

Title: Evening Standard

Date: 23/11/2000

Edition: A

Page: 54

Toeing a new line

BRICE MARDEN at Serpentine Gallery

NICK HACKWORTH

ALMOST two decades have passed since London last saw a major Brice Marden exhibition. Much is being made of the developments in his work since then. An important American abstract expressionist, Marden made his name in the Sixties and Seventies with monochromatic works of bold and simple form. Since the mid-Eighties, line, colour and almost sculptural form have filtered into his universe. The exhibition takes this process as its narrative thread. Across 18 large paintings and several drawings we see the logic of Marden's development played out.

The spark for his stylistic reinvention seems to have been a study of Chinese art and calligraphy, inspired by an exhibition he attended in 1984, fused with his regard for Jackson Pollock. *Cold Mountain 2* (1989-91) displays a tight tangle of drab olive-green, black and grey lines drawn across an opaque beige background with the gestural movements of a calligrapher and the chaotic form of a Pollock. The work lacks some of the joy of the later paintings - its sense of depth and luminosity suppressed by a limited colour range and a tangled form that prevents the eye from penetrating the surface. As we move through the Nineties the backgrounds become lighter, the colours bolder, the lines thicker, the forms less crowded, less calligraphic.

The story then, is one of liberation. By the late Nineties, epitomised here by his latest series, the *Attendants* (1996-99), Marden has abandoned the calligraphic form altogether. The lines become more intuitive, flow more easily and delineate rounded shapes; these at times suggest sculptural forms that flicker in and out of perception as the eye focuses and refocuses on the multiple depths hidden within the paintings. The boldness of the later works is striking, particularly from a distance, and, at its best, Marden's work has the meditative quality of Rothko. If you have the time and inclination to absorb the work, it may absorb you.

However, the artistic development charted on the walls of the Serpentine is an intensely private one, and the public praise heaped upon it seems a little overdone. Judging by the curators' description, one would think that Marden has pulled off the artistic equivalent of a handbrake turn of great importance for art at large. Indeed, within the context of an artistic environment in which myopia and almost obsessive adherence to a singular style or subject matter is expected and commercially rewarded, experimentation within the works of established artists should be encouraged.

But Marden has stayed well within the conventions of abstraction to which he has always adhered. The suspicion remains that these works, many painted over several years, through long, hot summers on the Greek Island of Hydra and influenced as they are by Greek myths and Eastern mysticism, chart intense developments within Marden's own universe. And the extent to which these emotions and ideas are communicated by these stylistic developments is questionable.

As always with this kind of work, the challenge for the viewer is to divine a public meaning from such private works.

Until 7 January. Details: 020 7402 7065.