

The background is a collage of various abstract paintings and art supplies. In the top left, there's a yellow and orange abstract painting. To its right is a purple and blue abstract painting. Further right is a red and black abstract painting. Below the yellow one is a white and blue abstract painting. To the right of that is a red and white abstract painting. Below the purple one is a white and black abstract painting. To the right of that is a pink and white abstract painting. Below the white and blue one is a grey and white abstract painting. To the right of that is a yellow and pink abstract painting. Below the grey one is a yellow and pink abstract painting. To the right of that is a red and black abstract painting. In the bottom left, there's a white shelf with several paint bottles and jars. Below the shelf, there's a metal bucket and a can of Douglas's Gum Valentine.

Nowscape

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HELEN FRANKENTHALER'S PAINTERLY APPROACH TO THE STAGE

VALERIE RODRIGUEZ



Fig. 1

TRANSCENDING *NUMBER THREE:* HELEN FRANKENTHALER'S PAINTERLY APPROACH TO THE STAGE

Text by Valerie Rodriguez

Fig. 1 Helen Frankenthaler's East 83rd Street studio with designs for Royal Ballet costumes and sets, New York, December 1984. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Brien Foy.

I.

Amid the uplifting press that followed the opening of her 1985 Guggenheim show *Frankenthaler: Works on Paper, 1948–1984*, Helen Frankenthaler returned to her preparations for London where she would fill a guest role of costume and set designer for a Royal Ballet production. Bryan Robertson, a close friend and curator, encouraged her to consider making work to accompany a new ballet by young choreographer, Michael Corder. Akin to a courtship, realizing this plan required visits by Corder to Frankenthaler's Saddle Rock Road studio in Connecticut where they would walk, converse, and listen to Prokofiev.¹

In addition to her artistic gift, Frankenthaler's ability to work on a grand scale exhibited the potential to undertake a monumental project. It is unknown whether she disclosed this to Corder, but it would not have been her first experience composing for the stage. In 1971, Frankenthaler created and installed a backdrop for the Erick Hawkins Dance Company show, *Of Love*.² It was an experimental show of a smaller scale, yet she was praised for her ability to create an environment that immersed the audience in the world the choreographer aspired to invent.³

As soon as their collaboration was confirmed, Frankenthaler began amassing tips and advice from her circle of artist friends. She consulted costume designer Willa Kim, dined out with fashion designer Oscar de la Renta, and met with David Hockney, who had himself worked on stage sets. One of her neighbors, the American choreographer Jerome Robbins, wrote to her candidly,

Remember this is a collaboration, and the choreographer and dancers will need time on stage. Particularly keep in mind that the choreographer will be focused on lighting the dancing... which may properly throw your vision from time to time... The first maxim of working in the theater is 'THERE IS NEVER ENOUGH TIME.' The second is 'IT USUALLY WORKS OUT OKAY ANYWAY.'⁴

Armed with wisdom and support, she created thirty studies of set designs alongside costume sketches to accompany Corder's *Number Three*.



Fig. 2

Fig. 2 Costume design for Royal Ballet Costume Department of silver leotard for principal dancer Bryony Brind painted by Frankenthaler on the floor of her East 83rd Street studio, New York, December 1984. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Brien Foy.

The state of her studio in late 1984 shows a level of devotion to the Royal Opera House project: there are color swatches in autumnal tones of oranges, yellows, and pinks pinned to the wall; fabrics, and images of a royal-red theater stage and a prima ballerina, all amplified by the paint splatters around her studio. Inspiration is splayed out across her desk, on her wall, even appearing on her floor. For Frankenthaler to configure an engrossing environment for the stage, she devised a comparable atmosphere in the studio: a place that flaunted her interpretation of a painterly ballet-centric space.

Evident in its name, *Number Three* was arranged in three separate movements selected from thirty studies. The set chosen for the first movement sets primary yellow, red, and blue, against an opaque backdrop in elongated curvilinear lines. Throughout the work, intentional spots are delicately placed, and a touch of orange appears beneath the long blue swirl across the canvas. The artwork's potency lies in the lack of painted space, where the bare white illuminates the movement created by color.



