

ARTS & CULTURE, ISSUE 37

Archive: Helen Frankenthaler

Helen Frankenthaler changed the course of American abstractionism with her free-flowing color fields and built “a bridge between Pollock and what was possible,” as one visitor to her studio gushed afterward. But while her canvases sang with color, daring and invention, she lived her own life strictly within the lines. Words by Tim Hornyak.



All Artwork: © 2020 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photography: Getty/Liberman.



Frankenthaler in front of *Interior Landscape* (in progress, 1964) in her studio at East 83rd Street and Third Avenue, New York, in 1964.

There's an early photograph by *Life* magazine's Gordon Parks of artist Helen Frankenthaler in a corner of her studio, with the walls and floor covered in her oversized canvases, large washes of blues, grays, pinks and browns. Dressed in a blouse and skirt, legs tucked under her, Frankenthaler has a faraway, dreamy expression and almost looks like a mermaid in an undersea fantasy. It's an image that symbolizes the intense, immersive quality of Frankenthaler's paintings, drawing the viewer into an irresistible maelstrom of color. "People say to me, 'How do you feel in the middle of making a picture?'" the American painter once said. "I can't answer. I think something takes over... you're lost in it."

Frankenthaler died in 2011 at the age of 83 after a career that spanned more than six decades. The engrossing power of her giant canvases helped change postwar American painting. Parks' photo was taken only a few years after Frankenthaler created *Mountains and Sea*, her 1952 breakthrough work. She painted it at age 23 after visiting Cape Breton Island, but the oil and charcoal canvas is more of an ephemeral impression of the Atlantic crashing against the rocks of Nova Scotia than a landscape per se. It reveals how she was influenced by abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, but it also showcases her soak-stain technique of pouring diluted paint onto an unprimed canvas on the floor, allowing the watery oils to soak into the fabric and coalesce into amorphous fields of color.

The work was a “bridge from Pollock to what was possible,” said fellow abstract painter Morris Louis, who, along with Frankenthaler, was among the originators of the Color Field movement, which emphasizes flat color planes removed from any figurative or subject matter, and includes artists such as Mark Rothko, Kenneth Noland, Sam Gilliam and Alma Thomas.

Frankenthaler was born in 1928, the daughter of a New York State Supreme Court judge, and grew up in comfortable surroundings. She studied art from an early age at the Dalton School, where she took lessons from the Mexican modernist painter Rufino Tamayo. At Bennington College in Vermont, she studied under Paul Feeley. After graduating in 1949, she returned to New York and her real education began through contact with other artists. “That shock, that recognition of what was going on in the art world in New York in those early '50s was tremendous for me and my painting,” Frankenthaler told Charlie Rose in 1993, describing the effect of seeing Pollock's work on the floor of his studio. “The approach took painting literally off the easel, so instead of dealing head on with four sides and four corners, you felt the boundaries of the canvas, the scale of it, were endless. That thrust of shoulder as compared to wrist alone, and zeroing in and telescoping, was nothing compared to this sweep of handling the method and material in a different way.”

Frankenthaler first exhibited in a group show in New York in 1950, and participated in the influential *9th Street Art Exhibition* of the following year. By the early 1960s, she was married to Robert Motherwell, an abstract expressionist of the New York School, and featuring in major international exhibitions as well as a retrospective of her own work. Over the following decades, as the Color Field movement expanded and changed, Frankenthaler's works spun like a phantasmagoric carousel, teasing representation with suggestive shapes and titles like *Milkwood Arcade* (1963), *Sphinx* (1976), *Cedar Hill* (1983), *Skywriting* (1996) and *Cloud Burst* (2002). She also experimented in mediums including paper, sculpture, printmaking, ceramics and tapestry while interest in her art grew.

By the time she died in Connecticut in 2011, Frankenthaler had taught at Harvard, Princeton

and Yale, been the subject of numerous scholarly articles and books, and received many accolades including the National Medal of Arts. *Mountains and Sea* now hangs in the National Gallery of Art on extended loan.

