

# Andrea Belag: *Morning* Meditations

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American artist Andrea Belag (b. 1951) began showing her abstract paintings in New York and Europe in the 1980s. Her works on paper investigate the complexities of abstract drawing in space. These ongoing explorations are distantly related to her studies at the New York Studio School in the 1970s, a time when the focus of the students' practice involved drawing from life. It was the presence of Philip Guston (1913–1980) as a founding faculty member that attracted Belag to the school. Later in the 1970s and '80s, Belag searched for approaches to painting that would allow her to expunge nature, and worked within the Minimalist tradition of the grid. From 1996 to 2005, the grid-like structure in her work made reference to windows (e.g., Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Since then, Belag has approached abstraction through highly immediate, and intensely physical, gestural means that create broad patches of foreground color in movement across the pictorial field.

This article concentrates on Andrea Belag's *Morning* series, a group of approximately eighty 6 x 4" watercolors on paper, which she completed between 2008 and 2009, the first sixteen of which are illustrated here (Figs. 2–5, 7, 9, 12–13, 16–22, and front cover). They are made on watercolor blocks she collected in France and Japan, as well as thin cotton paper from India. While all of Belag's work uses a pared-down vocabulary of brushwork, the *Morning* series is particularly reductive. She achieves a wide variety of forms,

evocations, and structures by using three elements: the white of the paper; saturated, defined line; and broad, washy areas of transparent pigment. Working on a small scale with the brush, exploring the act of drawing in space, she laid out new ideas for her contemporaneous abstract paintings. Drawing with the brush has been a critical part of her process in this way throughout her career. She begins new developments and series of paintings with explorations on paper, which form distinct bodies of work.



Figure 1

ANDREA BELAG  
Tree Fingers, 2002

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Figure 2

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 14,  
2008–9

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Andrea Belag)

In the *Morning* series, with her use of highly nuanced transparency and delicate layering of color, Belag invents a sequence of forms that are balanced against the brilliant, warm, white negative space of the paper. Offsetting the washes are precise strokes, which carry a host of suggestions. In one of the watercolors on Japanese paper,

*Morning 14* (Fig. 2),<sup>2</sup> the two strokes of red and blue feel like tear drops. In others, for example *Morning 11* (Fig. 3)<sup>3</sup> and *Morning 16* (Fig. 4),<sup>4</sup> they are like boundary lines—demarcations of private space. Still other lines, as in *Morning 9* (Fig. 5),<sup>5</sup> are grouped to suggest almost totemic figures. With delicacy and precision, these drawings




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*Figure 3*

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 11,  
2008–9

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*Figure 4*

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 16,  
2008–9

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*Figure 5*

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 9,  
2008–9

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simultaneously synthesize and expand the essential issues and vocabulary of her work and *oeuvre*. Each one feels as if made in one breath, as opposed to additively. As a group, they reflect a psychic and internal meditative process. For the viewer habituated to the shadowy byways of Belag's oils, it is like stepping out into the light and being temporarily blinded.

These small works are indicative of the drawing and line elements essential to Belag's *oeuvre*. More broadly, they suggest crucial aspects of her admiration of painters such as Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Philip Guston, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938): the individual mark is used not only as an isolated gesture carrying emotive suggestiveness, but also to create space.

Belag's two heroes as a young painter were Guston and Matisse. She has related that Matisse's *The Dance* (1909) in the Museum of Modern Art, New York,<sup>6</sup> gave her permission to be a painter: "When I discovered Matisse's paintings as a young teenager, I was taken with what I perceived as androgyny in his work, and I translated that vision into the possibility for me to become a painter."<sup>7</sup> More recently, Hillary Spurling's biography of Matisse became a crucial text for her. Volume 2 of the biography begins with the creation of the companion panels, *Music* and *The Dance*. Spurling described Matisse's process as follows:

*Matisse painted intuitively, without thought or premeditation, like a dancer or an athlete. Months of preparation and practice meant that calculation translated directly into spontaneous action. "A picture is like a game of cards," [stated Matisse]. "You must figure out from the very beginning what you will have at the end; everything must be worked backwards and always be finished before it is begun."*

*The process was intensely physical.... The figures on his canvas grew beneath his brush into a great elemental surge of release and liberation.*<sup>8</sup>

