The New York Times
March 21, 2013

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

A Young Colorist, Antennas Aquiver
Helen Frankenthaler, at the Gagosian Gallery

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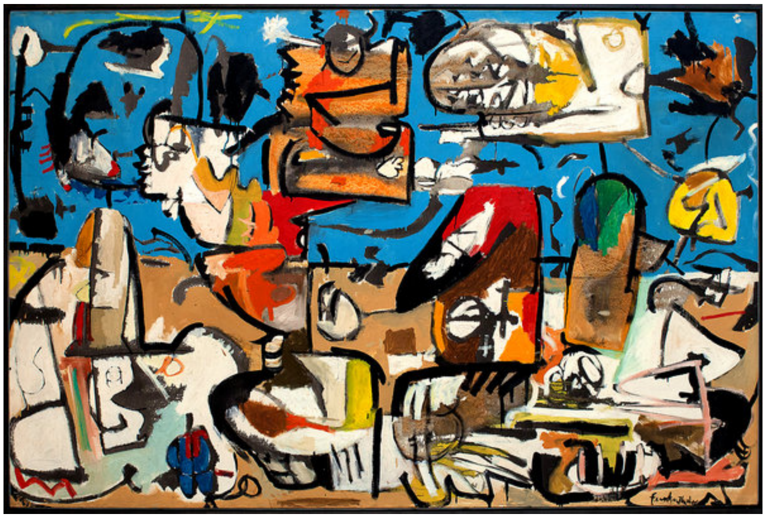

Painted on 21st Street *"Untitled" (1951), in a show at Gagosian on Helen Frankenthaler's early period.*

On Oct. 26, 1952, a 23-year-old artist named Helen Frankenthalermade a painting on unstretched, unprimed canvas laid on the floor, using a freehand stain technique that owed a great deal to Jackson Pollock but was less systematic. She called it "Mountains and Sea," and it became her best-known, most influential work. Its bounding scale, skirmish of pastel colors and charcoal lines, and mixture of landscape, still life and abstraction were distinctive. But most important was the way it fused color and canvas into a new, streamlined unity. Frankenthaler's stain painting method, as it was sometimes called, was considered a breakthrough in many circles, the gateway to what would become Color Field abstraction.

Art historically, "Mountains and Sea" was something like Frankenthaler's 15 minutes of fame, but generally almost nothing is known about where it came from. "Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler From 1950 to 1959," at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, performs the useful service of setting it firmly in the context of the 1950s, the best decade of the artist's career. Here "Mountains" becomes the pivot between the all-but-unknown work that preceded it and a lavish, refreshing display of the various if more familiar kinds of wild beauty that it unleashed in subsequent paintings.

Fabulously enlightening and unruly, this show of 29 paintings is the latest example of the historical excavations with which Larry Gagosian, the art dealer everyone loves to hate, regularly redeems himself. He may have a deleterious inflationary effect on the art market and the careers of younger talents and nontalents, but his shows of older, often nonliving artists would do any museum proud. This one has been organized in cooperation with Frankenthaler's estate by John Elderfield, chief curator emeritus of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. (Its richly illustrated catalog is distinguished by Mr. Elderfield's thoughtful essay and Lauren Mahony's wonderfully detailed chronology of Frankenthaler's passage through the 1950s, built around her letters, exhibitions and reviews.)

Frankenthaler was Color Field's prodigy and its single-minded glamour girl. Born into a wealthy family in Manhattan, she grew up cosseted, cultured and bent on painting. She attended the Dalton School, where her art teacher was the Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo, and went on to Bennington College in Vermont, studying with the painter Paul Feeley.

Graduating in 1949, Frankenthaler returned to New York and set up her first studio on East 21st Street. She soon began an affair with the esteemed art critic Clement Greenberg, nearly 20 years her senior, with whom she frequented galleries and museums, visited artists' studios and traveled abroad. It is a tribute to Frankenthaler's intelligence and ambition that she was soon up to speed on the latest innovations of the New York School, in addition to becoming friendly with many of its leading lights, including Pollock and David Smith.

Sometime in 1953 Greenberg brought Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, two painters from Washington, to Frankenthaler's studio, to show them "Mountains and Sea" — in all likelihood when Frankenthaler was not there. (Anyone irked by the presumption of this, raise your hand.) The Washington visitors immediately grasped the implications of Frankenthaler's singing, thinned-down colors and the way they sank into the unprimed canvas. Louis later described "Mountains and Sea" as "the bridge between Pollock and what was possible."

