



Helen Frankenthaler

In the pantheon of revered artists that constitutes

the essential canon of Provincetown's unique contribution to art history in America, the name Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) feels more distant, locally, than it deserves to be. Our focus on Frankenthaler in this issue explores the artist's continuing inspiration for contemporary artists: Angela Dufresne's passionate examination-by-alert-eye of Frankenthaler's painting *Holocaust*, about which she spoke spontaneously into Jennifer Liese's tape recorder while facing the work in situ at the Art Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design; Bonnie Clearwater's account of her experience working with Frankenthaler to select a survey exhibition of works on paper for the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, Florida; and Mira Schor's interpretation of the political, sexual, and competitive issues that Frankenthaler faced as a woman navigating the male-dominated world of the Abstract Expressionists. Finally, we show the ongoing influence of the artist's work in a profile on Jeannie Motherwell, Frankenthaler's stepdaughter and Robert Motherwell's daughter, in whose work the family and artistic legacy continues.

Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown, the exhibition on view at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum from July 6 through September 2, is devoted to works done by Frankenthaler during more than a decade of summers she spent living and working in Provincetown after her marriage to Robert Motherwell in 1958. Lise Motherwell, a stepdaughter of the artist and President of PAAM, curated the show with Elizabeth Smith, Executive Director of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation in New York. It is one of the largest exhibitions in PAAM's history and makes vivid the visceral impact of Provincetown on the artist's work and person, including as it does many photographs of this legendary art-world couple at work and at play.

Earlier this year, Douglas Dreishpoon, Director of the Helen Frankenthaler Catalogue Raisonné, moderated a closed roundtable discussion at the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation that focused on the dynamic artistic relationship between Frankenthaler and Motherwell. Excerpts from this conversation follow.

— CB

(facing page) Helen Frankenthaler in her Provincetown studio "in the woods," summer 1968; *Summer Banner*, 1968 (upside down), is in the background; Frankenthaler is holding *Spices*, 1968; and in the foreground is *Summer Core*, 1968.

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Helen Frankenthaler's Provincetown Years

A Roundtable Discussion Featuring Douglas Dreishpoon, Jack Flam, Lise Motherwell, Katy Rogers, Clifford Ross, and Elizabeth Smith

When the artists Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell married in New York City on April 6, 1958, Motherwell had been summering on Cape Cod for the past few years. He felt at home on the Cape, with its Mediterranean light and laid-back lifestyle, far removed from the bustling canyons of Manhattan. It's not surprising that he would want to share such a special place with his bride, who had previously walked the narrow streets of this Portuguese fishing town during the three-week stint she studied with Hans Hofmann in the summer of 1950. Nine years later, after spending their honeymoon summer of 1958 in Europe, she and Motherwell began spending their summers together on the Cape, initially in Falmouth, where they rented a summerhouse, and then in Provincetown, where, from 1960 to 1969, they spent some of the most productive times of their lives. During their first few years there, they set up studios, one above the other, in a rustic barn at Days Lumberyard. By 1964, both were painting in studios overlooking the bay at their newly constructed "Sea Barn" at 631 Commercial Street. In 1967, Frankenthaler moved again, this time to a studio in the woods, among the dunes, still close to the water.

Being an art-world couple, both painters shared friends, personal challenges, and aesthetic insights. Visits to each other's studio, to talk about work in progress, were no doubt part of an ongoing exchange. As to what was said at any given time, we may never know. What's apparent, though, looking at the paintings they produced during their thirteen years together, are the unmistakable affinities, the fruits of which have yet to be properly parsed out. With this objective in mind, a closed-session roundtable was convened at the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation on February 8, 2018. The participants included John Elderfield, Jack Flam, Lise Motherwell, Katy Rogers, Clifford Ross, Elizabeth Smith, and myself, though not everyone is quoted in the excerpts that follow. Working from a prepared outline of topics and questions, and constantly referring to slides of both artists' paintings, we discussed the subtle shadings of this artistic relationship. Those parts of the transcript germane to Provincetown are published here, edited and augmented where appropriate. The session reinforced our belief that the pictorial dimensions of this symbiotic relationship would make for an illuminating exhibition.

— DD



Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell at their Days Lumberyard studios, Provincetown, Massachusetts, summer 1961
COURTESY CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA © 1991 HANS NAMUTH ESTATE

DOUGLAS DREISHPOON: Our conversation about Helen and Bob brings us to the Cape, where many artists went for the summer to unwind. Compared to Long Island, the Cape was a different kind of place. I think about a painter during the 1960s, fleeing the mean streets of New York City for Provincetown Harbor, and what happens to one's consciousness with that shift of location. How long does it take to settle into another groove in a different locale? And how does location affect what you do as an artist? The Cape enabled a lot of socializing, visits and ongoing conversations, as the work got done. There were different schedules, too. Motherwell was nocturnal; Frankenthaler was more of a morning person. So the balancing of diurnal cycles is something else to consider.

LISE MOTHERWELL: The question about socializing is complicated. Helen writes about it and my father talked about taking a break from all the socializing in New York, not having a phone for many years, and people only being able to contact them by telegram or letter. There were certainly, on occasion, dinner parties and cocktail parties. A lot of the people they socialized with were from New York, not from Provincetown. Helen probably thought Provincetown was provincial, not intellectually stimulating enough, given the kind of social echelon she was used to. It wasn't until she started to meet some of the people in town that she started to talk about Provincetown as a place she could connect with. So it's unclear how much socializing was actually happening. But, certainly, I think they both protected their time. There was a rule in

the house. If somebody was in town visiting, Helen would say to them, “See you at seven thirty for dinner.” The message was, you’re on your own until seven thirty, which gave her time to paint. Dad would go to the studio after dinner and stay up until two or three in the morning. They both guarded those times. The only time we kids had to be home was at one o’clock, for lunch, when they’d both be there and available.

DD: Was there swimming as well? Was swimming part of the daily ritual?

LM: Oh, there was lots of swimming. I remember Helen teaching us how to swim. She used to take us not only to the beach in front of the house, but also to the ponds in Wellfleet, where we got professional lessons—so-called professional lessons. She swam twice a day in front of the house and was always a very strong swimmer. My father was not a good swimmer, so he didn’t swim much. In fact, we always wondered if he was going to make it. [laughter] We always hoped that the boat they owned wouldn’t sink. He always got boats that couldn’t sink. I thought that was a good plan.

ELIZABETH SMITH: We’ve uncovered something interesting in our research for the show at PAAM [the Provincetown Art Association and Museum] on Helen’s Provincetown work. There are a number of paintings based on banner-like imagery—hanging flags and banners Helen may have seen on Commercial Street and on the boats.

LM: Dad was a Francophile. So was Helen. The French and Italian flags are banner flags, simple and uncomplicated. My father wanted to hang the French flag in Provincetown, and did, above the American flag, I believe, until someone told him that it was illegal and he needed to switch them, with the American flag on top. So he took the French flag down and kept the American flag up. I never thought of my father as being



Summer Insignia, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 95 by 85¼ inches
PRIVATE COLLECTION

PHOTOGRAPH © 2011 CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LIMITED

very political. He always told us that his paintings were not political. But how can you paint a series of 170 paintings called *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* and not be politically inclined? Still, he insisted that his paintings were apolitical. And yet he flew the American flag in Provincetown every summer. It hung outside the house all the time, flapping in the wind. The neighbors would go crazy because it made so much noise. There’s

a photograph of the flag being put outside the window for the Fourth of July. Now it seems so patriotic in a way that I don’t equate with either one of them. There was also the Portuguese Festival and the Blessing of the Fleet, rituals that he connected with, as did Helen. The banners were potent symbols.

ES: And they were symbols that captivated their visual imaginations. In Helen’s case, there are a number of paintings—*Summer Banner* (1968), *Summer Insignia* and *Hurricane Flag* (both 1969)—titled after flags. She often titled things after the fact, particularly when there was a visual reference. It points to the environment of Provincetown as a tangible, generative influence.

LM: Provincetown, even with all the AbEx people who came to study with Hofmann or who had been through Hofmann’s studio school, was very laid back. Compared to the Hamptons, it was completely low key. That’s what my father loved about it. It also had a history for him. He was married to my mother, Betty Little, there. He also married Maria Ferreira y Moyers there and he married Renate Ponsold in Wellfleet.

