

GAGOSIAN

THE
NEW YORKER

Helen Frankenthaler and the Messy Art of Life

With her innovative soak-stain paintings, Frankenthaler embraced color for its own sake, animating and elevating the most elemental sensations.

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Frankenthaler's breakthrough emerged, as she recalled, from a "combination of impatience, laziness, and innovation." Photograph by Alexander Liberman / Courtesy the Getty Research Institute © J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2000.R.19). Artwork © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The American painter Helen Frankenthaler always resisted being treated as a “woman painter,” on the ground that artists should never be asked to be representative of anything except their art. Yet Frankenthaler’s life as an artist does make one think hard about adversity and resilience. Impediments impede; they can also inspire. Anyone who goes to Venice to admire the unimaginable richness of the pictures in its churches will find, on retreating to the museum in the Venetian ghetto, where the Jews were forced to pay their jailers to lock them up, that the visual art made by the persecuted was much less compelling than the art of the people who persecuted them. But, then, art is an outlier activity. In the Victorian age, a majority of the great novelists were women (only Dickens and Trollope hold up as well as the Brontës, Eliot, and Mrs. Gaskell); in the United States, all the most interesting mid-twentieth-century musicians were

African-American. In some instances, oppression can stifle artistic expression; in others, it can serve as a forcing house for it. Often, both things happen at once, or differently to different people.

Now the Stanford art historian Alexander Nemerov brings us a new biographical work, “Fierce Poise: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York,” concentrating on a key decade in the painter’s career. His is one of those books (Stephen Greenblatt’s “Will in the World” was a sterling example) in which a distinguished scholar says, in effect, to hell with being a distinguished scholar—I’m going to write like a human being. Nemerov refers to his subject not as Frankenthaler but as Helen—very much against the grain of current biographical practice—and he apologizes, in an affecting preface, for having been too much the pedantic puritan, early in his career, to fully appreciate her. The project even involves a sort of apology to his father, Howard Nemerov, the poet (and the brother of the photographer Diane Arbus), who was a teacher, friend, and admirer of Frankenthaler’s. When Nemerov taught an art-history survey class at Yale a dozen years ago, he made the decision, he tells us, to teach art as art, rather than as encoded political cartooning or as social history in pictures. “I abandoned my expertise,” he writes. “I let go of the skepticism I hid behind as a younger man. I left no scrim or safety net between me and the students, between me and the art, between me on the stage and the person I was alone. I began speaking—I don’t know how else to say it—as a person moved.”

Frankenthaler is not an entirely obvious heroine for our moment; even in her own day, she stood out for her good fortune. She was born in 1928, the daughter of a much admired New York State Supreme Court justice, and grew up on Park Avenue. The youngest and the prettiest of three daughters, she was very much her father’s favorite; she had a haunted relationship with her imposing mother, Martha, herself an unfulfilled artist. (Martha, caught in depression by Parkinson’s, committed suicide, decades later, by jumping from her apartment window.) Frankenthaler had a classic upper-Manhattan upper-middle-class education, switching from Brearley to Dalton, a move from an atmosphere of earnest progressivism to one of even more earnest progressivism. She also took art classes from the Mexican modernist Rufino Tamayo, and she knew that she wanted to paint. Nemerov’s book, to its credit, depicts her art not as a collision of art-historical icebergs but as the result of a personal practice, of nonverbal habits, of a way of being in the world. He tells us that, as a child, Frankenthaler delighted in drawing a single line of chalk tracing her route from the Metropolitan Museum to the family’s apartment blocks away—the opening scene of her bio-pic, surely—and loved to take her mother’s red nail polish and spill it in the sink, just to see the patterns it made—a surer sign of a painterly sensibility than museumgoing, although she certainly went to lots of museums.

But Nemerov doesn’t discount the effects of Frankenthaler’s enlightened education. In 1949, she graduated from Bennington, then a women’s college, where she studied with Paul Feeley, a Picasso admirer. Feeley taught her a version of Cubist painterly syntax, the first credible grammar for painting since Renaissance perspective. “At Bennington, the study and practice of modern painting was a part of the college’s intensity, not an escape from it,” Nemerov writes. The women’s colleges in the nineteen-forties did a terrific job of empowering women, as we would now say: whatever obstacles to the life of an artist Frankenthaler encountered, they were not found at Bennington. As in Mary McCarthy’s “The Group,” about a Vassar class from roughly the same period, the women’s colleges gave a slightly unreal, or premature, sense of women’s possibilities in the world.

