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‘Like a Rothko dancing wildly to jazz’ – Helen Frankenthaler review
Gagosian Grosvenor Hill, London; She invented staggering new ways to paint, but it was the men who followed her who got all the credit. Now this towering figure is finally getting her due

Jonathan Jones



‘A glimpse of the infinite’ ... Sphinx, 1976, by Helen Frankenthaler. Photograph: Robert McKeever/© 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London/Courtesy Gagosian

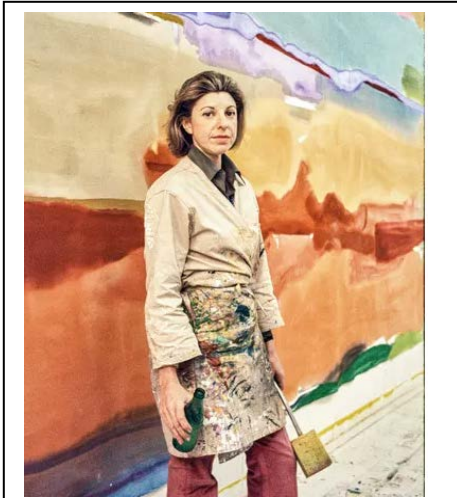


You generally have to go to New York to do abstract expressionism properly. For a moment, among Helen Frankenthaler’s very, very big paintings, I thought I was there among the skyscrapers, until I looked out of the window and saw some blokes sweating outside a Georgian sandwich shop.

Forgetting the everyday again, my eyes sank into a purple haze. Frankenthaler invented a way of painting by letting colour soak into an unprepared canvas on her studio floor. The results, all around you in this brilliant selection, are entrancing and authoritative. The colours are definitely inside the surface, not on it. They are fused into the unprimed fabric: pooled, puddled, and left to

dry. Then, gazing into her own paint lagoons, Frankenthaler has sometimes put a line around a blot, seen a face in a stain, an island in a spillage.

It all began in 1951 when, in her early 20s, she went with her lover, the art critic Clement Greenberg, to see a show by Jackson Pollock, who put his canvases on the ground and essentially threw paint at them. It set her mind on fire. “It was staggering,” she said. “I really felt



Mind on fire ... Frankenthaler in her East 83rd Street studio in 1974. Photograph: Alexander Liberman/J Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

surrounded.” Her own American glories are, of course, nothing like as famous as the works of her hero Pollock, or other male abstract expressionists. And that is Frankenthaler’s tragedy: she changed American art but was denied full credit, while her own male imitators got the acclaim.

That sense of being surrounded is exactly what this exhibition gives you. Her paintings, like Pollock’s, create their own imaginary space, mightier somehow than the gallery itself, as if they don’t stop at the edges of the canvas but are glimpses of one infinite work of art. This is why you can’t really understand painting until you’ve encountered abstract expressionism. And you can’t fully appreciate abstract expression without seeing how Frankenthaler did it.

She set out to build on Pollock’s liberating discovery of a new way to paint. She too laid her canvases on her studio floor – but instead of covering them with webs of spiralling squirts as he did, she let pools of colour settle into canvas like ink on blotting paper. What a great effect – and how tempting to copy it.

Frankenthaler pointed the way for the second generation of abstract expressionists to learn from Pollock without merely imitating him. Two artists who took up her idea of letting colour soak into bare canvas were Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. In the 1960s, they were hailed as leaders of Colour Field Painting. This supposed highest stage of modern art was championed by Greenberg, whose relationship with Frankenthaler was now over. Frankenthaler never got the same recognition as the Colour Field men, despite them using her ideas. New York art dealer André Emmerich, who was at the heart of this world, said she was seen “as a woman painter and therefore not quite in the same league as the male heavy hitters of her generation”.



'She challenges the mind and eye' ... Untitled, 1958. Photograph: Robert McKeever/© 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation/Artists Rights Society, New York/DACS, London/Courtesy Gagosian

Today, Noland and Louis are curiosities, their paintings huge empty period pieces. Frankenthaler, this exhibition proves, is the true great. That's because her art is not an idea or a style. It is a constantly changing engagement with feeling and the subconscious. And it's not all abstract, either.

Beach Scene, from 1961, has the freedom and ranginess of abstract expressionism – but it really is, as the title says, a scene on a beach. Three children stand on the yellow sand, painted in wild crude graffiti bursts, in front of a great rectangle of blue that clearly denotes the sea. It's dangerously, vitally torn between the dreamy calm of pure colour and the rough and tumble of real life. After Rubens, also painted in 1961, goes even more lusciously into figurative art. It looks as if she started with a few stains of grey, blue, brown, gold – then she's drawn around the blotches to define their contours. A nude woman with bulbous bangs of hair emerges from the blur, her breasts as Rubensesque at the title implies.

It is full-on surrealist. Max Ernst let his surrealist images come to him in a similar way, making a rubbing of floorboards and seeing a forest, face or landscape in it. In Frankenthaler's paintings, a face and a landscape can easily be the same thing. Sea Goddess, from 1963, seems to be an island seen from above, surrounded by blue summer sea and linked to the mainland by a narrow isthmus – but Frankenthaler has also seen a female head in it and added lips, teeth, eyes, a yellow bow.

Another great canvas, Cape Orange, painted a year later, is like a Rothko that has been enticed to a party, got drunk and started dancing wildly to jazz. Perhaps that's just what the tragic Rothko needed. Like his tall canvases layered with rectangles of colour, this vertical painting is filled with squares and oblongs of brown, red and pale blue – but they seem to be melting, collapsing, colliding in a joyous liberation from logic.

Frankenthaler challenges the mind and eye but she rewards the effort. It's time we got to know this towering modern artist.