JACK FLAM: With the exception of Helen, he married each of his wives on the Cape.



Jeannie and Lise Motherwell’s lemonade stand, Frankenthaler second from right, 622 Commercial Street, Provincetown, Massachusetts, July 4, 1963 COURTESY OF THE DEDALUS FOUNDATION



PHOTOS BY BILL RIDENHOUR

Frankenthaler in her studio “in the woods,” Provincetown, Massachusetts, summer 1969

LM: Exactly. As I mentioned before, being in Provincetown was probably a hard shift for Helen, coming from a very social New York world, where she knew everybody, and then suddenly moving to this fairly remote place. I’m sure Dad tried to convince her. “Oh,” he might have said, “this is a place where we can be quiet, where we can actually get some work done without all the background noise of New York.” I’m sure Helen found the idea appealing. But I’m pretty sure it was hard for her once she got there. That’s probably why she invited friends and associates from New York to come and to hang out with them. When I look at all the work she did in Provincetown—not just what’s in the show at PAAM, but all the paintings she did during these years—there’s a phenomenal amount of good work. I read recently that after one particular summer—it may have been the summer she painted in the studio in the woods—they couldn’t fit some of the paintings into André Emmerich’s gallery that fall.

ES: That’s true. The canvases were too large.

LM: Knowing this makes me feel a little better, because we couldn’t get some of the same works into PAAM either—for the same reason. Making paintings that large, knowing they would be a challenge for anyone acquiring one, took a lot of

courage. She eventually acclimated to Provincetown’s culture, found a way to work there and to feel more at home by creating some kind of social life. It wasn’t East Hampton; there wasn’t a dinner party every night. Back then, there was little to do in Provincetown except your work. It really forced you to connect with your work and with the people around you, your family and close friends.

DD: What else about Provincetown fueled their creativity?

JF: The light. And, also, Bob used to refer to Provincetown as being very European. In a way, it is; in a way, it’s not. But what he was referring to was not only the radiant luster of the light, but a certain manner of living that was not quite as high-stressed as American life often is, especially in New York and vicinity. In 1978, Motherwell compared the light in Provincetown to that in the Greek islands, because, he said, “Like them, Provincetown is on a narrow spit of land surrounded by the sea, which reflects light with a diffused brilliance that is subtly but crucially different from the dry, inland light of Tuscany, the Madrid plateau, Arizona, or

the Sierra Madres in Mexico, where the glittering light is not suffused, but crystal clear.” Also, he loved to get suntanned. I remember, actually, at the end of one summer, he came back and he was really tan. I said, “You look great.” He said, “Anybody looks great with a suntan.” [laughter]

LM: He was a Californian who loved to drive.



PHOTO BY DAVID SMITH

Robert Motherwell and Frankenthaler in Fiat “Jolly” in front of their home, 622 Commercial Street, Provincetown, Massachusetts, August 1962

He always had a convertible and loved to drive with the top down, getting a tan. Provincetown was inexpensive then. Artists could afford to go there and to spend many months. During the sixties, many artists, writers, and professors took their families to the Cape and stayed for the whole summer. That doesn't happen much anymore; it's too expensive to stay for a full three months. Now people rent out their houses or go for only a week or two. It's a completely different proposition, in terms of getting into the rhythm of the place. If you're able to spend two or three months, you really have time to settle in, literally, and experience the many holidays and rituals—the Portuguese Festival and Blessing of the Fleet, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, the Business Guild Carnival and Parade—something you can't do if you're there for just one week. They had that opportunity.

With Helen's work, you have to talk about the environment, because it is so extraordinary. The color of the water changes depending on the sky. If the sky is blue, the water is a deep Mediterranean blue. If the sky is gray, so is the water. At low tide, you can see eelgrass and sandbars. A painting like *The Bay* (1963) reflects this. So do *Head of the Meadow* (1967) and *Hurricane Flag*. I don't even know what a hurricane flag looks like, what the colors are on it. I know that it hangs in Provincetown when there's a hurricane coming, and I can imagine Helen seeing it flapping around, with its swaths of color, and holding onto the image. In Provincetown, you can see the moon and the sun simultaneously coming up



The Bay, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 80 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 82 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches
DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS, MICHIGAN; FOUNDERS SOCIETY PURCHASE, DR. AND MRS. HILBERT H. DELAWTER FUND

PHOTO BY MIKE@MIKESTUDIO.ORG, COURTESY OF TURNER CONTEMPORARY, MARGATE, KENT, UK



The Human Edge, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 124 by 93 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART, SYRACUSE, NY; PURCHASED TO HONOR MAX W. SULLIVAN, DIRECTOR, ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF THE NEW BUILDING, PC 68.23; COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF THE EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART, SYRACUSE, NY

over the horizon, which you can't in most places on the East Coast, because the sun sets in the west. There are extraordinarily beautiful phenomena, sights she may have internalized and reimagined. Then I think about my Dad's *Beside the Sea* series (1962) and the waves crashing against the breakers, all that motion and freedom. That's what summertime was about—being free.

CLIFFORD ROSS: Besides nature and life in Provincetown inspiring a looser and freer attitude for Helen and Bob, I think the security and thrill of their marriage during this period enabled them to explore new directions in their work—and to easily absorb influences from each other. If Helen's long suit was Dionysian abandon, Bob's might be seen as Apollonian, with a sure eye for structure. There's no doubt that Bob's *Beside the Sea* series leapt from the ocean outside their studios, but the *Lyric Suite* (1965), with its plumes of ink stained into paper, as well as the gestural passages in paintings like *Black and White* (1961) and *The Voyage: Ten Years After* (1960–1961/1962), make it impossible not to see Helen's impact. On the flip side, would Helen have painted *Swan Lake I* (1961) or *The Human Edge* (1967) without having been around Bob's paintings—and Bob? There are moments of poignant synergy. Summertime, landscape, and a relationship that fostered experimentation did a lot for both of them.

DD: If we're talking about their work, spontaneous process versus formal structure and how these played out between them, to my eyes, the bands in the bottom vector of the *Beside the Sea* series could refer to piers or breakwaters or to the ocean itself. As formal elements, similar bands begin to appear in Helen's work but in different and interesting ways. She seems to grab the idea and to develop it in her own way. She keys in on that part of the image, the nestling up of horizontals—perhaps personifying Provincetown—and carries these forward in a sequence of related works. Sometimes



Indian Summer, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 93½ by 93⅞ inches
HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, DC; GIFT OF JOSEPH H. HIRSHHORN, 1972

PHOTO BY CATHY CARVER, COURTESY OF THE HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, DC

he'd come back after Labor Day, I'd usually spend a few days seeing what he'd done and catching up. I was always impressed by what he brought back. Many of the works had a Provincetown feel to them, not only the blue paintings. So many of those paintings had a radiant tranquility.

KATY ROGERS: He talks about that, too, that you can tell the difference between a Greenwich painting and a Provincetown painting by the colors he used and the feel of them. In the late 1970s, he wrote, "In Provincetown, in summer the sunlit colors—cobalt and ultramarine blues, unmixed orange, white, purple, black shadows—plus a certain joy creeps into my works, just as, in winter, it becomes more somber, brutal, and atavistic." So it was definitely something he was cognizant of and working with. That tension between the darker and the lighter works, speaking both compositionally and emotionally, was central to his working process. His summer and winter works were separate but always in dialogue.

LM: Did he always say where something was painted? Or did you have to glean that from the titles? Because that's one of the things we struggled with as we chose the show for PAAM. Certain titles offered us clues as to where and when something was painted, but it wasn't always clear. And then there were others where it was obvious that they had been painted in Provincetown.

there are two bands, sometimes more. The number of bands is interesting to note. Who knows how artistic minds process what they see and then reenvision it. The reciprocity between Motherwell's *Beside the Sea* series and a painting like *Untitled* (1966), and Frankenthaler's *Buddha's Court* (1964), *Indian Summer*, *The Human Edge*, and *Flood* (all 1967), is a fascinating study of artistic affinity and formal transformation.

