

M A D A L Y N M A R C U S

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*Essay by Howard Norman*





*Hunter Gracchus*, 2002, oil and alkyd resin on linen, 58 x 82 inches

S U M M O N F O R T H T H E  
R E M E M B E R E D W O R L D

*by Howard Norman*

**T**he first thing to say about the paintings of Madalyn Marcus is that, within the advancing (or receding) insistence of their grids, the probing engagement with emotion and color, they are tour de force. Their size, their implied weight, the fluctuating densities of their surfaces, the painterly detail that inflect their boldness of form, their unmitigated melancholy, their suggesting a variety of readings (I purposely use a literary reference)—all of these elements contribute to what DaVinci (that great painter of the body) called a “cartographer’s vision,” at once intellectual and sensuous, which combines a geometric physicality with a sense of boundless exploration.

Marcus’ paintings are an ongoing dialectic between something concrete and something powerfully felt. Her paintings are even more complicated and provocative because they are personal, in that they evoke scarcely



contained anxieties. With painting, one must be cautious in the use of a psychological vocabulary; however, I would suggest that in Marcus' paintings a deeper turbulence informs even the most composed of surfaces, and sometimes the entire canvas. Each painting is its own mood, and also a mood about to change, so that a viewer is decidedly not lulled but becomes vigilant, is put on alert, tense in the delighted anticipation of feeling new things deeply.

Marcus' paintings are works of contentious passion. They do not acquiesce to emotion, they painfully dignify it. Part of the generosity of these paintings is that they chronicle process, therefore we see in them a painter actually coming to knowledge. Knowledge about herself, knowledge about herself within her art, and that is what I mean by personal.

In many of Marcus' works we feel the almost physical qualities of transformation from thought to paint, which, naturally, corresponds to a sense of the possibility of transformation in our lives—transformation, with its unpredictable vicissitudes and joys, the inevitable falling away of familiar notions of existence, and that is what I mean by intellectual.

Shadow—or shading—in Marcus' paintings feels specifically like a repository of Time, and one can perhaps see this most literally in *Cloud Shadow*. Though I think that all of the paintings seem to have (in Vosnesky's phrase) a "nostalgia for the present." When her paintings do not evoke an elegiac immediacy, they at least contain elegiac anticipation, a kind of preemptive melancholy sorrow. I am not suggesting that the primary allure and ambition of Marcus' paintings are their sense of "summoning." However, they do powerfully draw forth, up through the layers of paint—the drafts, the emendations, the archive of doubts and exhilarations congealed in

paint—a dedication to the Past and Present in equal measure. In Marcus' work *Memory* (writ large) is fierce, insatiable, and in a way unforgiving—history has proven that all the most compelling of narratives contain these properties, and that is what I mean when I say that Marcus' paintings are literary.

In Marcus' paintings background and foreground have equal currency, so that the viewer's eye, at first glance or upon extended study, need not rely on image *per se*. The paintings at once contain gestures of controlled drama and marvelous subtlety; always there is a fully utilized canvas: no space on the canvas goes unattended. Often there is featured (but not dominating) geometric scaffolding that holds an edifice, sometimes an oblong suggesting a caged zeppelin. In this regard, *Open Closed Open*, *Return To Blue (For Miles Davis)*, and *Body and Soul II* are representative. Such shapes are less symbols than vessels of emotion. In this regard, it is difficult in certain fundamental ways not to see many of Marcus' paintings as works about mortality, in that they make you feel the corporeal assertions of "the body." However, as for being a figurative painter, Marcus, of course, does not address the issue of mortality by painting nudes, say, or even endowing her figures with human attributes. Her paintings evoke the body as an emotional entity, a housing. Her paintings are original not because they ostentatiously break with any tradition (the tradition of the "figure," for example), but because they break with convention. Again, one way Marcus does this is through a literary sensibility or at least a narrative investigation. Though Marcus certainly cannot be said to "write in paint" she does seem to have a haunted adoration of the origins of language, the written word. The imagism in the painting entitled, *Hunter Gracchus*, for example, (with its mythological title) reads like the aerial view of the staked, cordoned off, twine grid-lines of an archeological excavation. Scrawled, etched, crosshatched, sun-dried mud earth-tones surround, what—the wooden hull of an

ancient boat? (poet Marina Tsvetaeva wrote “The body of the boat was papyrus to the touch/ pale survivor of centuries;/ memory of the sound of water kept it afloat/ in the harsh ground”). While Marcus’ work may often excite an almost liturgical desire (one senses it has in the painter herself), I think her basic sensibility is less historically operative than “down to earth.” Should the layers around the edifice in *Hunter Gracchus* finally be peeled away and the chiseled script (Greek? Hebrew? Babylonian?) deciphered, most probably it would contain—not aphorism or lofty proclamation—but more likely a “remembered conversation as eulogy,” (Isaac Babel), perhaps small talk between father and daughter, about child-rearing, cooking, marriage complaints, or something the father has suddenly remembered and implored the daughter to not forget, from his own childhood.

