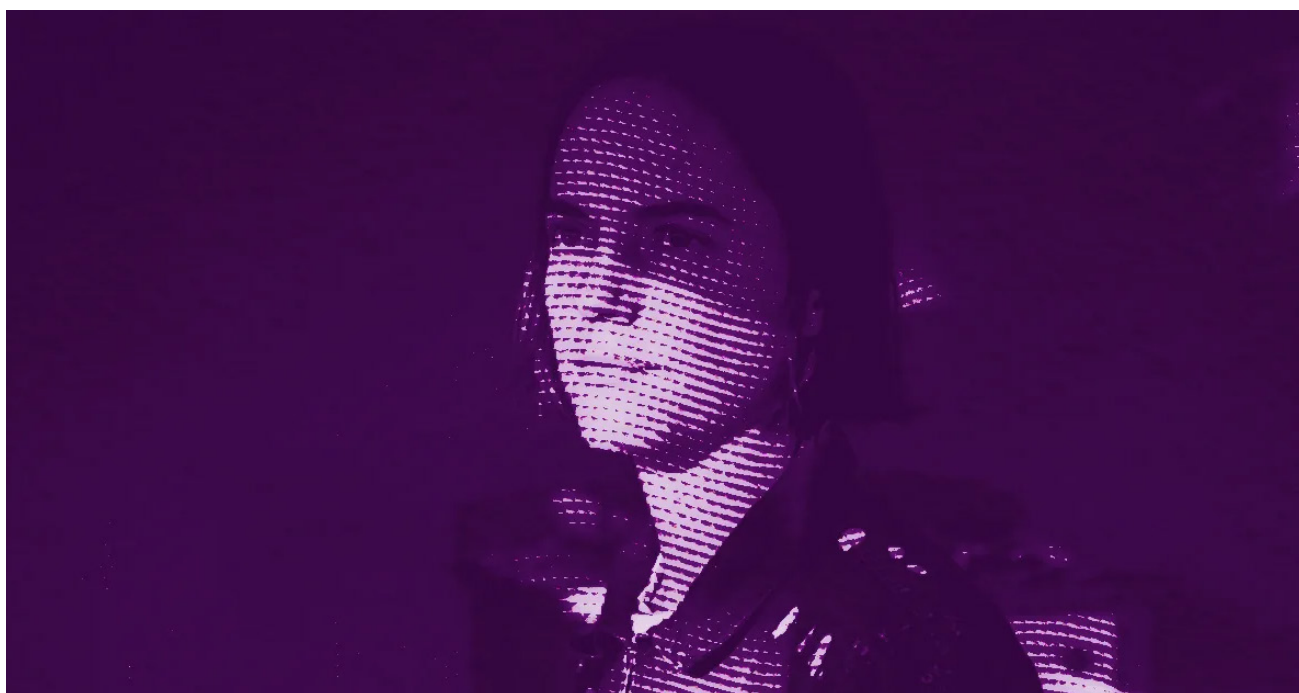


Marley Freeman: Weaving Color in Painting



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Marley Freeman constructs her paintings through successive layers of gesso, acrylic, and oil, in a gesture inherited from her time working in textile mills. Her pictorial vocabulary, made up of organic forms close to figuration without ever fully becoming it, owes as much to the loom as it does to the contemporary poetry that gives her canvases their names.

Listen to me carefully, you bunch of snobs: there is an American painter who, for fifteen years, has refused to choose between the warp and the image, and this obstinacy deserves our sustained attention. Marley

Freeman, born in 1981 in Lynn, Massachusetts, now divides her time between New York and the Berkshire Hills, where she maintains two separate studios that she drives to almost every week. She pursued a course of study that was anything but incidental: first at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, then at the Milton Avery Graduate School of Arts at Bard College, where she earned her degree in 2011. But reducing her path to an academic line would mean missing the essential point, because before picking up a brush, Marley Freeman spent nearly a decade in textile mills, handling jacquard fabrics and dobby cloths whose internal structure would, years later, permeate her entire practice of painting.