LM: The influence of Provincetown for my father may well have been the view through his studio windows and doors, awash with color and light. What always surprised me about Helen was that she could paint anywhere—in the woods, near the sea, even in a basement. She held recollections of places and things in her memory and body, as she said, "in her arms." In Provincetown, except for his studio at Days Lumberyard, my father always painted near the water, looking through windows and doors.

JF: I remember during the eighties, when your father came back from Provincetown with a lot of work that had a Mediterranean feel. Paintings such as *Gulfstream* (1980) and the earlier *Summer Open with Mediterranean Blue* (1974) are some of the most beautiful of the blue *Opens*. I was summering in Greenwich then, and when



Flood, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 124¼ by 140½ inches
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE WITH FUNDS FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART 68.12
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The Voyage: Ten Years After, 1960–1961 / 1962, oil and charcoal on canvas, 68¾ by 205¾ inches
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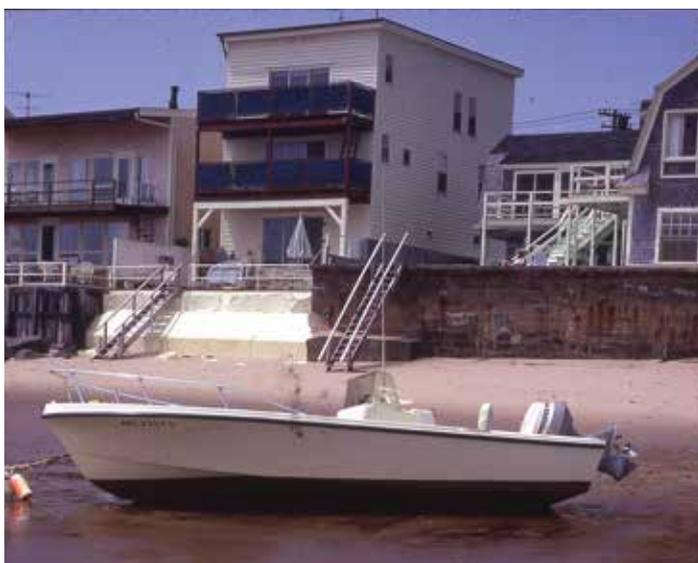
KR: He didn't always say where something was painted, but would regularly inscribe works with specific dates or locations.

JF: When he got back from Provincetown, he'd lay the paintings out in the studio, leaning them against the wall, in anticipation, among other things, of Larry Rubin [President of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.] coming to choose work. I would usually get there before Rubin. Everything was already laid out. In this instance, they were obviously Provincetown paintings, the fruits of a productive summer.

LM: At the end of the summer, I helped him take those same paintings out of his third-floor studio through the arched doors of Sea Barn. Because the Sea Barn was tall with a very narrow stairway, we hung the paintings from their stretchers on a pulley attached to a protruding beam like a Dutch house, and lowered them to the street. Imagine the sight of large Motherwell canvases swaying in the breeze as they descended to the ground! A bit reminiscent of Helen's banner paintings! Provincetown, with its extraordinary light, laid-back atmosphere, and community, was clearly an important influence on both Helen's and my father's work. The sheer size and number of works they created here capture the essence of Provincetown. While my father showed regularly at the Long Point Gallery and has had several exhibitions at PAAM, Helen's Provincetown paintings have never been exhibited here. Elizabeth and I are excited to bring these paintings back to Provincetown, where they originated and so rightfully belong. 📧



Beside the Sea No. 18, 1962, oil on paper, 29 by 23 inches
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Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell's motorboat moored at "Sea Barn," 631 Commercial Street, Provincetown, Massachusetts, summer 1968

DOUGLAS DREISHPOON is Director of the Helen Frankenthaler Catalogue Raisonné.

JACK FLAM is President & CEO of the Dedalus Foundation.

LISE MOTHERWELL is a retired psychologist, President of the Board of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Vice President of the Board of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, a daughter of Robert Motherwell, and a step-daughter of Helen Frankenthaler.

KATY ROGERS is Programs Director & Catalogue Raisonné Director at the Dedalus Foundation.

Artist CLIFFORD ROSS is Chairman of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation and Frankenthaler's nephew.

ELIZABETH SMITH is Executive Director of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation.

Everything Is Interdependent

Angela Dufresne on Helen Frankenthaler's *Holocaust*

In January, I met with artist Angela Dufresne at the RISD Museum, in front of Helen Frankenthaler's Holocaust, 1955. I'd noted in the paintings of both artists a similar combination of exuberance and apocalypse, and imagined Dufresne might share other affinities with Frankenthaler. I'd also heard Dufresne discuss paintings in student critiques at the Rhode Island School of Design before—she issues a torrent of observations from her awesomely widely read mind and viscerally knowing body, peppered with salty asides—and would take any excuse to do so again. Indeed, she had all kinds of insights, as her observations below, distilled from our conversation, attest.

Dufresne was on her way from New York to the Portland Biennial, which featured several portraits of friends she had painted at Skowhegan over the summer. She was just back from the second Women's March, for which she and about fifty artist friends in the group We Make America had spent days making "a giant Pussy Gate—a gate with cats on it—and loads of eagles, surfers, and blue waves, riffing on the Democratic Party midterm theme, 'ride the blue wave.'" She was also right in the middle of developing a solo show and performance for the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art about the centennial of the 1918 Armistice, which ended fighting between the Allies and Germans at the end of World War I, and "coming to terms with that anniversary and how it connects to everything that's going on politically now." Propped up on a dolly in collection storage, Holocaust, too, felt entirely of the present, vividly and disconcertingly so.

—Jennifer Liese

WHEN I WALKED UP to this painting, the first thing that came to mind for me is Gentileschi's beheadings or one of those Viennese floating heads of John the Baptist. You immediately think of violence, and not just because of the title—it's the liquidity of the paint, the sense of bodily fluids. I tend to pictorialize things, so even the signature becomes a part of that hideous bird's-eye view of the Battle of the Marne or the Allied troops landing on the beach at Normandy. To be able to syncopate the materiality of the painting with its meaning is so hard to do without being propagandist or metaphorical, but this painting marries materiality and pathos and lamentation in a way that's absolutely sublime. It isn't metaphorical, it's experiential.

I also think of the "goo" of feminist painting in Mira Schor's "Figure/Ground" essay, which I just reread, but that's looking through the lens of feminism, which we all know Frankenthaler never embraced. It was a different era, with different modes of survival for an artist, but in a way everything she did was feminist. In the *Painters Painting* documentary from the 1970s, she shows up as this badass, unapologetically arrogant, exuberant female in the midst of all these men. Unlike the men's paintings of the period, there's no critique of representation in this work, there's so much independence and liberty. *That* is feminist. The Helen Frankenthaler Foundation just gave a major grant to Skowhegan to make a brand-new studio. I was there last summer, and 65 percent of the artists there were people of color, and many did not come from elite institutions. So her success really does trickle down, to use a pun while looking at these drips. She didn't call herself a feminist, but her commitment to poetic revolutionary thinking was always there.

I'm also thinking of everything that Julia Kristeva ever wrote about abjection, from *Powers of Horror* on down. So—and this is also in hindsight, of course—everything about this painting is abject. The central shape feels as though it's been inverted, like in work by Dona Nelson or Amy Sillman, who, like me, also rotate their fields. That's abjection—being so removed from the body you don't know what's up or down. It's that unbelievable mystifying feeling, like, "Look how beautiful this is, but this is also the very thing that you shouldn't be looking at. This is *death*."

It's deeply primal, and while Frankenthaler would by no means be a fan of the Surrealists, it's highly indebted to them. I think many

young artists over the past decade and a half—and I would include myself—have embraced abstraction because they're super-aware that social media takes away our primal connection with each other. Collaging things together like this is a physical act; it's not cutting and pasting on Photoshop. That's the value of objects, and this is *such* an object. You could never feel that coppery color and that white floating over it on a screen.

Without having made a hundred different kinds of pours and knowing a hundred different ways to use a brush, this painting could not happen. You need emotional intuition and sensitivity and spontaneity, but a painting like this really comes from knowledge, from rehearsed, informed action, from strategic thinking and psychological observation and performance. It only works when all of this comes together. Everything is interdependent. The way the white sits on top of the messy gray creates light and an explosion of flesh. The white doesn't work without the brown area there next to the red. That red is reliant on the black that's oozing over it. These things are radically separate and totally interdependent. Understanding that takes making a lot of paintings. Difference and interconnectedness—it sounds like I'm talking about politics here.

