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Oral history interview with Agnes
Martin, 1989 May 15

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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Agnes Bernice Martin on May 15, 1989. The interview took place in Galisteo, New Mexico, and was conducted by Suzan Campbell for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

When Campbell asked a question that Martin did not wish to answer, she did not, but rather gave Campbell a visual signal, responded with a partial answer or changed the subject.

The original transcript was edited. In 2024 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[00:00:02.07]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: American Art Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Agnes Martin on May 15, 1989 at Ms. Martin's home in New Mexico. The interviewer is Suzan Campbell. We'll begin the interview now. Agnes, I understand that you were born on March the 22nd, 1912 in Macklin, Saskatchewan, Canada. What can you tell me about your parents and other family?

[00:00:32.94]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, my family were pioneers. My grandparents on both sides came from Scotland. And they went onto the prairie in covered wagons. And my paternal grandfather was a rancher, and a fur trader, and my maternal grandfather was a wheat farmer. And my parents were also pioneers. They proved up a homestead in northern Saskatchewan. But my father also managed a wheat elevator and chop mill. And—

[00:01:23.88]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What is a chop mill?

[00:01:25.95]

AGNES MARTIN: It's where you chop up feed for animals.

[00:01:28.54]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, like corn and other fodder?

[00:01:31.14]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And—

[00:01:31.32]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And that was in Macklin?

[00:01:32.36]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, in Macklin.

[00:01:35.25]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And you have brothers?

[00:01:36.84]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. I have two brothers and a sister.

[00:01:39.39]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And are they living?

[00:01:41.22]

AGNES MARTIN: No, one of my brothers died in the war.

[00:01:44.24]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, could you tell me your brothers' names?

[00:01:47.01]

AGNES MARTIN: My brother, Ronald Martin.

[00:01:54.68]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Your other brother?

[00:01:55.88]

AGNES MARTIN: Malcolm Ian [ph] Martin.

[00:01:57.44]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Malcolm? And your sister's name?

[00:02:01.87]

AGNES MARTIN: Is Maribel.

[00:02:05.35]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Which of your brothers died in the war, Agnes?

[00:02:07.87]

AGNES MARTIN: Malcolm Ian Martin died.

[00:02:10.63]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. Oh, did you tell me once that your father died when you were a young girl?

[00:02:16.63]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. When I was two years old, he died. And we had to leave the homestead. And we came to Vancouver, and I was really brought up in Vancouver.

[00:02:28.06]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. Do you have any recollection of Macklin? Or do your memories begin in Vancouver?

[00:02:33.91]

AGNES MARTIN: No, I don't remember Macklin.

[00:02:37.66]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You attended school in Vancouver. Did you go all the way through high school there?

[00:02:42.16]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:02:42.97]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: When you got out of high school, you graduated from high school, do you happen to remember what year that was?

[00:02:50.59]

AGNES MARTIN: 1930, I think it was—was '29, '30. '30.

[00:02:55.39]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And how old were you when you came to the United States?

[00:02:58.81]

AGNES MARTIN: I was 18.

[00:02:59.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And why did you decide to come to the United States?

[00:03:02.83]

AGNES MARTIN: Because I liked the kind of higher education that we have here in the United States, rather than in the scholarly type of education that they have in the Canadian-British schools. Because I think it contributes more to self-development.

[00:03:34.86]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It not being scholarly, how would you characterize it? More freedom for the individual to explore?

[00:03:44.58]

AGNES MARTIN: No, like, in a British school, or you would have to—if you were studying Socrates, you'd memorize what Socrates said. But in the American schools, you find out what Socrates thinks, and then you find out what you think.

[00:04:02.46]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, I understand. Well, I grew up in American schools, and so I'm pretty used to that system. When you came to the United States, you had a higher education in mind. Did you know it before you came that you'd be going to Western Washington State in Bellingham?

[00:04:17.91]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, no. I came down—my sister married an American, and she became ill. And I came down to take care of her. And then I noticed the difference in the American people and the Canadian people. And I decided I'd wanted to come to America to live, not

just go to college, but actually to become an American.

[00:04:47.71]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. Where was your sister living at that time?

[00:04:50.78]

AGNES MARTIN: She was also in Bellingham.

[00:04:52.09]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: In Bellingham. What did you study when you started school at Bellingham?

[00:04:57.38]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh. Since I wanted to become a citizen, it was necessary for me to have a profession. And so I decided to become a teacher. I studied, you know—

[00:05:13.32]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: The general course for teacher preparatory.

[00:05:17.04]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:05:17.49]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Were the years you were at Bellingham from 1935 to 1938? Does that seem-

[00:05:24.00]

AGNES MARTIN: No. I was there from 1930 to 1932, or something like that. I only went two years.

[00:05:30.84]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. And what did you do after you completed your two years at Bellingham?

[00:05:34.83]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I completed the course—the three-year course—in two years. And then I taught in the country schools for four years.

[00:05:53.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Around Bellingham?

[00:05:55.48]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, in the state of Washington. And then I asked what was the best university in the country, and somebody told me Columbia, so I went to Columbia.

[00:06:11.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And what was your goal in going to Columbia?

[00:06:14.15]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I just wanted to be graduated from the best university.

[00:06:18.68]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, that makes a lot of sense. [They laugh.] I understand from things that I've read that it was about at this time that you started making art in a serious way.

[00:06:29.30]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:06:29.63]

SUZANN CAMPBELL: Can you tell me about how you—I know we all make art as children, and it's in our lives, but at some point did you decide in a conscious way that you were going to be a serious artist?

[00:06:40.40]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, before I went to New York, I had very little contact with art. And then when I got there, I mean, it seemed to me that there were so many people interested in so many museums. And it just seemed like I thought for the first time the possibility of being an artist when I went to Columbia.

[00:07:11.16]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How did thinking about that possibility—can you remember how that made you feel to consider that prospect?

[00:07:17.09]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yes. I felt very happy to have had the inspiration. And so I registered for art work.

[00:07:28.73]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: At Columbia.

[00:07:29.99]

AGNES MARTIN: At Teachers College Columbia. Yeah, Columbia University is for boys. You have to go to the college. One of the colleges, you know.

[00:07:40.76]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:07:41.63]

AGNES MARTIN: The girls' college is Barnard. But my background made me go to the Teachers College.

[00:07:49.04]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: But you did take art courses there at the same time.

[00:07:51.77]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. All my art courses I took there.

[00:07:53.78]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did you have any memorable experiences in regards to either your fellow students, or any of your art teachers at that time?

[00:08:02.85]

AGNES MARTIN: No.

[00:08:03.42]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: When you got your degree from Columbia, it was a B.S. degree. My chronology that I put together indicates that you got that in 1942.

[00:08:15.46]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:08:15.78]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And what did you do after that?

[00:08:19.42]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I can't remember. I think I went down south, and taught in high school for a year.

[00:08:25.23]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So you did continue your work as a teacher even after you'd gotten your B.S. from Columbia. At some point, four years after that, in 1946, you came to the University of New Mexico. Can you tell me about how you decided to do that?

[00:08:42.08]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, but before that, I went back to Columbia.

[00:08:45.06]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh.

[00:08:45.96]

AGNES MARTIN: In 1952.

[00:08:48.24]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, now I'm way over here—I'm back here at 1946. And—

[00:08:53.49]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, that isn't when I went to—

[00:08:54.98]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: To the University of New Mexico. The first time—is it possible—

[00:09:00.12]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yes, I guess it is.

[00:09:01.11]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You got a scholarship, I believe.

[00:09:04.74]

AGNES MARTIN: No. No. I just came to the University of New Mexico because I heard it had a good art department. And so it was in the '40s.

[00:09:17.55]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah. Well, my records indicate that in—you came to the university. And I'm confused, Agnes, about—there was a notation in something that you wrote that you received a scholarship to go to the summer field school in Taos in 1947.

[00:09:34.10]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, no, miss. I didn't count that scholarship. Just a little—

[00:09:37.47]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It was just a little stipend?

[00:09:39.33]

AGNES MARTIN: And besides, it had—I had to work. It was a working scholarship.

[00:09:44.81]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, well, that now is not quite a scholarship, is it? [They laugh.] What did you do? What was the work they asked of you?

[00:09:50.64]

AGNES MARTIN: I was the matron.

[00:09:51.87]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: The matron? Well, that sounds very forbidding. [Laughs.]

[00:09:56.70]

AGNES MARTIN: The disciplinarian. I was the disciplinarian.

[00:09:59.64]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Were you in the dormitory at the school?

[00:10:02.64]

AGNES MARTIN: No. Well, I suppose you could say I was in a dormitory like the rest of them. We even went camping. And it was very interesting, the Field Summer School in Taos.

[00:10:18.63]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What made it interesting to you?

[00:10:20.40]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, we got up at five o'clock in the morning and went out and painted before breakfast and all that.

[00:10:26.94]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Who were your instructors? Do you recall?

[00:10:29.83]

AGNES MARTIN: Mr. Haas. I've forgotten his first name. Yeah, he was—we had a very good time, and had good results.

[00:10:42.30]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How did it feel to you to be a disciplinarian? Do you think you were successful?

[00:10:47.43]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. I am a good disciplinarian. [They laugh.] Sounds like bragging, but—

[00:10:54.90]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Not at all.

[00:10:57.00]

AGNES MARTIN: The best work I've done, I've done as a disciplinarian.

[00:11:01.23]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Both disciplining others and yourself?

[00:11:03.21]

AGNES MARTIN: But I don't believe in—I don't have to be a strict disciplinarian, you know. I think I inherited it from my mother. I'm just a natural disciplinarian.