In her private life, unlike in her art, Frankenthaler always drew within the lines. “My life,” she told *The New York Times* in 1989, “is square and bourgeois. I like calm and continuity. I think as a person I’m very controlling, and I’m afraid of big risks. I’m not a skier or a mountain climber or a motorcyclist. And I’m not a safari girl—I never want to go on a safari. My safaris are all on the studio floor. That’s where I take my danger.” Perhaps as a result of her unabashedly square personality, she had her detractors: Some critics suggested her work, which shies from overt emotion and movement, was decorative and without depth. That’s not too surprising given her comments like this one, also from *The New York Times* in 1989: “What concerns me when I work is not whether the picture is a landscape, or whether it’s pastoral, or whether somebody will see a sunset in it. What concerns me is—did I make a beautiful picture?”

“My safaris are all on the studio floor. That's where I take my danger.”



Frankenthaler behind *Inner Edge* (turned on its side, 1966) in her New York studio in 1966.



Frankenthaler with paintings in progress in her New York studio in 1964. Because of her staining technique, and because she painted on unstretched canvas, many saw Frankenthaler's approach as haphazard. As she put it when talking about *Mountains and Sea*, it "looks to many people like a large paint rag, casually accidental and incomplete."



Frankenthaler with paintings in progress in her New York studio in 1974.



Frankenthaler stands in front of *Sands* (in progress) in her studio in New York in 1964.

But anyone who sees a work like *Cool Summer* (1962) as merely beautiful is missing the point. This psychedelic color burst on a background of raw canvas is as much about the interplay of color, shape, gradation and empty space as what it might evoke in the viewer: a hazy memory, almost out of reach, of sunlight reflecting off water and scattering through trees on a summer day. Elizabeth Smith, executive director of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation in New York, has a favorite Frankenthaler quote that sums up her aesthetic sensibility: “My pictures are full of climates, abstract climates and not nature per se, but a feeling. And the feeling of an order that is associated more with nature.”

Frankenthaler broke new ground for female artists—including my own mother, Montreal painter Jennifer Hornyak—working in the decades after her. She’s relevant to younger artists, too. “Frankenthaler’s development of her own approach to abstraction, from her early introduction to Jackson Pollock’s painting process coupled with her continual quest to expand the materials and means by which paintings are made, are an inspiration to many of today’s artists,” says Smith. “We are also fortunate that a number of photographs exist of Frankenthaler in her studio; these and films showing Frankenthaler at work have inspired younger artists and informed them more deeply about her intensely physical painting process.”

Just as her canvases grew denser, Frankenthaler’s legacy has grown stronger. Renewed interest in the work of female painters has brought Frankenthaler into sharper focus in recent years, and a series of exhibitions from 2013, including shows at Gagosian Gallery and the Tate Modern, has further elevated Frankenthaler’s stature. Her work is increasingly visible in museums: When Smith began her job in 2013, no New York museum had her works on view despite owning them. “Now, all the major museums here have put her work on view, sometimes multiple times,” says Smith. “We’ve also seen this occur in other museums around the US ranging from LACMA and SFMOMA to the Walker Art Center and the Art Institute of Chicago, among many others, and in Europe in such museums as Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (MUMOK) in Vienna.”

Frankenthaler’s greatest legacy, however, is surely her role as an iconoclast, an agent of change that moved art in new directions. She said it best in 1994: “There are no rules, that is one thing I say about every medium, every picture... that is how art is born, that is how breakthroughs happen. Go against the rules or ignore the rules, that is what invention is about.”

“There are no rules. That is how art is born, that is how breakthroughs happen.”



Frankenthaler in front of *One O'Clock* (in progress), and, to the left, *Red Boost* (also in progress), in her New York studio in 1966. Frankenthaler has become a popular muse, so much so that Proenza Schouler's 2015 fall collection was presented alongside two of her major prints. Designer Jack McCollough told *Vogue* that he was inspired by how she went into the studio “without any preconceived notions of what the final result was going to be. We really approached this season in the same way.”



This story is from Kinfolk Issue Thirty-Seven