That orange circle in the upper left corner is Barthes's punctum, the emotional center. It could be read in infinite ways. You could read it perspectively, for example, but I think of it as an oddly placed word that creates a conundrum that creates a quagmire—if it were a sentence, you know. It's also a tranquil, peaceful moment amid lots of turmoil, articulating something somewhat ambivalent, the possibility of beauty in all that madness. And that orangey color against all that blown-out sap green—that quiet, soft, nonviolent color relationship—does that, too. You can see where the orange has been painted over, so it probably came first, but the decision to keep it came last, so it's first *and* it's last. I'm speculating on that, but I'm pretty confident that's when it happened. The white strands I'm sure of: that's pouring and brushing with a lot of water and just kind of flinging, letting it sort of dangle. It's the full-on Pollock move, the stick in the bucket.

Do you know Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*? It's set in a near future where morality and ethics have gone threadbare. There's that



Holocaust, 1955, enamel, tube oil pigment, and turpentine on unsized cotton canvas, 68 3/8 by 54 inches
 THE ALBERT PILAVIN MEMORIAL COLLECTION OF 20TH-CENTURY AMERICAN ART 72.108; MUSEUM OF ART, RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN, PROVIDENCE

kind of “threadbareness” in this image—literally the threadbareness of the canvas, but also in the overly exposed nudity of the mark-making. The main character, Lauren, has this magical skill or illness called “feeler” or hyper-empathy, where if she sees somebody fall and bump their head she feels their pain. Like that, this image might train the person who encounters it to a higher level of empathy and civility. Lauren also poses as a man to survive, and starts to understand what it means to be not locked in a single gender, that we are something bigger than our individual packaging. This is fundamentally the trans idea, that we’re all unique, and gender is just a construct we make. To queer something is to overstep a boundary—the ontology or the logic of what a thing is doing—and this painting is doing that, too.

I’m forever indebted to Frankenthaler. It’s a very dark time, with this backlash against the feminism that Frankenthaler, like many of her generation, didn’t embrace, but that she in fact made possible. She laid

the groundwork. She also found all these different methods to speak in ways that are unspoken. So many of the painters of her time feel design-y or robotic. They have a way of filling the space and creating central forms. There’s no compositional stability in her paintings, no image strategy. It’s like Miles Davis’s *Sketches of Spain*—no melody, only tonal harmonies and dissonances. She’s tireless. Her appetite, her sense of adventure about what you can do in a painting, is infinite. ❏

ANGELA DUFRESNE is a Brooklyn-based artist and Associate Professor in Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design. Her work—which she has described as articulating “non-paranoid, porous ways of being in a world fraught by fear, power, and possession”—has been exhibited at MoMA PS1 and the Hammer Museum, among other institutions, and she has received awards and residencies including a 2016 Guggenheim Fellowship and two Fellowships at the Fine Arts Work Center.

Helen Frankenthaler Remembered

By Bonnie Clearwater



PHOTO BY ROB MCKEEVER, COURTESY OF THE GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Flirt, 1995, acrylic on paper, 60½ by 89½ inches COURTESY OF THE HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, NEW YORK

Few artists ever make it into art history. Even fewer actually influence the direction of art itself. Helen Frankenthaler is one of those artists, recognized as a trailblazer of Modern painting. I was, therefore, greatly surprised when this legend initiated a plan for an exhibition with me. After visiting the Frank Stella exhibition that I had curated for the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, in 2000 (*Frank Stella at 2000: Changing the Rules*), she impishly inquired over lunch, “So when are you organizing my show?” We began hatching plans for the exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings on Paper (1949–2002)*, a career survey of her paintings on paper.¹

Over the next two years, I visited Frankenthaler at her home and studio in Darien, Connecticut, where we researched works for the exhibition, spending hours culling through piles of slides. As she held each slide up to the light, she would declare “this one is great” or “this one is not so good.” She would make these assessments so quickly and definitively that I was curious to know what gave her such confidence in her judgment. Where did this sense of competence originate? What was the source of her ability to create works of great critical merit that also simply delighted and engaged the viewer?

The answers to some of these questions are clearly rooted in her art education. Under the guidance of exceptional mentors—including Hans Hofmann and Paul Feeley, who sharpened her eye and intellect—Frankenthaler analyzed and absorbed the qualities of great art throughout history. She would thrill at the way the shadow defining a woman’s neck intersects with her shoulder in a Matisse drawing or the negative space between the limbs of a small Degas bronze nude. She painted color-fields

as vast as Turner’s sublime landscapes, then turned to mastering the murky vistas and darker palette of Whistler that enthralled her later in life. In her 2002 painting on paper, *From the Master*, she translated the highlight reflecting off the tip of the nose of a late Rembrandt self-portrait into a sparkling dab of paint that defines the point closest to the viewer.² In the delightful *Flirt*, 1995, Frankenthaler allowed a thin purple line to fling itself sideways like the dainty extended leg of Fragonard’s coquette in *The Swing* (ca. 1767).³ Describing herself as both a “traditionalist and renegade,” Frankenthaler knew how to contradict the rules of conventional compositions and still make a painting work.

During the course of my research, I made an observation that brought Frankenthaler a sense of closure in her relationship with the influential art critic Clement Greenberg. The two had been romantically involved in the 1950s, and she later regretted that he never wrote extensively about her work, with the exception of the significant mention in his well-known article on Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland in *Art International* (May

1960). Greenberg hailed Louis and Noland as among the few younger artists he considered to be serious candidates for major status. In order to justify his judgment, he demonstrated that the work of the two artists directly descended from that of Jackson Pollock. At this critical moment, Greenberg went on record to make a point, which he often made in conversation, that Frankenthaler's stain-painting technique played a seminal role as a link between Pollock and the two young color-field painters. Greenberg's observation is frequently excerpted in essays on Frankenthaler's work.

When I read the entire article, I was startled to realize that it was written as a partially veiled rebuttal to William Rubin's article "Younger American Painters," in a previous issue of *Art International* (January 1960), which was dismissive of the significance of Frankenthaler's work. While Rubin admired her technique and the beauty of her paintings, he felt they were not "accompanied by a sense of deep meaning in what is said." Greenberg, in his *Art International* article, ascribed a deeper meaning to her work by demonstrating that her stain technique was not a means to relinquish control of the painting, as Rubin contended, but was fundamental to the progress of Modern art as it opened up the possibilities in Pollock's work. Frankenthaler, in Greenberg's opinion, showed the way to eliminate the tactile element from painting—the stain technique made it possible for painting to achieve its purest form as the thinned pigments opened and expanded the picture plane. Moreover, in Greenberg's opinion, Frankenthaler's stain technique contradicted the illusion of pictorial space by emphasizing the literal, physical characteristics of the painting as a flat, opaque surface.

At the time I was working with Frankenthaler on the *Paintings on Paper* exhibition, her health was already deteriorating. When I shared with her how Greenberg's and Rubin's articles were connected, her face lit up. I like to think I helped at this moment to put to rest a disappointment from this important early relationship. Frankenthaler was always moving forward, testing herself, even changing her methods and medium. Although she had confined herself to working on paper for almost a decade, I was amazed that she had found the strength and desire to paint large-scale canvases once more.