Frankenthaler returned to New York in 1949, and, after a brief flirtation with art history at Columbia, set out to become a painter. She rented a studio downtown, and went to work, still in an essentially European, Picasso-influenced mode. Nemerov describes the young Helen as “larger than life, knowing well enough how to be a party’s center of attention.” She also had a remarkably unembarrassed sex life. Her peers scrutinized her romantic choices for signs of careerism, never more than when, during her first year back in the city, she took up with the legendary critic Clement Greenberg.

Greenberg was bad-tempered, prone to brawling, and often cruel—a constant critic, he actually kept a diary in which he gave his lovers’ bodies bad reviews. Reading about Greenberg now, you wonder why everyone in the art world didn’t just tell him to get lost. In truth, he’s like Reggie in the Archie comics, obnoxious but essential to the story. Why did the art world find him so irresistible? Some of it was the sheer allure of mischief-making, the unrepentant reprobate being more compelling than the nice guy. More came from his role as a sort of John the Baptist to Jackson Pollock’s Jesus: the first proclaimer of a divinity. It can be hard to recall, with our current seminar sleepiness about the many sources of Pollock’s art, how original and audacious his painting looked then—it seemed a spontaneous whirlwind of skeins, the artist becoming nature instead of merely serving it. Frankenthaler and the painter Larry Rivers took an oath, in the early fifties, to be forever true to Pollock’s example. As Pollock’s oracle, Greenberg had a kind of prestige that no critic has had since. Only Pauline Kael, in the mid-seventies—when, having placed her bets on the epic possibilities of pop “trash,” she was proved right by Coppola and Scorsese—had something like the same kind of cachet.

Yet Nemerov may underrate the connection between Greenberg’s actual views of modern painting and Frankenthaler’s artistic practice in the fifties. He emphasizes the critic’s invocation of the dark existential forces that hover over Pollock’s pictures, like the demons in a Goya print. But Greenberg’s organizing idea was surprisingly simple: modern painting, having ceased to be illustrative, ought to be decorative. Once all the old jobs of painting—portraying the bank president, showing off the manor house, imagining the big battle—had been turned over to photography and the movies, what was left to painting was what painting still did well, and that was to be paint.

So Greenberg was one of the first to see the incomparable greatness of Matisse, at a time when Picasso still occupied the center ring of the circus. But if Greenberg’s insight was that the decorative residue of painting might be the best thing about it, his evil genius was to enforce this insight with a coercive historical scheme, and then police it with totalitarian arguments. The scheme, borrowed from Marxist dialectics, was that History allowed no other alternative to abstract painting—the flatter and the more openly abstract, the better. The policing took place through Greenberg’s insistence on his own eye as the only arbiter of the dialectic.

Although everyone was waiting for the next breakthrough in painting, no one would have bet money on Frankenthaler’s being the one to achieve it—the general condescension she inspired, rooted in envy, prevented it. But on October 26, 1952, that breakthrough took place when, from a “combination of impatience, laziness, and innovation,” as Frankenthaler later recalled, she decided to thin her paints with turpentine and let them soak into a large, empty canvas. By using the paint to stain, rather than to stroke, she elevated the components of the living mess of life: the runny, the spilled, the spoiled, the vivid—the lipstick-traces-left-on-a-Kleenex part of life. She retreated, a little cautiously, into the landscape cognates of the abstraction, though, in naming the finished picture “Mountains and Sea.” The results were not much admired at first; the Times

deemed a 1953 show of her work, which included this painting (it now hangs in the National Gallery of Art), “sweet and unambitious.” But that year two other painters, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, visited her studio and adopted her innovation. A new style, “color-field painting,” or “post-painterly abstraction,” was born. Under Greenberg’s sponsorship—though outside his tutelage—it became, as Robert Hughes once wrote, “the watercolor that ate the art world.”

It’s a style now under a cloud, which is perhaps where it ought to be, liquidity, rain, and foam being its native vernacular. It’s beclouded, in part, because it doesn’t take much work to grasp. Picasso said once that an artist makes something new in order for someone else to make it pretty, but this was something new that was also something pretty. It was the later color-field variants—made mostly by men—that are more evidently austere.