Language. Paint. Memory. And then there is the sheer beauty of Marcus’ paintings themselves. And part of their beauty is that they accomplish what the great Jewish-Russian writer Isaac Babel hoped to accomplish in writing: “to summon forth the remembered world into observable feeling.”



On studio visits, conversations about painters—Mark Rothko, Jake Berthot and Milton Resnick come up most often—seem quite direct. Whereas conversation about Marcus’ paintings and drawings is partly accomplished by indirection. That is, opinion and inquiry are plaited into a kind of informal schmoozing, our navigating through subjects of children, schools, marriage, books (always books), “catching up.” On the other hand, once a direct comment is offered about this or that painting, Marcus fully expects the discussion to go somewhere. (Of course, talk about art is never-ending.)



“Investigation, belief, transcendence, everything painting ought to be about,” said painter Jake Berthot. These are accessible, reasonable, even expected subjects to talk about on my visits to Madalyn Marcus’ studio. On any number of studio visits, too, we have spoken of Memory as it applies to painting. (“Trying to apply memory to the canvas.”) “When I paint,” Marcus said one morning (Notebook, February 2002), “I remember. But what I remember might be something I read in a book.”

Books are everywhere in the studio; dog-eared, quotes and sketches in the margins, a sprawled library, books pervasively locatable, always within reach. (In this sense, the studio is an extension of Marcus’ house, her paintings and drawing on the walls, spill and scatter of books, crammed bookshelves.) Eclectic, serious reading—on any given visit I have noticed Ahkmatova, Kunitz, Buber, Celan, and so on.

“Want to see some drawings?” she says. She sets out perhaps a dozen drawings on a paint-splotted sheet or piece of cardboard. This imposes an aerial view, no matter how close I crouch to the floor. Marcus delineates between “paintings on paper” (see *Heliotrope*) and “drawings,” which are obviously smaller in physical dimensions only, though emotionally as charged and complicated as the paintings. Of course, the drawings have a separate authority and import; they require a different notice: they offer a more compressed sense of the intellectual possibilities inherent in line. And, in many instances one does notice in the drawings, around a central shape, (if there is one), an agitated chalky texture, scrawls, even a succinctly wild alarm in the choice of color—a burst of orange, say, or shout of green. The central shape or edifice seems also more free from gravity than in the paintings; this may be partly due to size (and, again, implied weight), but I think it is more that in the drawings, the logical shapes—whether grid, oblong, rectangle—have their logic more gently dissolved into the surrounding chalky