While debates still arise about her place in the pantheon of Modern painters, for Frankenthaler, technique was never the end-all. The meaning in her painting comes from the intense emotional experience she brings to the work. Viewers respond because they sense a correspondence between a familiar order of space, image, and structure that is found in nature and the masterpieces of art history, even if the source is not immediately obvious or identifiable. The elusiveness of her sources, in fact, provides pleasure in itself, as the familiarity always seems just beyond grasp. ❧

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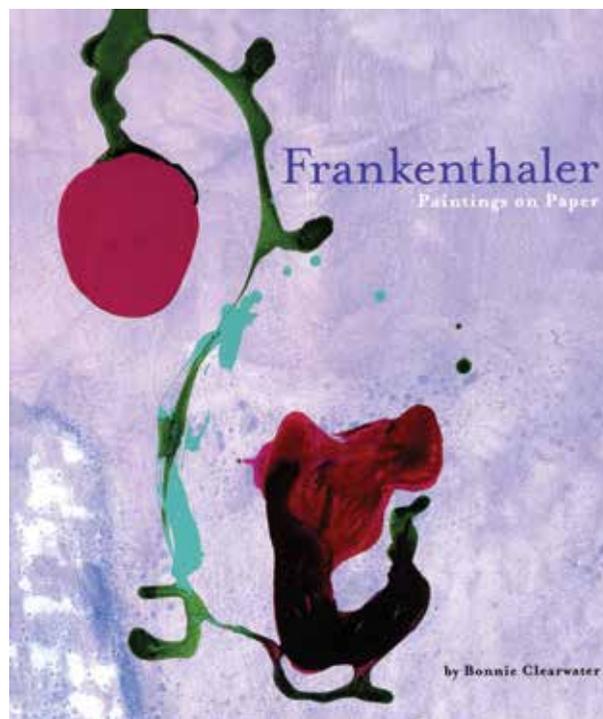
NOTES:

1. The exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings on Paper (1949–2002)* was first shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, from February 14 to June 8, 2003, then traveled to the Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh, from August 15 to October 26, 2003. Catalogue, with essay, by Bonnie Clearwater.
2. Frankenthaler described to me the thrilling characteristics of the Matisse



(above) *Fiesta*, 1973, acrylic on paper, 22¼ by 30¼ inches COURTESY OF THE HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, NEW YORK
(below) *Eve* (detail), 1995, on catalogue cover for Frankenthaler's works on paper retrospective, Miami Museum of Contemporary Art, February 14 to June 8, 2003

PHOTO BY TIM PYLE, LIGHT BLUE STUDIO, COURTESY OF THE HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION



drawing and the Degas bronze, which were in her collection (Henri Matisse, *Buste de Femme Au Collier*, 1922, charcoal on paper, 20¼ by 15¾ inches; Edgar Degas, *Woman Washing Her Left Leg*, 1896–1911, bronze, 6 by 4¾ by 6 inches), as well as her love for Turner's landscapes, the murky palette of late Whistler, and the late Rembrandt self-portrait (Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1659, oil on canvas, 33½ by 26 inches, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Andrew W. Mellon Collection).

3. I always meant to ask Frankenthaler about the potential connection between *Flirt* and Fragonard's *The Swing*, but never had the opportunity to discuss it with her. In my essay for *Frankenthaler: Paintings on Paper*, I observed how *Flirt*, and a few other paintings on paper from this period, such as *Aerie* and *Eve*, "contain elements of gentle humor and a playful sexuality that lift the spirit." I described how the "pink *Flirt* extends its organically growing branch to the bottom right of the composition as if to reach out and tickle the viewer." (Frankenthaler approved the text for the essay.)

Helen Frankenthaler, Unintentional Feminist

By Mira Schor

Gordon Parks's frequently reproduced photograph for *LIFE* magazine of Helen Frankenthaler seated barefoot on a painting on the floor of her studio, completely immersed in a sea of her paintings on floor and wall, with flowing blue paint the primary motif, is truly iconic. This photograph, published May 13, 1957, is on the same level of importance as an image and a symbol as Hans Namuth's transformational photographs of Pollock flinging paint on canvas laid on the floor of his studio. It is a beautiful photograph; the color is thrilling as is the pride of the artist in the world of her work. It is also an intriguing and alluring photograph of a young woman. But the very nature of the allure is also ironic from the point of a feminist interpretation—let's face it, she's young and pretty, she's barefoot, and she is on the floor in a pose of a woman in a harem, looking up provocatively at the male viewer. It is significant that photographer Parks posed her that way, and the published image is one of several different versions, with varied expressions.

Frankenthaler did not associate herself with the feminist movement of the 1970s. This is not unusual. Denial of feminism is a long-standing and depressing staple of women artists' biographies, including many of the women in major exhibitions such as *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles in 2007 (and PS1 MoMA in 2008), which featured artists associated with, or adopted by, feminist artists, historians, and critics interested in women artists and feminism. Nevertheless, noted women artists such as Alice Neel and Louise Bourgeois gave out mixed messages in the 1970s and later: they might distinguish themselves from the feminist movement while accepting the benefits of renewed and revitalized interest in their work because of it. Also, they couldn't repress their personal rage at having been subjected to disparagement, given faint praise, or ignored outright by the male-dominated art world and by the men in their personal lives. And, like any canny artist, they accepted interesting feminist analysis of their work in a strategic way, whether they agreed with it or not, because it enhanced their reputation and brought attention that eventually had results beyond the limits of the feminist world, in the "real" art world (of men).

Frankenthaler was one of several artists in the *LIFE* article "Women Artists in Ascendance: Young Group Reflects Lively Virtues of U.S. Painting."¹ That she was included, when she was only twenty-eight years old, indicates the level of fame she had already achieved as an artist. It was helpful that she came from a privileged background, had the best advanced education in the early postwar era, and had the financial wherewithal to have a studio in New York and the ability to focus on her work once she left college. She also was a very good painter and very ambitious in terms of her painting as well as her career. In her first years in the art world, she also just happened to be romantically involved with the most powerful art critic of the time, Clement Greenberg.

Nevertheless, her effort to distance herself from feminism needs to be seen in relation to how she was treated, and in one case one might well say betrayed, by the powerful male critics of the time, on unmistakably gendered terms. In her important essay "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Painting," Lisa Saltzman details how in the New York School, "art criticism turned these complex paintings into either heroic symbols of masculinity or denigrated emblems of femininity."² Saltzman quotes E. C. Goossen on Frankenthaler, writing in *Art International* in 1961: "Frankenthaler's painting is manifestly that of a woman. . . . Without Pollock's painting hers is unthinkable. What she took from him was masculine; the almost hard-edged, linear

splashes of duco enamel. What she made with it was distinctly feminine, the broad, bleeding-edged stain on raw linen. With this translation she added a new candidate for the dictionary of plastic forms, the stain."³ While Frankenthaler's most famous paintings—including the painting that established her place in history books, *Mountains and Sea*, from 1952—feature linear structural elements, Saltzman points out that what really interested contemporary male critics was the relationship of the stained areas to the female body and menstruation.

Saltzman also details Greenberg's betrayal of Frankenthaler. Having famously taken Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, two young painters from Washington, DC, to see Frankenthaler's new stain paintings in her studio without her presence,⁴ he began praising Louis's subsequent use of the pour-and-stain method in gendered terms that praised their hardness and sharpness, using language comparing them to ejaculation and giving them more praise than Frankenthaler's forms, which were now seen as accidental. Meanwhile, New York's other dominant art critic, Harold Rosenberg, praised artists like Pollock while implying that Frankenthaler was a passive conduit for her paint: "Apparently, Miss Frankenthaler has never grasped the moral and metaphysical basis of Action painting, and since she is content to let the pigment do most of the acting, her paintings fail to develop resistances against which a creative act can take place."⁵

Even though Frankenthaler distanced herself from feminism in the 1970s, she ultimately could not prevent generations of women artists from "reclaiming the stain" and embracing her work as a model for a feminist exploration of abstract painting, as well as Lynda Benglis's early floor-based poured painting as sculpture—itsself work that surely emerged from Frankenthaler's model. Subsequent generations of women artists have embraced ideas about liquidity, spillage, and stain as valuable metaphors for female embodiment, an interpretation that was exactly what Frankenthaler most wanted to distance herself from, given the misogynist critiques of her stains as essential rather than as aesthetic decisions in comparison to her male contemporaries' use of the same methods.

Katy Siegel's 2015 book "*The heroine Paint*" *After Frankenthaler* offers an exemplary revisionist history of Frankenthaler's work and documents the influence of her work among many artists, including Benglis, Dona Nelson, Cecily Brown, and Carrie Moyer. It is ironic that since the mid-'80s there has been a vigorous and often very divisive argument against such essentialist views of what constitutes femininity or even the body of a woman—the idea that biology is destiny and that what is essential



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, DC

Mountains and Sea, 1952, oil and charcoal on unsized, unprimed canvas, 86 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 117 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, NEW YORK, ON EXTENDED LOAN TO THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, DC

cannot be changed, thereby negating the possibility of any change in the oppressive or unequal conditions of women's lives, was roundly condemned. One result of this argument was that painting itself, the deployment of gooey or flowing matter, was seen as suspect: the "Pictures Generation" looked to photography and film in order to represent social construction of gender. That is, in fact, the basis of the return of women painters since the '90s to reclaim the influence of Frankenthaler.