One might believe that this double life, first as a spinner and then as a colorist, is merely a biographical anecdote, a simple detail to slip into a catalog entry. It is nothing of the sort: it is precisely in this tension between two worlds that the question running through her entire body of work resides. How can a practice inherited from a declining industry be redeployed through the solitary gesture of painting? Two paths make it possible to approach this question without ever exhausting it: literature, which sheds light on the way Marley Freeman names and thinks about her paintings, and sociology, which restores the economic and familial soil from which her work emerged.

The artist herself places her method firmly on the side of matter: “pigments have their own ways of acting” [1], she confides, and this sentence alone indicates that nothing in her work is decided in advance. These are the two paths, the page and the family studio, that we will follow, with the rigor demanded by a body of work as patient as hers.

Literature, or the art of naming without closing off

Let us begin with literature, since it is what gives each of Marley Freeman’s paintings its name and, often, its direction of reading. For about a decade now, the artist has made a habit of drawing her titles from poetry and prose rather than inventing them from scratch. In this way, she borrows from authors as different as Otto Dix, Bernadette Mayer, Agnes Martin, and Susan Howe, whose line gave its name to the New York exhibition “no when,” presented at Karma in spring 2025. This gesture is not a simple tribute: it places the painting within a chain of meanings that extends beyond it in every direction.

When Marley Freeman titles a monumental canvas nearly six meters wide “only his desire kept him from fleeing” (2025), the viewer is invited to search, within the twists of color, for a narrative subject that is never quite there. Painting then becomes a way of holding a sentence at a distance, making it float above a surface that refuses to illustrate it literally. By contrast, one thinks of the way a poem closes in on itself without ever exhausting its meaning; Marley Freeman proceeds in a comparable manner, except that she trades the verse for the brushstroke.

The title “no suffering is unnecessary” (2024), given to a composition with lyrical, offbeat forms, works in the same way: it explains nothing, but it provides direction, like a key one might turn without being certain which lock it opens. This practice of borrowed titles finds a concrete echo in her collaboration with the poet Anselm Berrigan, who once sent her a list of titles that she subsequently matched, one by one, with the paintings in her exhibition “Park Closes at Midnight” (2019). The artist herself has recounted this episode as a collaboration in the fullest sense of the term, in which the text sometimes precedes the image rather than following it.

Such a reversal is interesting: in the history of Western painting, the title is almost always secondary, added afterward to name what already exists on the canvas. With Marley Freeman, the order can be reversed, and the sentence sometimes becomes the painting's first brushstroke, even before the brush approaches it. This permeability between the arts also explains why the poet Eileen Myles chose, in 2023, to compose an entire collection in direct response to the artist's paintings. This is not a simple illustrated preface, but a dialogue between two practices that respond to one another without either being subordinated to the other, as the artist herself confirms when she states: "the only way to work through her ideas is to paint through them" [2].

It is worth noting, moreover, that the painting "See Past" (2019), a portrait of the photographer Janice Guy, also plays on the ambiguity of its title: seeing the past, or seeing beyond, in a language where both readings coexist without ever being resolved. The canvas "Ampersand" (2018) pushes this logic even further: the title refers to a typographical sign, one that links two words without conflating them, and as one observes the composition, it becomes clear that this sign of connection aptly summarizes the artist's entire method. Two human figures and a cat are arranged there in chromatic configurations rather than within a fixed narrative, as though the brush were conjugating rather than describing. This way of holding two orders together, the text and the color, without ever allowing the first to command the second constitutes one of the most recognizable features of her practice. There is a lesson in reading as much as in painting here: accepting that a title opens up a space of meaning rather than closing it off. To shed light on this gesture, one might invoke the old idea that a well-made work must unite its part with its whole in a proportional relationship, a notion that the novelist James Joyce formulated in these terms in the pages devoted to formal beauty. Marley Freeman seems to have internalized this lesson without ever theorizing it explicitly: each area of color, each borrowed title, maintains with the whole a relationship of necessity that owes nothing to chance.