[00:11:18.73]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Just a natural, born natural.

[00:11:20.29]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:11:20.70]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. And you felt that you had good results in terms of your art at—during the summer school in Taos.

[00:11:28.03]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:11:28.39]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And then what did you do after that? It looked—my little chronology, which is certainly not necessarily correct, shows that you lived in Albuquerque for a couple of years after that, and that somehow, you ended up in a University of New Mexico faculty show. Had you become a teacher at the university?

[00:11:49.60]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. I was elected to the faculty. I didn't apply, but they elected me one day anyway.

[00:11:59.57]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Sounds to me as though you got drafted. [Laughs.]

[00:12:01.64]

AGNES MARTIN: That's right. I was drafted into the faculty.

[00:12:04.52]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What position did they put you in?

[00:12:06.62]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I taught portrait painting, and creative design, and drawing.

[00:12:15.38]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did you enjoy that?

[00:12:16.85]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, I enjoyed it. But the salary was so low, I had to leave. And that's when I went downtown. And I taught criminal boys, and I was a disciplinarian again.

[00:12:28.88]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Again. What were you teaching these criminal boys?

[00:12:31.71]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I wasn't teaching them not to be criminals because that was impossible. [They laugh.] I was just keeping them out of jail.

[00:12:40.88]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Were you teaching them art?

[00:12:42.80]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, yes. And all—see, they couldn't read, so—they were 16 and 17. And they were half Spanish—and half of them were Spanish, and half were colored. And they couldn't read. What they were particularly talented in was dramatics.

[00:13:09.44]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, sort of a natural talent? You think a natural inclination?

[00:13:12.85]

AGNES MARTIN: But they were real criminals. They couldn't even play games because they just couldn't get along well enough.

[00:13:18.46]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Was this work for the city of Albuquerque, for the police department, or something like that?

[00:13:23.05]

AGNES MARTIN: No. It was for the school department.

[00:13:25.18]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:13:25.99]

AGNES MARTIN: They just wanted them out of the classrooms.

[00:13:29.53]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And you got the job. [Laughs.] That sounds sort of exciting.

[00:13:34.60]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it was very enlightening.

[00:13:37.57]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I can imagine. What inspired you to go back to Columbia University at that time?

[00:13:44.20]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I just wanted to finish, get my MFA.

[00:13:49.84]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What did an MFA represent to you?

[00:13:52.90]

AGNES MARTIN: The end. [Laughs.]

[00:13:53.59]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: The end. [Laughs.] So you were willing to go through the academic regimen, but you knew at some point, you'd be released to pursue your own ideas, I guess.

[00:14:05.42]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, no. I went to the universities because they had the setup. There was always a studio to work in. And usually in the universities, they let you work in the studios any time.

[00:14:26.00]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:14:27.60]

AGNES MARTIN: And so I would work at a job, and save my money, and go to a university when I took a year off to paint.

[00:14:39.46]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:14:39.76]

AGNES MARTIN: It was the quickest way to get to be painting.

[00:14:42.04]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It got you into a studio situation, and it got you among colleagues, and people thinking about the same ideas you must have been thinking about.

[00:14:50.20]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:14:50.65]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You got your MFA from Columbia in 1952.

[00:14:55.18]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:14:55.54]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And then did you take a teaching job after that?

[00:15:00.37]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I can't remember exactly what I did. But I've worked at a lot of things besides teaching.

[00:15:09.88]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: There was some indication that you'd gone out to the Eastern Oregon College in La Grande, Oregon for a while.

[00:15:15.55]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I did teach there a year or two.

[00:15:17.41]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah. What did you do besides teaching after you got your MFA from Columbia?

[00:15:23.86]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I can't remember what—you see, I would paint until I ran out of money, and then I would take a job. So I can tell you a few jobs that I took, if you want.

[00:15:42.20]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, one or two just to some—indication of your broad diversity. [Laughs.]

[00:15:48.64]

AGNES MARTIN: I was a playground director, and I was a tennis coach, and I was a baker's helper. And—

[00:15:57.88]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, my goodness.

[00:15:58.69]

AGNES MARTIN: I washed dishes. And whenever I was really starving, I always washed dishes because I got close to the food.

[00:16:07.84]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Gets you close to the food. Right. And everybody can wash a dish, I guess.

[00:16:13.24]

AGNES MARTIN: Of course, I've been a waitress, and all kinds of jobs. I've worked in childcare centers. I've worked even for mining companies, and logging companies. And I worked—I worked, as a matter of fact, for the Canadian government when I went into logging.

[00:16:37.24]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What did you do in the logging industry?

[00:16:39.79]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it was liaison. It's a pretty long story.

[00:16:46.53]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, let's save that one for our next visit. Let's get back to the art. A few years after you got your MFA from Columbia, it seems that you returned to Taos. Can you tell me why you decided to return to Taos?

[00:17:01.38]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I thought it was a good environment for painting. But it's a poor environment for getting work. It's very poor.

[00:17:13.86]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You mean for work to support your painting—regular jobs.

[00:17:18.03]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:17:19.14]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Nevertheless, you hung on there. And you did become involved.

[00:17:23.22]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. There, Betty Parsons came to visit, and Dorothy Brett, and I knew Dorothy Brett. So I called on them and asked her to look at my work. And she did. And she gave me—she bought enough of my paintings so that I could go to New York, and she promised to show my work.

[00:17:58.09]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is Betty Parsons the first art dealer to take serious interest in your work?

[00:18:03.49]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. The only one.

[00:18:05.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: The only one. Well, Betty Parsons, if you can have only one, I guess at that time, she was a pretty good one to have.

[00:18:12.64]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:18:13.09]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How was your relationship with Betty?

[00:18:15.70]

AGNES MARTIN: Well—I hate to tell the truth, because the truth is that she didn't pay very well. So I had to leave her in the end, although I was so indebted to her.

[00:18:34.41]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. Well, I know that you did show with her for many, many years. Oh, gosh. When did you have your first show with Betty, back in 1957, '58?

[00:18:45.75]

AGNES MARTIN: '59. And I left in '60.

[00:18:48.39]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: '60, '61. So—

[00:18:50.94]

AGNES MARTIN: '61. Yeah.

[00:18:52.44]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, let's go back to Taos because you did spend time there before New York in 1959. There are things that indicate that you showed at the Albuquerque Museum, and that you received a Wurlitzer grant in 1955.

[00:19:07.26]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, well, that Wurlitzer grant, I was the first one to receive a Wurlitzer grant. All I asked for was \$25 a month to buy supplies, and so they gave it to me right off.

[00:19:19.38]

SUZAN MARTIN: Well, congratulations. [They laugh.] You were the very first recipient. I guess, Helene Wurlitzer was still living at that time.

[00:19:28.80]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:19:29.28]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. She made personal choices?

[00:19:32.31]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. Well, yes. I think she did make personal choices of everybody.

[00:19:39.73]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I'm interested in which artists you become friends with and work with while you were in Taos.

[00:19:46.80]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I think I knew everybody in town.

[00:19:49.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Just about, huh?

[00:19:50.43]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. But I guess my best friends were Louis Ribak and his wife, Beatrice.

[00:19:58.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. Bea Mandelman?

[00:20:00.21]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, Bea Mandelman is her painting name. And I don't know. I just knew everybody in town.

[00:20:09.69]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I understand that sometime in the early '50s that you and Louis Ribak, and Bea Mandelman, and maybe Dorothy Brett, and maybe Clay Spohn started the Ruins Gallery.

[00:20:22.79]

AGNES MARTIN: No, Clay wasn't in it. And we didn't start it. I didn't—I wasn't in it at the beginning. I think Rogoway, a fellow called Rogoway started it.

[00:20:35.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Rogoway? I'm not familiar with that name. Is that an artist?

[00:20:41.92]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, he's an artist.

[00:20:47.26]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Tell me about the Ruins Gallery. Was it the only gallery in Taos at the time?

[00:20:54.52]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it was the best. [Laughs.]

[00:20:55.84]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: The best? What made it the best?

[00:20:59.11]

AGNES MARTIN: Because of the artists in it.

[00:21:01.57]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And what was it about the artists? How would you characterize the art that these people were making that made you feel a part, or at least sympathetic, to that group?

[00:21:15.05]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I wasn't very sympathetic. I mean, my art was different from theirs. I hesitated about going in the Ruins Gallery, but I finally went in.

[00:21:33.45]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why did you wait so long to begin exhibiting your work after you decided

to become an artist?

[00:21:39.68]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, for 20 years, I thought it wasn't good enough to put out into the world.

[00:21:48.89]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What was it about it that you felt was deficient?

[00:21:51.44]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, well, I'd painted all kinds of things in those 20 years, I tell you. But I never felt really satisfied with my work until after I went to New York and started the grid, which was absolutely abstract.

[00:22:10.25]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Tell me why you left Taos and went to New York at that time.

[00:22:14.36]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, Betty bought a painting so that I could afford to go.

[00:22:18.74]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It had been an ambition of yours, I guess, to return to New York.

[00:22:22.40]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, she wouldn't—she wouldn't show my paintings unless I went to New York and lived.

[00:22:27.11]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, really? So Betty enticed you away from Taos with a promise of a show and the purchase of the work.

[00:22:34.31]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:22:34.55]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: When you got—

[00:22:35.27]

AGNES MARTIN: Continued showing.

[00:22:36.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Continued showing. Yes. When you got to New York, where did you locate?