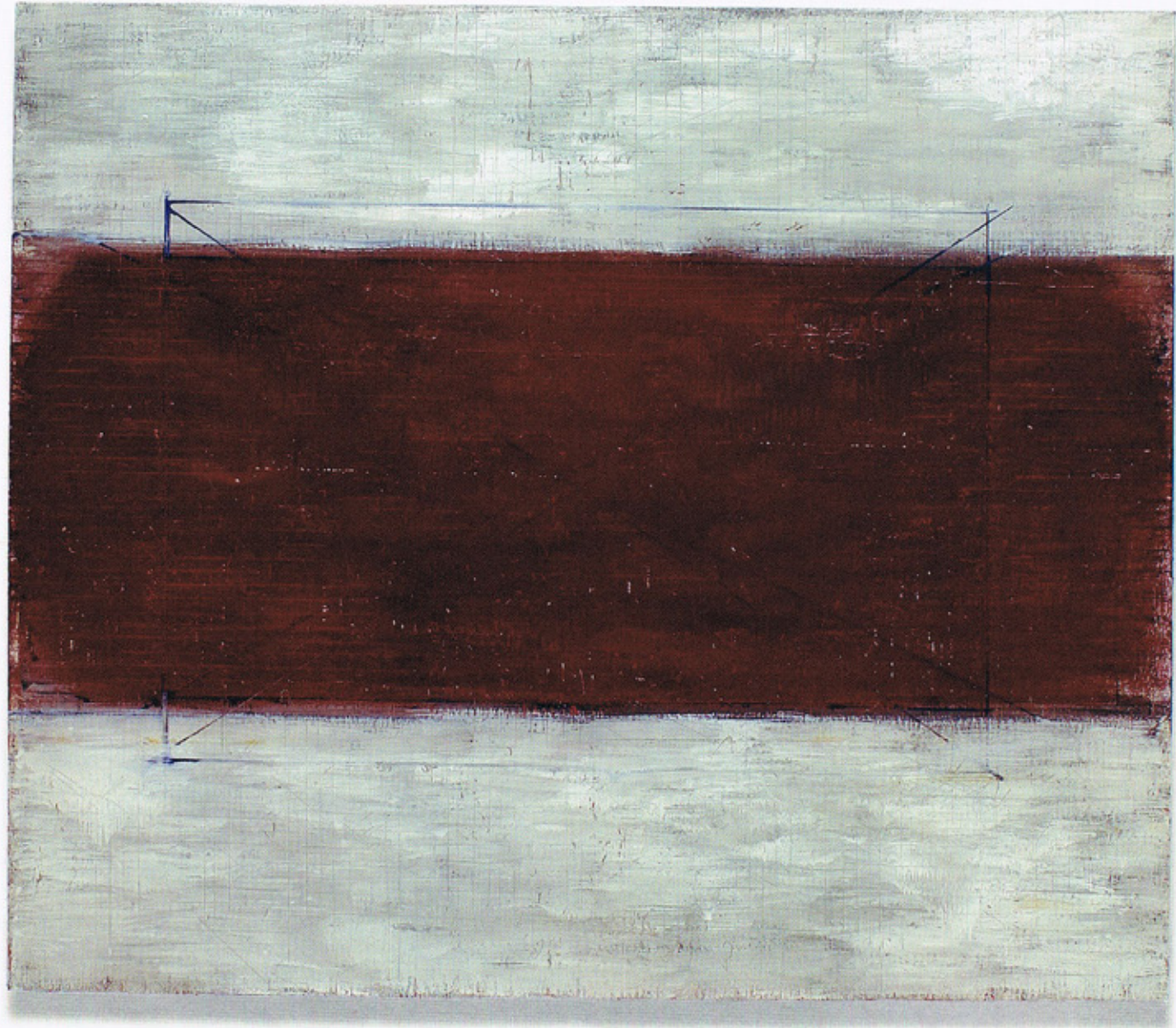
moat. Otherwise, the drawings strike me as absolutely derived from the same moodiness, apprehensions, wonderfully belligerent individual vision, as the paintings. The drawings are heart-rending and brilliant.



Perhaps it is not fashionable, nor the most useful existential mandate, to too-fully comprehend life through art. But one day, while driving through the Mediterranean climate and color-rectangles of farmland in central and northern California, I kept thinking, “This landscape is imitating Diebenkorn’s paintings—” Later, I drove past a fairground near Santa Cruz. A few men were dismantling the scaffolding that housed an enormous helium balloon painted bright turquoise, with charcoal scrawls vaguely shaped like flying sea-gulls on its oblong body. Two other men held anchor ropes. When the scaffolding fell away, the helium balloon and its bright orange gondola lifted a few feet off the ground. Then, suddenly, a windy rain blurred my windshield, mystifying the visual world. Observing this tableau—the restless oblong, the scrawled field of burnt sepia bunch-grass all around—I realized how frequently I’m preoccupied and instructed by the paintings of Madalyn Marcus, how her work applies to my life. How her paintings help me construct memories of a received life. I was so grateful. Such moments yield wonder, recognition, disquiet and beauty—like the paintings and drawing of Madalyn Marcus.