Women critics made much of the feminine nature of Frankenthaler’s stain paintings, even tying them directly to menstruation. She passionately objected to this reductive reading, as artists often will object to having their art explained or annotated, particularly since all artists of note have a standard sneer directed at them, and the one directed at Frankenthaler was that her art was merely “feminine”—derivative and pleasing, rather than difficult and sublime. In 1957, the painter Barnett Newman, affronted by Frankenthaler’s presence in a feature in *Esquire*, wrote her a cruel letter: “It is time that you learned that cunning is not yet art, even when the hand that moves under the faded brushwork so limply in its attempt to make art, is so deft at the artful.” Even her most gifted rival among the women painters of the time, Joan Mitchell, got in on the act, calling her a “Kotex painter.”

What’s impressive about the early soak-stain Frankenthalers, of course, is how unpainted they are, how little brushwork there is in them. Their ballistics are their ballet, the play of pouring, and a Rorschach-like invitation to the discovery of form. Paramecia and lilies alike bloom under her open-ended colors and shapes. Pollock is praised for pouring and dripping, as though inviting randomness, but one senses the significant amount of figural underpainting that exists beneath the surface. Even in the case of a painter as original and as decorative as Joan Mitchell, there’s a kind of stenographic calligraphic reduction of Monet, Impressionism remade as Action. By contrast, Frankenthaler’s images seep into the material; there really is no paint surface as we think of it, no top to be on top of.

Her work of the fifties and sixties speaks to a world not of action but of reaction, of absorption and fluidity, with intimations of aquariums and hothouse flowers rather than of the usual Eighth Street stoplights and street corners. As much as Mitchell is in active dialogue with Monet—a devotion so intense that it led her to move to Vétheuil, up the hill from his old house—Frankenthaler seems in conversation with Bonnard. They have the same love of faded color, and the same feeling for designs that are almost chatty, this bit laid alongside that bit, rather than “all over,” in the manner that links Monet and Pollock. There are Bonnard watercolors that, if one simply enlarges a sky or a flower surface, look eerily like Frankenthaler paintings. Even Picasso’s dismissal of Bonnard’s compositions as “a potpourri of indecision” holds for her pictures. In this sense, Frankenthaler’s work asks what would happen if you took this kind of Bonnard watercolor—with its deliberately slack, soft-edged intimacy—eliminated the more obvious referents, and worked big. But that principle of displacement is a truth of all modernist art, where shifts in practice come from seeing in the margins of an activity—like the spattered paint on a drop cloth—the possibilities of something central.

In a curious way, Frankenthaler's revenge on Newman has been achieved, almost accidentally, in the past decades, with Newman's pictures inspected for signs of patriarchal phallocentrism. His sublime zips have even been blandly likened to actual zippers—"mundane openings onto male organs," as one academic put it—an analogy that would have been seen as blasphemously belittling in his day. Meanwhile, Frankenthaler's weepiness, condescended to as feminine, looks more richly fertile.



Photo: © Arnold Newman / Liaison Agency

Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell, a New York power couple of abstract painting, in 1963. Photograph by Arnold Newman / Getty

For a nonparticipant, these arguments will seem crudely reductive. If a straight line is to stand for phallocentrism while a soft center stands for its vaginal opposite, do we have an argument worth winning? Both Tom Wolfe and Robert Hughes were indignant at this seeming smallness of meaning and metaphor in abstract painting. And yet the reduction of the argument to simple gestures is the whole point of the game. What makes good games matter is the commitment of their players to the rules as the springboard of invention. Art is its constraints. Scrabble players don't suppose that spelling words is significant; what's significant is assembling words from a limited array of letters. Chess players don't think about capturing kings and rooks; they think about strategies for capturing kings and rooks. No painter imagined that eliminating perspective or storytelling from pictures was inherently virtuous, or that the picture plane was a prime place in itself; they were drawn to the game of eliminating everything else, then finding out what was left and how it could communicate. The dignity of American abstract art lies in the intersection of the obviousness of its motifs and the complexity of its motives. It says smart things simply.