This description of Matisse's process must have resonated with Belag, for in 2007 she made a painting, *Open Letter* (Fig. 6),<sup>9</sup> in response to



Figure 6

ANDREA BELAG

*Open Letter*, 2007

*Private Collection* (©  
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Matisse used the word “sign” in the sense of “mark” to describe the cumulative process of building up a picture in terms of a balancing of brushstrokes. This was related to his notion that each individual brushstroke could function as a discrete sign related to a distinct visual sensation, and that a picture could be constructed as an ensemble of such quasi-abstract individual marks, which created a surface syntax through which the image was perceived.<sup>10</sup>

Belag’s directness of process and the painterly elements are rooted in Abstract Expressionism. At the same time, her work becomes its own (perhaps subconscious) critique of the overblown qualities and scale of heroic abstraction. Belag—and others of her generation—have certainly also explored the issue of mediating the direct process. Many of Belag’s paintings from the decade 1985 to 1995 utilized the works-on-paper technique of “printing” with paint as a way of mitigating the emotion of the hand. Similar to De Kooning’s technique, she laid sheets of newspaper over wet paint, peeled them off and pressed them on other parts of the painting.

In addition, Belag, like contemporary artists Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), David Reed (b. 1946), and Howard Hodgkin (b. 1932), has used the “frozen brushstroke” as a discourse with and critique of Abstract Expressionism. Isolating the structure of broad, individual brushstrokes questions this essential part of the vocabulary, and can function as a distancing device, making the gesture selfconscious.

Ultimately, though, the *Morning* drawings are deliberate explorations of the resonance of direct mark-making, and the richness of non-referential, abstract drawing. In *Morning 12* (Fig. 7),<sup>11</sup> she explores the interactions that three different kinds of marks have on each other and on the white of the paper. A saturated rose wash forms a triangle at the right. Pale violet, textured horizontal strokes overlay the top of the sheet, stopping just before the left edge. A thin blue line bleeds into the violet and moves precisely into the lower left corner. The line divides the sheet into triangles of negative space. The triangular formations and the



Figure 7

ANDREA BELAG

*Morning 12*,  
2008–9

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Spurling’s biography. While it is possible to dissect Belag’s process into a series of marks, the overall effect is unified.

The physicality of Matisse’s process is also relevant for the art of Belag; her strokes are an extension of her body, her arm sweeping and dragging the brush over the surface. The stroke becomes a sign—an actual subject of her painting. As Jack Flam wrote:

Figure 8

ANDREA BELAG

Smoke and Fire,  
2008

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juxtapositions of different types of marks extend spatial illusion and layering beyond the horizontal–vertical structures of Belag’s earlier work.

The oil painting *Smoke and Fire* of 2008 (Fig. 8)<sup>12</sup> uses a precise and similarly placed saturated blue line to provide contrast from the two broad, waving brush areas of pale orange and rose on either side of the canvas. In the *Morning* drawing, Belag adheres to the sheet and the possibilities for

creating space mainly through subtle textural variation, allowing the white of the paper to function as form. *Smoke and Fire* moves away from clean divisions of form as the spiraling brushstrokes create density and the ground is completely veiled by color. Despite this, that blue stroke functions as a “mark”—possibly both the first and the last mark. We can trace it both under the deep rose at the top and over the pale pink at the left. It is a





