

JCP

JCP EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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This edition of the Journal of Contemporary Painting contains new writing, by artists and academics, that focuses on the work and legacy of the American artist Helen Frankenthaler (12 December 1928 - 27 December 2011).

Recently, in the United Kingdom, there has been renewed interest in Frankenthaler's painting and printmaking, with important exhibitions being staged giving a new British-based audience the chance to encounter and see her work in person and in-depth.

It is worth noting that Tate, which houses Britain's national collection, holds just one painting by Frankenthaler, a beautiful work from 1961, with the title *Vessel*. The painting utilizes the artist's so-called 'soak-stain' technique, where artist's oils diluted with turpentine were poured and manipulated by Frankenthaler onto clean unprimed cotton-duck canvas, in veils of colour to create and build this complex and elusive abstract image. However, *Vessel* only entered the Tate's collection recently, in 2019, and was gifted by the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. The British national collection did not have a significant work by Frankenthaler before then, so local access to her work for British painters has been tricky. The Tate does, however, hold a considerable number of Frankenthaler's prints. These have only occasionally been on display. The majority of these woodcuts, lithographs and etchings were donated by Tyler Graphics Ltd in 2004, with two being gifted earlier by Garner H. Tullis and Pamela Auchincloss in 1992. Likewise, the prints and works on paper in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and in the Abbot Hall collection in Cumbria have scarcely been on view.

During her lifetime Frankenthaler's paintings were shown in Britain. The nineteen sixty-nine *Helen Frankenthaler: A Retrospective Exhibition*, which was curated by E. C. Goossen, and originated at the Whitney Museum in New York, came to the Whitechapel gallery in London.¹ There were also of course important early exhibitions of Frankenthaler's work in commercial galleries, notably at Kasmin Gallery (1964) and at Leslie Waddington's Gallery (1973, 1974) in London. And Frankenthaler did continue to show up to her death in 2011 with solid relationships in the city, with first Knoedler Gallery (1978, 1981, 1983, 1985), and then with Bernard Jacobson Gallery (2000, 2008, 2010). However, apart from an exhibition of her

paintings on paper in Royal Scottish Academy Edinburgh in 2003, for a Museum audience, and an audience that wanted to engage with her work in its entirety, it was not until an exhibition at Turner Contemporary in Margate in 2014, *Making Painting: Helen Frankenthaler and JMW Turner*, that it was possible to re-engage with the many facets of the artist's career, and do so in depth.² This exhibition marked, somewhat remarkably the first time in forty-five years that a substantial number of her canvases had been shown in the United Kingdom.

Alison Rowley's essay, 'Helen Frankenthaler: something new in terms of nature' has been developed from a paper given during a study day associated with this Margate exhibition. In this text Rowley returns to Frankenthaler's most famous painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952), which she discussed in her 2007 book, *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting History, Writing Painting*. There Rowley, who trained initially as a painter, through careful scholarship and poetic speculation, proposed that Frankenthaler herself could be imagined to embody the sensibilities of the fictional character Lily Briscoe in Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, and that the mountain in Frankenthaler's painting *Mountains and Sea* corresponded to - or was poetically - Mont Sainte-Victoire, as painted by Cezanne. In her current text Rowley returns to *Mountains and Sea* as well as Frankenthaler's later painting *Eden* from 1956. The author, here, considers Frankenthaler's relationship to nature, and to 'past painting' – which Rowley argues should be understood as 'nature', for a painter. In her text Rowley continues the discussion around Frankenthaler's relationship to works by Cezanne, and paintings that the artist may have seen in the Louvre when visiting Paris in 1956. Through such a reading Rowley builds a physically embodied, rather than formalist and optical, understanding of Frankenthaler's works.

In September 2021, Dulwich Picture Gallery in South London staged a second major exhibition of Frankenthaler's work in Britain. This exhibition, *Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty*, concentrated on Frankenthaler's woodcut prints.³ These were displayed in great depth with proofs and notated works being included alongside a scholarly publication which opened up Frankenthaler's printmaking processes, and how she collaborated with different printmaking studios and craftsmen in America and Japan.

During this exhibition, I convened a one-day symposium for Dulwich Picture Gallery which was organized in partnership with The University of the Arts London and which took place at Camberwell College of Arts.⁴ Given Frankenthaler's commitment to making and

experimentation it seemed important, and appropriate, that discussion of Frankenthaler's work, should take place in an art school, and that we should concentrate our discussion around how contemporary painters, from different generations, responded to the materiality and processes in Frankenthaler's approach to painting and printmaking. With our focus on how painters, and particularly those engaged with the language of abstraction, responded to Frankenthaler's work, we understood there were many other positions that we were ignoring. For example, how artists working outside of the discipline of painting, or those working with painting and figuration, may have been inspired by Frankenthaler's work. These latter positions formed the focus of both an exhibition, *Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler* at the Rose Art Gallery at Brandeis University in Waltham Massachusetts curated by Katy Siegel in 2015, and a publication she edited, which was connected to the exhibition, but called "*The heroine Paint": After Frankenthaler*, and was published by Gagosian Gallery, the same year.⁵

Three essays in this journal come from the Camberwell event. Titled *No Rules: An Abstract Art Symposium* the symposium comprised of papers by five artists, Crystal Fischetti, Melissa Gordon, Rachel Jones, Katie Pratt, and Gary Wragg, as well Jane Findlay, the curator of the *Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty* exhibition, and the art historian Suzanne Boorsch. The symposium took place just as Britain was lifting the lockdown restrictions that had been imposed due to the Covid pandemic of 2020. As such Suzanne Boorsch, who was based in America, presented on-line, and regrettably the painter Gary Wragg was unable to present as he had tested positive to Covid.

