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ARTNEWS

More Than 50 Years After Representing the United States, Helen Frankenthaler Returns to Venice

Andrew Russeth

Installation view of with Helen Frankenthaler's For E.M., 1981. (The E.M. is Édouard Manet.) © ARTNEWS

The Palazzo Grimani in Venice is a capacious 16th-century palace that once belonged to one of those grand Venetian families that produced a cardinal, a doge, a bishop, and a other assorted luminaries. Thanks to extensive renovations, the building is now in superb condition, and home to a classical statuary collection assembled by Giovanni Grimani, the onetime patriarch of the city of Aquileia. It is, in short, a pretty ideal location for an art exhibition.

As it happens, Palazzo Grimani is now hosting one on its second floor: "Pittura/Panorama: Paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, 1952–1992," put on by Venetian Heritage and the Frankenthaler Foundation in association with its representative, Gagosian. (Another show of work by the artist, "Sea Change: A Decade of Paintings, 1974–1983," is on view at the gallery's space in Rome.)

Helen Frankenthaler, Pink Bird Figure, 1961. Oil on canvas, 71 x 93 1/2 in.
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"I had the pleasure of knowing Helen Frankenthaler for about 25 years, and I know that she would have just been delighted to have her work shown in this amazing building," John Elderfeld, the Museum of Modern Art chief curator emeritus and Gagosian senior curator, said at a press conference for the show this morning. The event was, in a sense, a family and friends affair, with Elizabeth Smith, the foundation's director, noting that her nephew Clifford Ross and stepdaughter Lise Motherwell were in attendance.

In Venice, where Frankenthaler was one of four artists to represent the United States at the 1966 Biennale, Elderfeld has assembled 14 paintings from the foundation's holdings—almost all of them much longer than they are tall, suggesting the format of a panorama picture—and half of them are from the 1980s or '90s. There are some wild ones in that bunch—like *Brother Angel* (1983), a gold ground dotted with the dabs of silver and blood red, and *Madrid* (1984), a gray field with pools of green and purple. They suggest, respectively, a Miró and a Rothko, both of them melting in unpredictable ways.

Helen Frankenthaler, Italian Beach, 1960. Oil on sized, primed linen 67 1/8 x 82 1/4 in. ©2019 HELEN FRANKENTHALER
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And yet, there is always the presence of a clear sense of restraint in her compositions—she never lets things get too carried away. A classic example: the shockingly spare *Italian Beach* (1960), with four patches of solid color against white.

Frankenthaler, who died in 2011, at the age of 83, is also on hand in two video clips included in the show, looking formidable as she handles paint with sponges, pours it from a can, and pushes it about using a broom. In an excerpt from Michael Blackwood's documentary *American Art in the 1960s* (1972), she says that her pictures turn out best when she's "feeling that the edges can spread," when she can get into "drawing, spilling, staining, tinting, with much more reach and fewer limits." She seems to be describing a state in which anything is possible, and her best pictures here impart that same feeling.
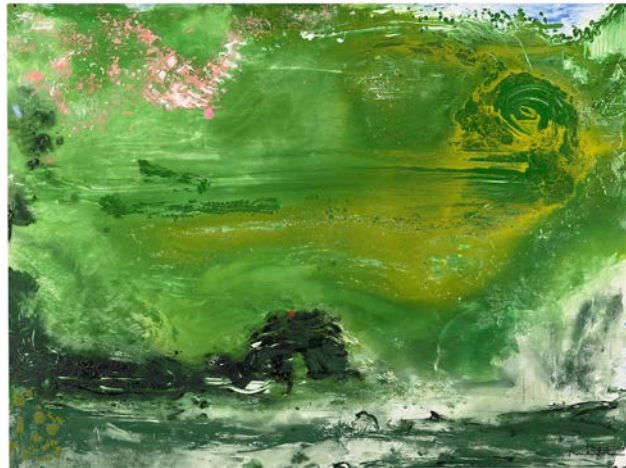
Helen Frankenthaler, Overture, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 94 in.
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Helen Frankenthaler, Barometer, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 54 1/4 x 69 1/2 in. © 2019 HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC. / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/PHOTOGRAPH BY ROB MCKEEVER, COURTESY GAGOSIAN