[00:22:44.06]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I lived on Coenties Slip. It's down below Wall Street. And I had a view of the river and everything. And I paid \$45 a month. [Laughs.]

[00:22:59.29]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Were you in a loft?

[00:23:00.52]

AGNES MARTIN: In a loft, uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:23:01.42]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. And were there other artists working there?

[00:23:04.30]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. Ellsworth Kelly was in the same building that I was in. He had the top floor with the skylights. And then just down the street was Indiana and Jack Youngerman. And around the corner on Pearl Street was Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, and Larry Poons. And then later came James Rosenquist. I think that's all.

[00:23:40.90]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That's a pretty potent list of artists. You were the only woman among them.

[00:23:47.26]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:23:47.71]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did that make any difference to you the way—did you perceive that you were treated any differently as an artist because of being the only woman among that group of men?

[00:23:55.99]

AGNES MARTIN: No, I don't think so.

[00:23:58.06]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Tell me about the grid. But before you do, I'm going to take this opportunity to flip this tape so I'm not going to have to stop you in the middle of that.

[END OF TRACK AAA_martin89_5393_m]

[00:00:03.08]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: This is tape one, side B. Agnes, tell me about the grid. The grid seems to have coincided with your arrival in New York.

[00:00:11.81]

AGNES MARTIN: No, not quite. I had one show. Well, it was sort of related to the grid, my first show, but it was not the grid. No, it took me two years. In 1960, oh, I guess it was just a year, I made my first grid. It was six by six feet. And so I kept that measurement. Now, I've been painting for 30 years, six by six feet.

[00:00:55.29]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: To the casual or uninitiated viewer of your work, it appears that it was a big jump, both philosophically and aesthetically.

[00:01:06.00]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. It's a big jump to jump into completely abstract work, like not abstracted from nature, but really abstract. Like, it describes the subtle emotions that are beyond words. Like, music, you know, represents our abstract emotions. All music is completely abstract. And so it's a—that's the big leap to get from objective work into abstract work.

[00:02:02.61]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I understand that, but what perplexes me is how you—what was it that inspired you to discontinue making the work that you had been making in Taos, that kind of work, and move to the grid, which visually is, at least to my way of looking at it, quite different than the work you had been doing in Taos. Can you trace that to any experience, or

—
[00:02:36.18]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, when I first made a grid, I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees [laughs], and then this grid came into my mind. And I thought represented innocence, and I still do. And so I painted it. And then I was satisfied. I thought, this is my vision.

[00:03:09.61]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You recognized—there was a recognition for you in what you had made that must have felt good to you?

[00:03:15.73]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:03:16.21]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: After all, 20 years of working and then more years of working and exhibiting but not ever quite being satisfied with your work.

[00:03:25.15]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, I finally was satisfied, yeah.

[00:03:27.22]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did you celebrate?

[00:03:29.40]

AGNES MARTIN: I can't remember. [Laughs.]

[00:03:31.60]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I'm going to give you an opportunity to answer people who've written about you, who persist in claiming that your grid work, work from that period to the present time is based on nature. One writer that I read said that you came to the grid after you came out onto a plain after being in the mountains, and were affected by the horizontal line.

[00:04:00.17]

AGNES MARTIN: Hmm.

[00:04:00.56]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Does that make any sense to you? Does that ring a bell with you?

[00:04:06.15]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I think when you come out of the mountains and onto a plain it's a pretty exciting experience. And I guess it is the expansion that is related to the grid, you know, the expansion of that experience. It's not the horizontal lines. It's that you see so far, you know?

[00:04:32.98]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. Yes. There is an implication of the infinite in that vista.

[00:04:38.08]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, that's it. It's about the infinite.

[00:04:40.81]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. I also read in the catalog from your show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts at the University of Pennsylvania that your work did have to do with

nature, and that—let me see if I can find the quote here. Oh, dear. I did want to—yes, Lawrence Alloway wrote in this catalog, that—and I'll quote him, "Both by inference from her imagery and from judging her titles we recognize the form of nature imagery. Martin uses images that evoke an iconography of wholes and totals whose natural analog is landscape as it expands into amplitude and infinite spaces." How would you respond to that statement?

[00:05:33.86]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, as a matter of fact, I have titled my paintings, you know, like when I thought of the innocence of tree, I called the painting "The Tree," when it was really about the innocence. And other titles that I have given "Desert Flower" and "White Flower," and it isn't really about a flower. It's really about a mental experience. It's like Solomon in the Bible. You know, in the Songs of Solomon?

[00:06:07.25]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:06:07.91]

AGNES MARTIN: That's really a mental experience, the Songs of Solomon, but everybody reads it as erotic, really. [Laughs.]

[00:06:23.15]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well—

[00:06:25.89]

AGNES MARTIN: It's a heart/mind experience.

[00:06:31.15]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I read an article by a man who was writing about your piece called "Grey Geese Falling," you may remember this—

[00:06:39.07]

AGNES MARTIN: "Gray Geese Descending."

[00:06:39.82]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: "Gray Geese Descending," excuse me. He said, "Well, there are no geese."

[00:06:46.09]

AGNES MARTIN: [Laughs.] There are no geese.

[00:06:47.26]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And you said, it wasn't about the grey goose descending so much as my feeling while watching the grey goose descending.

[00:06:57.26]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. We have certain feelings when birds descend. And that's what the painting is about. Yes.

[00:07:05.74]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What kind of feelings do you have when you see a bird descend?

[00:07:09.10]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, you have descending feelings. [Laughs.]

[00:07:11.77]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Not depressing feelings, though.

[00:07:13.14]

AGNES MARTIN: No.

[00:07:13.45]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Descending feelings.

[00:07:16.03]

AGNES MARTIN: Very thrilling. They're beyond words. That's what makes them abstract. My dealer encourages me to name the paintings. He claims that it helps the observer respond to them, so sometimes I name them.

[00:07:37.34]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Does it bother you if an observer or a viewer of your paintings doesn't see in them what you felt when you were making them?

[00:07:44.34]

AGNES MARTIN: No, it doesn't bother me at all. I just want—I want them to make their own response to the paintings.

[00:07:54.68]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What was the response to your paintings by your fellow artists in New York City? I know that when you arrived in New York City, Abstract Expressionism was probably the most talked about and the most dominant form of painting.

[00:08:12.35]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:08:12.80]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What did these artists think about and your work when they saw the grid?

[00:08:16.97]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't know, because the Abstract Expressionists, the only one I knew very well was Barnett Newman. And he liked my work very much. And he even hung some of my shows for me.

[00:08:31.29]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I've wanted to ask you in particular about your relationship with Barnett Newman. I see similarities in the inspiration between you and Barnett Newman. Is that a comparison that you find any validity in?

[00:08:45.32]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't think so.

[00:08:46.67]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why don't you think so?

[00:08:50.74]

AGNES MARTIN: [Laughs.] Well, I don't know what the comparison would be.

[00:08:57.56]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, I've always thought that Barnett Newman was an Abstract

Expressionist.

[00:09:01.92]

AGNES MARTIN: He is.

[00:09:02.48]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And I always felt that Barnett Newman dealt with space and time/space relationships, and also approached his canvas with the same respect you do, and applied as little to the surface of the canvas as necessary to make his aesthetic—

[00:09:20.32]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, but it's from the grid. He's far from—

[00:09:22.61]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, I'm not suggesting that you and he both painted the grid, but I'm suggesting that maybe at some level, there was a similar response to your—

[00:09:32.00]

AGNES MARTIN: We have the same approach to art?

[00:09:34.28]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Somehow. Not the same. I don't think that I've known anyone with the same approach to art that you have. Nor have I ever known of an artist who had the same approach to art that Barnett Newman had. But I felt that there was some kind of kinship in some of your work, and I was wondering if you'd felt any of that.

[00:09:56.29]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I like his work very much.

[00:10:00.95]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Barnett Newman was just about your age, I suppose.

[00:10:05.66]

AGNES MARTIN: No, he's—

[00:10:06.35]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: A little bit older.

[00:10:07.05]

AGNES MARTIN: —ten years older, I think.

[00:10:07.79]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Ten years older.

[00:10:09.30]

AGNES MARTIN: And so were—well, like Rothko was, too. I met Rothko one day, but he never saw my work.

[00:10:20.33]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: When you showed at Betty Parsons that 1960 or '59 exhibition, was that of work that you'd made in Taos, or was that the grid work?

[00:10:27.67]

AGNES MARTIN: No, I made it in New York.

[00:10:29.60]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. So she didn't exhibit those paintings that she bought in Taos?

[00:10:34.31]

AGNES MARTIN: No.

[00:10:34.79]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. So what she saw in Taos is not at all what she ended up exhibiting in New York?

[00:10:41.94]

AGNES MARTIN: No. No.

[00:10:42.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How did how did she feel about being confronted with an entirely different body of work than she had seen in Taos?

[00:10:50.39]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, she was very open-minded about artwork. You know Betty.

[00:10:54.14]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:10:55.70]

AGNES MARTIN: And she knew what she was doing. She knew what I did in New York was better.

[00:11:04.02]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Agnes, I know you didn't hang out with people in the way that we think of it in terms of socializing a lot, but which artists in New York did you consider yourself close to in a friendship kind of way?

[00:11:18.87]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I was closest to I guess Ellsworth Kelly, and all of them down there, the rest of them. I was pretty good friends with Indiana. And I was friends with all of them.

[00:11:41.86]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did you feel that being in that milieu with those artists working quite hard, as you were—did that help you as an artist? Did it reinforce your determination or goals?

