

Nowscape

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Beautiful Order Feeling and Memory in Helen Frankenthaler's Collage Works

Giovanna Becerra



5/59
Frankenthaler



Fig. 2 (detail)

Painting is a matter of creating a beautiful order from human emotions and experiences.

—Helen Frankenthaler¹

Beautiful Order

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When you look at abstract art, what is the first thing that you think of? Is it ugly, beautiful, challenging? Does it make you feel something or does it leave you trying to decipher the artist's intent?

In Frankenthaler's *Summer Picture* (1959), media collide to create a visual dynamic. At the center, a thin line of charcoal glides across the paper, dancing harshly beneath and between passages of yellow ochre and cadmium red. At its peak, the line disappears completely beneath daubs of opaque white. This central scene is anchored in a sea of light blue that surrounds the charcoal's chaos, eliciting a sense of tranquility to each corner of the paper, as wide as a bright summer sky. Frankenthaler used collage as a vehicle to evoke "an amorphous inner world perspective."² Through composition, color, and layering, Frankenthaler abstracts the experience of emotion and memory.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Composition

Summer Picture, *The Joker* (1958), and *Untitled* (1959) each exude a distinct energy skillfully anchored within a remarkably centralized compositional structure. For instance, in *Untitled*, Frankenthaler affixes commercial ephemera—a Bazooka Joe comic strip and the instructions from a Tang container—at the center, enclosing them within a large field of black paint. *Summer Picture* displays a similar encapsulating composition, with vibrant colors drawing the viewer's eye inward toward the composition's heart. In *The Joker*, while the configuration appears less contained, there is a clear framing of the playing card positioned just above the center. Frankenthaler fully explodes the visual elements of the joker in front of our eyes, translating the archetypal trickster's energy into a visual cacophony of marks and colors. This approach to compositional framing suggests Frankenthaler's depiction of an "amorphous inner-world perspective."

What if these inner-world perspectives were simply memories of emotion? In *Summer Picture*, the artist begins at the center with sparse markings that contrast with the rest of the piece. She then extends towards the edges using slightly disorganized but expressive strokes, creating the impression of the inception of an idea or, alternately, the surfacing of a memory—gradually developing it through additional color and layers. The outcome is a vibrant composition that mesmerizes the observer, enveloping the viewer in the nostalgic aura it exudes.

Color

In *The Joker*, Frankenthaler utilized the original card's color palette to transcend conventional boundaries, liberating it from rigid lines. This approach mirrors the whimsical nature of a trickster through energetic splatters and playful brushstrokes. But it is her artistry that skillfully transforms a flat paper surface into a realm of profound dimensionality, bridging the gap between the visible joker and raw inner energy, vividly portrayed in the foreground.

The colors of *Untitled* are also derived from its collage elements, evoking a distinct emotional resonance. In the back and middle ground, a pop of yellow ochre is positioned on the right side. The incorporation of yellow from the comic, along with the Tang instructions, serves to harmonize both experiences at the focal point. Furthermore, encircling the central collage is a form that blends darker shades of colors found in the comic, creating a sense of containment. Once again, we experience a kind of tunnel vision, but this time, the presence of yellow and subtle white imbues these childlike collages with a sense of hope, like a beacon at the end of a dark passage. With no additional details beyond the center, we are left to fill in the emotional landscape ourselves, emphasizing our connection to these fragments of memory.



Fig. 3

Depth and Layers

Through layering, Frankenthaler builds from charcoal markings on white paper to very distinct layers of oil topped with a collage of wax paper in *Summer Picture*. Each step gets closer to forming an image that feels familiar and evocative of summer's essence—the shimmer of heat rising from the pavement, the cool relief of shade from a tree. From the initial stages of a nascent idea and an underdeveloped background, we progress towards a vivid exhibition of colors and free-flowing forms that culminate in the portrayal of a complete memory of a summer scene.

There is a gradual oscillation between the abstract and concrete yet somehow still abstract in her work, as each layer builds depth and complexity. It's as if Frankenthaler invites us to journey with her through the creative process, from the initial spark of inspiration to the final realization of a vivid memory or feeling captured on paper.

Although these are only three examples of Frankenthaler's collage work on paper, there are many more examples throughout her oeuvre that stay true to her idea of making sense of human emotion and experience. While discussions around technique and material are valuable, it is crucial to also honor the profound emotional energy intrinsic to her method. In these pieces, her artistry transports me through time, blurring the boundaries between past and present with a distinctive allure. Frankenthaler's ability to convey universal emotions through her work and technique is truly remarkable. Her use of color, form, and composition creates a deeply moving experience for the viewer, allowing them to connect with her work on a personal level. Each piece tells a story, inviting us to reflect on our own emotions unlocked by nostalgia. Through her collage work, Frankenthaler leaves a lasting impression that transcends time and space, resonating with audiences for generations to come.

Fig. 1

Helen Frankenthaler,
Summer Picture, 1959.
Oil, crayon, and collage
on paper, 19 x 23 3/8 in.

Fig. 2

Helen Frankenthaler,
The Joker, 1958.
Oil, crayon, and collage
on paper, 30 x 21 5/8 in.

Fig. 3 (and cover)

Helen Frankenthaler,
Untitled (Bubble Gum Wrapper), 1959. Gouache
and collage on paper,
10 1/4 x 14 1/4 in.

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Giovanna Becerra is an artist and recent graduate of SUNY Purchase, where she studied sculpture and anthropology. In her creative practice, she explores the intersection between craft and fine art, as well as the origin of folklore and its unconscious influence on Ecuadorian society. Giovanna was an Artwork Research Intern at the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation during the summer of 2024.

1 "The Vocal Girls",
Time, May 2, 1960, 74–76.

2 Ibid.

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