

Nowscape

June 2026

*A Green
Thought
in a Green
Shade:*

Paint as an
Expression
of Movement
and Biology

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Fig. 1

Algal clouds of green saturate the canvas, dominating the visual field. In parts, the green is a weight: dark and condensed. In others, it reflects air: light and dispersed. I first came across Helen Frankenthaler's *A Green Thought in a Green Shade* (1981) as I sorted through a box of photographer Steven Sloman's color transparencies of her artwork. As I held the transparency before me, I knew I could sit in conversation with it for the remainder of the day if I wanted to. I felt a magnetic pull to carefully attend to each detail, as if noticing the features of a loved one. It was nothing short of transfixing.

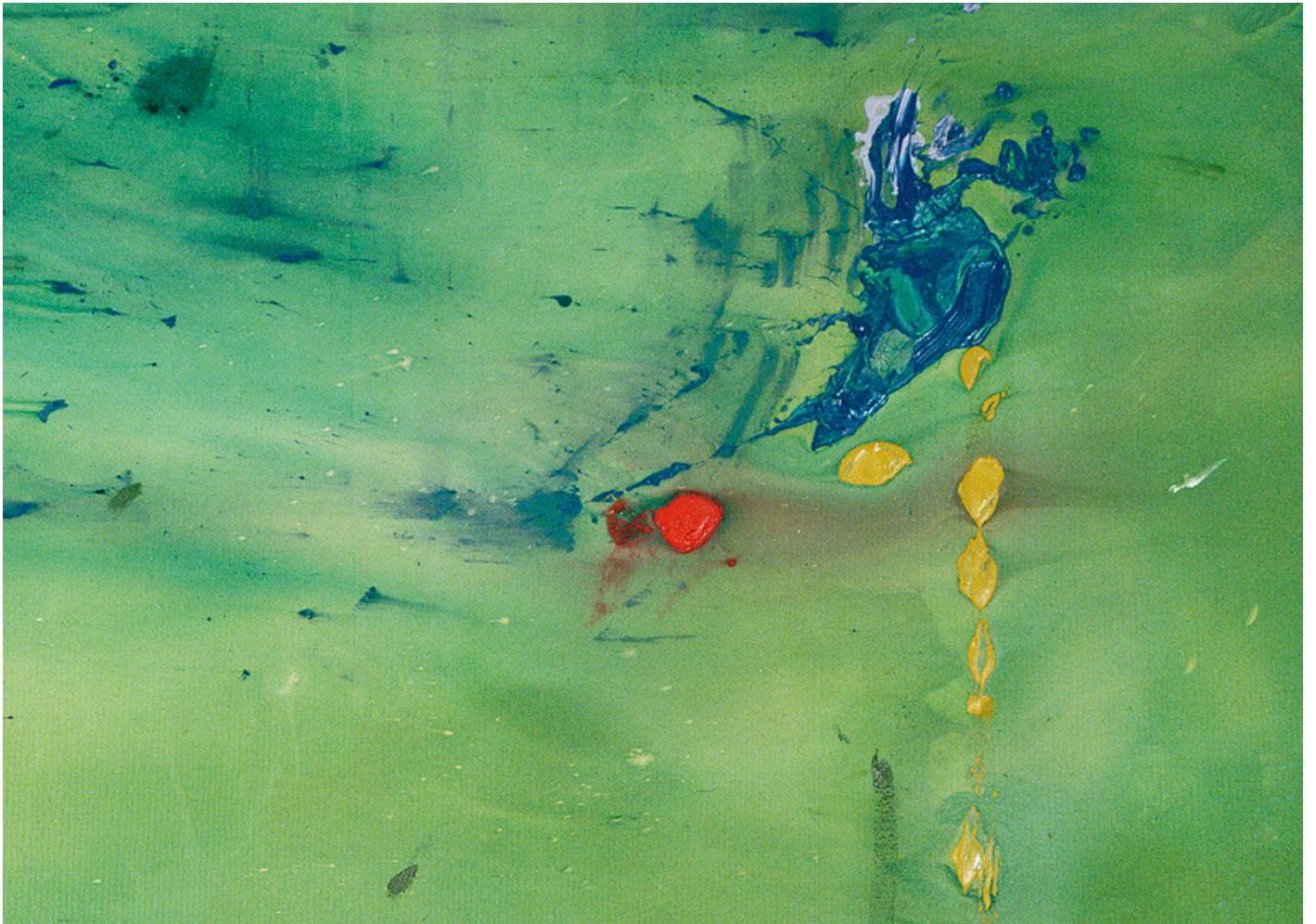


Fig. 1 (detail)