[00:11:53.79]

AGNES MARTIN: No. No. As a matter of fact, when you say we didn't hang out, we were very good friends when we met. And you know, but when you finish a painting, you have to do something else to get it off your mind. And we all did the same thing. Like, we went to Prospect Park and went across on the ferry and things like that. But we went alone. We didn't go together.

[00:12:31.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is that right?

[00:12:33.45]

AGNES MARTIN: Because it's better not to get involved, and argue and talk, if you're really seriously moving ahead. Yeah, but I was interested that they did the same things I did. But—

[00:12:52.49]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You mean the way they live their lives?

[00:12:54.65]

AGNES MARTIN: Walked across Brooklyn Bridge.

[00:12:57.20]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is that right?

[00:12:58.04]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, we all did the same things, but we did it alone.

[00:13:01.01]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You didn't know? They were just—these were spontaneous occurrences happening at the same time.

[00:13:06.08]

AGNES MARTIN: No, it's just the best thing to do when you stop painting. It's the best thing in the world to do is cross Brooklyn Bridge.

[00:13:11.80]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, I think that's a wonderful observation. [They laugh.] Which of those artists or other artists in New York, which of their work did you particularly respect?

[00:13:22.39]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I don't like to say that, I guess.

[00:13:25.55]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Okay. Who did you show with? Did you ever show with other artists?

[00:13:38.57]

AGNES MARTIN: No.

[00:13:39.80]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How did you come to show—begin your relationship with the Robert Elkton Gallery?

[00:13:44.84]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, well, when I left Betty Parsons, I went to Castelli. And he said that he's filled up, you know, had all the artists, but that there was this Robert Elkton had opened a gallery, and it was brand new, and he didn't have any artists. And so I thought I'd go someplace where there was no competition.

[00:14:09.17]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Sounds like a good plan. It seems that your relationship worked out fairly well.

[00:14:14.06]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:14:14.51]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You exhibited with him for about five or six years.

[00:14:17.07]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, I had very successful exhibits with Elkon.

[00:14:21.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Who were some of the other artists that helped him at that time when he was just opening the gallery, do you recall?

[00:14:28.19]

AGNES MARTIN: Gosh, I don't. It was Tony DeLap.

[00:14:33.24]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, really?

[00:14:33.90]

AGNES MARTIN: And let's see. He also had a lot of paintings that he had bought in Europe. Like, he could have a show of Magritte, he had so many Magrittes.

[00:14:47.48]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Really?

[00:14:47.96]

AGNES MARTIN: And Dubuffet. And—

[00:14:50.84]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So he was quite an art—serious art lover?

[00:14:53.48]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yeah.

[00:14:53.78]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah.

[00:14:55.72]

AGNES MARTIN: And Sam Francis showed with us.

[00:15:07.09]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh. Did Jack Youngerman show with you?

[00:15:09.10]

AGNES MARTIN: No. I can't remember who else. I can't remember their names.

[00:15:17.36]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, that's something that can be looked up in the history books. That's not important. I want to ask you about the comparison that people, from time to time, make between your work, the grid work, the grid-inspired work and Jackson Pollock's all-over painting.

[00:15:33.40]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, they don't make any.

[00:15:34.75]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, people do make that comparison. And I was just interested in what your response to that would be other than I wish I had a video camera to register the smile on your face right now. [They laugh.] Someone wrote that you took Jackson Pollock's all-over painting and ordered it, made it orderly.

[00:15:53.76]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:15:54.43]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And I was curious about how you felt about that.

[00:15:58.90]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't see any relation. His is like all this wonderful color and relationships, not color relationships. He'd have checked anybody saying that about his painting. But you know, such a free way of going at it, dripping it.

[00:16:23.48]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:16:24.29]

AGNES MARTIN: And all about color and life.

[00:16:26.48]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:16:27.98]

AGNES MARTIN: And I really think that some Pollocks are ecstatic, you know?

[00:16:34.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I do, too.

[00:16:35.59]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:16:37.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I think some Agnes Martins are ecstatic also. [Agnes laughs.] It's interesting how we arrive at the same point coming different paths.

[00:16:44.37]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:16:48.09]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You don't consider yourself an Abstract Expressionist?

[00:16:51.03]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, I do.

[00:16:51.72]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You do? I'm glad to hear that. I read that you didn't. I was surprised that something came along and allowed you to be perceived for a while in New York as a minimalist.

[00:17:02.64]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:17:03.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And I know you did show at one time with, what, nine other artists at the Virginia Dwan Gallery?

[00:17:07.66]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, that's it.

[00:17:08.37]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And I suppose it was that experience?

[00:17:10.59]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, that's what—they were all minimalists, and they asked me to show with them. But that was before the word was invented, you know? And I liked all their work, and so I showed with them. And then when they started calling them minimalists, they called me a minimalist too.

[00:17:33.04]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And what did you think about that?

[00:17:34.96]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I let it go. But I didn't protest. But I consider myself an Abstract Expressionist.

[00:17:46.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I'm not so sure that minimalist is a movement in art that was ever realized. It seemed like such a lofty ideal goal. And I just wonder if you think that any of those artists who did call themselves minimalists achieved the goals that they'd set out for themselves.

[00:18:04.78]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yes. The truth was that what they were was non-subjectivists. That they wanted to not make any personal decisions in their work. And they were idealists, you know, like the Greeks. The goal was perfection, such as we have in our minds. Like the Greeks knew that we couldn't make a perfect circle, but in our minds, we can see a perfect circle. And so they say their perfection is in the mind. But the minimalists wanted it to be impersonal.

[00:18:59.00]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:19:00.29]

AGNES MARTIN: You know? And they thought the more impersonal it is, the more effective it, which is logical.

[00:19:13.64]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Do you feel that that would describe your work?

[00:19:17.66]

AGNES MARTIN: No.

[00:19:18.83]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What's the difference between you and those minimalists, those people who came to be called minimalists?

[00:19:26.45]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, mine is more expressive, you know? Like, I don't know exactly what the expression is, but it has more like human expression. That's why I say that I'm an expressionist.

[00:19:42.79]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. The Greek reference interests me because your work, while it's not mathematically based, it seems that through some device, maybe perhaps intuitively or some other means, you arrive at the Golden mean in some of your works, the two to three ratio or the three to four ratio.

[00:20:01.21]

AGNES MARTIN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:20:01.97]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How do you think that happens? How did that happen in your work?

[00:20:06.77]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I have a vision in my mind about what I'm going to paint before I start. And that's what the vision was. And that's what I paint.

[00:20:20.44]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So before you approach your canvas, you have in your mind what the canvas will look like, more or less, when it's finished?

[00:20:26.76]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. And when I make a mistake, I make a mistake in scale.

[00:20:31.28]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is that right?

[00:20:32.45]

AGNES MARTIN: Then it's no good at all unless I get it exactly to scale. See, I have a little picture in my mind. And I have to make it into a six-foot canvas. And so I often make mistakes in scale.

[00:20:45.26]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Tell me how you arrived at the six-foot canvas size.

[00:20:49.28]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I just think it's a good size because it's as big as everybody, you know? You can just feel like stepping into it. It has to do with being full-size, the human body.

[00:21:07.70]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That's also a Greek ideal. So much Greek art and including the golden rectangle or the golden mean took into account the human figure as a point of departure. People have told me that if you put your finger on your belly button, that from your belly up is—

[00:21:28.34]

AGNES MARTIN: The same as down?

[00:21:29.27]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: No, it's two to three. That you have the golden mean.

[00:21:32.68]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh.

[00:21:33.14]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That below your belly button to your feet is the three. And from your belly button to the top is the two.

[00:21:40.49]

AGNES MARTIN: Huh.

[00:21:40.82]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And that the Greeks derived at the golden rectangle or the golden section by that perspective, that relationship that they find in nature. So it seems that you arrived at the same conclusion with the same kind of intuitive response. That must've been quite a departure from the size of paintings you were making before.

[00:22:05.81]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I made them all sizes before.

[00:22:10.01]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did you ever work that large before when you were in Taos, for instance?

[00:22:13.94]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, no. Well, I made some that were four by eight.

[00:22:19.87]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Ah-ha.

[00:22:21.08]

AGNES MARTIN: But it's not significant.

[00:22:28.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You've been quoted as saying, "Painting is not about ideas or personal emotion. When I was painting in New York, I was not so clear about that. Now, I'm very clear that the object is freedom." What kind of freedom are you talking about when you say that?

[00:22:45.19]

AGNES MARTIN: Did I say that?

[00:22:46.69]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: If you didn't say it, we don't have to talk about it. It seemed to me that painting—the object of painting as freedom was an intriguing comment, but not one that I understood completely.

[00:23:06.61]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't understand it, either. And I don't think I ever said it. I'm often misquoted.

[00:23:10.99]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes, I know you are. That's one of the reasons that we're doing this tape today [laughs] to correct the record to the extent we can.

[00:23:18.01]

AGNES MARTIN: The object of painting is to represent concretely our most subtle emotions. That's my own definition.

[00:23:25.84]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And that seems like a pretty complete definition to me. I'm curious about why, after a decade in New York City, you decided to leave New York City. I've read many reasons—partial reasons, including the fact that your loft was torn down?

[00:23:45.73]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:23:48.76]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why did you leave New York?

[00:23:50.32]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I thought I would experiment in solitude, you know, and simple living.

[00:24:03.48]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Had New York become—well, it's a silly question—

[END OF TRACK AAA_martin89_5394_m]

[00:00:02.96]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: This is an interview with Agnes Martin on May 15, 1989, tape two, side A. Yes.