The painting "give this sea a name" (2024), with its flashes of ochre, azure blue, and magenta, illustrates this economy: to name the sea is already to limit it, to contain it within a syntax that suddenly makes it possible to look at. We then realize how much the artist works less as an illustrator of texts than as an attentive reader of their power of suggestion. She never seeks to translate a poem into an image, which would be a complete misreading of her approach, but to bring to life, in pictorial matter, the same productive hesitation that a good line of poetry knows how to sustain.

It is precisely this hesitation that distinguishes her work from pure illustration and connects it to a much older literary tradition, one in which the name sometimes precedes the thing and brings it into existence in advance. One might object that this practice of borrowed titles is merely a gallery affectation, a convenient way of dressing abstract canvases in an added layer of mystery. But the consistency of the process, repeated from exhibition to exhibition for more than a decade, disproves this lazy reading and reveals, on the contrary, a fully deliberate working method.

The sociology of a spinning mill turned into a studio

It is now necessary to leave the library and enter the family workshop, because Marley Freeman's work can only be fully understood in light of a precise economic history: the decline of the American textile industry in the second half of the 20th century. The artist's father, who came from a working-class background in the Boston area, began collecting antique fabrics in the 1970s, at a time when no one was

interested in them yet. Back then, fabric served at most to cover furniture; it had not yet acquired the status of an object worthy of attention, a status that Marley Freeman and her father would help restore. This collecting activity, born of economic necessity rather than dilettantish taste, eventually formed a considerable collection, now housed in the Los Angeles area and known as Textile Artifacts.

Marley Freeman herself began working at the age of nineteen in New York mills specializing in jacquard and dobby weaves, before one of her employers advised her to consider another professional future. She recounts it plainly: “I didn’t understand it then, but the industry was collapsing” [3], she recalls, a sentence that by itself sums up the dismay of an entire generation of textile workers. This experience of manufacturing work, far from being a mere biographical detail, shaped a way of seeing: that of an artist who knows how much an object’s value depends on the collective gestures that produced it, and how easily those gestures can disappear within a generation.

The sociology of work makes it possible here to understand something beyond the family anecdote: it sheds light on why Marley Freeman insists on making her own gesso, pigments, and mediums, in a gesture that rejects the division of labor characteristic of the industry she left behind. Every tube of oil paint she buys, often secondhand, comes from a resale market she appreciates for its unpredictable nature, as if she wanted to recover, in the studio, some of the chance that industrial production was specifically designed to eliminate. The same logic can be observed in her approach to scale: most of her paintings fit within a limited format, restricting the amount of material consumed at every stage of production, from the stretcher frame to the final shipment to the gallery. This choice is not an aesthetic renunciation; by other means, it extends an ethic of restraint acquired through contact with a sector in which every centimeter of fabric mattered.

The more generously sized canvases, such as “a self area” (2021) and “ones former other one” (2021), both approaching one square meter, thus appear as deliberate exceptions rather than as a sought-after norm. The small piece “tuned to existence” (2021), barely larger than a postcard, instead condenses this economy of means into an almost calligraphic gesture, in which pictorial energy seems compressed into a deliberately restricted space. This attention to material connects with a broader concern that Marley Freeman shares with the gallery representing her in New York, which documents year after year her efforts to limit travel, reuse materials, and avoid pouring even the smallest amount of pigment down the drains in her studio. Here we encounter a properly sociological dimension of contemporary artistic practice, in which the question of material production intersects with the broader issue of collective responsibility in the face of resource depletion.

It would be naive to reduce this concern to a communications strategy; on the contrary, it is directly continuous with a childhood spent watching her father repair, sort, and circulate objects rather than throw them away. The artist’s recent collaboration with her own family business, presented in 2026 at a fair in Los Angeles, illustrates this continuity in an almost literal way: the paintings there engage in dialogue with antique fabrics from the same collection assembled by her father.

