

RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY (detail), 2010
 AN AMERICAN GODDESS: IN FEMALE HISTORY, 2010
 CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD: AN UNCOMMON DIALOGUE, 2010
 SEA ROMANCE AND THE BIBLE, 2010
 BECOMING A WOMAN OF GOD, 2010
 FAITHFUL WOMEN AND THEIR BROTHERS, 2010
 READING FOR THE LOST, 2010
 FAITHFUL HOUSEWIVES: HOW THEY NEEDED THE LIVES OF HEAVENS, 2010
 THE MYSTICAL CITY, 2010
 THE ONE WHO IS BEING, 2010
 THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD, 2010
 DECISION MAKING AND THE WILL OF GOD, 2010
 WHAT HAPPENED TO THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS, 2010
 THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS, 2010
 CANT YOU TALK TO GOD, 2010
 THE GODS OF AMERICA, 2010
 GODS UNFOLDING BATTLE PLAN: A FIELD MANUAL FOR ADVANCING THE KINGDOM, 2010
 REASON, FAITH, AND REVOLUTION: DISCOVERING GOD AS A PERSONAL FRIENDSHIP, 2010
 THE ESSENTIAL WORDS OF GOD, 2010
 THE ELOHIM OF AMERICA, 2010
 HOW TO TALK TO GOD, 2010
 A VOICE OF HEART: UNDEAD AND ALIVE, 2010
 I REALLY WANT TO CHANGE... SO I TALK TO GOD, 2010
 HOW YOU CAN BE LIKE GOD, 2010
 PRAYERS: THE ART OF BEING WITH GOD, 2010
 WOODS OF GOD: HEALING OUR SPIRIT, 2010
 QUESTIONS (PART I): FIFTY-ONE RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD, 2010
 FINDING AN ANSWER, 2010
 THE GODS EXPERIMENT: HOW SCIENTISTS DISCOVERED GOD, 2010
 GODS GOATS: HEALING OUR SPIRIT, 2010
 GREAT GODS: HEALING OUR SPIRIT, 2010
 THE GODS OF AMERICA, 2010
 HOW ON EARTH DID I GET HERE, 2010
 JESUS AND THE BIBLE, 2010
 DEATH OF THE BIBLE, 2010
 MOMENTS TOGETHER FOR INTERLUDE: GODS AND SPIRITUALITY, 2010

MARTIN BRIEF

(Born in 1966 in Chicago. Lives and works in St. Louis)

Martin Brief's work has appeared in solo and group exhibitions nationally and internationally, including exhibitions in New York, Paris, Zurich, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. In addition, his work is in several public collections, including the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson and the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts in Honolulu. Martin is currently an Assistant Professor at Saint Louis University.

Cover image:
Non Fiction (detail), 2010
 Ink on paper, 72 x 20 inches.
 Courtesy of the artist

INVITING GOD IN: SCRIPTURAL REFLECTIONS
 ENCOUNTERS WITH GOD: IN QUEST OF ANCIENT
 'ER FOR ALL WHO SEEK GOD
 IT AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD
 MISTER GOD, THIS IS ANNA
 GOD IN THE WHITE HOUSE: IS GOD TO BLAME? MOVING BE
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 THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD
 REFLECTIONS ON THE GOD DEBATE
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 TREASURING GOD IN OUR TRADITIONS
 UNDERSTANDING HOW GOD SHAPES SPIRITUAL, LEA
 THE ORGANIC GOD
 GOD CHICKS; LIVING LIFE AS
 SEEKING GOD: THE WAY OF ST. BENE
 THE GOD VIRUS: HOW RELIGION
 CITIES OF GOD: THE REAL STORY OF I
 HANGE... SO, HELP ME GOD
 GOD AT WAR: THE BIBLE +
 IDE OPEN: LOOKING FOR GOD IN POPULAR CULTURE
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 IS THAT REALLY YOU, GOD? HEARING THE VOICE
 CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD: AN UNCOMMON DIALOG
 PUTTING GOD ON THE GUEST LIST. U.

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Religion & Spirituality (detail), 2010
 Ink on paper, 72 x 20 inches.
 Courtesy of the artist



1 — Main Galleries

Great Rivers Biennial 2010

Martin Brief

Amazon God

Martin Brief's work explores the way that language, thought, and information relate to contemporary culture and the creation of self. His work is characterized by precision and alteration, as he takes robust sources of information and translates them into images with only traces of their former selves. His process of obscuring and renewing textual data presents us with new ways of experiencing networks of information. Brief presents a new suite of large-scale drawings at the Contemporary.