[00:00:11.24]

AGNES MARTIN: There are a lot of people that withdraw from society, you know, as an experiment.

[00:00:17.03]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:00:18.20]

AGNES MARTIN: So I thought I would withdraw and see how enlightening it would be. When I found out that it's not enlightening, I think that what you're supposed to do is stay in the midst of life.

[00:00:35.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How did you come to that conclusion? I'm asking you to skip over an awful lot of living that you did in this—So you left New York. Was it your goal to go to Cuba [New Mexico], or were you just looking for an isolated place?

[00:00:56.86]

AGNES MARTIN: No, I didn't know where to go, and so I drove around for a long time. But I finally had a vision of an adobe brick, so I thought that must be I was supposed to go to New Mexico.

[00:01:10.96]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Where you knew adobe bricks existed. Yeah.

[00:01:14.40]

AGNES MARTIN: So in Cuba I asked a man if he knew of anybody that had some land outside of town up on a mesa that had a spring of water. And he said his wife had such land.

[00:01:34.28]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Really?

[00:01:35.00]

AGNES MARTIN: And so I leased the land from his wife.

[00:01:37.73]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Really?

[00:01:39.32]

AGNES MARTIN: Built a lot of buildings up there.

[00:01:43.61]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Tell me about you left New York, did you have a truck that you moved your things in?

[00:01:48.74]

AGNES MARTIN: No. We had a pickup and camper.

[00:01:51.41]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Oh, really? And did you wander around the country?

[00:01:54.92]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yes, I drove all over this continent. [Laughs.] No, I didn't drive in the South, but I drove all in the West and up in Canada, and couldn't make up my mind where to stop.

[00:02:12.40]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How long did that take you?

[00:02:13.93]

AGNES MARTIN: Two years.

[00:02:15.07]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Of driving around?

[00:02:16.33]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, about a year and a half of driving.

[00:02:18.22]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Until you finally got to Cuba and found this woman who had your mesa for lease.

[00:02:23.24]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:02:24.43]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Tell me about the buildings.

[00:02:27.82]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I just am interested in building with Native materials, you know? Adobe bricks and these logs they call vigas.

[00:02:40.11]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:02:41.47]

AGNES MARTIN: And I built some log houses, too. Out of Cuba, I built a very big log studio.

[00:02:54.76]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: When you say you built them, did you do these alone, or did you employ —

[00:02:57.81]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, I built them.

[00:02:58.06]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: —local people to help you lift the other end of the viga? [They laugh.]

[00:03:02.17]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I built them by myself because I lived so far away that by the time anybody got there [laughs], they'd have to go home.

[00:03:11.20]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, I'm interested in the materials. How did you acquire the materials for building?

[00:03:16.48]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, they were right there. I mean—

[00:03:18.11]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did you chop down the trees?

[00:03:19.78]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. I didn't chop them. I had a—

[00:03:22.09]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Chainsawed the trees?

[00:03:23.53]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:03:25.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did you make the bricks, the adobe bricks?

[00:03:27.21]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, I made bricks.

[00:03:28.15]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did you have a brick form that you used?

[00:03:30.43]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:03:31.75]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How long a building process was this?

[00:03:35.83]

AGNES MARTIN: It was years. I built for years.

[00:03:40.37]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What were your building goals?

[00:03:43.61]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I didn't have any goals. I got up every morning and built.

[00:03:47.56]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Just built. I'm interested in what happened to your painting after you left New York City. Did you paint while you were on the road?

[00:03:55.59]

AGNES MARTIN: No, I didn't paint. I didn't paint for about four and a half years. But when I was up in the mesa out of Cuba, a man came, Robert Feldman, and asked me to make some prints. He wanted me to go to Germany and make prints. So I did. And then I got started the art works. And then I started to paint and built a studio. Started to paint again.

[00:04:26.27]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I understand that when you were in Cuba you wrote.

[00:04:29.75]

AGNES MARTIN: My journal.

[00:04:30.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Your journal. And people have called you a poet.

[00:04:33.45]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yes, I know they have. [Laughs.] I certainly haven't written many poems, but they were always quoted.

[00:04:39.47]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. Yes. Did you intend not to paint? Was that a conscious decision, or was that a circumstantial situation?

[00:04:50.34]

AGNES MARTIN: I thought I'd given it up.

[00:04:53.06]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Forever?

[00:04:53.78]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:04:55.04]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: One writer that I read said that when you completed that—I'll quote the writer—said that you had "completed a period of masterful output at the beginning of 1967 when you left New York City and stopped painting." Were you aware that the art world considered you to have spent a decade in New York making masterful paintings?

[00:05:18.14]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yes, I thought I had, too.

[00:05:19.82]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And did you think that—how did you—

[00:05:23.06]

AGNES MARTIN: I thought I'd already made them, so I could leave.

[00:05:25.55]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You thought that you had completed your task?

[00:05:28.22]

AGNES MARTIN: [Laughs.] Yeah.

[00:05:28.88]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You'd arrived at the pinnacle? [Laughs.]

[00:05:31.39]

AGNES MARTIN: Not the pinnacle. There isn't any pinnacle. The first one is just as good as the last.

[00:05:36.59]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How do you describe a masterful painting? What is to you a masterful painting?

[00:05:41.27]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, it's just one that gets the response that you want it to get.

[00:05:46.22]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So you had ten good years of painting things that people responded to in a way you felt was appropriate?

[00:05:52.05]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. I even sold out at the opening about four or five times.

[00:06:01.78]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It's hard for some people to quit when they're at the height of their success or their—

[00:06:05.90]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, that's the best place to quit. [Laughs.]

[00:06:07.78]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: May be the best, but it's sure hard for some people to give that up. You probably were making—had a good income by then. You had a certain amount of financial security and stability. You were making work that pleased you and others.

[00:06:20.68]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. As a matter of fact, I was sort of driven away by the lust of the young painters and wanting to be so successful. And I thought I'll just let—go away and let them be successful in my place.

[00:06:36.05]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Make room for them?

[00:06:38.51]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:06:38.90]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That's a very interesting idea.

[00:06:42.08]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, they really are pretty hard to bear. [They laugh.]

[00:06:49.52]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, a lot of artists who've developed into their mature style of expression in New York City have left New York City soon after becoming—reaching that point. And I suppose that similar motives have driven them away too. The pressures of life there can be intense. How did you occupy yourself in Cuba? Did you just simply build?

[00:07:16.13]

AGNES MARTIN: Building buildings.

[00:07:17.33]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Building buildings. What happened to those buildings?

[00:07:20.43]

AGNES MARTIN: They're still there.

[00:07:21.41]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Do you ever go back there?

[00:07:24.30]

AGNES MARTIN: No, I lost them in a real estate deal. After I built all these buildings, this woman's brother came and said that I was on his land.

[00:07:35.67]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:07:36.42]

AGNES MARTIN: And they surveyed it, and I was on his land.

[00:07:39.39]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:07:40.32]

AGNES MARTIN: And he wanted it.

[00:07:42.30]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How did you feel when you were forced off that land?

[00:07:46.15]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I felt like I got rid of a lot of stuff I didn't want. [They laugh.]

[00:07:54.35]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Where did you go after that?

[00:07:56.02]

AGNES MARTIN: Then I came here.

[00:07:57.11]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You came here to Galisteo, to this land that we're sitting on right now?

[00:08:00.97]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. Yes.

[00:08:02.00]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Was there anything on this land when you came?

[00:08:04.33]

AGNES MARTIN: No. No, I built these buildings out here.

[00:08:07.52]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What are the buildings? We're sitting in your home.

[00:08:10.91]

AGNES MARTIN: I didn't build this house.

[00:08:12.47]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:08:13.34]

AGNES MARTIN: But the rest of those buildings out there.

[00:08:15.60]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You did? The studio?

[00:08:18.80]

AGNES MARTIN: And the outdoor work area and storage. And then guest house. I have a guest house out there.

[00:08:30.74]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. Do you fill that guest house very often?

[00:08:34.76]

AGNES MARTIN: No, I've let it go to wreck and ruin.

[00:08:39.35]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What did you hope to accomplish through your writing?

[00:08:42.14]

AGNES MARTIN: My writing?

[00:08:43.19]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:08:43.91]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, I was just staying sane. I wrote a journal.

[00:08:47.88]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It was intended for you?

[00:08:49.69]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. I think anybody that goes to live in a solitary and simple life, they would naturally write a journal. Keep you company.

[00:09:04.36]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why did you decide to publish your work, your writing?

[00:09:07.95]

AGNES MARTIN: Publish? I didn't decide to publish. But you mean, that—

[00:09:15.93]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, your writings, your entries from your journal and your poetry and other writings do appear in magazines and articles.

[00:09:27.04]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I had a retrospective show in Philadelphia at the Museum of the Institute of Contemporary Art. And there was a very energetic girl that did the catalog, a friend of mine, and she dug up all this—my notes and my—oh, everything.

[00:09:53.70]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What was that woman's name? Ann Wilson?

[00:09:55.68]

AGNES MARTIN: Ann Wilson, yeah. And she filed them in there at the university. And then the university wanted to publish the speech that I made at that time. And the others have been published, like I had a retrospective in England at the Hayward. And they published another speech that I made. I didn't make it at the Hayward.

[00:10:25.70]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Right.

[00:10:29.76]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't know. And a lot of people have referred to the file of information at the University of Pennsylvania.

