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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Frankenthaler's art prompts new take on history at the Rose

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Helen Frankenthaler's "Flirt."

WALTHAM — In May 1957, Life magazine published a photo spread headlined "Women Artists in Ascendance." The Life article is the opening gambit in "Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler," a revisionist examination of painting from the 1950s to the present day, opening at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University on Feb. 11.

The story led with a full-page photo of Frankenthaler. In it, she's seated — either on a painting, or on a drop cloth; it's a sea of blue — in a neat pink blouse and a white skirt, her legs neatly tucked beneath her. She's young and attractive. But there's something defiant, something fed up, about her gaze.

Maybe the photographer had prompted her to change out of her studio clothes into something prettier. Or maybe he — let's assume it was a he — asked her what it's like being a woman artist.

Henry Geldzahler, the Museum of Modern Art curator, asked her just that in 1964, and she responded, in part, "Looking at my paintings as if they were painted by a woman is superficial, a side issue. . . . The making of serious painting is difficult and complicated for all serious painters. One must be oneself, whatever."

Art history has not traditionally made room for women. The story of modern painting is largely masculine and fairly linear. It progresses from the hothouse heroics of Abstract Expressionism to

cooler-headed, anodyne Color Field paintings. Critic Clement Greenberg, a champion of Abstract Expressionism and a force behind Color Field painting, helped to define the path. He was also, for a time, Frankenthaler's lover.

The line continues with Pop and Minimalism — clever and smart, but emotionally anemic.

In this progression, painting in the 20th century became more about itself, and less about the world around it. Toward Color Field's decline, not surprisingly, painting was declared dead.

"Painting becomes purified into something very narrow," says Katy Siegel, the Rose's Curator-at-Large, who organized "Pretty Raw." "Not about everyday life or the body. It becomes just an optical experience in Greenberg's writing. Not that it's not beautiful. It just doesn't have the complexities that came right before or after."

Siegel turned to Frankenthaler, who died in 2011 and never called herself a feminist. What if we viewed painting of the last 60 years with her as the progenitor, rather than the more commonly named granddaddy, Jackson Pollock?

"It would easily be another history of painting," says the Rose's director, Christopher Bedford. One that a university art museum, with a directive of academic investigation, is uniquely positioned to write: "I want the Rose to be seen as a place that does exhibitions that are as scholarly as they are dazzling," says Bedford. "That's the aim of museum work, and it's really difficult to achieve."

He encouraged Siegel to explore the Frankenthaler branch of art history. Now, in addition to the exhibition, Siegel is putting together a book, which will be published by the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation and Rizzoli.

A pivotal figure in postwar art, Frankenthaler was an ambitious painter with confidence and grit, often working on a large scale. Where Pollock splattered on the floor, Frankenthaler poured and pushed her paint, staining raw canvases. That technical invention paved the way to Color Field painting.

Frankenthaler stained. She didn't shy from pretty colors. An early painting in the show, "Hommage à ML," is a Rorschach-blot bouquet of shimmering blues, coral, and yellow. It pays tribute to Marie Laurencin, a French painter of women who favored pastel colors and aimed for a female aesthetic.

Siegel points to Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which opened in 1950 and represented Frankenthaler along with other second-generation New York School artists, as the nexus of a taste that embraced decorative art, campy humor, and exquisite found objects alongside more commercial abstract paintings. The gallery's founders, John Myers and Tibor de Nagy, were a gay couple; many in their circle were gay.

Siegel's history springs from this hotbed: playful, juicy, increasingly fluid about gender and sexuality, and reveling in the pretty, the decorative, the domestic. Painting had been about paint, but now that materiality signaled something more.

“Materiality is tied to sexuality, and also to feelings — spewing uncontrollable feelings,” says Spiegel.

“Pretty Raw” starts with artists such as Larry Rivers and Grace Hartigan, and swings through Color Field painters. It pivots at African-American painter Sam Gilliam, who approached color through a jazzy framework, and feminist artist Lynda Benglis, who cites Frankenthaler’s floor painting as inspirational. Then it drops into the feminist 1970s and 1990s.

“The first wave of feminism was about decoration and aesthetic,” says Siegel, “ ’90s feminism was about social role play and sexuality.”

The 1980s were quiet. “Whenever there’s a great movement in civil rights, there’s a backlash,” says Siegel.

The next room she calls “The Men’s Room.” It includes “Shape With Points,” a typically gaudy and graphic Carroll Dunham painting, with a blue penis bobbing up at the bottom.

“Dunham was completely inspired by Frankenthaler’s work,” says Siegel. “He has said, ‘She had balls.’ It’s surprising from someone associated with a pretty male point of view.”

The final section of the show is devoted to contemporary paintings, such as Carrie Moyer’s “Four Dreams in an Open Room,” which hangs beside a late Frankenthaler, very large and very pink, called “Flirt.” Moyer’s work sizzles with overlapping blocks and veils of color.

“Greenberg was interested in image, but not in process,” says Siegel, looking at Moyer’s painting. “Artists today are interested in process, in the act of pouring and painting.”

In the end, Siegel’s art history has more intrinsic ties to society and how it has evolved than does the art history constructed by critics such as Greenberg, powerful galleries, collectors, and museums.

“There’s no moment in the history of art that is not a pluralist moment,” Siegel says. “Art and history shouldn’t be a place for winners and losers. It should be a place for everybody.”