The rest, you could say, is mystery. Frankenthaler's stained-color technique has often been treated like a bit of precocious luck that Morris and Louis adapted and developed. Besides, Color Field's critical prestige, if not its market share, began to contract after 1960, the year Frankenthaler was given a survey at the Jewish Museum. Frank Stella, a young artist fresh out of Princeton, had already emerged as the next hot thing, and Minimalism was on the horizon.

Frankenthaler's path to "Mountains and Sea" deserves to be an immutable part of postwar history, and this show should make it so. It conjures a vivid portrait of the artist as a fearless young woman, unencumbered by rules or ideology, who had a remarkable ability to bend other artists' styles and motifs to her own expressive needs. One advantage was her restless attention to the methods and materials of both painting and drawing, which she tended to combine.

This is evinced by the works in the show's revelatory opening gallery, starting with the caked, episodic surface of "Painted on 21st Street" (1950), a smeary white-on-white mixture of paint, plaster, sand and scribbled fragments that suggests a pristine cave painting.

Another surprise is “The Sightseers,” a youthful masterpiece from 1951 in enamel and crayon on paper mounted on Masonite. After establishing an open fretwork of looping black lines, Frankenthaler fills the interstices with bright crayon, applied in broad areas accented with sharp scribbles and all kinds of marks and signs. There are periodic glimpses of “sights”: seascapes, mountains, possible figures, a crown. “The Sightseers” evokes precedents including Pollock, Krasner, de Kooning’s great “Excavation” and maybe a little Jean Dubuffet, yet it radiates an assured independence, partly because of the eccentric way it is made.

The same goes for the “Untitled” from 1951, a kind of landscape of tan ground and turquoise sky populated by a screenlike parade of who knows what — multicolored aircraft? sea creatures? plants? — accented once more with the fragmented black lines. Look closely, and you’ll see early signs of the stain technique among several other manipulations of paint. Here Miró and Gorky join the list of possible inspirations. Around the corner, the raucously exuberant “Ed Winston’s Tropical Gardens,” with its bright yellow ground and intimations of plants, trees and fruits, might be a billboard honoring Gorky’s “Garden in Sochi.”

Mr. Elderfield argues that Frankenthaler was more a second-generation Abstract Expressionist than a Color Field painter, especially in the 1950s, and this show bears him out. He also rightly contends that subject matter was essential to her art. It helped that she was as acutely attuned to the natural landscape as she was to the culture of painting. And while most members of the second generation cleaved to de Kooning, Frankenthaler concentrated on Pollock, combining aspects of his early and late phases, when he was most involved with imagery and myth.

Her best works are a kind of swirling, centrifugal mix of form, process, possible meaning and gorgeous, unpredictable colors, shot through with joie de vivre and wit. She wanted her paintings to seem quickly made and to be seen all at once. Yet they sustain concentrated looking, and reward time spent taking them apart and putting them back together, as they slip between legibility and abstraction, control and abandon, lines and seeping forms.

Frankenthaler gave herself a tremendous amount of permission. In “Western Dream,” of 1957, you can almost hear her naming the various motifs as her hand produces them: red insect, black idol, blue vortex, desert sand. In “Europa” she reiterates Titian’s straining goddess as a remarkably accurate blob of bright pink and then crosses it out, as if dissatisfied. In “Before the Caves,” she festoons an orange foot-shaped peninsula with lavender, gray and red and squeezes it between feathery curving lines that whip in from the sides.

Frankenthaler refused to see herself as a “woman painter,” although feminist art historians would later draw parallels between her staining technique and menstrual flow. (The insouciant, almost mocking 1952 “Scene With Nude” — with its tiny splatters of red paint between the outlines of female legs — provides some reason for doing so.) But her sense of freedom is to some extent implicitly female. Any woman making art at Frankenthaler’s level in the 1950s did so, at least in part, from a necessary sense of defiance. It burns bright in these canvases.

“Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler From 1950 to 1959” remains on view through April 13 at the Gagosian Gallery, 522 West 21st Street, Chelsea; (212) 741-1717, gagosian.com.