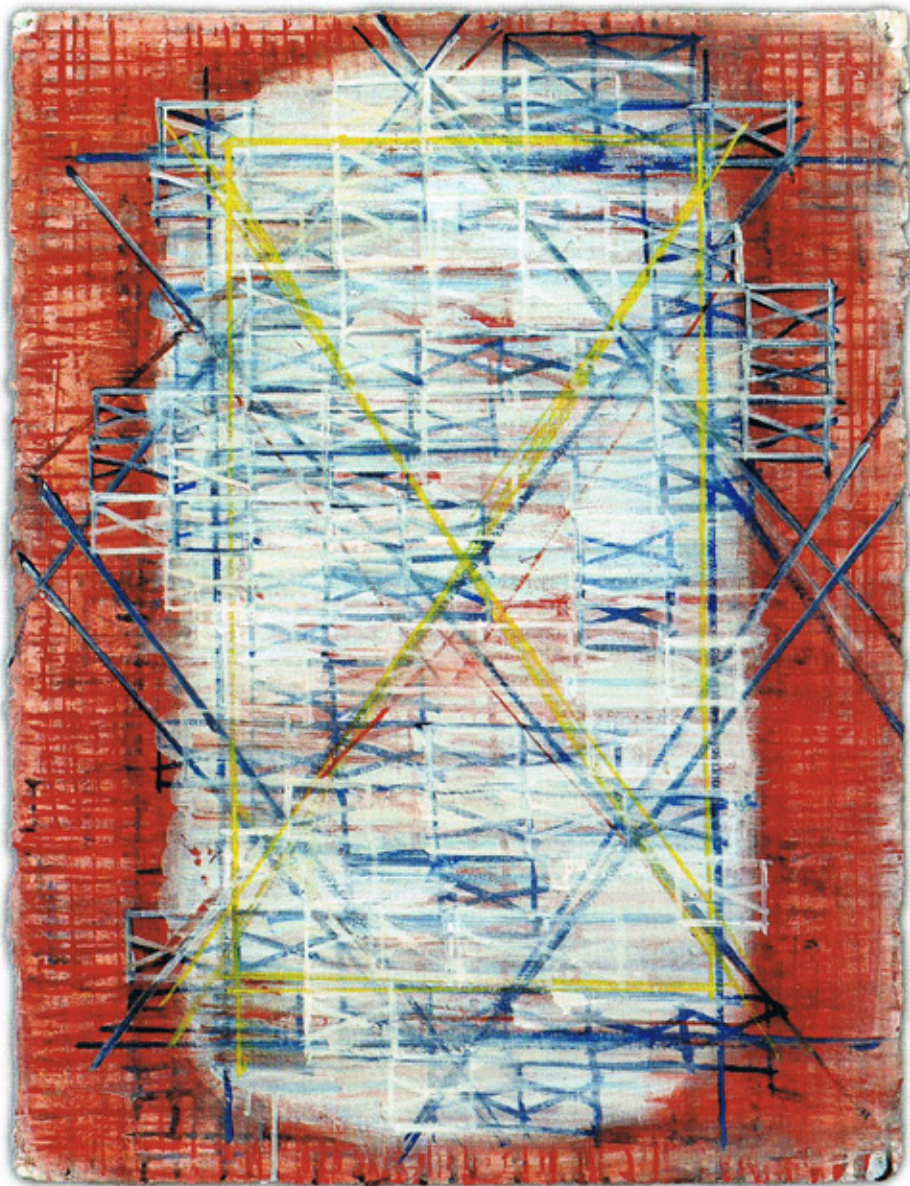


Howard Norman is the author of the novels, *The Northern Lights*, *The Bird Artist*, *The Museum Guard*, and *The Haunting of L.* He received a Lannan Award in fiction and has twice been short-listed for The National Book Award. His forthcoming books are *Amorous Window*, a novella, and a travel journal, *Nova Scotia Diaries*.