The title for the symposium came from an interview Helen Frankenthaler gave in 1994, when she stated to the printmaker Kenneth Tyler, that "There are no rules" governing how art should or could be made.⁶

Suzanne Boorsch, who knew Frankenthaler, and wrote the introduction to Pegram Harrison's definitive publication on her printmaking, *Frankenthaler: A Catalogue Raisonné, Prints, 1961-1994*, presented a new paper titled 'Frankenthaler's Woodcuts and Japan'.⁷ In it the author examines how Frankenthaler re-imagined the discipline of the wood cut, breaking with conventions to create beautifully elusive and gentle images, from a medium which in the west is typified through its bold graphic qualities. Boorsch frames this development through an understanding of the socio-political climate in post war America, that saw Frankenthaler become interested in Japan and Japanese printmaking techniques.

In 'Liquid Gestures: The Language of that Land', the artist Melissa Gordon reflects on Frankenthaler's painting and printmaking techniques – specifically that of the wet liquid gesture. Gordon investigates how this gesture's materiality can be seen to operate in Frankenthaler's paintings and conceptually in the male dominated artworld of 1950s New York. Gordon, whose practice is underpinned by careful historical and theoretical research, goes on to write about how the legacy of a such a gesture can inform contemporary artistic practice, and can be used as a form of gendered critique. The artist explains how within her own exhibitions she references these legacies and brings together historical and contemporary positions in both painting, and complex installations.

For the artist Katie Pratt, Frankenthaler's desire to abandon rules is provocative. In her text 'The Bureaucracy of Freedom', Pratt discloses how she makes work through rules. By following systems and algorithms, Pratt explains how she can move beyond the impasses she might experience whilst making a painting. So, unlike Frankenthaler she sees rules as creating the opportunity for newness and invention. Pratt's paintings are materially robust and within her essay she explains how through her adherence to pre-determined patterns and systems of making, she builds up and constructs complexity within her work.

In 'Cullinan Richards: A visit to the studio, 9 December 2022, Painting Fluid Thinking' the artist Joan Key visits the long-term collaborative artist duo Charlotte Cullinan and Jeanie Richards. For Key, fluidity is important to the understanding of Cullinan Richards's collaborative painting practice. Key describes this in detail, explaining how the paintings themselves are made and how they are part of more complex installations, which include tables with reflective mirror-like tops. Key positions Cullinan Richards's work through readings of both Frankenthaler's paintings, where fluidity and diffusion can be seen to complicate the traditional and hierarchical categorizations within painting, and through the feminist writings of Luce Irigaray. Key explains how for Irigaray fluidity is seen as an expression of difference, and as a challenge to ideas of order.

After such detours the art historian Cora Chalaby returns us to the close consideration of Helen Frankenthaler's own artworks in her paper "'Something Else'? Helen Frankenthaler's Printerly Paintings'. Here Chalaby moves beyond modernist discourses around ideas of medium and medium specificity, that often have been used to frame Frankenthaler's own paintings, as she

opens up ideas of painting and printmaking being for Frankenthaler interconnected fields of enquiry, each informing the other. Chalaby posits the idea of the ‘printerly’ being a useful term in which to understand and interrogate Frankenthaler’s painting practice and how such cross-disciplinary translation can enrich our understanding of the artist’s work.

As a whole this collection of essays on Frankenthaler’s work has been a privilege to put together. It stands as testament to how Frankenthaler’s paintings and printmaking continue to be a source of contemporary inspiration to artists working today.

Daniel Sturgis, July 2023

¹ *Helen Frankenthaler: A Retrospective Exhibition*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 7 May – 8 June 1969.

² *Making Painting: Helen Frankenthaler and JMW Turner*, Turner Contemporary, 25 January – 11 May 2014.

³ *Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty*, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, 15 Sep 2021-18 Apr 2022

⁴ *No Rules: An Abstract Art Symposium*, Camberwell College of Arts, London, 11-5:45pm, 26 March 2022.

⁵ *Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen*, Rose Art Gallery, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, 11 Feb-7 June 2015; Katy Siegel Ed, *“The heroine Paint”: After Frankenthaler*, New York: Gagosian/Rizzoli, 2015

⁶ “There are no rules, that is one thing I say about every medium, every picture ... that is how art is born, that is how breakthroughs happen. Go against the rules or ignore the rules, that is what invention is about.” in Babington, Jaclyn, “Against the Grain: The Woodcuts of Helen Frankenthaler,” Canberra: Australia, National Gallery of Australia, 2005. Exhibition catalogue.

⁷ Harrison, Pegram, Suzanne Boorsch, *Frankenthaler: A Catalogue Raisonné, Prints, 1961-1994*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996