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Berkshire Tour: Formalism Relaxes, Handcraft Goes Digital

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Helen Frankenthaler paintings at the Clark Art Institute. From left, "Scorpio," 1987; "Red Shift," 1990; "Barometer," 1992. Credit Tucker Bair/Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

What do we talk about when we talk about abstraction? Two small, illuminating exhibitions of work by Helen Frankenthaler at the Clark Art Institute, one of paintings and the other of woodcuts, together suggest nature lurks throughout the imagery of this ostensibly unyielding formalist. At nearby Mass MoCA, the question is what makes figuration go live, raised by Elizabeth King in work that marries exacting handcraft and digital technology.

"There are no rules," Frankenthaler proclaimed, in a statement about the importance of risk-taking that gave the woodcut show at the Clark its title. She applied this to the processes of art-making: Frankenthaler defied rules about painting as well as printmaking, most consequentially when she thinned her paint with turpentine and poured it directly onto raw canvas, in a manner that radically redirected so-called Color Field abstraction. But she also applied her declaration to maintaining that movement's firm renunciation of any subject matter other than painting's own material conditions.

The scant dozen paintings chosen for "As in Nature," curated by Alexandra Schwartz, are not necessarily "about" the landscape, but rather reflect a kind of parallel play with natural forces. Early on, Frankenthaler reported the "magic moment" of being "caught between the making of an abstract picture and the emergence of certain images." Even with her help, the images she identifies are elusive.

The earliest work shown at the Clark, helpfully titled "Abstract Landscape," dates to 1951, when the artist was 22. (It precedes by a year her breakthrough "Mountains and Sea," not on view.) Tawny hills and colorful vegetation are clearly outlined amid washes of blue; clear, too, are the

influence of Gorky and Matisse. “Milkwood Arcade” (1963), an early use of acrylic, places a passage of cool, tree-shaded light above a marine blue oblong; an excitable band of brown above and a hot sunny yellow embracing the whole complete a composition both Rothko-esque and allusively naturalistic.

This exhibition’s centerpiece, and one of Frankenthaler’s largest paintings, “Off White Square” (1973) is an abstraction in CinemaScope. Anchored by the titular white square, chalky white and slightly sticky, are floods of pink, purple, khaki and blue. As she often did, Frankenthaler placed a lighter shade, here yellow, at the bottom, which levitates the whole. Borders are almost always emphasized in her work, through strong colors at the edges of canvases and at the boundaries of poured fields.

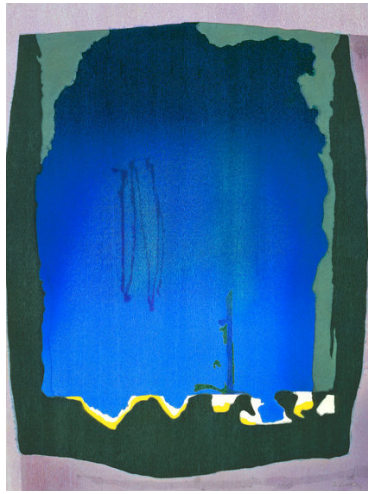


“Madame Butterfly,” woodcut, 2000. Credit Helen Frankenthaler Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

By the later 1970s, Frankenthaler was departing from her signature style to capitalize on the tactile heft achievable with acrylic, as in “Jockey,” with its thick dabs of bright green. Least known are such late paintings as “Red Shift,” in which clashing crimsons and deep pinks create a toxic glow along the horizon of an irradiated landscape, and “Barometer,” a rare grisaille that suggests a frozen wasteland of churning seas and joyless snow. By way of a coda, the exhibition ends in 1992 with “The Birth of the Blues,” a vibrant chord of rich blues and greens swept in horizontal lines, like notation for a bar of music.

With “No Rules,” the show surveying Frankenthaler’s woodcuts, the curator Jay Clarke demonstrates how well a refractory medium can suit an artist who favors intuition and chance. Although she made a greater number of lithographs and (particularly) monotypes, both more conducive to spontaneity, the woodcuts, which span the years 1973 to 2009, offer a fascinating overview of her thinking and process.

From the start, Frankenthaler was looking toward 19th-century Japanese masters, as is evident in the delicate tracery of white lines through areas of meaty red and grassy green in “Savage Breeze.” Yet to achieve the smoky, fire-lit atmosphere of “Cameo,” Frankenthaler worked the woodblock with such unorthodox implements as sandpaper, a cheese grater and dental tools.



