

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



John Elderfield on 'Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler from 1950 to 1959'

John Elderfield, Sam Cornish



Helen Frankenthaler, "Untitled", 1951, oil and enamel on canvas, 56 3/8 x 84 1/2 inches (143.2 x 214.6cm), © 2013 Estate of Helen Frankenthaler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeeve

John Elderfield, Chief Curator Emeritus of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, has curated an exhibition of early work by Helen Frankenthaler (1928 – 2011) for Gagosian Gallery. Elderfield's 1989 monograph is the key text on Frankenthaler's painting, and the exhibition likely represents the first stage in a reassessment of her career. *abstract critical* had the opportunity to ask him some questions about the exhibition, and about Frankenthaler's work in general.

Sam Cornish: Returning to Frankenthaler a little over twenty years since your monograph, is there any aspect of her work of the fifties which you have felt it necessary to substantially reevaluate?

John Elderfield: Looking again at about thirty of Helen's great 1950s works, I was especially struck by three things: 1. The extraordinary variety of inventive mark-making in many of the paintings, which belies the idea that Colour Field painting was about creating homogeneous surfaces—but, then, Helen was a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, not a Colour Field painter, in the 1950s. 2. The over-all depictive thrust of these canvases. There are some works that read primarily as non-referential, abstract works, but the majority are depictive representations of observed, remembered, and imagined phenomena created by "abstract" means—which is also to say that she was intolerant of received notions of depiction and abstraction. 3. The fact that every single work is different. The means may be similar, but are certainly not the same from work to work. The organization of certain works are also similar, but never identical. And the imaginative subject of individual works are always different. She never repeats herself.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, oil and charcoal on canvas, 86 3/8 x 117 1/4 inches (219.4x 297.8cm), © 2013 Estate of Helen Frankenthaler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever. On extended loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

SC: *Mountains and Sea*, with its introduction of the stained canvas, 'its absorption of imagery into an open, breathing surface', and its now iconic art-historical status as a 'bridge' between Abstract Expressionism and the colour-field painting of the sixties, must be the central piece in the exhibition. Is there another painting which you would single out for special attention? And why?

JE: There are a lot of surprises in the present exhibition: The first work, *Painted on 21st Street*, with its built-up surface of plaster, sand, coffee grounds as well as oil; Ed Winston's *Tropical Gardens*, 1951: the reimagination of a Gorky vocabulary in the format of a Pollock frieze; 10/29/52: made three days after *Mountains and Sea*

without the charcoal armature of the more famous work, and with an amazingly rich vocabulary of mark-making. I could keep going on...



Helen Frankenthaler, *Eden*, 1956, oil on canvas, 103 x 117 inches (261.6 x 297.2cm), © 2013 Estate of Helen Frankenthaler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery.
Photography by Robert McKeever

SC: Because of her precocious start, the positioning of her as a 'bridge' between generations, and her long and highly personal career, Frankenthaler seems to me to be an isolated figure. Is there a twentieth century painter with whom she could be constructively paired in a large two-person exhibition?

JE: I have written in the catalogue essay about the "bridge" problem, and how it has impeded appreciation of Helen's work. As for pairing, her friend David Smith comes most obviously to mind.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Western Dreams*, 1957, oil on canvas, 70 x 86 inches (177.8 x 218.4 cm), © 2013 Estate of Helen Frankenthaler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery.
Photography by Robert McKeever

SC: At the beginning of your monograph you suggested that 'Frankenthaler's status as a woman artist' was the topic most notable by its absence. Could you briefly fill in that gap?

JE: Frankenthaler's status as a woman artist is a bigger gap than can be quickly filled. Again, I have written something about this in catalogue essay, notably about how her use of staining has been discussed, both positively and negatively, as a "feminine" characteristic; how the increased recognition of women painters in the late 1950s provoked a backlash; and how Helen's own refusal to allow herself be thought of as a woman artist was not always to her own advantage. What we still need is a broader study of the emergence, exhibition, and reception of women Abstract Expressionist artists.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Mother Goose Melody*, 1959, oil on canvas, 82 x 104 inches (208.2 x 264.1 cm), © 2013 Estate of Helen Frankenthaler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

SC: As this exhibition deals with the commencement of Frankenthaler's career as a painter, can we assume that other exhibitions will follow? Are there any other areas of her career you would especially want to return to?

JE: It is fair to assume that other exhibitions will follow, but it is too early to say what they will be.

SC: Abstraction is again rising to some prominence. Yet it is fair to say that today's dominant concerns are remote from Frankenthaler's, with many painters distrusting the sensuality, faith in personal experience and candid painterly confidence that are central to her work (perhaps in a way this echoes how her art stood

in relation to the dominant trends of the sixties – certainly there is a fair amount of sixties flatness in current abstraction). What lessons do you think her art holds for a young artist?

JE: This is a huge topic, which I don't think I can begin to get into here, except to say that I have heard from many abstract artists on how radical, inventive, and extraordinary they think these paintings are. These 1950s painting are so little known that they have come as a shock to a lot of people, and my sense is that it is the no-holds-barred, I can do anything I want, I am curious about everything I see, I won't be constrained by old formulae, and similar aspects of her artistic personality that have been so affecting.