GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Off-Ramp

Review: Helen Frankenthaler (at Gagosian Gallery) danced with Travolta, painted with beauty

Off-Ramp arts contributor Marc Haefele reviews "Line into Color, Color into Line: Helen Frankenthaler, Paintings, 1962–1987," at Gagosian Gallery through October 29.

Marc Haefele

Helen Frankenthaler's Pink Field, 1962. Rob McKeever/Frankenthaler Foundation / ARS

Walking into the Gagosian Gallery on Camden Drive in Beverly Hills, my eyes are whammed, seized, grabbed by the first Helen Frankenthaler painting I see: "Milkwood Arcade,'' a suggested, flattened pilot-house shape of wan, paneled blue, encircled by cocoa brown and embraced by actinic yellow.

Why is this picture so immediately arresting? The colors and the implicit shapes that lie beneath and deep within them, writhing away with sub-representational significance are things being shown to us, but we are the assemblers of the meanings in our minds.

That is the way Helen Frankenthaler's art works on us.

Frankenthaler died in 2011 at 83. She had a public career lasting nearly 60 years, from the accomplishment of her first great painting, "Mountains and Sea" in 1952. Influenced strongly by Jackson Pollack, she created her own techniques, her own modality in this first, great piece. Instead of doing more pictures like it, she moved on and kept moving on to new ideas almost to the end of her life. Her key innovation was called "Color Field," which spread all over modern painting via her artistic debtors Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland.

Hers is a very rich and generous form of abstract expressionism. It is abstract expressionism for people who do not like abstract expressionism, yes, but much more than that. Her language of art expresses what's been called the fidelity of her vision. There are the things that she did with her canvases, like her trademark up-bubbling paint formations and her "soak-stain'' washes of dilute

paint on unprepared canvases). And there was her agility and work ethic, spending endless hours to show us what at first only she could see.

Frankenthaler often used the word "beautiful" to describe her works. And, often, they are, but in a hard-won way that belies critics who saw the attractiveness of her paintings as a kind of softness. Very little of what she paints could be called "accidental." But the amount of energy that goes into her paintings percolates right out at you. The 17-painting Gagosian show includes 25 of the most important years of her work, but avoids the painting she did in the 1990s, as well as the print work that followed, like her magnificent wood-block-print tour-de-force "Madame Butterfly'' of 2000. Examples of her post-80s lithographs, that embody so much of her last decades' development, would have fitted well in this show.

As it is, here are 17 magisterial pieces ranging from the vital verticalities of "Rapunzel" to the rugged browns of "Mineral Kingdom." "Grey Fireworks" spatters implausible snatches of colors on mixed neutral backgrounds—suggesting echoing depths.

And "Burnt Norton" recalls the T.S. Eliot poem of that name:

> "Time present and time past
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> Are both perhaps present in time future,
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> And time future contained in time past.
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> If all time is eternally present
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> All time is unredeemable.''

The gallery says the works have been selected to show the relationship between line and color in this period of her painting. According to Frankenthaler, "A line is a line, but it is (also) a color.'' And of course a boundary of two colors is the thinnest possible line. There is "no formula" for great art, she told the New York Times in 2003. "There are no rules. Let the picture lead you where it must go."

Her life led her to some interesting places, too. A favorite story was how, at age 57, she twirled the night through at a 1985 White House ball with a young man she said was the greatest dancer she ever met. His name meant nothing to her until a friend explained who John Travolta was.