[00:10:37.77]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes, I'm aware that there is a big file there. I've not seen it, but I know that it exists there. How do you feel about seeing your work in print?

[00:10:47.31]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, I don't know.

[00:10:52.57]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You seem to continue on.

[00:10:55.97]

AGNES MARTIN: I wouldn't want to publish all of my speeches. After a while, I get so I don't like them so well.

[00:11:04.90]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah. Do you feel that way about your paintings and your drawings?

[00:11:07.93]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, no. I don't. I feel that I always like my paintings.

[00:11:12.79]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Do you feel that your writing and your visual art are on the same plane at all? What is the relationship of your writing to your visual art?

[00:11:22.57]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, the visual art goes beyond words, so you see, there's no relation.

[00:11:27.04]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Way beyond. [Laughs.] Well, there are people who feel that poetry, especially, is a very high form of art.

[00:11:37.28]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. They try to go beyond words in poetry, with words.

[00:11:40.81]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, I don't know how that's possible, myself. That stymies me.

[00:11:44.96]

AGNES MARTIN: By the use of metaphor, and meter and rhyme, they try to move us into a miracle mood that goes beyond words.

[00:12:03.77]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Does it ever succeed for you?

[00:12:05.81]

AGNES MARTIN: Poetry?

[00:12:06.32]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:12:06.61]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yes, I like it.

[00:12:07.76]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes. I read somewhere that someone asked you about the grid system and why you used it. And rather than answering that question directly, you responded that sometimes people react negatively to your paintings. And this was back in the late '60s. And you said that some of your paintings had even been destroyed by people viewing them.

[00:12:31.22]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yeah. Vandalism.

[00:12:32.30]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What happened?

[00:12:32.75]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't think vandalism means that they don't like the painting.

[00:12:38.28]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What do you think it means?

[00:12:39.53]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, vandals are just vandals. They destroy everything. You know?

[00:12:45.04]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I'd heard that somebody had taken the liberty of coloring in some of your rectangles in some of your paintings?

[00:12:51.16]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. And like somebody took an ice cream cone and went around and round on one of my paintings. And somebody else opened a fountain pen right it.

[00:13:06.80]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How did that make you feel?

[00:13:08.12]

AGNES MARTIN: And then there was one that was destroyed with a green crayon.

[00:13:11.00]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Ooh.

[00:13:13.88]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it just makes you mad at vandals.

[00:13:21.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, that seems a pretty universal response.

[00:13:23.97]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, in Germany, there was a nationalistic group that threw garbage at the paintings that were in the Documenta Five. And I lost one painting there.

[00:13:39.15]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That sounds political rather than aimless vandalism.

[00:13:42.24]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:13:42.75]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah. Well, I don't know; the French people say they don't care what you call them, as long as you pronounce their name right, but it seems that even vandals were drawn to your work in some way. In other words, it was not a neutral reaction to your work.

[00:14:03.55]

AGNES MARTIN: No.

[00:14:04.96]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I think it's interesting that you were able to take that with the equanimity that you did. I would be very—I would feel very—

[00:14:13.18]

AGNES MARTIN: I no longer owned the paintings. [Suzan laughs.] They belong to somebody else.

[00:14:19.13]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Do you feel that? Do you feel that truly, Agnes, that when you sell a painting it's no longer yours?

[00:14:24.12]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, yes, I feel it's theirs, and they have to look after it.

[00:14:27.91]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. Well, I think there's a valid point there. Someone wrote that your building project in Cuba was inspired by some idea that you had to build a garden or to build an enclosed garden.

[00:14:43.44]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, yes, I was going to build a garden, and it had nothing in it but stones. I mean, like gravel, different kinds of gravel and stones. Nothing growing.

[00:14:53.90]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah.

[00:14:54.80]

AGNES MARTIN: And there's some very interesting kinds of ashes and things of this state. And then I was going to put a wall around it and everything. And I hoped it would be a restful experience for anybody to see it, but I didn't build it because of vandalism.

[00:15:24.67]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: There was vandalism out there on that isolated mesa?

[00:15:27.52]

AGNES MARTIN: No, but you know, just about every monument and things that people make, there's vandalism.

[00:15:35.59]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That's true. That's true.

[00:15:37.36]

AGNES MARTIN: And it would have been a tremendous amount—take a tremendous amount of effort to build it. And when I thought of vandalism, it took the starch out of me.

[00:15:48.40]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah, I can imagine so. That must have happened close to the time that these paintings had been vandalized.

[00:15:53.98]

AGNES MARTIN: Everybody was making earthworks at that time, Smithson and Heizer and I don't know. I can't remember their names.

[00:16:07.77]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, they're—the Donald Judd project in Marfa, a lot of the building that he's done down there has been similar to what you're describing your intention for this garden was. What do you think—why do you think so many artists were interested in earthworks at that time?

[00:16:26.43]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't know. I don't know. One of them thought of it, and the rest of us thought of it after them, I guess.

[00:16:33.39]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, you're not going to tell me that you were influenced by Smithson, are you? [They laugh.]

[00:16:38.16]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, just the idea of earthwork.

[00:16:44.03]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Tell me about the Willie stories. Where did they come from, and what do they mean to you?

[00:16:49.80]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, well, they're just—I guess they're fables, aren't they?

[00:16:54.71]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I guess. I've read them. I've read two that were in your catalog from 1973.

[00:17:01.58]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. One of them, there's only half of it there.

[00:17:04.04]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:17:04.61]

AGNES MARTIN: Half the story. That's just—those stories are what Ann Wilson remembered from what I told her.

[00:17:11.36]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:17:12.17]

AGNES MARTIN: She didn't have any—I never wrote them down.

[00:17:17.18]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why would a person construct a fable? Why did you construct the fables?

[00:17:21.95]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, I don't know. They just come to you all at once.

[00:17:24.97]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see.

[00:17:25.55]

AGNES MARTIN: When I—I hadn't written any of them down, but I've thought of lots of fables.

[00:17:31.28]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I think they're wonderful. They're wonderful stories. The story—

[00:17:34.76]

AGNES MARTIN: But I haven't thought of lately.

[00:17:36.77]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: —about the parable of the equal hearts.

[00:17:38.99]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah. I haven't thought of any lately.

[00:17:44.72]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I thought the parable of the equal hearts was especially sweet. [They laugh.] You don't remember why those came to mind?

[00:17:59.21]

AGNES MARTIN: No. Or any of the fables at that time.

[00:18:01.22]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Or any of them? After you moved to Galisteo, it seems to me that your paintings ceased to rely so obviously upon the grid and became more striped, and also began to contain color.

[00:18:16.74]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:18:17.48]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And I was interested in that. That seems like a very dramatic change to me in your work.

[00:18:23.76]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, that changed up on the mesa. I painted colored paintings up there.

[00:18:30.56]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Did it seem pretty radical?

[00:18:32.66]

AGNES MARTIN: Some of them were horizontal, and some of them were vertical. Well, I don't know. We don't get to choose what we paint, you know? You just have to do it.

[00:18:44.83]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Right.

[00:18:45.38]

AGNES MARTIN: It comes into your mind, and you just have to do it, so.

[00:18:49.78]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I think everybody who's involved with art here in New Mexico, many artists and most curators, and people who love art and collect, feel that New Mexico has a specific influence on every artist who comes here in one way or another. And I want to know how you feel New Mexico influenced you as an artist, if at all.

[00:19:14.91]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I don't think so, not when you're an abstract artist. You wouldn't—even if it did, you wouldn't admit it. [They laugh.]

[00:19:28.18]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I was interested in the stripes, because as I recall, it was about that time you started painting—first of all, it seems that you got away from symmetry a little bit. And it seems that you started painting stripes, both horizontal stripes and then vertical stripes as well.

[00:19:44.90]

AGNES MARTIN: They're pretty symmetrical.

[00:19:46.25]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Pretty symmetrical, yes, but do you recognize deviation from the symmetry?

[00:19:53.90]

AGNES MARTIN: Just barely.

[00:19:54.74]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Just barely? That was, again—

[00:19:59.07]

AGNES MARTIN: Just a little off beat.

[00:20:00.26]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah. Was that something that you arrived at through thought processes or through emotional response?

[00:20:07.23]

AGNES MARTIN: No. No, I just paint whatever comes into my mind to do. The same with the fables. They just come into your mind absolutely from beginning to end. You know, you don't write them like people write, I don't think—it just comes instantaneously, the whole thing.

[00:20:36.95]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: If that happens, I guess you're left in the position of looking at the work you've created and responding to it along with the rest of us.

[00:20:46.23]

AGNES MARTIN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:20:47.08]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You chose to draw rectangles within a square. And you've been quoted many, many times—well, many writers have referred to this same quote, and whether the initial quote actually ever was spoken by you or not, we can discuss. But it's been said that you felt that by putting a rectangle within a square that you had destroyed the power of the square.

[00:21:13.01]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, rectangles, not one rectangle.

[00:21:16.31]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes, rectangles in square.

[00:21:18.38]

AGNES MARTIN: See, my grids are—they're not squares. Although the lines go up and down and across the resulting little forms are not squares. They're rectangles.

[00:21:35.52]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:21:37.29]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, I thought that covering the square canvas, which was six by six feet with rectangles destroyed the power of the square. Yeah, I did that. I did say that.

[00:21:48.18]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Tell me what the power of the square is.

[00:21:50.88]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, you know what a square makes you feel like.

[00:21:53.31]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What?

[00:21:54.03]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it's more aggressive than a rectangle, I can tell you that.

[00:22:00.92]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why is that?