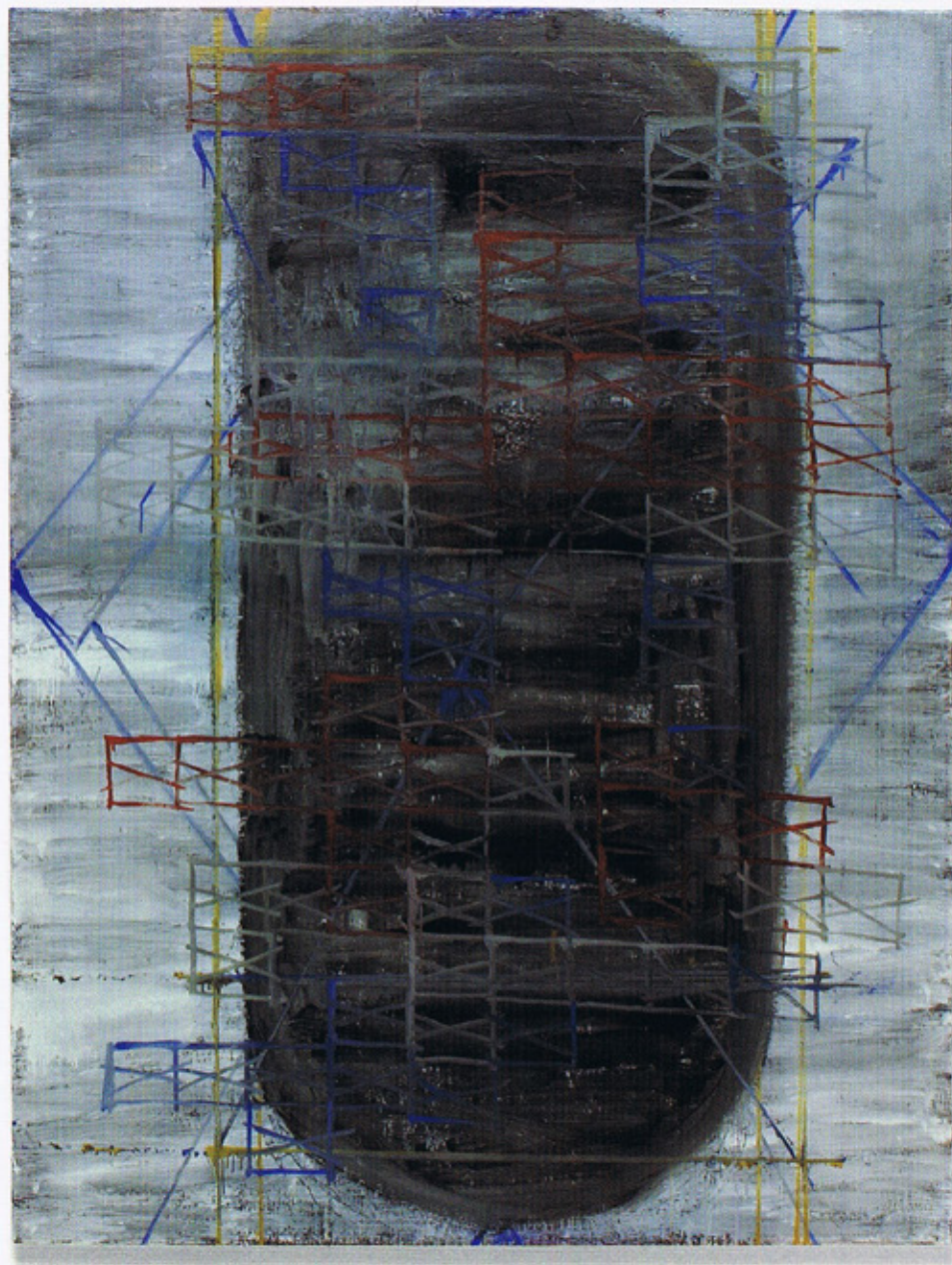
*Body and Soul*, 2001-2002, oil and alkyd resin on linen, 70 x 82 inches