Figure 9

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 5,  
2008–9

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Figure 10

ANDREA BELAG

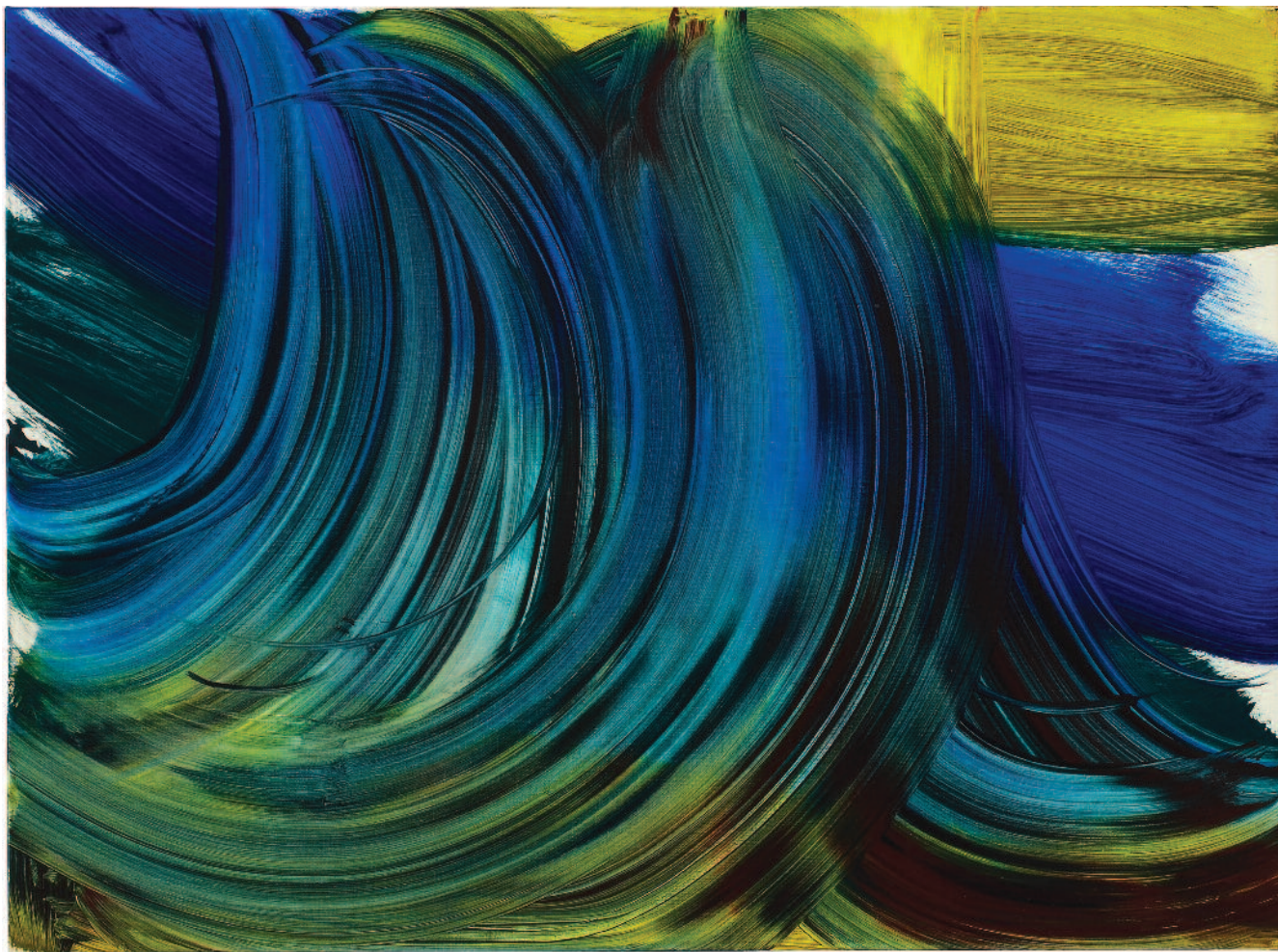
Gelb, 2009

Collection of the  
Artist (© 2012  
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reminder of the drawing process: how an individual mark can alter space and shift the picture plane.

The watercolor *Morning 5* (Fig. 9)<sup>13</sup> is related to the oil painting *Gelb* of 2009 (Fig. 10).<sup>14</sup> In *Morning 5*, washy black marks swirl to the left edge of the paper in a side-ways wave shape, or like the wind-blown branches of a tree. Thin orange-red lines balance out the waves in a triangular formation. *Gelb* contains a similar wave formation of inky green-black, hovering above an orange ground. This painting takes marks and spatial formations found in the *Morning 5* in *Gelb*: the triangle at the base separating deep orange waves from the less saturated purple-orange horizontal ones at the right. The inky green area is the most explosive, with drips, rarely found in Belag's work.