All of which is to say that an artist ultimately can't control how her work is seen. Further, artists who try to control interpretation can end up limiting how their work is understood and discussed. It seems significant that some of the most interesting exhibitions of Frankenthaler's work have come after her death in 2011: for many, *Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler from 1950 to 1959*, at Gagosian Gallery in New York City in 2013, focusing on the work she did in her twenties, was a revelation—so much more vibrant and impressive for the scale, ambition, boldness, and skill of her work, at all stages of an incredibly speedy growth, than the more conventional and sometimes repetitive exhibition at MoMA in 1989, *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective*.

That Frankenthaler separated herself from feminism is completely understandable given the conditions of art reception and criticism when she entered the art world, yet it did not prevent women artists from taking her work as inspiration. Unfortunately, she also aligned herself in later years with some of the most conservative and flat out maliciously reactionary elements of the art and political world in the '80s, such as when she helped to eliminate the NEA critic's grant, during a period when senators like Jesse Helms were leading a campaign against artistic expression. Critic Robert Atkins noted these efforts in the *Village Voice* in 1991:

Despite the agency's stated mission to help foster art understanding, a vocal minority on the National Council—the chairman's presidentially appointed advisory group—spent much of the '80s lobbying against "anything that smell[ed] of criticism," as NEA fellow Ann McQueen put it in her 1990 report obtained by the *Voice*.

Comprising Joseph Epstein, Jacob Neusner, *New Criterion* publisher Samuel Lipman, and painter Helen (nary-a-good-review-since-'62) Frankenthaler, the council's neo-con cabal killed what it regarded as the left-leaning-critic's fellowships in 1983. (Some have suggested that the council's assault on critics was a dress rehearsal for the contemplated dismantling of the entire NEA.) By the late '80s, the National

Council's antipathy to criticism had grown so virulent that a rejection of a 1988 grant to the Center for Arts Criticism was actually overridden by Reagan-appointed chairman Frank Hodsoll. . . . More important, the intransigent anticriticism minority on the National Council is nearly history: Lipman's tenure ended in 1988; Neusner's, Epstein's, and Frankenthaler's terms were up in 1990, although the last two continue to serve pending replacement. While report-writer McQueen feels optimistic that criticism will be more broadly funded by the NEA of the '90s, she also observed that "I don't think they'll ever go back to individual grants for critics."⁶

Given how Greenberg and Rosenberg may be seen as having undervalued or denigrated her contribution to American art, this position is understandable on a personal (perhaps unconscious) level, yet the end of this grant had a real-world chilling effect on an occupation that is singularly unremunerative in the best of

times and yet crucial to a functioning art world. The fact that she aligned herself with some of the worst reactionaries in the American art world at the time is a painful reminder that good artists can have bad politics.

At the meeting of art and politics, artworks can contain political meanings that even the artist may not fully embrace, and even a great artist can sometimes make harmful decisions for complex reasons. But, ultimately, the artworks themselves, and how other artists embrace them and grow from them, defy the political specificities of any particular moment in time. For this reason, Helen Frankenthaler will always have an important place at the nexus of art, history, and feminism. ▣

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Notes:

1. "Women Artists in Ascendance: Young Group Reflects Lively Virtues of U.S. Painting," *LIFE* magazine, no. 19 (May 1957): 74–77. A PDF of this issue of *LIFE* magazine is available online at edwardtylernahemfineart.com/attachment/en/588263605a40919f008b4568/Press/5882639c5a40919f008b58ee, accessed April 17, 2018. The other artists featured were Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Nell Blaine (both also photographed on the floor of their studios), and Jane Wilson, posed alluringly reclining on a sofa. As John Berger has noted in *Ways of Seeing*, the representation of women is always an embodiment of the male gaze and of patriarchal values, and women artists even today must negotiate the meaning of the poses they take in promotional photography.
2. Lisa Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Painting," in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005): 374.
3. E. C. Goossen, quoted in Saltzman, 375.
4. It is not verified whether Greenberg took them there without Frankenthaler's knowledge nor whether she was present during the visit, but it is likely she was not present.
5. Harold Rosenberg, "Art and Words," in *The De-definition of Art* (New York: Horizon Press, 1972): 64; quoted in Saltzman, 376.
6. Robert Atkins, "Crit Beat," *Village Voice*, March 5, 1991: 78. Available online at robertatkins.net/beta/witness/culture/nea/continuing.html, accessed April 17, 2018.

Jeannie Motherwell

Chance Favors the Ready Mind

By Christopher Busa

Last fall, I spoke with the artist Jeannie Motherwell in Boston at the Rafius Fane Gallery, amid a solo installation of her new, larger paintings, aptly titled *Pour. Push. Layer*. Cate McQuaid, reviewing the show in the *Boston Globe*, wrote, “The title gives away her kinship with Frankenthaler, who stained her Color Field canvases with poured paint. Motherwell’s affinity for black echoes her father’s. . . . This and all [of] Motherwell’s paints pit generation against collapse, and are as capricious as light flashing on water. They pin us with similar intensity—a moment of coming to be that will just as soon vanish.”

This review mentions Motherwell’s connection with the artists Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler, her father and stepmother, who were two iconic figures in midcentury abstraction. And, while their story is a natural segue into a discussion of Motherwell’s work and shows some early influences, this influence merely reflects the beginning of Jeannie Motherwell’s artistic journey. Over forty years of painting, she has created her own legacy in her innovative techniques and bold vision of abstract painting.

JEANNIE MOTHERWELL WAS BORN into a culture where the idea of being an artist involved a communication with unconscious processes. During the thirteen years Robert Motherwell was married to Helen Frankenthaler (1958–71), Jeannie and Lise, children of Robert’s second marriage to Betty Little, were growing up under the tutelage of icons of American art, each projecting power and natural confidence. When Robert Motherwell first came to New York in the fall of 1940, he assessed the young artists he encountered and concluded that talent was abundant, but many artists failed to find a “point of attack,” meaning that their work was not guided by a personal “creative principle.” For Motherwell, it was important to attend to the hints, clues, and spontaneous associations that bubble up into being during the process of working. The “creative principle,” he discovered, was the daily activity of what the Surrealists described as “automatism.” This was the method that revealed one’s originality to oneself; the spontaneous gesture that showed the honest signature of one’s intuitive impulses. Motherwell liked to say, “The only thing I have over any other painter is that I’m the only one who can make Motherwells.”

Helen Frankenthaler, stepmother to Jeannie in her formative years, between ages five and seventeen, had a strong influence on her stepdaughter’s life and work. Fundamental to Frankenthaler’s ability to find her own independent “point of attack” in her work is the inspiration she received from seeing Pollock’s shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery, an impact made even more emphatic by a 1951 visit to Pollock’s studio in Springs, East Hampton, where she actually saw how his paintings were made. A decade later, Frankenthaler, in her early thirties, became an art-world star with her youthful “retrospective” at the Jewish Museum in New York.

As a female artist succeeding in the male-dominated art world of the 1950s, Frankenthaler was a role model for Jeannie and many other young artists; perhaps she was an even greater influence in the way she focused on the work itself rather than engage in debates about her art in terms of her sex. In a 1965 interview in *Artforum*, Frankenthaler was asked by Henry Geldzahler how being a woman affected her painting. The artist answered with the aplomb of one possessing natural self-confidence: “Looking at my paintings as if they were painted by a woman

is superficial, a side issue, like looking at [Franz] Klines and saying they are bohemian. The making of serious painting is difficult and complicated for all serious painters. One must be oneself.” In John Gruen’s book *The Party’s Over Now* (Viking Press, 1972), she was quoted as saying, “I don’t resent being a female painter. I don’t exploit it. I paint.”