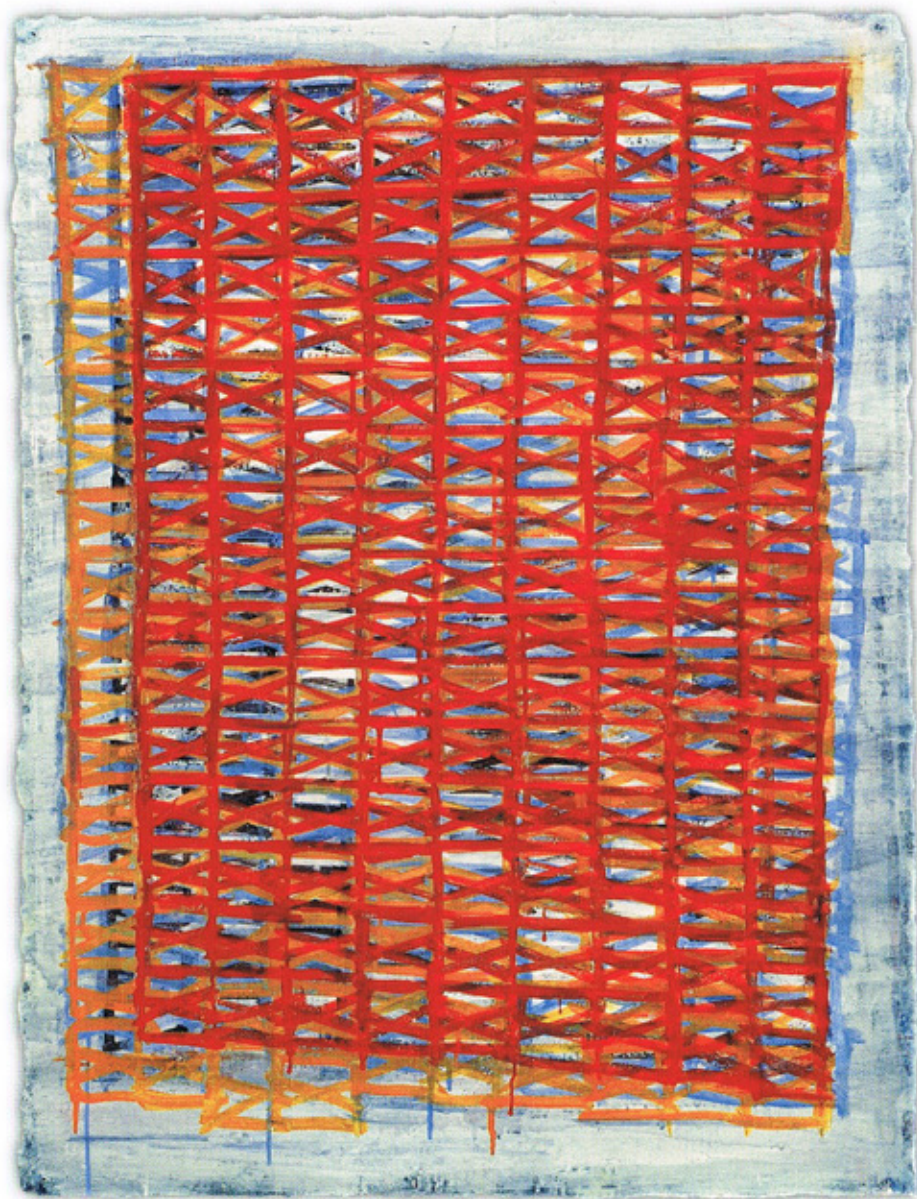


*Open Closed Open*, 2002, Kremer ink and shellac on Arches paper, 30 x 22 inches



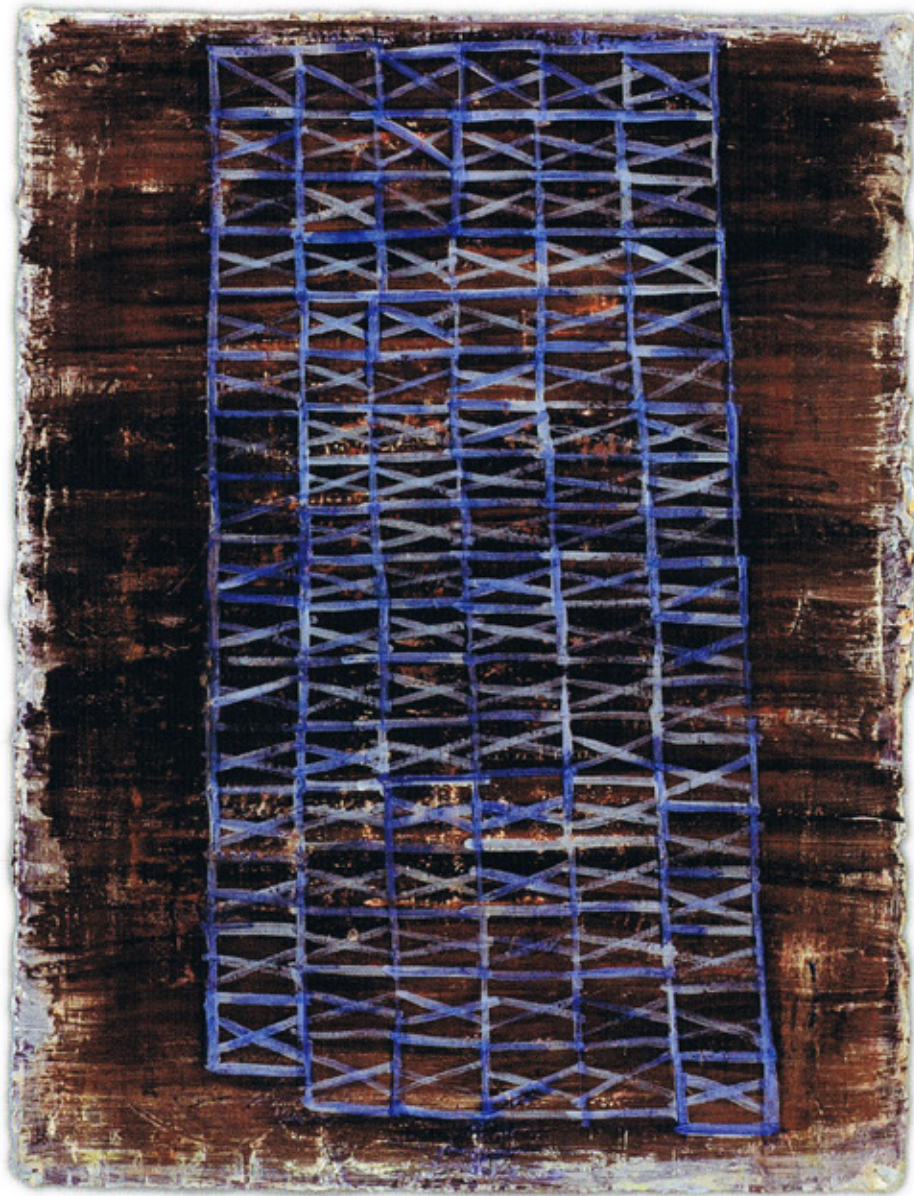


*Return to Blue (for Miles Davis)*, 2002, oil and alkyd resin on linen, 71 x 54 inches