Fig. 3

Fig. 3 Helen Frankenthaler's East 83rd Street studio with *Covent Garden Study* (1985) canvases and works on paper in progress, New York, December 1984. Second row on studio wall: final set designs for the 1st Movement, 2nd Movement, and 3rd Movements of *Number Three*. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Brien Foy.

In the second, an atmospheric grayscale painting with components of blue, orange, and purple through clumps and thin lines emerges. It is almost as if a cloud of various grays seeps itself into the background, with emboldened color leaking into the foreground.

The finale is a vast field of deep pinks and oranges with thick sheens of multidimensional iridescence, that pushes through the fourth wall of the canvas. The ombre backdrop allows for shimmery tones of green, yellow, and blue to stand out. Accompanying the sets were renditions of the hand-painted costumes Frankenthaler designed with the assistance of the Royal Opera House wardrobe department. The costumes were skin-tight leotards that protract the dancers' bodies in long, warm orange or frigid blue, vein-like strokes..

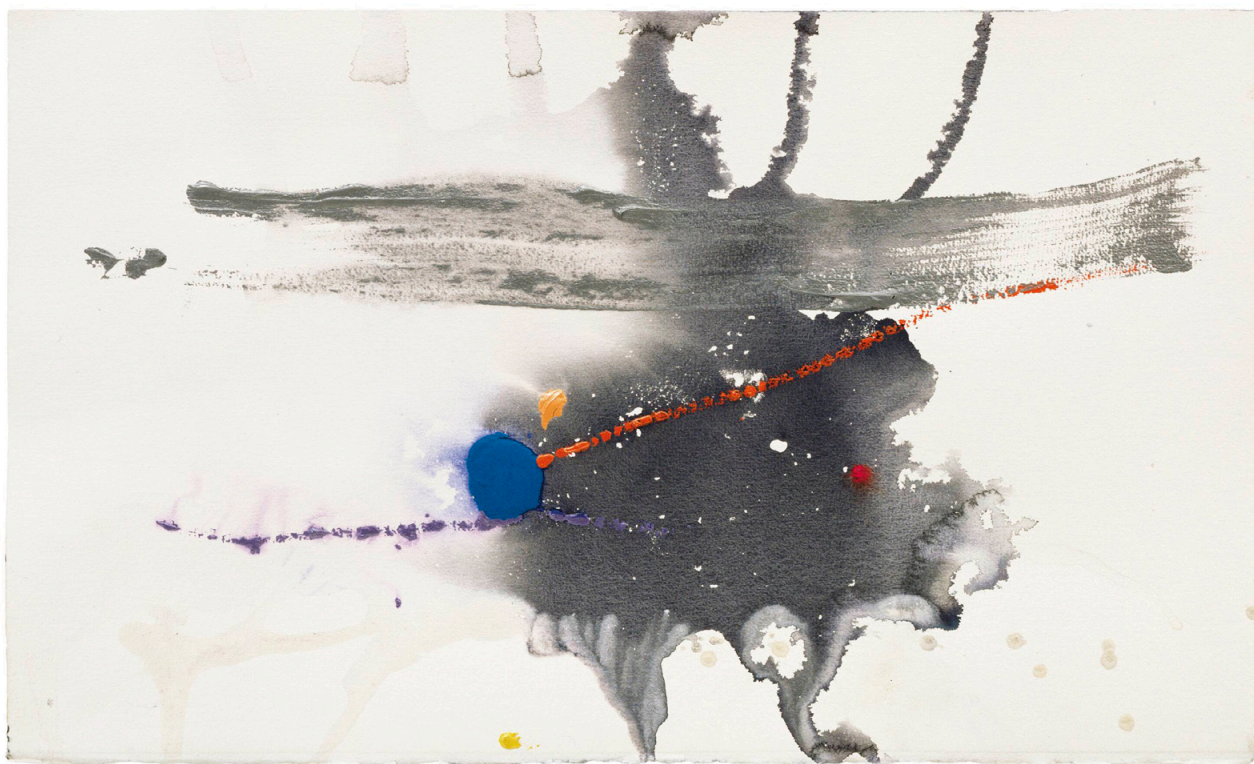


Fig. 4

II.

