

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



### Helen Frankenthaler, Gagosian Gallery, New York - Review

By Ariella Budick



*"Mountains and Sea" (1952)*

When I heard that the eminent curator John Elderfield was putting together a show of Helen Frankenthaler's paintings at the Gagosian Gallery, my heart beat a little faster. Frankenthaler has long been a favourite of mine. A star in the 1950s, she has languished ever since in a pall of pale accolades. Typically condescending was Morris Louis, who referred to her as "a bridge between Pollock and what was possible" – meaning, of course, himself. When she died in 2011, obituaries treated her as a transitional figure between the abstract expressionists and colour field painters. She was far more than that; she was a speculative, sensual original – not a bridge, but a destination.

She bears some responsibility for her reputation. Louis and his buddy, Kenneth Noland, were brought to Frankenthaler's studio by Clement Greenberg, her lover at the time. She later married Robert Motherwell, another juggernaut of the New York scene. The perks of surrounding herself with powerful and egocentric men – the early access, the exposure, the fawning attention – later morphed into liabilities. Linking two mostly male generations, she fell into no classifiable camp, and thus into relative obscurity. No museum has mounted a major retrospective since 1989.

The Gagosian show promised to rectify matters, and while it makes a good case for Frankenthaler, it is not the definitive retrospective she deserves. Entitled *Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler from 1950 to 1959*, it focuses tightly on the first decade of her career, and even so is troubled by some gaping absences: “Mt. Sinai” in the Neuberger Museum, the Hirschhorn’s “Basque Beach” and the Brooklyn Museum’s “Lorelei”. Do I seem ungrateful? Gagosian is a for-profit gallery after all, and exhibitions like this, mixing first-rate loans from major public institutions with lesser-known commodities, are a gift art lovers shouldn’t take for granted. But what I’d really like to see is a full-on Frankenthaler blowout.

Gagosian’s show gets going in 1951, when, fresh out of Bennington College, she went head-to-head with Kandinsky, Miró, Gorky and De Kooning. None of the paintings in the series that floods the first room really stands out. They’re too derivative, too juvenile and too searching to be memorable. Still, a heady sense of adventure crackles through them. Critics of her first solo show at Tibor de Nagy tuned in to their electric audacity, hailing the 22-year-old beginner as “imaginative, fearless, and immensely talented”.

Frankenthaler had her breakthrough the next year with “Mountains and Sea”, a lyrical evocation of Nova Scotia, blurred through the lens of abstraction. She and Greenberg had made side-by-side watercolours the summer before, and the landscape shimmered in her mind as she poured pastel washes of green, blue and pink oil over her raw, unprimed canvas. The painting, on loan from the National Gallery in Washington DC, dominates the second room at Gagosian, and, as always, it overwhelms. Frankenthaler’s work does not reproduce well; her diaphanous colours and the elegance of her gestures look muffled and washed out in photographs. But here, those clear, airy spaces have the fresh luminosity of a seaside at dawn.

Louis and Noland commandeered Frankenthaler’s innovations for their much shallower work. But what often gets lost in discussions of her staining technique is how expressively and profoundly she used empty white space, how she translated the radiance of watercolour into oil. Critics didn’t much appreciate her new direction. As she later remembered it, people likened “Mountains and Sea” to “a large paint rag, casually accidental and incomplete”.

I’ve always thought of her as a pure abstractionist, but Elderfield’s clever hanging shows I was wrong. Placing “Scene with Nude” near the Museum of Modern Art’s great “Trojan Gates”, he uncovers the anatomical origins of what I had understood as mere formal imperatives. In three years, the watery splayed legs of the 1952 “Nude” have matured into a pair of hulking black “Gates” that bar all entry except by means of trickery. In “Europa” pink blobs resolve themselves into flesh, and white ones into the sleek haunches of a muscular beast. Hidden beneath airy pastel arcs and evanescent clots of pigment lies a dark tale of rape and bestiality. Across the room, another “Nude” surfaces out of negative space, outlined in a brown haze. The body is defined by its outer limits; its core is the essence of emptiness.

Frankenthaler had ample precedents for this kind of misdirection. Kandinsky hid apocalyptic iconography beneath a veneer of abstraction. Pollock, too, twined symbolism into his painterly macramé. His closeted figuration particularly struck her in the tangled black lines of “Number 14”, where she “saw very clearly the drawing of something like an animal or a fox, in a wood in the centre of it”. Eroticism percolates through the Gagosian show, and sex huddles beneath skeins of paint.

But if Frankenthaler hid the actual body, she gave vent to femininity in her soft rococo colours and deceptive simplicity, defying the flinty machismo of the New York School. She paid the price. Rosenberg slammed her as too passive. Fairfield Porter, hardly a tough guy, dismissively praised her canvases as “having a light touch and the accidental and charming virtues of beginnings”. (Which is a backhanded way of saying “My four-year-old could do that.”) Elderfield provides a bracing antidote to all these pats on the head, by reading her supposed faults as the very foundation of her strength.

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