A Green Thought in a Green Shade is a full-bodied dance of color that is entirely alive. Shades not only of green appear, but white, blue, red; colors that echo the surrounding natural world. The canvas appears to be in fluid motion, or at the very least, imbued with the potent desire to be blown, tossed, caressed, or otherwise swayed into action. There is something elemental about Helen Frankenthaler's work that is ceaselessly immersive. That theme is abundant in this piece, each detail within the painting evokes the sensation of biology, of origin. The way the paint buds, swirls, and emerges freely across the canvas, elicits connotations of new life. The motion feels organic. It possesses its own agenda. Various clumps of paint add to the sensation that each color is a breathing physicality. Thick splatterings of dark green and blue rest or trail across the canvas. The visual field is punctuated by occasional whites and pinks and is further disrupted by three sudden, conspicuous reds—an abruptness that carries both flower and violence—a large passage of impasto blue, and a dripping golden yellow that shimmers, collapses, and cascades downward on the right: secretions after the initial impact.

These movements not only reflect the intimacy of the artist's own animal instinct as she applied the paint, but it is as though the paint itself is carrying out its own expedition. Each detail of the painting appears to be an intentional enigma. This choreography of the painting can be seen as the elegant convergence of freedom, chaos, play, and chance—apt descriptors for the radicality of nature itself. Ultimately, the artwork feels like a living organism caught in a moment. We are invited not only to observe, but—through our active navigation of the canvas—take part.

Helen Frankenthaler was anything but stagnant. She maintained a consistent and fierce curiosity, always looking to expand her vocabulary as a visual artist. She viewed such ever-present innovation as essential to an active, creative life. In many ways, it can be argued that this inquisitive perspective led Frankenthaler to shift between varied, stylistic eras throughout her lifetime. In the 1970s, Frankenthaler began to experiment with color over the entirety of the canvas. She began to work in large swaths of acrylic paint, leaving little to no blank

space (*Portrait of a Lady in White* (1979), for example). As became more apparent during my time with the Sloman photographs, this exploration became deeply honed throughout the 1980s.

Helen Frankenthaler's aesthetic explorations throughout that decade are unique and striking. What stands out the most in her 1980s work are the rich, full-bodied color fields. There is a complete immersion of color that these paintings invite us to indulge in, to enjoy and relish the color for its essence.



Fig. 2

Fig. 1 Helen Frankenthaler, *A Green Thought in a Green Shade*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 119 x 156 ½ inches (302.3 x 397.5 cm). © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Fig. 2 Helen Frankenthaler, *Portrait of a Lady in White*, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 82 x 48 ¼ inches (208.3 x 122.6 cm). © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