On March 9th, 1985, *Number Three* premiered at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Set to Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 3*, the choreography was a stark contrast to Frankenthaler's abstract works. Ballet has been traditionally noted as a masterful scope of movement to classical melodies, and in part due to *Number Three's* departure from that ideal, London's conservative dance critics condemned it, with unrelenting insults. Trying to outwit one another through the inclusion of as many insults as possible, critics cried out: "... the blurby, squelchy, oozy blobs of colour, which in the main constitute American painter Helen Frankenthaler's backcloths, only distract the eye in the wrong direction."⁵ Headlines furthered the humiliation in bold lettering stating,^{6,7,8,9}

**DANCE UNHAPPILY COSTUMED
STEPPING IN TO A SLOUCH
SORRY SLIP
BITTER BALLET BATTLE**

The lack of grace exhibited does not combat the well-known perception of the English press as an entity focused on spectacle and harassment. One does not need to look far to find scandal, even in accounts of their own Prime Minister at the time, Margaret Thatcher. Headlines such as, "HAS MRS. THATCHER EXORCISED THE DEMONS?"¹⁰ and "A PRIME MINISTER UNDER SIEGE"¹¹ do not do anything to quiet tantalizing accounts.

Fig. 4 Helen Frankenthaler, *Untitled*
(*Covent Garden Study, 2nd Movement, Final Set Design*), 1984, acrylic on paper, 17 3/4 x 28 3/4 in.
(44.1 x 73.3 cm). Private collection.



Fig. 5

Fig. 5 Rehearsal for the 1st Movement of *Number Three* performed by the Royal Ballet, Royal Opera House, London, 1985. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photographer unknown.

Fig. 6 Helen Frankenthaler's East 83rd Street studio with designs for Royal Ballet costumes and set maquette, New York, December 1984. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Brien Foy.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Frankenthaler is not an English politician by any means, but *Number Three's* dismal reception situated the sole blame of the failing production on her participation. She served as the object of English critics' frustrations toward American artistry in the mid-1980s. Her presence as a woman known to experiment widely with conventional forms of representation angered the press, as they were accustomed to observing ballets with backdrops of literal depictions of space. Among the biased critique, the press selectively forgot the tireless efforts demonstrated by Frankenthaler and her assistant in surmounting the performance's visual components.

Fig. 7 Helen Frankenthaler's East 83rd Street studio with designs for Royal Ballet costumes and sets, New York, December 1984. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Brien Foy.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Fig. 8 A member of the Covent Garden Production Department and Harkers Studio painting the Royal Ballet set for the 3rd Movement of *Number Three*, London, January 1985. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Darryl Williams.

Fig. 9 Helen Frankenthaler's East 83rd Street studio with *Covent Garden Study* (1985) canvases and works on paper in progress, New York, December 1984. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Brien Foy.

One of the reasons for controversy can be found in a small notice in the playbill informing the audience that only three of the five performances of *Number Three* would feature Frankenthaler's creations, while dancers in the other two would have Corder's own costuming of stark white leotards. Instead of the Royal Opera House diffusing the tension, they jested alongside the publications, providing them with a means to gossip. Line after line reads like a soap opera with statements reiterating disappointment,

Their latest disaster has been to invite Helen Frankenthaler, who specialises in those abstracts that American art dealers have hyped into being currently fashionable over there, and three of the wretched things are blown up into enormous backcloths....¹³

Frankenthaler's backdrops and costuming were a recurring antagonist. The ease displayed in insulting a flourishing American artist while devaluing the presence of American culture in London was not only lazy and simplistic but neglectful of proper journalistic practices. Shock-value prevailed.

Leaving aside the reactions to the show, the stage remains illustrative of a space where Corder and Frankenthaler found unity. Corder described his artform in simple terms, "Dance is all action."¹³ Frankenthaler locates kinship in Corder's beliefs through the dynamism of her process; her artistry exists beyond the two-dimensional plane her brush strokes reside on. In turn, her three movements awaken a visceral feeling through the use of color. Even in conception, Frankenthaler is lively in depicting her dynamic by moving across her surface fluidly yet with precision. Her decision in scale has been challenging and required intense physicality to complete, further proving how Frankenthaler, unbeknown to the public, is involved in her own painterly dance, verified by the existence of her artworks.