The drawings are controlled experiments of spatial possibilities and harmonies, and these findings are transferred into complex orchestrations of color, movement, and variegation of brushstrokes in the oil paintings, especially in more recent works, such as *Shift* of 2011 (Fig. 11).<sup>15</sup>

Despite the control and reduction, Belag experiments in the *Morning* drawings with the range of suggestions and evocations that each kind of mark and color can have. In *Morning 13* (Fig. 12),<sup>16</sup> for instance, she makes a spiraling line with

Figure 11

ANDREA BELAG

*Shift*, 2011

*Private Collection*  
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Belag)



Figure 12

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 13,  
2008–9

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washy black, balancing it against a saturated, deliberate blue line. The combination of these marks, and the blue–black color harmony, creates a duality of playfulness and intensity, characteristic of much of this series. In *Morning 15* (Fig. 13),<sup>17</sup> a red vertical swath of color and a black one are juxtaposed, bumping up and bleeding into one another and the white paper. The fiery, stormy suggestions of this drawing are expanded on in paintings such as *Woozy* (Fig. 14)<sup>18</sup> and *Rot* (Fig. 15),<sup>19</sup> both of 2009.

The *Morning* series was created in the private space of the home as Belag sat at the table: these drawings were literally made close to her mind and body. The *Morning* drawings reflect a mental process and turn it into an aesthetic / visual experience. Belag acknowledges, “I have always transformed my anger into images of beauty.”<sup>20</sup> These paintings synthesize emotions that we might associate with bigger, more active gestures into reductive, yet intimate, marks.

As Belag acknowledges, however, not every experience can be transformed or manipulated into something neat or acceptable or pleasant. And so the grid disappears, and the storms let loose. The idealism of Modernism is no longer part of her mental reality. Belag states: “In my work, abstraction demands the transformation of history and emotion into images created by hand, touch, and visual acuity.”<sup>21</sup> The *Morning* series carries a feeling of loss and mourning—but these sensations and responses are marked with precision. She marks lines and divisions to work within active storms and, ultimately, lightness, by allowing the white of the paper to function with its own brilliant resonance (Figs. 16–22).<sup>22</sup>

*Jennifer Samet, PhD, is an art historian and professor at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY, and gallery director of the Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York.*





Figure 13  
ANDREA BELAG  
Morning 15,  
2008–9  
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Figure 14 (upper  
right)  
ANDREA BELAG  
Woozy, 2009  
*Collection of the  
Artist (© 2012  
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Figure 15 (lower  
right)  
ANDREA BELAG  
Rot, 2009  
*Collection of the  
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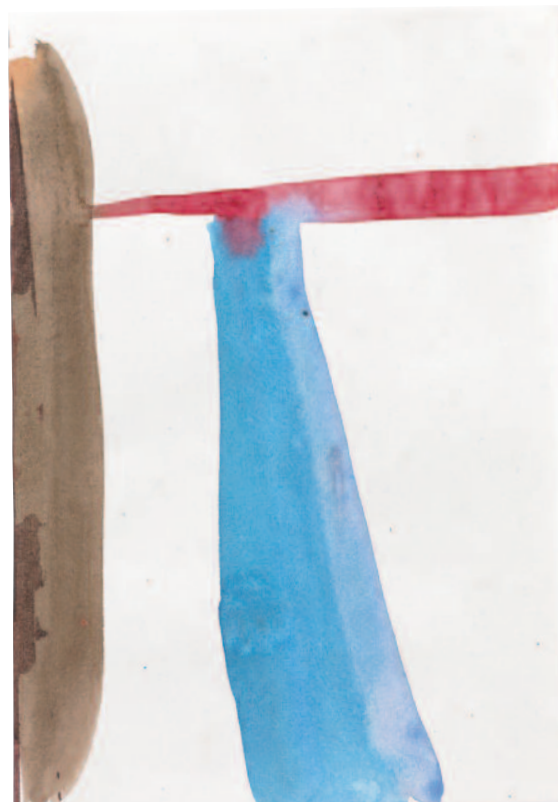
Figure 16 (upper left)

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 1,  
2008–9

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Figure 17 (upper right)

