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WHEN IT POURS

Works by Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis.

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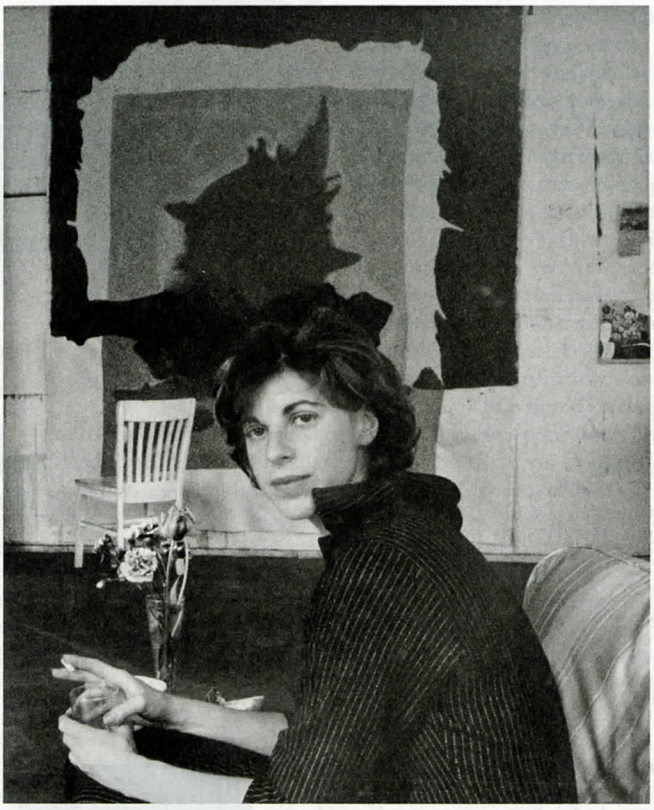

Frankenthaler in her New York City studio, in 1964, with "Interior Landscape."

Two new shows of color-field paintings from the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties—by Helen Frankenthaler, at Gagosian, and by Morris Louis, at Mnuchin—recall a time when such works served as intellectual battle flags in the dispute over what painting should be. The movement was mentored by the critic Clement Greenberg as the inevitable next phase after Abstract Expressionism. Inspired by Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, color-field aimed for "purely optical" effects—the works were dead flat, eschewed drawn line, and referred to nothing. They were made by pouring paint onto unstretched canvases laid on the floor, or, in the case of Jules Olitski, by applying the paint with a spray gun. Color-field reacted against the juicy, muscular styles of Willem de Kooning and his many followers, which Greenberg deemed spurious and passé. It won that scrap, in the court of uptown galleries, but soon succumbed to the juggernauts of Pop art and minimalism, which had behind them forces of more than rarefied aesthetic theory: by 1962, Andy Warhol's silk-screened works equalled the formal strength of color-field and surpassed its éclat, with the added bonus of Marilyn Monroe. Greenberg's dialectic made color-field sound formidable, but the art proved lightweight in practice, a genteel sort of taste—the visual equivalent of second-Martini euphoria. Still, some gifted artists espoused it, none better than Frankenthaler, its effective inventor, and Louis, its sternest reductionist.

The two shows, in their timing, attest to one nice effect of today's ravening art market: the scramble of dealers and collectors for undervalued goods, which affords the rest of us fresh encounters with the artists who made them. It's not as if Louis, who died, of cancer, at the age of forty-nine, in 1962, and Frankenthaler, who survived in grand style until 2011, are obscure. Their work hangs in museums and sells, at auction, for respectable six-figure sums, with the odd spike into the low millions. But compare that to the example of their contemporary Joan Mitchell, whose unabashed, emphatic lyricism was scorned by Greenberg; she holds the auction record for a work by a female artist—almost twelve million dollars, set at Christie's in May. Shadows of overblown and unmet expectation fall across the reputations of Frankenthaler and Louis. Can a reset button be hit? The next auction tallies will tell.

There's pleasure to be had, certainly, at Gagosian, in eleven lively paintings by Frankenthaler from a two-year period, 1962-63, when she was transitioning from oils to acrylics, then a modish new medium. The change incurred a loss in the depth and the bite of Frankenthaler's color, though it enabled the flooded look, like that of an engulfing weather front, that characterizes much of her later work. (Her cultivation of what the critic B. H. Friedman called the "total color image" was never doctrinaire.) The pictures vary within two main types: discrete, skittery spills of paint, with lots of blank canvas, and more crowded, overlapping pourings, cradled in surrounding forms. The colors tend to the horticultural: rose red, mint or grass green, citron, grape, and peach, with occasional sun yellow and sky blue.