A great and somewhat limiting event of Frankenthaler's life took place six years after "Mountains and Sea," when she married Robert Motherwell, an older Abstract Expressionist of unimpeachable integrity. At the time, Motherwell had an Arthur Miller-like aura of dignity and authority. His signature work—big funereal blobs of black solemnly processing across a void, called "Elegies to the Spanish Republic"—provided, in retrospect, a too easily remembered recipe for seriousness in the serious fifties. The work "indicates," as Method actors of that period

learned to say of a too neatly telegraphed emotion, rather than inhabits its mood. The obvious visual metaphor—big black forms meaning big black feelings—was bolstered by an obvious progressive piety in the title. Motherwell's best works were his less strenuously virtuous collages, built around his favorite brand of French cigarettes rather than around his loftiest beliefs. But the romance between the two artists is genuinely moving: Motherwell and Frankenthaler fell on each other as soul mates. Frankenthaler took in his two daughters by his first marriage, and they made their home in an Upper East Side town house. For a while, Frankenthaler and Motherwell were the Lunts of abstract painting, the unquestioned power couple of the form.

Although the marital connection, as rivals groused, assisted Frankenthaler's career in certain ways, it may have arrested it in others. For a very long time, Frankenthaler's style supplied a default look for American abstract art. In Paul Mazursky's late-seventies feminist film "An Unmarried Woman," the SoHo artist played by Alan Bates paints in just this style (which, historically, is a little too late); perhaps it was inevitable that the style was appropriated from a woman and assigned to a male painter by a male filmmaker. For all Frankenthaler's fame, though, she was typed as a member of an earlier generation than the one she belonged to. When subsequent waves of art—Pop art and Minimalism—came washing over, she seemed like an Old Guard holdout rather than, as the lightsome, colorful, improvisational nature of her painting might have suggested, a predecessor of an art less self-consciously angst-ridden than Abstract Expressionism.

The marriage brought other forms of misfortune. Motherwell, whose father had been the president of Wells Fargo, turned out to have been the prisoner of a traumatic childhood, and sank into alcoholism. Frankenthaler and Motherwell divorced in 1971, and perhaps it should have been easier for peers and critics to re-situate her art within the generation that rebelled against the Ab Ex anguish. A painting like her simple silhouette of orange, "Stride" (1969), now in the Met, looks gaily Day-Glo, very much of its time. There was an evident overlap, as the art historian Robert Rosenblum once pointed out, between the high-keyed color and ease of post-painterly abstraction and the formal qualities of Pop; they were both helium-filled antidotes to the dark agonies of Abstract Expressionism proper.

Frankenthaler, had she been the careerist some decried, might have benefitted from this resemblance. She didn't, in part because of her allegiance to the "serious" stuff. Some of her best painting, certainly, is her most larksome. Pictures like "Tutti-Fruitti" (1966), now in Buffalo, or "Royal Fireworks" (1975)—which sold at Sotheby's last June for a handsome, though not Pollockian, sum—have a warmth and a brightness of affect that seem entirely their own. The appealing *pousse-café* of color in "Tutti-Fruitti" implies sherbets, water ices, fireworks—nothing "deep" and everything alive. They have what Nemerov calls "childlike connotations," an unapologetic, inspiring embrace of color for its own, elemental sake.

Frankenthaler continued to paint late into her life. She remarried, in 1994, to an investment banker, and five years later they moved to a house in Darien, Connecticut, right on the Long Island Sound. There her paintings picked up the sea greens and turquoises that, for the last dozen years of her life, she could see from her studio.

Learning to be an aesthete in middle age, as Nemerov has, is like taking tango lessons in your fifties: the spirit is admirable, but the moves are awkward. Almost overequipped to handle the intersection of art and social history—Nemerov does a masterly job on the relation of Frank

O'Hara's poetry and Frankenthaler's painting—he is underequipped to make people and pictures live on the page. No one could pick a picture out from all the others after reading his description of it. At one point, we're told, of Frankenthaler's 1955 "Blue Territory," "The graffiti of a schoolgirl's private confession takes on the aura of saintly ecstasies, a conventional sign of forlorn adolescence martialled almost against its will into a bold strapping air of titanic achievement"—a description that reveals little about the picture except that the author likes it. Attempting to create novelistic character and an inhabited world, Nemerov relies on mechanical double adjectives and stock word pairings: "Elegant yet earthy, Martha Frankenthaler was a person of vibrant enthusiasms and impetuous moods"; Greenberg is "tough as nails."