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 3,  
2008–9

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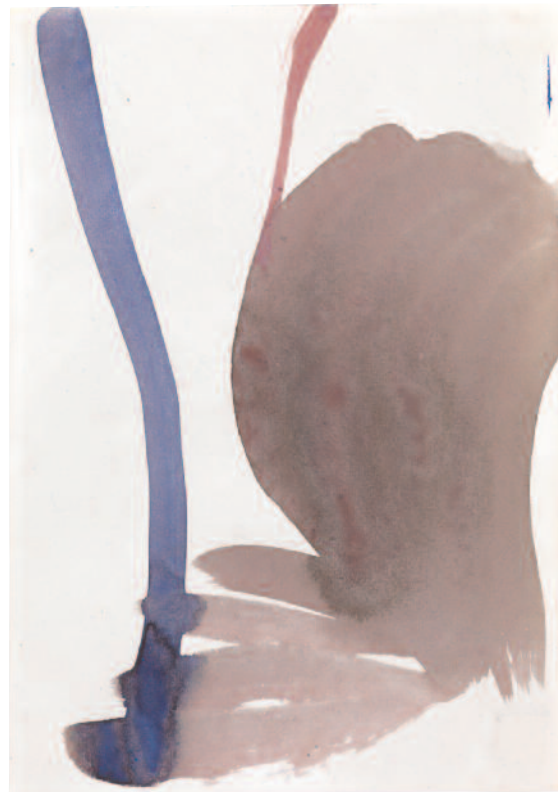
Figure 18 (lower left)

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 4,  
2008–9

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Figure 19 (lower right)

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 6,  
2008–9

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*Figure 20*

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 7,  
2008-9

*Collection of the  
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Figure 21

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 8,  
2008–9

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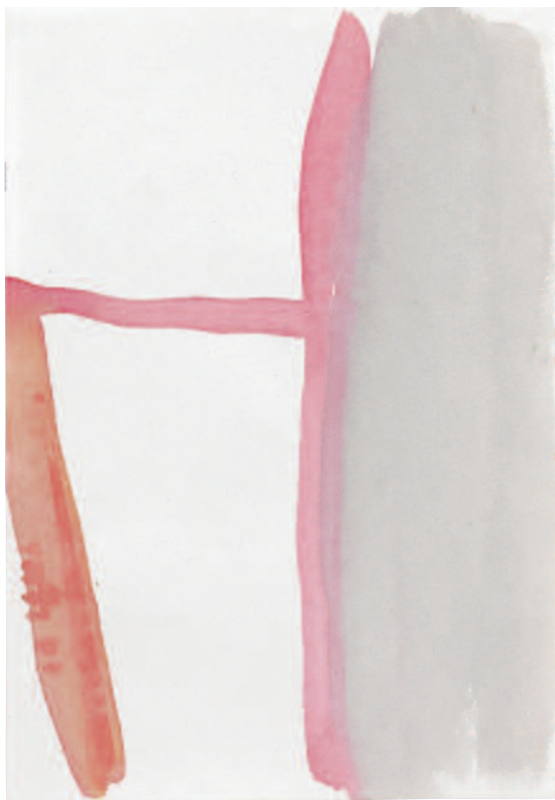


Figure 22

ANDREA BELAG

Morning 10,  
2008–9

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#### NOTES

1. Oil on canvas; 66 x 56 cm; see *Andrea Belag: New Paintings and Works on Paper*, exh. cat., Cologne, Galerie Heinz Holtmann, 2002, p. 15, repr. (in color).
2. Watercolor on Japanese paper; 146 x 100 mm.
3. Watercolor; 146 x 103 mm.
4. Watercolor; 146 x 103 mm.
5. Watercolor; 149 x 101 mm.
6. Inv. no. 201.1963 (oil on canvas; 259.7 x 390.1 cm); see Carolyn Lanchner, *Henri Matisse, New York, 2008*, repr. on front cover (in color).
7. Andrea Belag, letter to author (19 June 2011).
8. Hilary Spurling, *Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse, the Conquest of Color, 1909–1954*, New York, 2005, pp. 48–49.
9. Oil on canvas; 177.8 x 114.3 cm.
10. Jack Flam, ed., *Matisse on Art*, Berkeley, 1995, p. 16.
11. Watercolor; 146 x 104 mm.
12. Oil on canvas; 132 x 96.5 cm.
13. Watercolor; 149 x 104 mm.
14. Oil on canvas; 114.3 x 96.5 cm.
15. Oil on linen; 55.8 x 76.2 cm.
16. Watercolor; 149 x 104 mm.
17. Watercolor on paper; 149 x 104 mm.
18. Oil on canvas; 114.3 x 96.5 cm.
19. Oil on canvas; 114.3 x 96.5 cm.
20. Belag, letter to author (19 June 2011).
21. Ibid.
22. All watercolor; approx. 146 x 103 mm.