

## GAGOSIAN

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### The women who prove abstract expressionism was more than just a man's game

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*Helen Frankenthaler. ALEXANDER LIBERMAN, © J PAUL GETTY TRUST, GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES*

I properly fell in love with abstract expressionism when I was a teenager and visited New York and — more particularly — the Museum of Modern Art (Moma) for the first time. That was three decades ago. It was all about Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning for me. Though I liked some of the other men almost as much. Because that's what abstract expressionism was, right? A man thing. Like most of the art that was deemed important enough to make it into the big collections back then.

It says everything about the mainstream history of art that it was years later when I started to find out about the women. First it was Joan Mitchell, by way of a kaleidoscopic canvas at Frieze Masters that seemed — like Rothko's Seagram Murals at Tate Modern — to change the colour and quality of the very air around it. Her Yale University Press monograph is one of the most stupendous art books in my collection, her work capable of ravishment even when confined to the printed page.

It was through Mitchell that I discovered Lee Krasner had not been mainly the wife of Jackson Pollock. And then I came across Helen Frankenthaler, who, it transpired, had not been mainly the wife of Robert Motherwell.

There's a small but perfectly formed Frankenthaler show at Gagosian Grosvenor Hill in London until September 18 called *Imagining Landscapes*. Her huge resonating canvases seem to expand into and inhabit the space in true abstract expressionist fashion. They are so painterly, and yet at the same time something so much more than paint.

The peachy hued *Sphinx* (1976), for example, presents like an outsize Rorschach test, courtesy of its mirroring blot-like forms. It appears to have been conceived to interrogate what it means to see, and then to interrogate what it means to draw conclusions from what you see. At the same time, however, like all the best art, it feels so spontaneous, so "now" as not to have been conceived at all, but to have transmogrified in front of your eyes. Likewise the yet more obtusely entitled *Cape Orange*, its contrasting blocks of red (yes, red) seeming to inhabit three dimensions.

When I posted about my visit on Instagram — because one hasn't lived it if one hasn't posted it, right? — I was struck by how many people, individuals I know to be more than usually informed about art, hadn't come across Frankenthaler, who died in 2011. "I went to art school but I haven't heard of her," said one. "Thank you. I will check her out."

Among the quintet of artists who form the focus of Mary Gabriel's fascinating book *Ninth Street Women: Five Painters and the Movement that Changed Modern Art* Frankenthaler is one of the four to remain surprisingly under the radar in this country. Only Krasner's work now enjoys the right sort of pinging, given the incredible retrospective at the Barbican a couple of years ago. The other three in Gabriel's line-up are Mitchell, Grace Hartigan and Elaine de Kooning. (Yep. Not mainly the wife of Willem de Kooning.)

All five had work in the celebrated artist-led Ninth Street Show of 1951, which included more than 70 artists, and from which the book takes its name. And, in contrast to their male peers, all five had to deal with variations on the theme of what the playwright Edward Albee once described — with reference to Krasner, who suffered from it more than most — as "extra-art garbage".



*Frankenthaler in her studio on East 83rd Street and Third Avenue, New York, 1964 ALEXANDER LIBERMAN, © J PAUL GETTY TRUST, GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES*

When Krasner — the eldest, born 20 years before Frankenthaler, the youngest — started living with Pollock in 1942, her work, not to mention her selfhood more generally, was obscured by his. Many believed she had stopped working entirely, which was never the case. “These piles of garbage,” continued Albee, “were named ‘female artist’ and ‘wife of artist’.” All of which meant it was “an effort to move into the pure center and experience the painting for its own sake”.

Frankenthaler’s “extra-art garbage” was initially focused on her affluent background — her father was a judge — and later on her 13-year power marriage to Motherwell. (They divorced in 1971. Abstract expressionists may have been good with a paintbrush but they were terrible at staying hitched.)

As one critic observed snootily in an article on Mitchell in 1961, “Nowadays there is a handsomely garbed monde of women artists in New York, but they have for the most part married and adopted lives of more or less stable *rhythm*”. While some railed publicly at this “anthropological art criticism”, Frankenthaler merely wrote an irony-laced letter to Hartigan noting, “What a pity that we married, chic, square, bourgeois females cannot share the true American bohemia of other women!”

Even more than a decade after that, Frankenthaler would — on the advent of a new show in Washington — find herself getting as much attention in the Washington Post for her “regal” posture, “gliding” gait and “intentionally bland” responses as for her art. By then she had become two women according to those who knew her — as “spontaneous” and “funny” as she had ever been in private, according to a niece, but “aloof” and “patrician” according to the press. It took until 1989 for her to be accorded a retrospective at Moma, after Krasner five years earlier and Georgia O’Keeffe in 1946.

“I don’t resent being a female painter,” Frankenthaler once said. “I don’t exploit it. I paint.” Now — finally — we have reached the point where her paintings are allowed to speak for themselves. I would like Mitchell’s to be the next to be given that opportunity. Her last show in this country was in 2012.

We may still be some way off Albee’s “pure center”, but we are nearer than we have ever been.