LAURA FRIED: Martin, your current project attends to the seemingly infinite catalog of the word "God" as it appears in titles for sale on Amazon.com. Spanning diverse literary genres—from "nonfiction" to "religion and spirituality" and even to "cooking"—this registry

becomes a stream of textual data on large-scale sheets of paper. Could you describe your project?

MARTIN BRIEF: Language has its limitations. Attempting to describe God using language is an absurd proposition and yet it is one that has been tried *ad nauseam*. This project is my foray into this Sisyphean task but with the acknowledgement (or perhaps the outright intent to demonstrate) that this is a fool's errand. My interest lies in the question of what happens if we reconfigure language and emphasize its role as form. I use very small type in my drawings because it allows language to transform into abstract form. This creates a synthesis of the two systems of description; line becomes language and language becomes line. These pieces never fully settle into one system or the other. In the end, this "portrait" of God transcends its linguistic armature.

FRIED: Could you describe your process in the studio?

BRIEF: This project began when I became curious about what a search for the word "God" on Amazon.com would yield. The result from the book department was around 700,000 items. I don't

know what anyone else's response to this would be, but I found it irresistible, and my immediate instinct was to collect and use all 700,000 titles. I appreciate a challenge and can handle tedious tasks, but definitively amassing every book title seemed impossible. Ultimately I built my project around Amazon's category structure and chose to use a representative number of titles rather than the complete catalog. This allowed me to maintain some sense of the enormity of the endeavor, while making it manageable enough to complete in one lifetime. The arrangement of the titles developed very naturally. I wanted the word "God" to be the focal point of the drawings and it seemed like a logical, if not obvious, choice to arrange the titles by aligning the word into a straight vertical line. This arrangement unexpectedly created a graph-like form that placed "God" at the center as a mean value that all of the information would be measured against.

FRIED: I have come to read this series of works as endurance tests on a micro scale. How did you reach this point in your practice?

BRIEF: Endurance test is a

great description. I found it to be more a test of mental endurance than physical, although there is a physical component. My previous projects involved a similar kind of practice, although the timeline for this project forced me to work more hours per day and more days per week. At one point, I was able to spend a few weeks devoted almost exclusively to it. Transcribing book titles for six to eight hours a day for two weeks in silence proved to be an intense experience.

FRIED: I wonder if you could elaborate on how your relationship to this loaded signifier (the word "God") has changed as you have developed these works.

BRIEF: I was interested in getting a broad sense of God through the books written on the subject. Admittedly, by using Amazon my search was impacted by market forces, and the commodification of God became readily apparent. In this context, God is used in association with every conceivable endeavor, from dating to money management, with books suggesting these can be done "God's way." I think what I see most clearly from this project is quite simply this: God has been and will likely always be ineffable,

amorphous, and for sale.

FRIED: What have previous projects looked like?

BRIEF: Drawing and language have been at the center of my practice for the past four or five years. In the *Dictionary* and *Newspaper* series, I eliminated the text, instead relying on the visual patterns created by the text. In the former, I am creating one drawing for each page of the dictionary by tracing the outline of the columns of text on each page. In the latter, I filled in all of the o's in the text on the front page of randomly selected issues of the *New York Times*, revealing a similar sequence of dots in each drawing. In the *Artforum Series*, I began to use text as the raw material for the drawings, allowing it to function as both language and abstract form. For this project, I collected all of the names from each issue of *Artforum* magazine for an entire year. I made one drawing for each issue, rewriting the names line by line to create a 10.5" square matching the size of the magazine.

FRIED: Could you describe your relationship to cataloguing, taxonomies, classification ... and how this endeavor is manifest in

your nearly abstract, seismologic drawings?

BRIEF: Cataloguing is about control and, for me, the illusion of control. Similar to the idea that myths help to explain the unexplainable, these types of catalogues bring a sense of order to what can never be ordered. In the end, the form of the drawing relies on the order the titles appear on Amazon, the length of the titles, and how much of the title falls to the left or right of the word God. These uncontrollable factors determine the formal aspects of the drawing. Within the tight controls of the process, chaos prevails.