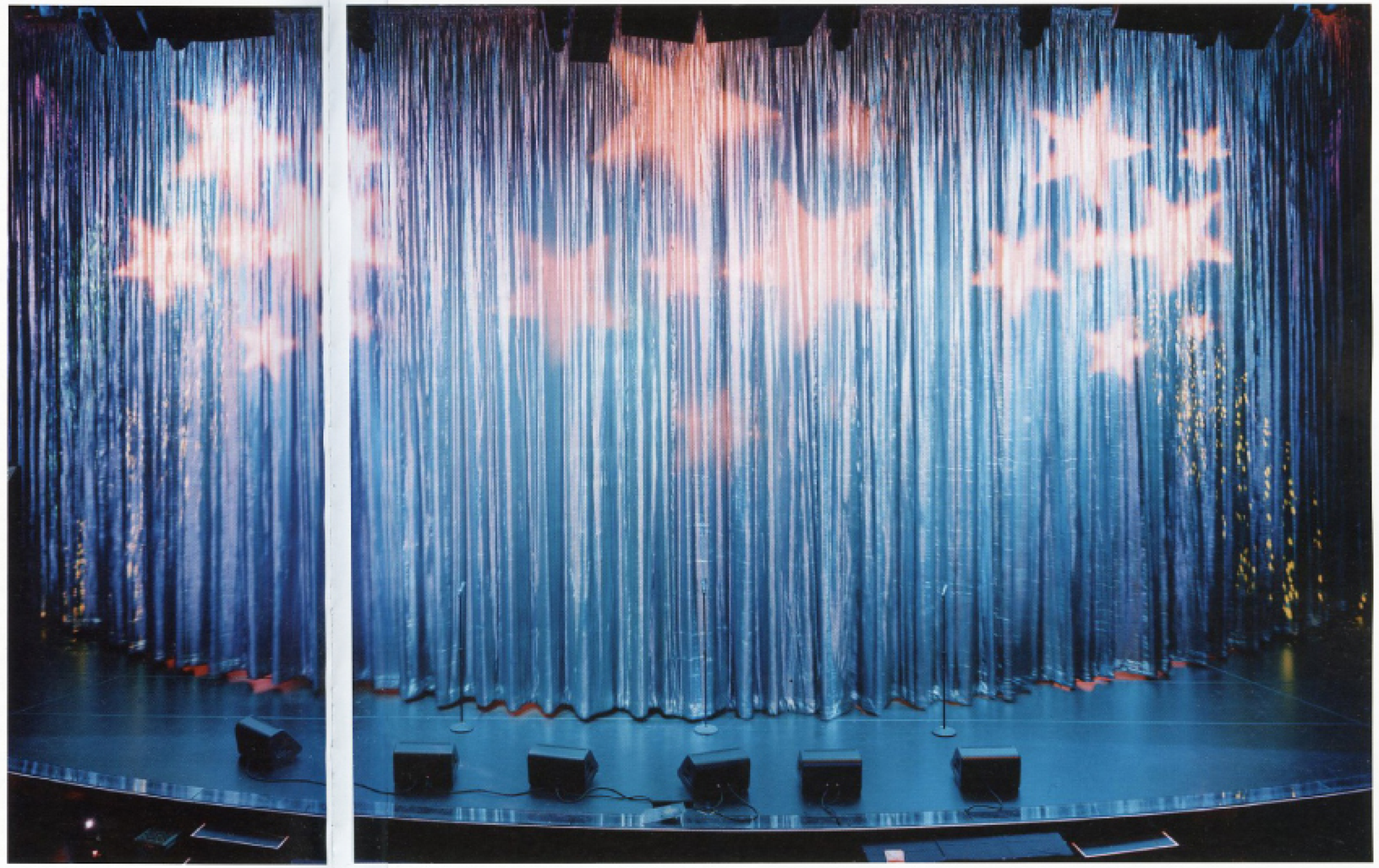
—Mónica de la Torre



Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, ink on paper (3 1/2 x 2 3/4 in.), 2004. Private collection. Courtesy Peter Blum Gallery, New York

This Land is Your Land at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago

It's been recognized for a while that Woody Guthrie's 1940 "This Land is Your Land" is not the blissful paean to America it's often thought to be. It was written in response to the cloying boosterism of Irving Berlin's 1939 "God Bless America," and in several of the verses rarely performed today Guthrie spoke with empathy of the unemployed and the dispossessed. It's this darker, more brooding, and decidedly less empathic America that curator Karen Irvine seems to see, and this exhibition of the photographs and videos by Roberto Bellini, Peter Granser, Caroline Hake, Christian Jankowski, Simon Roberts, Greg Stimac, and Bryan Zanisnik chronicled a nation many Americans might find strange and foreign. The artists—only two were born in America—collectively reinforce the recent cliché of shallow and retrograde red-state America, a largely rural place of televangelists, xenophobic conservative politics, post-9/11 paranoia, and a kind of rampant redneck machismo.



Caroline Hake, *Miss World*, C-print (28 x 41 in.), 2002. Courtesy Galerie b2, Leipzig

British photographer Simon Roberts' photos of mostly middle-aged white guys watching things blow up in the stark beauty of the Nevada desert reveals a kind of pathetic and impotent updating of the energies of the frontier. Taken during two visits—in 1999 and in 2002—that were separated by the events of 9/11, his photos of the latter gathering are sheathed in patriotism, as if their activities constituted exercises in self-protection and guerrilla training rather than a juvenile destruction fetish. American artist Greg Stimac's video *Peeling Out* (2007), showing car after car screeching and burning rubber in usually peaceful and rustic sites, hits a similar note of brash machismo—America as adolescent male rampage. Though these events are staged and the gender of the drivers can only be surmised, Stimac's recognition of the impulsive predilection of America for the fastest, loudest, and most aggressive and destructive tendencies—driving as tantrum and psychobiography—is well realized here. German photographer Caroline Hake's images of Los Angeles chronicle empty stage sets for pageants and game shows and interior views of museums, seeing them as shallow and artificial contexts for America's obsession with fame and glamour, both gussied up and empty at their core. These artists and their curator see America as a troubled giant, lumbering inexorably toward a glum and dysfunctional future.

—James Yood