Helen Frankenthaler's "Freefall," 1993, a 12-color woodcut. Credit Helen Frankenthaler Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

From the '90s comes the sumptuous "Freefall," in silky blues and greens on a hand-dyed sheet 78 inches high — a feat of papermaking as well as printing. Bravura workmanship reached its height in "Madame Butterfly," a slightly fussy triptych involving 46 woodblocks and 102 colors.

But most of the late prints are marvels of freshness and lucidity. "Japanese Maple," with its deep, wet reds, seems effortlessly evocative, as does the final, ethereal "Weeping Crabapple," completed two years before Ms. Frankenthaler's death in 2011.

Recently returned to attention after a long hiatus, Frankenthaler is being hailed not only as a covert naturalist — and, to be sure, a heroine of formalism — but also an unfortunate victim of her era's implacable misogyny. (Notoriously, the critic E. C. Goossen, comparing her to her towering predecessor, Jackson Pollock, wrote, "What she took from him was masculine," i.e., enamel paint flung onto canvas with a stick; "What she made with it was distinctly feminine: the broad, bleeding-edged stain on raw linen." More pithily, Harold Rosenberg accused her of being a passive "medium of her medium." By association, even men were at risk, as when Arthur Danto said of Morris Louis's poured paintings known as "Veils" — famously cribbed from Ms. Frankenthaler — that viewing them was like "walking through racks of negligees at Bendels.")

No feminist herself, Ms. Frankenthaler was often defined by her romantic relationship with formalism's ruthless arbiter, Clement Greenberg, and her later marriage to the painter Robert Motherwell, another polemicist of high modernism. She is further dogged by her privileged upbringing, and the irrepressible elegance it is seen to have produced. Ms. Schwartz argues that these emphases obstruct recognition that Ms. Frankenthaler's work could be tough and even ugly; that she sketched outdoors (which no purist of abstraction would do); and that her very considerable success makes her a role model for younger women.

The Clark Art Institute is a string of Apollonian galleries set amid rolling hills and wooded trails as in a landscape by Poussin. The atmosphere is meditative. On the other hand, Mass MoCA, as its name implies, aims — successfully — to engage eager crowds. Within its newly augmented industrial-era spaces, visitors of all ages line up for James Turrell's rooms of mesmerizing color and light, and for the goggles and handsets that make Laurie Anderson's two irresistible virtual reality animations come to life.

Elizabeth King's sculptures, stop-motion animations, and photographs might, in this context, similarly appear bent on spectacle. Theatricalized by spot lighting in dim rooms, the exhibition "Radical Small," curated by Denise Markonish, even includes a simulated film set. But pensive, old-fashioned interiority is afoot. No stranger to cutting-edge technology, Ms. King (born in 1950) is also a close student of historical automatons. Facing you on entry is a stop-motion animation, projected high on the wall, of a huge staring glass eyeball, its lids held open by a spring-loaded, Clockwork Orange-y device. After a few moments it blinks quickly; you have to watch for it, and you may blink sympathetically when it does. The subject of the film is a sculpture nearby. Set atop a brass stand on green baize inside a wood-framed glass vitrine, and illuminated like a figure onstage, the naked eye seems touchingly abashed.

Navigating between digital technology and laborious handcraft, Ms. King pursues the elusive spark of animation, the moment when a wooden hand waves gently and tentatively moves its wonderfully opposable thumb. Months of work are spent honing the mostly half-life-size heads and hands, made of wood, porcelain or bronze. Each digit and joint, wrinkle of lip and brow is precisely articulated. The lucent eyes are commercially produced, hence big for the faces they occupy. Eyebrows are formed of individual eyelashes. Startlingly, as one gleans from a video of the artist at work, the sculptures are almost all self-portraits.

Favoring transparency, Ms. King shows us how the back of a porcelain head opens — she calls this "the occipital hatch" — to insert the mechanics of movement. The magnetic drive motoring one hand is itself an object of fascination.

Also on view is material from Ms. King's studio, in Richmond, Va.: medical tools, eyeballs in old wood cases, a hand cast from life in wax. A final "demo" video shows Ms. King as puppeteer, maneuvering a head this way and that. She concentrates fiercely, looking up as the head does, and then briefly — reluctantly, one feels — smiles at the camera before turning back to her sculptural world. Despite all evidence, Ms. King says, "we persist in feeling that when we close our eyes, we adjourn to a private interior, our sovereign estate." Although she tests that dream rigorously, Ms. King doesn't ask us to relinquish it.