[00:22:02.78]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, why do they call people "squares" when they're— [Suzan laughs.]

[00:22:11.44]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: If we can't reproduce a perfect circle, can we reproduce a perfect square?

[00:22:17.14]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't think we can reproduce a perfect anything. And you know, think about nature. Even your left hand and your right hand are not the same. There's no repetition. No.

[00:22:36.04]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why would you be interested in destroying the power of the square?

[00:22:39.94]

AGNES MARTIN: Because it's aggressive.

[00:22:41.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So you were—

[00:22:42.40]

AGNES MARTIN: It's much softer when it's covered with rectangles.

[00:22:43.36]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, destroying—

[00:22:44.92]

AGNES MARTIN: Rectangles is a soft experience.

[00:22:47.39]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. "Destroying" to me is an aggressive word. Maybe "neutralizing" is a less aggressive word. If you neutralize someone's aggression or the aggression of the square, but "destroy" to me sounds very aggressive to me.

[00:23:04.33]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it's destroying a strong thing, you know? So it makes it—the result is a milder thing.

[00:23:20.24]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I'd like to talk about perfection, because perfection is a concept that floats around you and your work.

[00:23:26.51]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:23:27.30]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And I know that you know it's elusive. And I'd like you, if you could—

[00:23:34.01]

AGNES MARTIN: Impossible to achieve.

[00:23:37.46]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why are you as an artist compelled by the notion of perfection?

[00:23:41.96]

AGNES MARTIN: Isn't a notion. [Laughs.] In our minds, we have this awareness of perfection that makes it—all our choices are made with the use of this perfection in our minds. All our choices. I mean, if it's bringing up children, or anything, you know, we try to do the best thing. And we do it as close as possible to the perfection that we are aware of in our minds.

[00:24:23.80]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How are perfection and nature different?

[00:24:27.58]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, perfection in nature—you mean beauty?

[00:24:30.76]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: No, I don't. I mean—

[00:24:32.87]

AGNES MARTIN: There isn't any perfection in nature. It is beauty.

[00:24:36.55]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How are perfection and beauty different?

[00:24:38.95]

AGNES MARTIN: There isn't any difference, but the nature is an expression of the perfection in our minds. I mean, when we see beauty, we see it with this awareness of perfection in the mind. And so that—and that it's really the miracle of existence that we are able to recognize perfection in beauty.

[00:25:16.31]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It is a miracle, isn't it?

[00:25:18.55]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

[00:25:21.45]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I'm going to turn this tape over, Agnes.

[END OF TRACK AAA_martin89_5395_m]

[00:00:04.30]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: This is tape 2, side B. How do you explain—or can you explain how it is that you as a painter find contentment as a painter, pursuing perfection when you know that you're never going to be able to achieve perfection?

[00:00:25.36]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, you get to the place in a painting where you say—if you're an artist, you know when you come to the end. It says, "This is it." That's all you can do. And the fantastic thing is that other people respond the same way. Really, people do respond the same as the artist.

[00:00:59.09]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It's true that a viewer does know when the piece has been finished properly. I've never understood that—how that happens.

[00:01:12.00]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, they know. And just like—the response to music is about ten times the response to visual arts. People make a fantastic response to music. Every note affects them. But they're not aware of the fact that it is an emotional response beyond words. They just respond, and that's it. [Laughs.]

[00:01:42.82]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why is it harder for people to respond at that level to visual art?

[00:01:47.32]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, they respond to visual arts. But we don't—human beings do not make the visual response that they make to aural. Our aural response is much keener than visual.

[00:02:03.75]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It does seem to go very deep.

[00:02:06.46]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. I guess it's very serious to become deaf.

[00:02:12.43]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I wouldn't want to. I'd find it a tremendous loss. I'm interested in your films. They're not obviously part of your body of work. Why did you get into making films?

[00:02:26.10]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, at first I made a film to protest the commercial films being negative, that they're always about deception and deceit and violence. And I decided to make a film that was about happiness and beauty and innocence and see if people would respond to it. And it was just a silent film about a little boy that climbed a mountain and saw beautiful things. But he did get to the top, though. [Laughs.]

[00:03:01.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: He did reach the pinnacle. [They laugh.] Did people respond to the film the way you'd hoped they would?

[00:03:08.60]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, yes, I think so. A woman sitting next to me said, I just feel like running outside [laughs] into nature.

[00:03:19.29]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Into nature? What was it like being a filmmaker?

[00:03:23.96]

AGNES MARTIN: Oh, I'm very glad I made them. My goodness, it was such a marvelous experience. And for three months, I just went and photographed the most beautiful things I could find in three states—in California and Colorado and New Mexico. And then I enjoyed going with this little boy around up in the mountains.

[00:03:49.64]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Was Gabriel really his name?

[00:03:51.80]

AGNES MARTIN: No. [Laughs.] No, that was the innocence part. He was an angel.

[00:03:57.41]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah. Where did you find the little boy?

[00:03:59.10]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, he was a little hippie boy that hadn't had enough to eat. So he was way undersize. He was really fourteen years old. And he only took size eight or something like that—nine.

[00:04:11.57]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I thought he was a lot younger than that. Did he live in Cuba?

[00:04:15.67]

AGNES MARTIN: Did you see the film?

[00:04:16.74]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah. Did he live in Cuba?

[00:04:19.92]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:04:22.10]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What did he think of making the film?

[00:04:24.85]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, he was a rather odd little boy.

[00:04:28.07]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. What do you do when a painting or a drawing or any other art that you make isn't successful?

[00:04:39.10]

AGNES MARTIN: When it isn't successful? I throw it away. And I've thrown away a tremendous lot. Well, sometimes I paint over them, and—not sometimes. I paint over them again and again until I get to the place where I feel that I am moving ahead. You know, you feel as though you've got a grip. Then I stop painting over them. Yeah, it's very important to throw them away because they hold you back psychologically. It doesn't do to keep paintings that have some good in them, or sort of good, but not the real thing.

[00:05:23.59]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is it hard for you to do that?

[00:05:26.53]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it's expensive. [They laugh.]

[00:05:31.63]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I guess with drawings, there is no reworking.

[00:05:34.96]

AGNES MARTIN: No. No, I just throw drawings away.

[00:05:41.92]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You once said that art is nothing more than an attempt to capture inspiration. Did you say that?

[00:05:49.66]

AGNES MARTIN: I can't remember saying that.

[00:05:51.11]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How do you feel about this notion of inspiration? What is inspiration?

[00:05:55.46]

AGNES MARTIN: Inspiration is—well, it's our guide to life. People think that you're only inspired when you paint. But the truth is you're inspired with everything you do. Your mind tells you, you know, do the dishes, even, or—it tells you everything. But people think that they think of everything themselves, that they think of it intellectually. The intellect regards evidence and comes to a conclusion or a decision. But we go through life without coming to conclusions and deciding. We just go by inspiration all the time.

[00:06:47.51]

The mind has two halves to it. The inspiration half says yes and no. You say to yourself, "I think I'll go skiing." The mind says, "No." Well, it also says, "I think," if I thought, which I don't do—but I thought, "I'll paint this." And my mind would say, "No, no good." And then when you have an inspiration to paint something and then your mind says, "Yes, paint it," then we call that an inspiration. It has all to do with the part of your mind that says yes and no.

[00:07:45.05]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Excuse me. That can't be right. Let me just—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Well, I think what commonly people think of inspiration is something that comes from above, where we live a mundane life that's occasionally visited by inspiration.

[00:07:59.91]

AGNES MARTIN: I know they think that, but it isn't that way. Let's say that you had a young baby just born and you wouldn't know what to do. You just wouldn't know what to do. It would be an emergency. Well, then it would come to you, everything that you had to do to look after this baby.

[00:08:20.73]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Right.

[00:08:21.03]

AGNES MARTIN: See, that's inspiration.

[00:08:22.27]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So it's the kind of thoughts that aren't the product of an intellectual

process?

[00:08:29.25]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:08:30.21]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So it would be the opposite of intellectual process?

[00:08:33.85]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, it is. You know how poorly children turn out that are brought up by the intellectual process. [They laugh.] Inspiration is the way.

[00:08:49.71]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, I think most things that are the product of intellectual process can attain a certain degree of excellence, but only a certain degree. And that's why people make so much of inspiration, because they think inspiration supplies what the intellect can't.

[00:09:05.85]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, that's right, too.

[00:09:08.94]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: But we don't normally think of it as an ordinary, everyday event being inspired. I think that your—the way you talk about inspiration makes that very clear and a very reasonable way to think about it. Where does the ego fit into your work?

[00:09:28.32]

AGNES MARTIN: Ego is the enemy.

[00:09:31.11]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How so?

[00:09:35.87]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it's the enemy in this life, ego. It's against everybody else, and for yourself without any kind of—without either intellect or inspiration. [Laughs.] It's a mindless—selfishness is not a strong enough word for ego.

[00:10:03.79]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: No, it's not.

[00:10:06.68]

AGNES MARTIN: I can't say anything more about it, except it's the enemy.

[00:10:11.24]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Does your work have theme?

[00:10:14.66]

AGNES MARTIN: Well—[pause]. I don't know. It's about happiness and innocence. I suppose that's a theme, pretty abstract theme.

[00:10:38.65]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Innocence?

[00:10:40.42]

AGNES MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:41.68]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: By innocence, what do you mean? A return to an idyllic state?

[00:10:47.70]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:10:49.48]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is it a return, or is it not yet having been?

[00:10:57.01]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, innocence is lack of knowledge. You know what I mean?