In distilling the shortcomings of the collaboration between Frankenthaler and Corder, it trickles down to an excess of artistic freedom. She was primarily alone in the studio except for an assistant in charge of the needs of the artmaking. All theatrical productions are intensely communal and operate largely on-site—Frankenthaler's studios were in the United States which forced her to compose her artworks without access to the creative process unfolding on stage. Her existence as an American—both by dint of location and identity—combats British pride in their own country's artistic culture. For Frankenthaler, it must have been exhilarating to be left alone in the creative process, but when it came to fusing the painterly with the ballet, the two vital elements were in stark contrast to each other.



Fig. 10

Fig. 10 Costume design for Royal Ballet Costume Department of silver leotard for principal dancer Bryony Brind painted by Frankenthaler on the floor of her East 83rd Street studio, New York, December 1984. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Brien Foy.



Fig. 11

- 1 William Zimmer, "Helen Frankenthaler—From Studio to Ballet Stage." *The New York Times*, Feb. 17, 1985.
- 2 Anna Kisselgoff, "Hawkins Dancers in 'Of Love' Premiere." *The New York Times*, March 10, 1971.
- 3 Kisselgoff, 1971.
- 4 Letter to Helen Frankenthaler from Jerome Robbins, December 11, 1984. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York.
- 5 Ken Lawrence, "A New Ballet," *Kensington & Chelsea Times*, April 12, 1985.
- 6 John Percival, "Dance Unhappily Costumed," *The London Times*, March 11, 1985.
- 7 Edward Thorpe, "Stepping in to a splotch," *The Standard*, March 11, 1985.
- 8 Peter Williams, "Sorry slip," *The Observer*, March 17, 1985.
- 9 "BITTER BALLET BATTLE," *The Daily Telegraph*, March 25, 2023.
- 10 Perry Mehrling, "Has Mrs. Thatcher Exorcised the Demons?" *Challenge* 25, no. 6 (January 1983): 57.
- 11 Edward Pearce, "A Prime Minister under Siege," *National Review* 37, no. 7 (April 19, 1985): 36–37.
- 12 Nicholas Dromgoole, "Designing Dance," *Sunday Telegraph*, March 17, 1985.
- 13 Mary Clarke, "Three steps to heaven," *The Guardian*, August 3, 1985.
- 14 Richard Davies, "I want the audience to get a huge explosion of energy," *Classical Music Fortnightly*, March 16, 1985.

Fig. 11 Helen Frankenthaler's East 83rd Street studio with designs for Royal Ballet costumes and sets, New York, December 1984. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York. Photograph by Brien Foy.

The fact of Frankenthaler's gender can also not be ignored. She prided herself on being an artist, not a *woman* artist. She dismissed sexist labeling and operated on the notion that the work will speak for itself. It is a strengthening belief and assertion of her talent but refers back to the English press's handling of the image of Margaret Thatcher, furthering a pattern in which women are never just people, they are objects to comment on and take swipes at.

The undertones of sexism present in the British response to Frankenthaler's set and costume designs framed her as the overly dramatic female while Corder was the man in charge; a voice of reason who complied with her unseemly demands. In reality, contracts were signed many months in advance, establishing clear guidelines; all Frankenthaler did was protect her artwork. The comments on her style of painting purport ideals of female painting in which capability lies solely in whimsical and colorful lines. Nevertheless, the media's consistency in condemning women reflects a fear of progression, perhaps especially in the field of ballet, an artform in which women's bodies and youthfulness is at the forefront and any attempt to release oneself from those expectations can result in heavy backlash.

The perceived failure of *Number Three* is a naive take-away from Frankenthaler's partnership with the Royal Opera House. Corder's initial thoughts for the ballet were, "I want the audience to get a huge explosion of energy,"¹⁴ which appears to have been accomplished by both Corder and Frankenthaler, as the public reflected on the show, expending vigorous bouts of time and energy toward it—whether negative or positive. Instead, the emphasis should be on the risk taken to attempt exhibiting artworks in a highly classicized space—a bold act that has encouraged artists to attempt the same ever since.



Valerie Rodriguez is Project Assistant for the Helen Frankenthaler Catalogue Raisonné and has researched and analyzed works from Helen Frankenthaler's oeuvre. Previously, she was a researcher at the Greenwich Collection. Valerie maintains a poetic practice and hopes to meld her two interests, art history and foreign languages, into a chapbook in the near future. Valerie earned her BA in Art History with a minor in Creative Writing from New York University.

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