

'I paint about emotions, not about lines'

Agnes Martin¹

Abstraction has historically been concerned with the reduction of figuration and emotive qualities, with meaning often being found only in form and materiality. This led to rigid grids and shapes constructed with controlled and sometimes cold precision. Selina Foote takes these principles – including the idea that abstract paintings are expressions of paint as a physical and conceptual object, and the structure of the grid that underlies many of these works – but uses them to complicate and even destabilise a Modernist reading of her work. Her paintings are about paint, but from within the broader art historical context, and their foundations are grids, but her lattices are interrupted by delicate curves and polygons that are the opposite of hard-edged.

Her process begins with books, specifically illustrated texts about the history of art. Foote searches for reproductions of paintings that can be dissected into colour and structure, from which she then constructs the foundation of a painting. Her work is inherently collaborative – finding a spark within the original through which she expands and plays against, with her own additions and subtractions. The final product is her own, but holds within it the history of art. The title of the paintings only hint at their origins with names such as *Chignon, Lydia, Girl arranging her hair, Mother, or The Boating Party*.

The evocative nature of these titles has us searching the paintings for the figurative. They conjure visions of women in profile attending to their toilette or enjoying communal leisure. They also indicate another theme within the works – intimacy and fragility. Foote's works are intimate not only in scale, the largest measuring just half a metre tall, but in their materiality. Reminiscent of the work of mid-20th century Canadian/American abstract painter Agnes Martin, Foote's choice of materials is telling – particularly in her use of graphite. In using pencil in tandem with paint she is introducing a softer and less stable way of making. The use of pencil or graphite is closely associated with preparatory sketches – artworks that are liminal and exist in the space between the artist's mind and the 'final' artwork. In the context of Foote's work these graphite lines and shapes weave under, over, and through the painted surface to destabilise the surface. At any moment they could be 'completed' with a painted overlay or erased with just as much ease. They also expose what could be another artwork within the painted surface – can we trust our eyes?

In the context of Modernism, abstract paintings have been understood as dealing solely in the optical.² In Foote's paintings each line is straight, but never consistent – rectangles sit in quiet discomfort next to squares, while black ribbons slither across the surface in unique formations.

In subverting the grid Foote is again following Agnes Martin in her 'unrepetitive use of a repetitive medium'.³ In Foote's non-mechanical approach to abstraction she is placing herself within the work. Rather than utilising tools to block out and create seamless edges, her grids bleed and shift. They are products not only of art history, but of the human hand, mind, and heart.

Sarah McClintock, Suter Curator

¹ Agnes Martin speaking in 2002 in Leon d'Avigdor's documentary *Agnes Martin: Between the Lines*, 2016

² Lawrence Alloway, 'Agnes Martin' in *Art Forum*, April 1973, <https://www.artforum.com/print/197304/lawrence-alloway-38607>, accessed 29 July 2022.

³ Lucy R. Lippard, "Top To Bottom, Left To Right", *Grids*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1972.