

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Exhibit illustrates how Helen Frankenthaler pushed her art to continually evolve *Exhibit traces work of pioneering artist Frankenthaler*

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"Cool Summer," a 1962 painting by Helen Frankenthaler, is on view in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's exhibition "Giving Up One's Mark: Helen Frankenthaler in the 1960s and 1970s."

There is a certain fearlessness to Helen Frankenthaler. It is evident both in her work and in the way she forged a remarkable career through the male-dominated art world of the 1950s.

As a young painter, Frankenthaler was not only inspired by central figures of the Abstract Expressionist movement, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, she was undaunted at the prospect of standing on the shoulders of these art world titans. She absorbed the complex methods and philosophies, namely of Pollock, in the pursuit of her own vision. Through experimentation and improvisation she developed a technique of pouring thinned-out paint onto unprimed canvas, arriving at her trademark expanses of washed color and gossamer-like stains that would come to be considered the beginning of Color Field painting.

"Giving Up One's Mark: Helen Frankenthaler in the 1960s and 1970s," on view in Albright-Knox Art Gallery, covers a significant 20-year period of her career, one that was marked by transition and demonstrated the continually evolving nature of her work. The show is a combination of monumental canvases, of which she is known for, and smaller works that offer a more intimate view of her creative process.

The exhibition skillfully orchestrated by Albright-Knox Chief Curator Emeritus Douglas Dreishpoon, begins with a look at some of these smaller pieces along with the show's earliest conceived work, "Round Trip, 1957," a moderate-sized canvas that shows both a connection to

the quick gestural marks of Pollock as well as hints of the stained areas of color that would become her trademark.

You emerge from this space – your interest piqued, a sense of the artist’s style forming – into the presence of some of her monumental canvases awash with gorgeous colors in wonderfully nuanced combinations, such as “Hint from Bassano, 1973” and “Moveable Blue, 1973,” that ebb and flow in formally astute and satisfying ways.

Moving on, you encounter a number of other masterfully rendered large-scale canvases including the seminal work “Cool Summer, 1962,” which achieves a harmonious equilibrium, with amorphous shapes that seem to simultaneously seep into and radiate from the white unprimed canvas. Clearly on display here is Frankenthaler’s continued move toward the reinvention of drawing, not as a separate act that outlines or confines, but as one that is imbedded in the formation of the colored expanse themselves.

While looking at the perfectly balanced colors and forms of her work, it is hard not to let the mind drift to associations of actual subjects. Frankenthaler usually avoided concretely talking about any subject, choosing to discuss her work in more formal terms. But as Dreishpoon suggests, in the reassessment of Frankenthaler’s work from the 1960s and 1970s, “It’s equally productive to see her brand of abstraction as an expression laden with potential content.”

He continues that “Frankenthaler intuitively understood that a successful abstract painting is inherently ambiguous. Ambiguity, the poetry of possibility, enabled all portals of perception to remain open.”

This ambiguity then opens the door to perceive not only the natural landscapes and oceans that are often associated with her abstraction, but also, as noted in the catalog that accompanies the exhibition, “geologic formations” and even anatomical structures.

The final room of the exhibition shows the film, “Frankenthaler: Toward a New Climate,” an enlightening biographical account of Frankenthaler’s life, punctuated with stories told by friends and colleagues. But most intriguingly, you have the rare privilege of seeing Frankenthaler at work in her studio, pouring, pushing and maneuvering paint, with sponges, squeegees and fingertips. Sit and watch this film in its entirety. It’s thrilling to see her moving about a massive canvas, taking chances, daring to push herself and the possibilities of painting ever further.