The canvas “Jinx Gold” (2025), hung alongside a European jacquard velvet from the 1920s, does not quote this fabric, but extends its constructive logic, patch against patch, in a pictorial syntax inherited from the loom. We can then grasp how deeply the sociology of deindustrialization, far from being an

abstract framework imposed from outside, constitutes the concrete matrix from which her entire formal vocabulary proceeds. This matrix is also visible far from the canvas itself, when Marley Freeman created, in 2023, a series of fused-glass stained-glass windows for a former deconsecrated Catholic church in Thomaston, Maine, transformed for the occasion into a summer outpost of Karma gallery. The piece “ice glistens” (2023), mounted directly on one of the building’s windows, captures the light of a rainy summer and returns it to the floor in the form of a shifting halo of color, as if the stained glass were rediscovering, through another material, the logic of layering characteristic of her painted canvases.

The very choice of glass, a material shaped by the successive fusion of colored layers, extends the vocabulary of weaving without detour: layers are superimposed, pressed, and left to the chance of firing to determine part of the final result. Two more recent canvases, “habit of vigilant fear” (2024) and “speaks with his whole body” (2025), both from the exhibition “no when,” develop this same economy of repeated gestures, in which color accumulates through successive layers rather than through a single, definitive stroke.

For her, the act of painting therefore does not break with the work of the family workshop; it extends its memory through other means, in a craft that has changed its name without entirely changing its nature. It would be wrong to reduce this continuity to a nostalgic stance directed toward a finished past embellished in retrospect. On the contrary, it involves present, everyday work, measurable even in the choice of materials and the length of the journeys between the artist’s two studios. She expresses it herself with disarming lucidity: “small industries do not seem likely to return anytime soon” [4], and it may be this acute awareness of a loss that gives her painting its quiet gravity.

What ultimately remains between the pages of a book and the shelves of a textile mill, if not the conviction that Marley Freeman has succeeded in transforming two inheritances into a single working discipline? She does not illustrate literature, nor does she document the economic history of textiles; she allows these two worlds to work within her, silently, until they surface in a form that belongs only to painting. This may be her rarest gesture: understanding that one can inherit a craft without repeating it, and inherit a text without illustrating it. Her painting proceeds through patience, like a fabric constructed thread by thread, never yielding to the temptation of a spectacular gesture that would quickly make one forget the slowness of the craft. It would be wrong to see in it a simple nostalgia for a vanished craft: it is rather a demanding reformulation that acknowledges the disappearance of an industrial world in order to preserve, by other means, its rigor and attention to detail.

One question remains, and it deserves to be asked without rushing to answer it: can a painting truly carry the memory of vanished manual labor without reducing itself to an act of commemoration? Nothing is less certain, and it is precisely within this uncertainty that Marley Freeman situates her work, rejecting both pure decorative abstraction and the dutiful reconstruction of a lost know-how. Each of her canvases stands on this narrow line, between the literary naming that opens up meaning and the memory of working people that holds it in place. This is undoubtedly why her work continues to interest institutions as diverse as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which have chosen to welcome into their collections a body of work that sacrifices none of its complexity in order to become more legible. There is, in this quiet persistence, something that goes beyond the question of style alone to touch on an ethics of work: painting slowly, in an era that has ceased to value

slowness, amounts to formulating a silent objection to the general acceleration of things. Marley Freeman never puts it in these terms, but each of her canvases murmurs it with a constancy that commands respect. You may continue searching this painting for a story to tell from beginning to end, and you may take the opportunity to visit her current exhibition at Parker Gallery [5] to see more clearly; you will find only a patient weaving of references and gestures, stubbornly refusing to be summed up in a single sentence, which may ultimately be the fairest definition one can give of a work that is still alive.

Notes

- [1] Francesca Aton, “Marley Freeman on Time and Spontaneity,” ARTnews, June 19, 2019.
- [2] Ocula, exhibition listing for “Marley Freeman: no when,” Karma, May, July 2025.
- [3] Katie White, “Marley Freeman Is Making Abstraction Cool Again,” Artnet News, June 9, 2025.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Exhibition at Parker Gallery in Los Angeles, “worthless serpentine,” from September 12 to October 31, 2026