Another struggle is presented by Nemerov's puritanical take on Frankenthaler's concern for her career, too much remarked on in her day; she thought nothing of posing for a spread in a popular magazine if doing so would increase her fame and sell her pictures. Nemerov assures us that, nevertheless, "something saved Helen. Her paintings stood apart from her quest for recognition and sales." Why, though, would she need to be saved from being sold? Being part of the world of buying and selling is constitutive of what the visual arts have meant and have been since the end of the medieval era. Only priests and academics find anything shameful in it. Whatever is lost in contamination by commerce is more than made up for by what's gained in independence. Frankenthaler painted what she wanted, and people bought what they wanted.

Nemerov worries, too, about the possibility that bourgeois collectors found her subtle intimacies merely soothing. Yet the idea that New York collectors would seek out pictures they thought comforting is a misreading of the psychology of New York collectors; they like to collect what they don't think likes them. The prestige lies in showing that you don't need to be flattered by the art you own. This is why, in the apartments of Manhattan collectors, sweet photographs of the grandchildren are hived off in the bedroom, while kinky Koonses and Bacons take places of honor next to the coffee table. (The people who thought of Frankenthaler's art as in any way "easy" were, in that period, teaching in colleges, not collecting paintings.)

Nemerov's admiration for his heroine sometimes makes him overrate her originality. "Helen's sensitivity allowed her to grant ordinary experience—faltering, incomplete, apparently meaningless—the large solemnity of art," he writes, as if this were not the achievement of every landscape and still-life since the birth of painting. Of all the constraints that make art matter, that pairing—small, sensual objects seeking big, lifesaving points—is the most familiar. Having once been shuttered in a classroom where commonplace lyricism is censored and the depiction of intimate experience is assumed to be merely a cover for bourgeois ideology, Nemerov is a bit like Molière's M. Jourdain, discovering that he has been speaking prose his whole life—or, in this case, discovering that, while he has been speaking prose, everyone he studies has been reciting poetry all along.

From today's perspective, the most striking thing about Frankenthaler's career is how much all the things that were said to belittle her, sometimes by other women, now seem to point toward her art's larger soul. Joan Mitchell may have sneered at Frankenthaler as that "Kotex painter," while Grace Hartigan said that her pictures seemed "made between cocktails and dinner." Now the Bonnard-like ease within the cycles of domesticity, and even the possible origins of her work in menstrual staining, are seen by feminist critics as an admirable uplifting of the "abject." Nemerov is appropriately voluble on this subject: "The painting that left the studio, the painting that hung on the gallery wall, offered such a range of experiences and emotions that it might disguise how it had all started with a gesture connoting such a private and bodily function."

He is surely right to sense a larger American story here, about women, painting, and the elevation of the decorative instinct in art. Impressionist painting became uniquely valued in America at a time when it was still scorned in France, in large part for being “feminine,” instinctive, and soft. (It was no accident that the leading post-Impressionist correctives to Impressionism were almost comically phallic, as with Seurat’s Piero-like pillar people.) The Chicago curator Gloria Groom has established that American women played a crucial role here. Mary Cassatt and May Alcott (the original Amy March) formed a circle in France that assisted married women with money to buy pictures, and advised them to heed the judgment of Sara Hallowell, a remarkable curator and art adviser in Paris. These viewers prized exactly the qualities that made the art of Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro dubious in France: non-heroic, housebound subjects like babies and kitchens, an allergy to firm contour and an adherence to the domesticity of the passing day. This tradition of “feminine” defiance is part of the inheritance of Frankenthaler’s art. It extends to a painter like Elizabeth Murray, but also to the seemingly Dadaist activity of Janine Antoni, who was rightly included in “Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler,” a 2015 show at Brandeis University. Antoni chews chocolate and then, spitting it out, forms it into her own signature objects—an extension, in deadpan form, of Frankenthaler’s revaluing of the messy necessary liquids of life.

In the classic pattern of the oppressed taking on the values of the oppressor, social radicals still sometimes think that only “subversive” art—tense and tedious—can be serious, while things that look like big watercolors cannot be. This dismissal leaps past gender to the heart of the modernist enterprise, where Monet’s delight in painting for the eye is still suspect, and Matisse’s calm insistence that he saw his art as akin to a comfortable armchair for an exhausted businessman is still the most taboo of all artist manifestos. And yet this unashamedly decorative impulse, experienced as a woman’s domain, is a constant in the American tradition. For her fond biographer, Frankenthaler’s art delights the eye, as it was designed to, and that’s enough. Enough? It’s everything.