

## GAGOSIAN

## ARTFORUM

### Helen Frankenthaler

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View of “Pittura/Panorama: Paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, 1952–1992,” 2019, Museo di Palazzo Grimani, Venice. Left: *For E.M.*, 1981. Right: *Riverhead*, 1963. Photo: Matteo De Fina.

“THE BEAUTIES OF HELEN FRANKENTHALER’S WORK are various and dramatic,” wrote the poet and critic Frank O’Hara. The year was 1960, and Frankenthaler, just thirty-one, was enjoying her first major survey, at the Jewish Museum in New York. “She is willing to risk the big gesture, to employ huge formats so that her essentially intimate revelations may be more fully explored and delineated,” O’Hara continued in his catalogue essay. “She is willing to declare erotic and sentimental pre-occupations full-scale and with full conviction.”

Tragically, O’Hara lived to see only the first few movements in the drama of Frankenthaler’s oeuvre. He was killed in an accident on Fire Island in the summer of 1966, the same summer in which her paintings were feted in the US pavilion of the Thirty-Third Venice Biennale. Frankenthaler survived O’Hara by four and a half decades. She continued painting until she was well into her seventies, and she was still making prints at the end of the 2000s. (Frankenthaler passed away, at eighty-three, in late 2011.) Throughout her life, she returned again and again to those big gestures and huge formats, while at the same time allowing the mood and texture of her work to change in profound and fundamental ways.

With a selection of just fourteen canvases produced during a span of forty years, the sinuous and breathtaking exhibition “Pittura/Panorama: Paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, 1952–1992” told a revelatory story of how the artist mastered the soak-stain method that made her famous but then continually moved farther and farther away from it, in works by turn austere graphic and

densely turbulent, abstract or evocative of landscape. Expansively installed in seven galleries, the show led viewers from the monumental vertical forms of *Open Wall*, 1953, to the jaunty white primed canvas of *Italian Beach*, 1960, from the linear clarity of *New Paths*, 1973, to the hazy and elusive *Madrid*, 1984, leaving no doubt that Frankenthaler never wavered in the intellectual seriousness of her art-historical engagement, just as she never abandoned her intuitive passion for color.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Barometer*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 54 1/4 × 69 1/2".

In the most triumphant of the galleries in “Pittura/Panorama,” two of Frankenthaler’s mural-size paintings hung on opposite walls facing each other in conversation and catching viewers in a volley of ideas and actions. On one side was *Riverhead*, 1963, with its enormous washes of blue edged in purple, pink, and orange, all looming over a peekaboo glimpse of green, like an ocean exploding to eclipse the sunset above it. The painting suggests any number of coastlines, marshes, inlets, conjuring powerful sense memories of long-ago summers, of seasons spent on salty shores. On the other side of the gallery was the very different *For E.M.*, 1981, which offers a mind-bending variation on a tiny 1864 still life by Édouard Manet, to whom it is dedicated. Frankenthaler’s painting replicates Manet’s colors and the exact qualities of his light, but instead of duplicating his composition—a fish slapped down on a tablecloth next to a lemon, a pot, a handful of oysters, and an eel—her work is totally abstract, a gorgeously balanced array of bold shapes and suggestive brushwork. Well, perhaps not totally abstract: Frankenthaler perfectly—and humorously—mirrors the glimmering underbelly of Manet’s central subject.

For all the graceful rhythm of the pairing of the Italian terms *pittura* and *panorama* in the exhibition’s title, there was something slightly awkward about its oblique allusion to upright easel painting, given Frankenthaler’s well-established propensity (illustrated in the show itself by two large archival photographs) for applying paint to canvases that lay flat on the floor. But to offer such a minor criticism seems discourteous when considering a show that illuminated so much. The exhibition drew a crucial line from Frankenthaler’s lesser known late paintings of the 1990s back to her 1966 visit to Venice, highlighting the ways in which Venetian painters influenced her formation. In the accompanying catalogue, art historian Pepe Karmel argues that “having observed old master painting firsthand in the summer of 1948, when she visited London, Amsterdam, and other European cities, [Frankenthaler] would have been aware that such elongated proportions were associated not just with landscape in general but with marine painting in particular. Before the first touch of the brush, the proportions of the canvas evoked the sublime expanse of the sea.” To his point, there may be hints of Titian and Tintoretto, as

filtered through the Venetian paintings of J. M. W. Turner, in *Maelstrom and Barometer*, both 1992. One may trace a direct path from her early seas to her later depictions of atmospheric conditions like fog and mist, while in the painterly physicality of other later works, such as *Overture*, 1990, storm-like accumulations of gesture suggest states of mind as vividly as the force fields and phenomena of the natural world.

“Pittura/Panorama,” organized by the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation and Venetian Heritage (and staged in the newly restored Palazzo Grimani), followed on the heels of an exhibition of the artist’s work at Gagosian in Rome and coincided with two more: “Abstract Climates” at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, New York, which focused on the paintings Frankenthaler made during her many summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and “Seven Types of Ambiguity” at the Princeton University Art Museum in New Jersey, which opened up the world of her printmaking. While these shows all relied on some of the same institutional factors (most notably the involvement of the foundation, Gagosian, and the curator John Elderfield in an advisory role), there was virtually no overlap among them. Each exhibition featured completely different works and put forth distinct sets of ideas and frameworks for revisiting Frankenthaler’s oeuvre. Shedding light on such varied aspects of her practice, they were like widely spaced points on a map, hinting at the contours of a territory clearly beautiful but not yet fully known.