She had her detractors, especially among the male art critics of this period. In his essay “Art and Words,” Harold Rosenberg tartly criticized the artist, saying that the “vital actor” in a Frankenthaler painting is not Frankenthaler but the paint, which was more in control than she was. He stated: “The artist is the medium of her medium.” In a review in *Art International*, E. C. Goossen viewed the artist as the female heir to Pollock: “Frankenthaler’s painting is manifestly that of a woman. . . . Without Pollock’s painting, hers is unthinkable. What she took from him was masculine.” John Elderfield put it another way: “Femininity has long been an available metaphor to describe such qualities of painting as lyricism, delicacy, colorfulness, and restraint.” Regarding colors that are “feminine,” Amy Sillman raises the issue of the “politics of color,” pointing out that Pollock’s colors in *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)* (1950) are not “diaphanous” like Frankenthaler’s stained colors.



Helen Frankenthaler (center) with Jeannie Motherwell (right) and Lise Motherwell (left) in front of their New York City residence, early '60s. COURTESY OF JEANNIE MOTHERWELL

PHOTO BY ALAN SHAYNE

I find it strange that Pollock is so often referred to as a seminal artist in terms of his originality. The roots of his work, in the connotations of fluidity and fecundity, are abundant in other artists' repertoires and boldly represented in the art of Helen Frankenthaler. Here, perhaps, is the locus of Frankenthaler's historical significance in altering the waning cultural meme of what is called the "male universal," where *he* includes *her*, implying in our very language a hierarchal ordering of gender.

Even though Frankenthaler rejected an identity of being a "woman painter," she was mindful of the feminist artists who were inspired by her example over the last six decades. This illuminating history is detailed in *"The heroine Paint" After Frankenthaler: Stains, Flows, Decoration, Play, Ambition: A Different Account of Painting from the 1950s to the Present Day*, a collection of extraordinary contributions by contemporary artists and art historians including Liz Hirsch, Daniel Belasco, Carroll Dunham, John Elderfield, Barbara Guest, Harmony Hammond, Suzanne Hudson, Carrie Moyer, Laura Owens, Lane Relyea, Dwight Ripley, Sterling Ruby, Amy Sillman, Howard Singerman, Tracy K. Smith, and Mary Weatherford. The range of discussions raises questions never asked before and offers a previously unrecognized parallel history to the macho orientation of the Abstract Expressionists. The book was edited by Katy Siegel, who writes about the "bind" confronting these artists:

They didn't want to be acknowledged as women, but it was equally unacceptable to openly claim a "masculine" role. They were left to triangulate between publicly rebuffing categorization, playing with or debating the role of the feminine among friends, and assuming masculine traits. . . . In retrospect, this very incoherence of identity may have allowed them a certain freedom.

MY YOUNGER SISTER, Marianne, was a childhood friend of Jeannie Motherwell. During summers in Provincetown, they collected shells along the beach across from Commercial Street and played hopscotch on the chalked lines they drew on little-used Allerton Street. ("Great for children," Robert Motherwell once wrote about the location of "Sea Barn," the family home with two studios that he shared with Helen.) My father, Peter Busa, a colleague of Motherwell in New York in the early forties, owned a house and studio half a block east from Sea Barn on Commercial Street. The neighborhood was dense with artists working in studios adjacent to the commotion of domestic life—the artists Arthur Cohen, Anne Packard, Suzanne Sinaiko, Lily Harmon, Mervin Jules, Leo Manso, Howie Schneider, Umberto Romano, Jack Kearney, Richard Florsheim, Lila Katzen, Henry Rothman, and Phil Malicoat first come to mind. Children wandered in and out of their parents' studios; they were often asked to offer opinions about works in progress.

Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler discouraged their children from using coloring books; instead, they provided them with paper and paint and pastels from their own studios, then displayed on the refrigerator door the most eye-catching drawings and spontaneously written poems, which they would all discuss at lunch. On visits to galleries and museums, the children were asked to select a favorite painting. "This was a huge responsibility," Motherwell recalled. "If you liked something, you were obliged to say why. Helen and Dad prompted us consistently to say what we thought about a particular painting, especially at one of their openings."

Motherwell told me about the genesis of her name, Jeannie, which her father chose in honor of the Stephen Foster song, "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," and the poems of Robert Burns. She said, "It's my given name, with Burns being the middle name of my Scottish father. Dad didn't want people to know he had a middle name after somebody famous."



Fracture, 2017, acrylic on Claybord, 48 by 60 by 2 inches

Just before Motherwell began classes at Bard College, her father told her that he and Helen were getting a divorce; that next year he would marry the German photographer Renate Ponsold. "I think it was 1971 when he took me to St. Gallen, Switzerland, where he was commissioned to make some prints," she recalled. "From there, we went to Germany to pick up his new Mercedes convertible, which at that time was not available in the States. We drove all through the winding roads of the South of France with the top open to the summer air. We bonded on that trip. It was the first time I was having adult conversations with my father, at a time when I was developing my own interest in art and had found the school where I was going to major in painting. Bard had a great art department. All of the professors there were artists actively showing in SoHo and abroad."

While at Bard, Motherwell made weekend visits to see her father in Greenwich, Connecticut, two hours away. She would drop off her car and then take the train to New York to see art shows, but first she would often go into her father's studio to see what he was working on. She was drawn like a magnet to his signature black paintings, and one day her father asked her why. She said, "Black is my favorite color," blurring out that she did not see black as the absence of color, but as a color as primary as red, blue, or yellow. In her own paintings, she limits her palette to the powerful interplay of a few restricted combinations. She mentioned to her father, "If I'm about to begin a painting, unsure of what to do, I'll begin with black." His response: "You really do get black, don't you?"

In her junior year of college, Motherwell moved into a New York loft purchased for her by her father, which gave her a large living and working space on Mercer Street in the vibrant early days of SoHo. Nearby, at the buzzing corner bar Fanelli's, she met with friends to discuss shows they had seen and what openings to attend on the weekend. Summers, she spent in Provincetown in the Mermaid Apartments, next door to her father's Sea Barn, which had three separate quarters for Lise, Jeannie, and frequent guests—art dealers, critics, historians, and reporters.

For thirty summers, Motherwell worked in her water-view studio, with mesmerizing drama ever present in the ripples of water, blasts of wind, and cascades of waves soaring skyward from concussions against the bulkhead—an image that inspired her father's *Beside the Sea* series. Motherwell told me that she hears "a humming drama when the sea is flat and calm." She began to see how a breeze creates small "capillary waves," fine as fingerprints, as it flows across and grips the surface of the water. For a period, her paintings referenced the loss of Provincetown fishermen she had known on the vessel *Patricia Marie*, which was



Chrysalis, 2017, acrylic on Claybord, 48 by 60 by 2 inches

destroyed in a storm in 1976. Triangles of painted paper began to flutter in her collages, obliquely evoking the silence of abstracted draggers skimming over water.

Motherwell initially evolved a working process derived from the “collage aesthetic,” so consistently cited by her father as the essence of Modernism, since collage was the only medium capable of expressing the cacophony of contemporary life. Gradually, however, Motherwell departed from the torn-paper edges of her early collages and began producing sinuously fluid new paintings. These pieces reflected a vital unfettered freedom in her technique, in which liquid harmonies of poured paint flowed naturally from a combination of the force of gravity and the intuitive guidance she provided with squeegees, brushes, sticks, and cheesecloth. She would also physically lift the canvas from its level position on the floor, further controlling the direction and speed of the flowing paint.

Motherwell described her process to me: “I start by working with the piece laid out on the floor, then after it is dry enough I work with it hanging on the wall, then go back to the floor, depending on how many layers I need to add. On the floor, if I move the canvas or board, I can lift and move the flow. I do other things to manipulate the desired effect, but I tend not to put my handprint on it too much. I want the results to feel natural and fresh, as if it were revealed in an instant.”

The sense that an exploding image is arrested while in motion is the result of years of experimentation. “It’s a visceral feeling where I know I can’t push it any further,” she explained. She yields to these intuitive limits, mindful that even nature’s expressions of great force—crested waves or flames grasping at the sky—always seem to hold energy in reserve. She experimented with splatter effects, but, unlike Pollock, transitioned into a new technique in which absorbent ground mixed with gesso generated a different effect on the canvas. “It would often break things up in a way that gave me something new to like and work with,” she said.