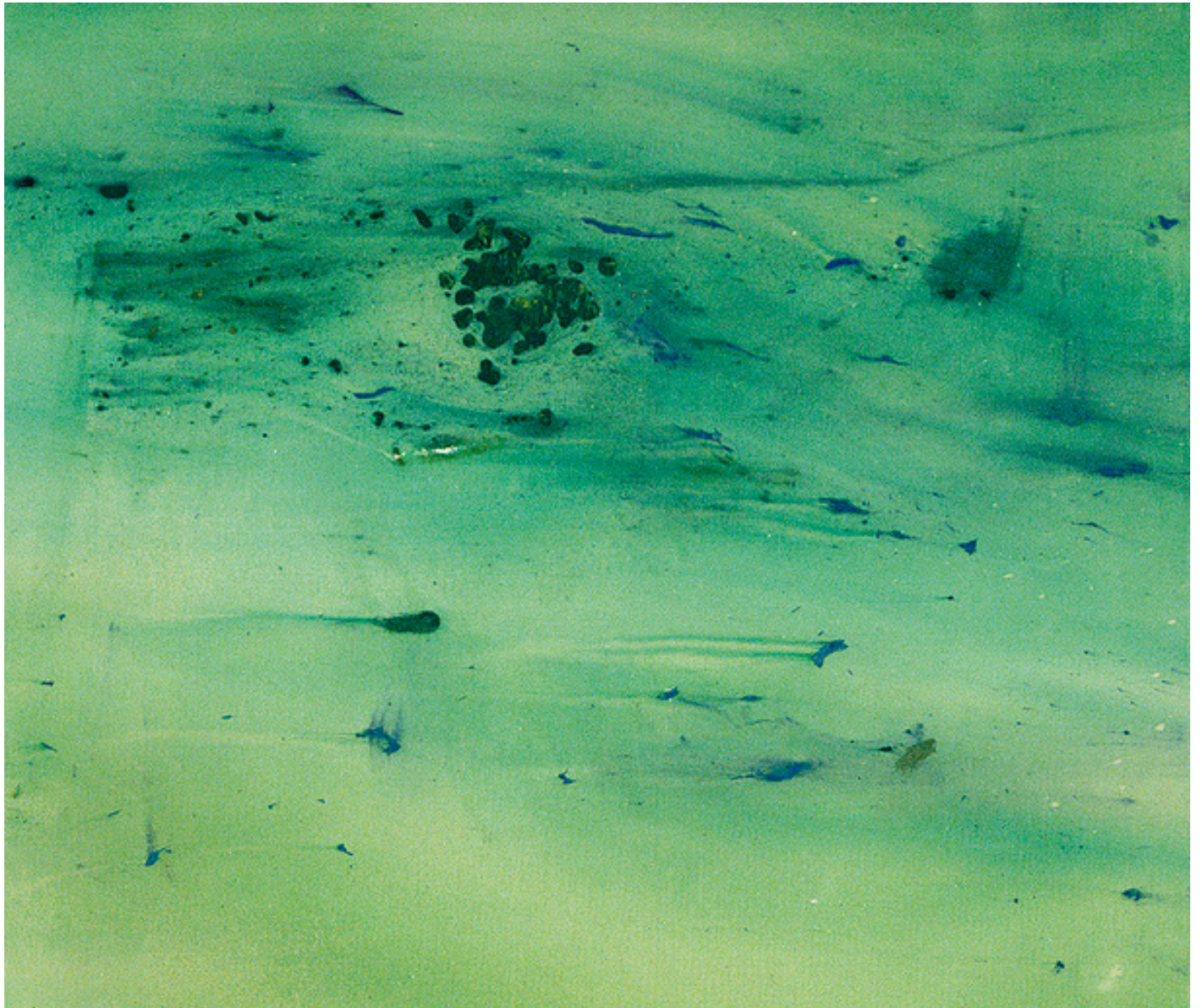


Fig. 3

In my own experience of the work, I have found that these paintings reflect a kind of emotional landscape. Specifically, their texture, detail, and abstract nature, evoke and reflect the landscape of human feeling. To take it a step further, these paintings feel like human interpretations of the biological and organic—the strange movements not only of emotion, but of the cells and molecules that shape our very experience of life. This is illustrated by the various biological elements in *A Green Thought in a Green Shade*: the earthy, blooming green, the blurred smears of blue, all suggestions of biology taking form. This enormous and masterful painting exemplifies Frankenthaler’s technical range, signature curiosity, and commitment to unceasing creative expansion and evolution.

Frankenthaler’s artistry, while manifested and experienced via her painting, possesses a respect for and interest in many mediums and realms—including the literary: She was an avid reader. The Helen Frankenthaler Foundation currently houses over 1,800 books that she kept in her personal library, including many poetry anthologies. It’s interesting to note the last line in the sixth stanza of the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell’s poem “The Garden”:

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness;
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find,
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that’s made
To a green thought in a green shade.

It is reasonable to speculate that, as Frankenthaler kept her (very literal) running list of potential artwork titles, she may have collected Marvell’s line along the way.¹

Fig. 3 Helen Frankenthaler, *A Green Thought in a Green Shade*, 1981 (detail), acrylic on canvas, 119 x 156 ½ inches (302.3 x 397.5 cm). © 2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Fig. 4 Gracie Yaconelli viewing a transparency of Helen Frankenthaler’s *A Green Thought in a Green Shade* (1981) from the Steven Sloman Photographic Materials, 1981–2002, in the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives reading room. Photograph by Kristen Tivey.