In the best instance—"Cool Summer" (1962), a panoramic winner in oils—rhythmic shapes distantly suggest blurry figures at a beach, wavering in a stiff breeze. (Greenberg said that we should reject seeing chance imagery in abstract art, but he didn't say how.) "Moat" (1963) reinforces its flatness with striations, the result of the lines of the floorboards on which the canvas was spread. Frankenthaler often inserts her signature into a composition, which can

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seem elegant to a fault—a sometime weakness that she shared with the high-minded Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell, whom she married in 1958. There's a provisional, close-call air to each painting, which I think owes less to her spontaneous method than to her appraising taste: the long look afterward to decide if something had worked or not. You sense an anxious risk and a wariness of the arbitrary.

Frankenthaler was a New York City child of privilege; she graduated from the Dalton School and, in 1949, from Bennington College. The following year, she met Greenberg, who became, for a few years, her lover. She studied with the German-born guru of painterly abstraction Hans Hofmann, but she shunned the modes of fervent expressiveness—promoted as Action painting by Greenberg's agonistic rival critic Harold Rosenberg—that engaged most artists of the so-called second generation of Abstract Expressionism. She said, "You could become a de Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror, but you could *depart* from Pollock," by which she meant that adapting Pollock's idea of coöperating with chance held more promise than aping de Kooning's unattainable virtuosity. She was just twenty-three when she poured puddles of paint, in palely glowing colors, onto a cotton canvas to produce "Mountains and Sea" (1952), which is the Rosetta stone of color-field (it's in the National Gallery of Art, in Washington), despite the fact that it bears drawn lines and a redolence of landscape. Greenberg showed the picture to Louis and the painter Kenneth Noland, both visiting from Washington, D.C., on April 4, 1953. If color-field were a nation, that day would be its Fourth of July. Frankenthaler's work was the "bridge from Pollock to what was possible," Louis later declared.

Louis was born Morris Louis Bernstein, to working-class Russian immigrants, in Baltimore in 1912. He pursued a passion for art in rugged circumstances, taking menial jobs, participating in the Depression-era Public Works of Art Project, and teaching privately. Smitten by Abstract Expressionism, Louis made unsatisfying attempts to absorb variants of the style. His introduction to Frankenthaler's technique, and encouragement from Greenberg, led him to eliminate drawing and brushwork and to develop rote formats that bet everything on flat, frontal color. The Mnuchin show samples the most extensive of these, the "Veils," which he painted between about 1954 and 1960: mostly large canvases that he tilted to soak with layered, broad runs of translucent acrylic, their downward course narrowing slightly from top to bottom. Like the man himself, by all accounts, the motif is clenched and taciturn, even glum, though given over to delectations of the eye in nearly infinitely variegated chords of color.

Despite the liberty implied in letting gravity make a picture, the "Veils" evince something like the steely control of scientific experimentation. The cumulative, blushing colors are kept within tight ranges of hue and saturation, and of warm and cool. There is a remarkable effect of liquid depths snugged up to dust-dry surfaces, as optical pushes and pulls attain an exquisite equilibrium. How to look at the works isn't obvious. They appear clunky from any great distance. (On the score of seeing things you shouldn't, I can never entirely shake a fancy that some of the big shapes represent dental X-rays of fantastically diseased molars.) Beauty happens within a couple of feet. Then the nuances of color, as of a dusky green caressing a smoldering orange, trigger little shocks of perception. Closeup viewing may persuade you that you have underrated your powers of visual discrimination. Look long, for best results. You may feel lonely, but that's by design.

Color-field climaxed a modern ambition to expunge narrative content from painting. You were meant to be alone—"autonomous" was a byword—in wordless communion with art, as with a sunset. But art, unlike nature, requires someone to perform an act of will, and where there's a mind directing a hand there's a story. If the story is excluded from a picture, it will reconstitute around it as art criticism, which provides a set of thoughts for the reasons that, as you look, you should abandon thinking. That isn't fair to individual aesthetic experience, which may find drama in abstraction and transport in realism. It also leaves out of account the worldly circumstances that impel and reward changes in art. Those turned out, by the end of the sixties, to endorse almost anything but more color-field. Color-field paintings are period artifacts, some of them lastingly enjoyable, of a peculiar presumption. ♦