*Heliotrope*, 2002, Kremer ink and shellac on Arches paper, 30 x 22 inches





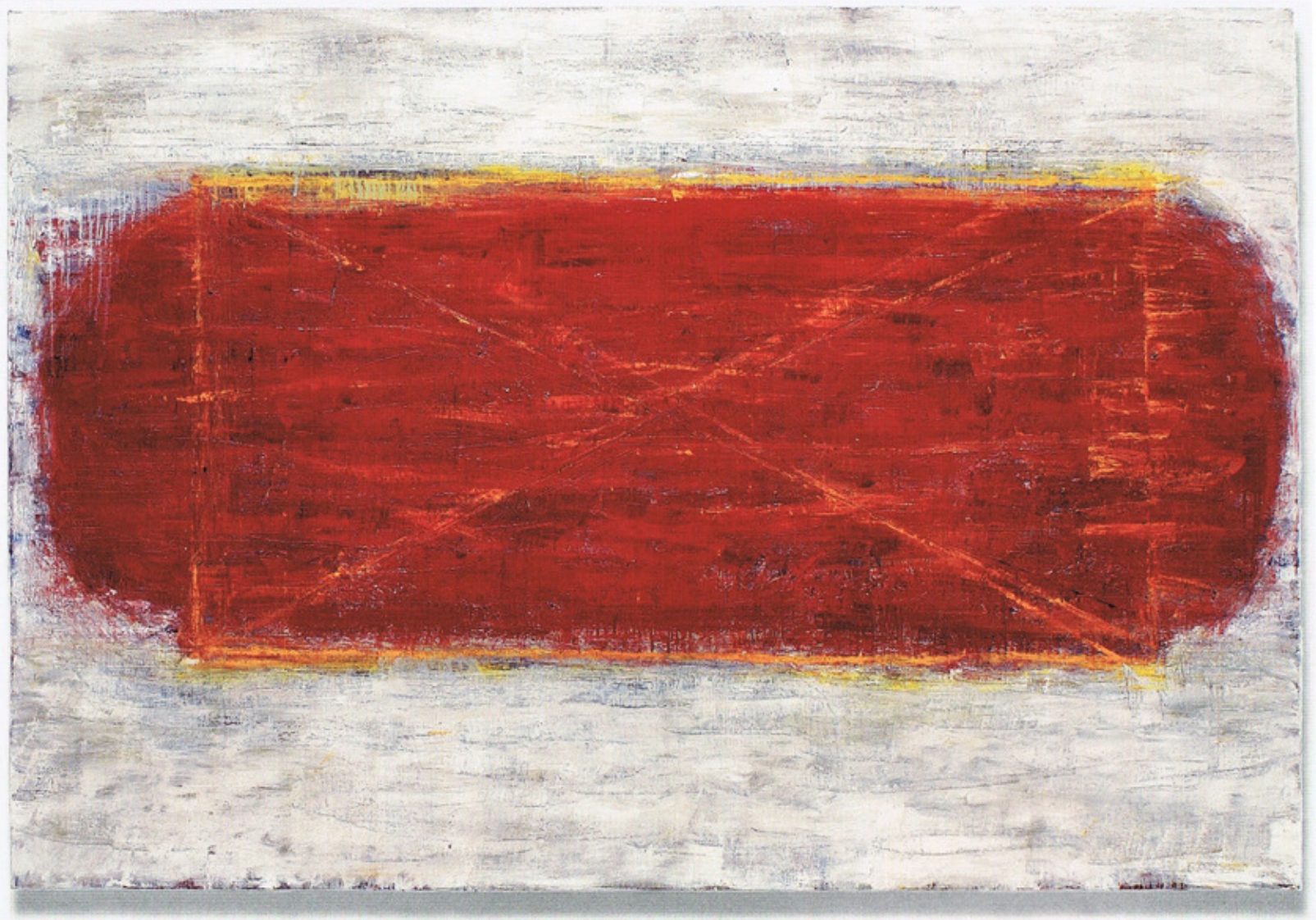
*Cloud Shadow*, 2002, Kremer shellac and sepia on Arches paper, 30 x 22 inches





