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**Helen Frankenthaler: *Drawing within Nature: Paintings From The 1990s***

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*Helen Frankenthaler, Magnet, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 106 x 81 3/4 inches. © 2023 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Rob McKeever.*

The exhibition of Helen Frankenthaler's paintings from the early 1990s currently on view at Gagosian is a curious and provocative one. The show's title, "Drawing within Nature," was a phrase once used by the artist to describe her work, which has been appropriated by the scholar Thomas Crow, who contributes an essay to the exhibition catalogue.

If I understand Professor Crow's interpretation correctly, the role of nature is not simply the subject matter anchored within the artist's paintings, but a discrete sensibility taken *from* nature that suggests an ordering of its own.

Keeping in mind that Frankenthaler's work before the 1970s was done with oil, charcoal, and turpentine on unprimed canvas, we might look at these earlier works as a signal of the artist's desire to find a parallel between the source of her paintings and her ambition to transform it

beyond the ordinary. In the more recent work from the 1990s, the effect of acrylic on canvas gives the painterly surfaces a more deliberate and self-sustaining tenacity.

In this context, her work falls easily into a breakthrough category in which the paintings involve either a progression from one work to the next, or a counterpoint between them. In doing so, they become open to the effects of chance, with a tendency to either separate or relate to one another. In either case, Frankenthaler's works from the 1990s exceed the seemingly endless repetitions made by the painters of the New York School throughout most of the 1950s.

It is important to note that the dates of the paintings included in this exhibition begin in 1990 and continue through 1995—they encompass just a half-decade. Among these works are paintings that celebrate color and space, all broadly within the concept of nature. Frankenthaler consistently found ways to address the source of her work within the actuality of painting. Her work at this time was consistently driven by her concept of nature, extending through the act of painting as a form of perception where the coordination of color was made intrinsic.



*Helen Frankenthaler, Vespers, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 63 3/4 inches. © 2023 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Rob McKeever.*

The layering of paint in *The Rake's Progress* (1991) is a forceful example of this process whereby the source of the painting reveals itself through the temporal process of perception, which appears entirely absorbed by color. There is nothing in the natural world to match, identify, or compare with this painting other than the impulse to redress the interior of space in general, opening on all sides onto vistas of light that regain the creation of its source.

Much of what we see in this exhibition aspires to reconcile an emphasis on light with what constitutes another crucial aspect given to these paintings, namely the use of darker shades in selected works. These paintings are given to the color gray, as in *Spellbound* (1991), *Vespers* (1992), and most evidently, *Barometer* (1992).



*Helen Frankenthaler, Western Roadmap, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 104 inches. © 2023 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Rob McKeever.*

*Spellbound* hangs at the show's entryway. Its gray tone is coupled with yellow, specifically in the lower half of the painting. There is a reference to dynamism and speed, as a circular form suggests movement across the lower edge beneath a large circular gray wherein a lighter gray hovers. In *Vespers*, the emphasis is given to an abstract horizontal "landscape," predominantly in gray and interspersed with white cloud-like forms at the top juxtaposed by a parallel linear stretch of red and blue striations at the bottom.

Finally, we come to Frankenthaler's *Barometer*, a painting that could be considered a second abstract landscape, composed entirely without the additional effects of primary color. This one is painted in white with touches of light gray, thereby creating a misty sensation as if descending from the top edge of the picture plane. The gestural white atmosphere, together with an irregular dark gray define the bottom edge that virtually defines the space of the painting.

When first shown, these works constituted a fresh approach to painting in that they could be read as pure abstraction either with or without the presence of a landscape, which might be understood as concomitant to nature—the source of abstraction rather than its antithesis.

Frankenthaler herself offers the following:

"I had the landscape in my arms as I painted it. I had the landscape in my mind and shoulder and wrist."