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‘Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown’ Review: The Lure of the Outdoors

The time Helen Frankenthaler spent in Provincetown helped shape her into the powerful, independent artist she was.

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Helen Frankenthaler's 'Flood' (1967) PHOTO: HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

It's not news that Helen Frankenthaler was extremely responsive to her surroundings. When she traveled, she often made watercolors loosely about the places she visited. Her best known work, "Mountains and Sea" (1952), was made after a trip to Nova Scotia when, she said, "the landscape was in my arms." And the changing light of her Connecticut waterfront studios, where she lived and worked after the mid-1970s, first part-time and then full-time, resonated in her luminous abstractions, whether they were made in her New York studio or within sight of Long Island Sound. This is most decidedly not to describe Frankenthaler's abstract paintings as disguised landscapes, but it does justify an exhibition such as "Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown," organized by Massachusetts' Provincetown Art Association and Museum, where it was seen last summer, and now at the Parrish Art Museum in a dramatically expanded version. ("Abstract Climates" was Frankenthaler's own description of the relation of her paintings to their purported stimuli.)

Frankenthaler first came to Provincetown in 1950 to study for three weeks at the legendary German-born abstract painter and teacher Hans Hofmann's summer school, as a charcoal drawing of a hefty nude attests. Hofmann's diagram of the way the model's body moved in space, which he habitually imposed on his students' images as a teaching tool, appears to the

right of the figure; the 21-year-old aspiring artist refused to let the legendary teacher draw on her work. Frankenthaler, who always described herself as “a space-maker,” later noted that since she already had a thorough grounding in Cubist structure, from her Bennington education, Hofmann’s “push-pull” dictum wasn’t a necessary lesson for her. (Despite this initial standoff, they became close friends.)

Some fairly disparate canvases and works on paper, also from 1950, have echoes—now more explicit, now less—of Provincetown’s distinctive townscape, but what’s more obvious is the daring young painter’s testing herself against Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Wassily Kandinsky, Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning. Though the large, accomplished “Abstract Landscape” (1951) is generally redolent of all of these precursors, its crisp floating shapes in near-primary hues and its suggestion of distant space are also impressively distinctive and original.



Helen Frankenthaler's 'Abstract Landscape' (1951) PHOTO: HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Fast-forward a decade. After Frankenthaler married the youngest of the first-generation abstract expressionists, Robert Motherwell, in 1958, they spent a few weeks of the summer of 1960 in Provincetown. Then, finding the light, the proximity to water, and the presence of a few art-world friends and colleagues stimulating, they spent the entire summer of 1961 in the former fishing town, painting in a two-story barn in a lumberyard found for them by Hofmann. For the next eight years, the couple spent every summer but one in Provincetown, building the bayside “Sea Barn,” a version of their first lumberyard studios that later became their residence. In 1967, Frankenthaler worked in a larger space that she described as “in the woods.” After 1969, her marriage beginning to dissolve, her connection with Provincetown ended.

The Parrish installation includes a group of large, sparse, playful works on paper, the Provincetown Series, made during the couple’s initial visit together in 1960. The following year’s extended stay generated some spectacular canvases, 7 to 10 feet high, in which scrawled, over-scaled geometric figures vie with pools, patches and sweeps of liquid color, like giant calligraphy against the pale, unpainted canvas, locked into the background by spreading halos of thinned-out oil paint. (Frankenthaler’s switch to acrylic was partly prompted by wanting to eliminate the halos—part of her signature technique—which she called “a gift and a crutch”

because they automatically fused color incidents with their surroundings.) “Orange Breaking Through” and “Provincetown,” two standouts from 1961, both begin with emphatic, roughly outlined, open squares, interrupted by flourishes of frankly gorgeous, unexpected hues. Orange glows beside intense blues in the former, while in the latter, pinks and reds, from marzipan to cinnabar and a lot in between, swoop against layered blues and surprising neutrals.



Helen Frankenthaler's 'Orange Breaking Through' (1961) PHOTO: HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

In Frankenthaler's Provincetown paintings of the early 1960s, such as the declarative “Breakwater” (1963), with its tasty palette of mauve-black, cadmium red, and blue-green, discrete spills of color, coaxed and willed into configurations that seem utterly spontaneous, hover against raw canvas. By contrast, the brooding, crepuscular “Blue Atmosphere II” (1963) intermingles transparent floods of deep blues and red browns, mauve and dull ocher. These contiguous zones of color anticipate the structure of works from the late 1960s, such as the aptly named “Flood” (1967), a vast torrent of warm hues—rose, gold, lavender, flesh—plunging toward narrow bands of blue and green. Frankenthaler was justifiably proud of her dark paintings and of mixing her own darkest hues, so she would be pleased to see “Blue Atmosphere II” at the Parrish, along with the severe “Chatham Light” (1969), with its near-black thrusting shape against deep brown. These revelations of a less familiar side of this brilliant colorist's inventiveness are like a squeeze of lemon, sharpening the impact of other works.



Helen Frankenthaler's 'Blue Atmosphere II' (1963) PHOTO: HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/SMITH COLLEGE OF ART, NORTHAMPTON, MA

The catalog accompanying “Abstract Climates” is handsome. The essays are mainly biographical rather than illuminating or analytical, but Frankenthaler emerges as the powerful, independent artist she was. Of course, the paintings tell us that anyway.