Fig. 4

Frankenthaler was an established artist when she painted *A Green Thought in a Green Shade* at fifty-two. By this time, she had achieved both critical acclaim and a steady flow of exhibitions. Of course these accolades, especially in the case of a woman artist in the 1950s, brought with them significant—often gendered—critique throughout her career. The most obvious thread being a skepticism and disdain towards the beauty of her work. Specifically, the apparent lack of more overtly political or powerful—one could argue, masculine—messaging. These critiques were heavy in the early rise of her status. The art critic and journalist Deborah Solomon quoted Harold Rosenberg as calling Frankenthaler’s paintings “decorative bombast”² in the 1950s, and Sanford Schwartz added on to this in the late 1970s when he wrote that she was “too proficient about beauty.”³

With abstraction gradually falling from favor in the wake of the louder and more avant-garde Neo-Expressionism, the 1980s developed its own beauty-averse sentiments. Solomon wrote in regards to the 1989 exhibition, *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective at MoMA*, “At a time when abstraction is regarded in certain quarters as a dated style, the exhibition promises to raise fundamental questions... Is it possible to be preoccupied with formalist problems—problems of surface, dimension, edge and color—without being obsolete? Does beauty count for anything?”⁴



Fig. 5

Fig. 5 Helen Frankenthaler's *A Green Thought in a Green Shade*, flanked by *Yin Yang* (1990) and *Janus* (1990) at Gagosian Gallery. Installation view of *Helen Frankenthaler: The Moment and the Distance*, Gagosian New York, April 30–July 2, 2026. Photograph by Maris Hutchinson, courtesy Gagosian.



Fig. 6

A trademark attribute of Helen Frankenthaler was her fierce integrity and faith in the importance of her work. She said in an interview once “You can’t prove beauty... it gives no specific message other than itself, which in turn should be able to move you into some sort of truth and insight, and something beyond art.”⁵ Frankenthaler had no interest in creating art that catered to a direct political agenda nor her identity as a woman. Frankenthaler once replied to art curator, Henry Geldzahler, in an *Artforum* interview, when asked how it felt to be a “woman painter”: “Obviously, first I am involved in painting, not the *who* and *how* ... One must be oneself, whatever.”⁶ Frankenthaler held firm in her defiance and steady dismissal of the probing of such questions. “What concerns me is—did I make a beautiful picture?”⁷

This poses the question: Is Frankenthaler’s art standing defiant in its beauty? Is it not itself a radical act? Her work explodes with the exposition of life and raw color across the visual field. It is an experience as, arguably, all art strives to be. Is the moment I was first spellbound by *A Green Thought in a Green Shade* not moving in and of itself? The radical meaning lies within the painting’s ability to transport me from a reading room in Chelsea to the abstract depth of human creation. That is the power of beauty.

A Green Thought in a Green Shade represents a combination of Frankenthaler’s ever-curious spirit, as well as her profound comfort and familiarity with paint and canvas. She had nothing to prove. Throughout the latter part of her career, the canvas must have felt like an intimate extension of herself—a conversation—each mark and stroke executed with intention and freedom in equal measure. In all of her work from this period, but particularly in *A Green Thought in a Green Shade*, Frankenthaler immersed the viewer in a deeply natural and biological landscape—an evocative experience that extends itself to the bedrock of our creaturely experience, confirmed by the stunned response the painting can evoke. One can’t help but surrender—permitting the dance of colors to serve as a softness, an intrigue, an earthly respite.

Notes:

1. John Elderfield, Frankenthaler (Gagosian and Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, 2024), 334.
2. Deborah Soloman, “Artful Survivor,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1989.
3. Sanford Schwartz, “Helen Frankenthaler at Emmerich,” *Art in America* (May–June 1978), 115.
4. Deborah Soloman, “Artful Survivor,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1989.
5. Helen Frankenthaler, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, PBS, April 12, 1993.
6. Henry Geldzahler, “An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler,” *Artforum* (October 1965), 38.
7. Deborah Solomon, “Artful Survivor,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1989.

Fig. 6 Helen Frankenthaler in her East 83rd Street studio, New York, March 1981. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, © Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

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Gracie Yaconelli is a graduate of Bennington College, and was a 2025 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation archives intern. Photograph by Rachael Pullin.

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