*Elegy (for Yehuda Amichai)*, 2002, Kremer ink and shellac on Arches paper, 30 x 22 inches





*Body and Soul II*, 2002, oil and alkyd resin on linen, 56 x 82 inches



# M A D A L Y N M A R C U S

Lives in Washington, D.C.

## EDUCATION

- 1982 MFA - Painting and Drawing, American University, D.C. Studied with Robert D'Arista, Alan Feltus and Helene Herzbrun.
- 1978 BFA with concentration in Japanese and Korean ceramics, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, MO.

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2002 Troyer Gallery, Washington, D.C. "Madalyn Marcus: Paintings," solo exhibition of paintings with catalogue and essay by Howard Norman.
- 2002 Troyer Gallery, "Abstraction and Illusion," work of featured gallery painters.
- 2002 Art in Embassies Program, U.S. State Department, work selected for American Embassy in Israel.
- 2002 WPA/Corcoran Curator's Choice Art Auction. Curated by Judy Greenberg, Director, The Kreeger Museum.
- 2000 Art in Embassies Program, U.S. State Department, work selected for American Embassy in Egypt.
- 2000 Ceramic Wall Installation. Over 350 tiles (6" and 12" square) spanning 9 x 12 feet. Attached to exterior stucco wall facing private garden and residence.
- 1999 Troyer Gallery. Installation of paintings.
- 1999 ARTSCAPE/A 2000 MINUS 1: Visual Arts exhibition Maryland Art Institute: curated by Terry Sultan, Howardena Pindell, and Doreen Bulger (curator of Baltimore Museum of Art).
- 1999 Ann Loeb Bronfman Gallery, Washington, D.C. Paintings titled "Out of Absence," co-curated show with Mindy Weisel
- 1998 Washington Project for the Arts/Corcoran Museum of Art presents "Recent Paintings." Oil on linen. Curated by W.C. Richardson and Paula Crawford.
- 1998 Washington Project for the Arts/Corcoran Museum of Art presents ARTSITES '98. Curated by Sarah Tanguy.
- 1997 The Ann Loeb Bronfman Gallery, D.C. Works on paper. Curated by Mindy Weisel.
- 1989 International Monetary Fund, D.C. Oil paintings.
- 1988 Fine Arts Academy of Budapest, Hungary. Oil paintings.
- 1987 Artists Space at Ninth and South Streets, Philadelphia, PA. Oil paintings.
- 1987 N.A.B. Artists's Space, Chicago, IL. Oil paintings.

## PUBLICATIONS

- 1999 *Washington Post*, Arts Section, February 18, 1999 review by Ferdinand Protzman titled "Starting at Square One."
- 1998 ARTSITES catalogue by Sarah Tanguy, published by WPA/Corcoran.
- 1998 Front cover of "Articulate - The Mid-Atlantic Region's Premier Arts Magazine," Issue Number 29. Article by James Mahoney on ARTSITES, including Emerson Gallery site.
- 1998 Catalogue of show "Recent Paintings," WPA/Corcoran. Essays by Chip Richardson and Paula Crawford.

## SELECTED GRANTS

- 1999 Recipient of D.C. Commission on the Arts Fellowship Awards Program.