[00:11:02.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It's not ignorance, however.

[00:11:05.05]

AGNES MARTIN: No, no. Ignorant people have the wrong kind of knowledge. But if you have absolute lack of knowledge—

[00:11:14.80]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Then you're innocent.

[00:11:15.67]

AGNES MARTIN: Then you're innocent.

[00:11:16.37]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I see. Do you think your work is anti-nature?

[00:11:21.94]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes, I do.

[00:11:23.65]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: "Anti" is a strong word to me.

[00:11:26.53]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, you see, in nature, there isn't any—there aren't any straight lines. Mine's all straight lines. And then in nature, there's no symmetry. I don't have—I don't use nature colors or anything like that. No, nature is not the—although it's called Mother Nature, it's not the comforting thing in life. The comforting thing is to be able to get beyond it, put it out of your mind. The whole world—put the whole world out of your mind, and you'll be comforted.

[00:12:24.83]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That's hard to do.

[00:12:27.57]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, that's the way to comfort for me. [Laughs.]

[00:12:34.22]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why do you think that so many artists today especially shy away from using words like happiness and perfection and beauty?

[00:12:42.16]

AGNES MARTIN: I don't know. I can't tell you about what they are thinking.

[00:12:46.85]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What gives you the courage to use words like that when it's so unpopular?

[00:12:51.65]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I mean, they won't even talk about beauty. And it's pretty obvious, isn't it?

[00:12:58.34]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I've always thought it was obvious. But I've never been chastised more severely than using the word "beauty" in front of certain minimalist and Abstract Expressionist artists who've equated beauty with sentimentality.

[00:13:12.98]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, gosh. I don't see how they can do that.

[00:13:15.41]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: [Laughs.] We're running out of this tape. And I have about two more questions. Will you let me put another tape in and just get about fifteen more minutes?

[00:13:24.60]

AGNES MARTIN: Okay.

[00:13:25.16]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And we'll just—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

I'm hearing strange noises. We'll just continue with this for a few minutes. Happiness, perfection, and beauty are words that, to me, create almost a trinity or a pyramid or a triangle dependent upon one another. And I think they're very powerful words.

[00:13:51.38]

AGNES MARTIN: Beauty and perfection are the same. And they never occur without happiness.

[00:14:06.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: If beauty exists in nature and perfection does not, how can beauty and perfection be the one and the same?

[00:14:15.39]

AGNES MARTIN: Because it really is in our minds.

[00:14:18.03]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It's the reference. It's what you said earlier about the reference to perfection, that beauty triggers when you see it?

[00:14:26.39]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, it's really in your mind. You know, see beauty. But it's an awareness of perfection in the mind that makes it visible. And like in my speech, I said, "When a beautiful rose dies, beauty does not die because it's in the mind."

[00:14:45.96]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That's true. That's true.

[00:14:48.38]

AGNES MARTIN: Some people have gotten to the place where they think it's in their eye. But it isn't. It's in your mind. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, they say. But no, it's in your mind.

[00:15:02.12]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: What role do you think that rose plays in life?

[00:15:05.61]

AGNES MARTIN: The rose?

[00:15:06.69]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: The rose that is beautiful, then dies.

[00:15:09.36]

AGNES MARTIN: [Laughs.] It doesn't play such a terribly—it doesn't play any role. When you respond to the rose, you see it. It wouldn't even exist if you didn't respond to it.

[00:15:22.43]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is that right?

[00:15:23.81]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah.

[00:15:25.01]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So it plays a role of giving you a notion of the perfection that is possible?

[00:15:30.36]

AGNES MARTIN: Just like everything else, yeah. It's not the rose that it's important. It's your response to the rose that's important.

[00:15:39.56]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It's so difficult to talk about these things.

[00:15:41.30]

AGNES MARTIN: And it's the same about paintings. It's not the paintings that are important. It's the response made to them that's important. That is the reality in art, the response made by the observer.

[00:15:56.06]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: So art cannot be a solitary experience?

[00:15:59.67]

AGNES MARTIN: No.

[00:16:00.47]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I know that you've felt that and expressed that in regard to your film, that until someone saw your film, it didn't really exist and hadn't really fulfilled its goal. Do you feel that way about your writing and your visual art?

[00:16:15.48]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. But I'm not concerned about them like I am about painting. [Laughs.]

[00:16:22.32]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How do you mean that?

[00:16:24.87]

AGNES MARTIN: I'm very much concerned with people not making so much fuss about artists, but realizing that their response is what makes the art field.

[00:16:41.74]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Which gives the art its content?

[00:16:45.18]

AGNES MARTIN: Gives it its being.

[00:16:48.20]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: You're giving—as an artist, you're giving a great deal to the viewer.

[00:16:52.82]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, but the viewer is—the whole thing depends on the viewer. It doesn't even exist unless they take time to respond to it.

[00:17:03.91]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How much time do you think a viewer should take to respond to your work?

[00:17:07.28]

AGNES MARTIN: Just about one minute.

[00:17:08.84]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: A minute?

[00:17:09.55]

AGNES MARTIN: Yeah, but a minute is quite a while.

[00:17:11.41]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: It is a long time. It's not a very long time to cover a six-by-six-foot square.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

Let's just keep going and see how we do. I want to know if you could answer this question for me. These questions are difficult because they deal with emotion, and not statistics or facts. But was there a point that you felt that as an artist, you had attained your vision, that you knew exactly what to do and how to do it?

[00:17:42.31]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes. I attained my vision when I made the grid. I knew that that's what I was supposed to do, and other paintings as abstract and as reserved as the grid. That's what you—and every artist comes to that place where—When Pollock started dripping his paintings, he attained to his vision.

[00:18:09.60]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:18:11.23]

AGNES MARTIN: What's the next one?

[00:18:12.26]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: The last thing we want to talk about is, you mention fear and pride often. And is the dragon fear?

[00:18:22.34]

AGNES MARTIN: No, it's pride.

[00:18:22.52]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is the dragon pride?

[00:18:23.76]

AGNES MARTIN: It's pride. The dragon is pride. And in the speech, I said, "We hope that he's going to sleep."

[00:18:31.50]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yes.

[00:18:32.45]

AGNES MARTIN: But if he wakes up, he destroys everything. He destroys all your friend's paintings. And he destroys the galleries. And he destroys the museums and destroys your own paintings. There's nothing that pride leaves undestroyed—destroys other people and destroys yourself.

[00:18:54.62]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: And let's talk about fear.

[00:18:58.32]

AGNES MARTIN: The fear in that lecture was the fear of being alone. It's one thing you have to be able to do if you're an artist, is you have to be able to be alone, and silent, too, I think. But a lot of people play music. And you see, we—as soon as we're alone, we feel fear.

[00:19:23.88]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Why is that?

[00:19:25.05]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, it's just inborn.

[00:19:27.96]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: How do we overcome that in order to achieve our goals? What method would one use?

[00:19:33.12]

AGNES MARTIN: You just have to recognize that you think—you're working along, and you think, "Here it is. Now I feel afraid." The funny thing is that as soon as we're with other people, we don't feel it, even with a dog. If you were walking by yourself, you might feel fear. It depends where you're walking. With a dog, you're much less liable to feel it. Well, you just have to realize that when you're alone, you're going to feel this fear. And you have to recognize it and, in that way, overcome it and not let it disturb you when you're working.

[END OF TRACK AAA_martin89_5396_m]

[00:00:06.87]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: One time you complained that nobody asked you what advice you had

for other artists.

[00:00:12.66]

AGNES MARTIN: I complained that they didn't ask me?

[00:00:14.31]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: That they didn't ask you. And I couldn't close this interview without asking you. What advice do you have for other artists, emerging artists?

[00:00:21.55]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I don't give advice. You see, I don't believe in influence. What I am anxious for everybody to do is to recognize their mind telling them to do things, recognize inspiration, and not be influenced by anybody, and not look for help, or look for expert opinion, or look for—or, you know, to be like anybody else. But I suppose that sounds like advice. But what it is, is the opposite, that they're not to take any advice. You see, you can't be an artist if you're going to take advice.

[00:01:10.25]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Yeah.

[00:01:12.59]

AGNES MARTIN: No, I never give advice.

[00:01:14.19]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, what about this notion of fear? What advice would you give a person, any person, who wishes to achieve the things that can only be achieved through a solitary existence and has to confront fear?

[00:01:33.53]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, they just have—you see, in life, we are all afraid, and on the defensive in life because of ego. Well, there's no getting away from it.

[00:01:50.44]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: I don't think there's any way to get away from it. And so I think my admiration for those who deal with it and go on to do what they need to do is immense, because it's a very strong emotion, fear is, very dominant feeling.

[00:02:09.25]

AGNES MARTIN: Yes.

[00:02:12.13]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Is there anything that you would like to say, Agnes, to close this discussion that we didn't cover, that I didn't give you an opportunity to talk about, that means a lot to you?

[00:02:33.62]

AGNES MARTIN: Well, I know what I'd like people to do. I'd like them to become aware of—I don't think it's giving advice when I say I'd like them to become aware of their mind saying "yes" and "no," and go in the way of your mind saying "yes." Really ask your mind, should I do this? And should I do that? And if it says, "no," don't do it. And if it says "yes," go ahead. And then you'll be living your original life, an original life, because none of us are alike. And your own original life will be happier. Just to become aware of your mind dictating, because it does.

[00:03:28.38]

SUZAN CAMPBELL: Well, thank you very much. We're finished.

[END OF TRACK AAA_martin89_5397_m]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]