Her large, recent paintings boldly explode with fascinating chemical reactions. Her trial-and-error experiments with various mediums cause unexpected results, surprises sometimes as plainly beautiful as the breaking of dawn. She also experiments with alternative surfaces—canvas, plywood, silk, and Claybord, which is made from a very fine clay. “It’s the same kind used in women’s makeup,” she explained, “which is manufactured into a very smooth surface. The paint lies on it beautifully, then you apply water and/or a medium and it

goes *wacko!* I mix gesso with certain amounts of absorbent ground on my canvases, which allows for a marvelous natural stain effect. Amazing things happen, and I capitalize on them. The *mistakes*—no, not the mistakes—the *accidents* would remind me of galaxies to further explore.” Slowly, over years, Motherwell has evolved a way of working that does not depend on brushes, removing as much as possible the evidence of an artist’s hand, and allowing independent processes to find their own resolution.

Hans Hofmann urged a fundamental understanding of the commonalities between abstraction and figuration, telling artists not to imitate nature, but to imitate nature’s processes; for example, by portraying the way the force of wind can reveal the back sides of leaves or show the shape of a sail—a dynamic picture of motion and energy. In this sense, Jeannie Motherwell’s forms do not resemble figures from reality so much as express her kinship with serendipitous emotional memories revealed by chance. Like Helen and Bob, she trusts her intuition.

A major change for Motherwell was relocating from a studio in Provincetown to a studio in Somerville, where she discovered the sky above her, not the ocean around her. She commented on this new “stargazing” perspective in her current artist’s statement:

I am amazed by the images and mysteries of the oceans and skies in changing weather, Hubble-type images of the universe, and my own physicality during the painting process. It has inspired my recent body of work for many years. My paintings, which are quite abstract, have an intimacy to the space in them but also an immensity. The process I use and the mere physicality of it help me explore spatial complexities that yield marvelous surprises. They often carry me in directions I cannot anticipate. I like to think of my paintings as an “event” or an “occurrence”; that is, an action that emerges in the here and now—where the subject matter symbolizes the images and mysteries of creation.

Here I am mindful of a surprising analogy with this artist’s contemporary “motion studies” and the groundbreaking experiments in visualization of Harold Edgerton at MIT in 1936, using a high-speed camera and a stroboscopic light, when he famously recorded his silent film *Seeing the Unseen*. The film reveals the acrobatics of milk drops as they somersault into gorgeous shapes after being splattered on a hard, flat surface and tracks the motion of a red-hot poker as it plunges into brine, showing the turbulent beauty of its sizzle.

Titles of Motherwell’s paintings offer clues into her thinking. They are somewhat provocative, encouraging the viewer’s emotional associations



The Eyes of Argus, 2016, acrylic on Claybord, 48 by 70 inches



A Sacred Trade, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 48 by 67 inches

and offering suggestions rather than explanations of the paintings' import. She, like Frankenthaler, does not work in a serial manner, creating variations of related bodies of work. Rather, each work seeks to express something unique in itself; in this way, Motherwell shows the synthesis and harmonizing of her influences.

The painting *Fracture* implies a kind of explosion, rather than portraying an image of an actual object. The division in the image has the amorphous symmetry of a Rorschach inkblot. This allusion to Rorschach is significant. Psychological suggestivity is a phenomenon that produces pareidolic effects, in which one's perception of meaning in ambiguous visual images reveals likenesses in the real world. Symmetry appears abundantly in organic forms, but is absent from inorganic forms, such as clouds or rocks. Another psychological effect is the perception of movement without motion, and how motion can be evoked by unstructured forms.

Strange forms are found with lucky blunders, and this is why Abstract Expressionists were keenly alert to the transformative possibilities of chance. Psychologically, Rorschach inkblots, which were so interesting to artists of the '40s and '50s, played with the idea of symmetry and showed that even an ugly shape can become appealing when it is flopped into a mirror image, creating an "amorphous symmetry." The viewer has permission to read the image in ways personally meaningful, with felt associations becoming active in the experience of looking.

Another painting, *Chrysalis*, which reflects a birth image in the sheltering encasement for a budding seed, is one of only a few of the artist's works that summon figuration. Helen Frankenthaler once said that she didn't like Arshile Gorky's work when hints of figuration were too obvious in his painting. When I later asked Motherwell if she was conscious of the birthing metaphor when painting, she answered, "Not at all."

In *The Eyes of Argus*, Motherwell reduces and concentrates the one hundred eyes of Argus, the many-eyed giant of Greek mythology, to four ovoid apertures. The focus here on the expanding power of the white of the inner eye recalls her father's use of black in his thunderous *Elegies*.

In our discussion at the Rafius Fane Gallery, Motherwell reflected on Frankenthaler: "When making some of these paintings, Helen came into my mind. I had been thinking of her very intensely ever since she had become ill, in the last years of her life, and could no longer paint. Not painting must have been breaking her heart and spirit, and so it spurred me into painting larger pieces with new ideas. There were times while I was painting that I felt I was almost channeling her, and I'd exclaim, 'Oh, that's how she did it!' Without consciously trying, I could really feel her spirit."

Motherwell also discussed how Frankenthaler would critique her paintings: "She used to say things like, 'That's very good,' but she never disparaged anything. Dad would say things like, 'Don't touch that. It's

done!' When I first started making collages in the seventies using postcards and bits of small imagery, he might say, 'That's good—it's almost tacky, but it's not.'" She would ponder her father's remarks for weeks, anguishing over what he meant in his sphinx-like, cryptic comments. "His remarks were not meant to wound me," she said. "He was trying to teach me in his own way how to tell the difference between what is genuinely good and what is not. He encouraged me to find that out for myself, rather than teach me."

While Bob and Helen clearly had much harmony in their working relationship, Motherwell recalled that there was also a competitive dynamic between them: "I don't think I was conscious of competition between them when I was very young. However, I noticed later on that they were very competitive about a lot of things, and the artistic factor had to be a part of it. There was a time early on in their marriage when their work was very similar. They were even using each other's colors. I have a small painting on paper by Helen, which was made when Dad was sick with the flu. She went down to his studio, painted it, and wrote in pen, *Please Feel Better*. In the painting, she used Dad's yellow ochre paint, probably the first color she came across in his studio."

In Motherwell's recent works, one can see something in common with the working process of both her father and Frankenthaler: each tested their spontaneity against their own very intelligent scrutiny and revision. Their practice was to isolate and capture an authentic mood, revealing the self to the self in the *éclat* of surprise. But, having spent many hours talking with Robert Motherwell about what is good in a painting, I know that it was his deeply sourced critical facility that confirmed the success of a painting. Compared to Jeannie Motherwell's earlier collages with torn edges, the flow in these new and related paintings seems unimpeded, able to extend and fulfill the artist's impulse.

A discussion about *A Sacred Trade* offers a good concluding comment about Motherwell's work. "This title refers to what it means to be an artist—the sacrifices the artist makes, like the fisherman," she told me. "In this particular painting, I saw the ghost image of the *Patricia Marie*. This was after I had stopped painting my boat paintings and collages, so it is of significance to my work." The "ghost" image is a star-bright concentration of the stellar shape of a ship, almost electric in the intensity of whiteness, a white even whiter than the color that surrounds the surreal apparition. And the surrounding blacks have the deep magnetic attraction that Motherwell always felt as a power in her father's black paintings. The chemistry of Motherwell's lineage has yielded a new element in the periodic table of painting.

Motherwell asked me if I saw a family resemblance in her paintings. "I hope mine don't look like Helen made them!" she said. "I don't start with a memory. I start with a process. The process reveals things to me, like a feeling of familiarity, and as these revelations happen, I can then begin to edit."

Robert Motherwell once stated that the medium of painting had the potential to express the complexity of a human being, but only when the painting triggered an authentic experience in the viewer. I am reminded of this when I see the synthesis of complexity and intuitive response in the work of Jeannie Motherwell.

Noting that some of her paintings are streaked with spurts of energetic black gestures, I said, "Those streaks of black are very Motherwellian."

"Which Motherwell?" Jeannie asked. ☒

This summer in Provincetown, Jeannie Motherwell's work will be shown at AMP Gallery, July 27–August 8, at the same time that the Provincetown Art Association and Museum presents a major display of Helen Frankenthaler's work in the exhibition Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown, July 6–September 2, 2018.

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