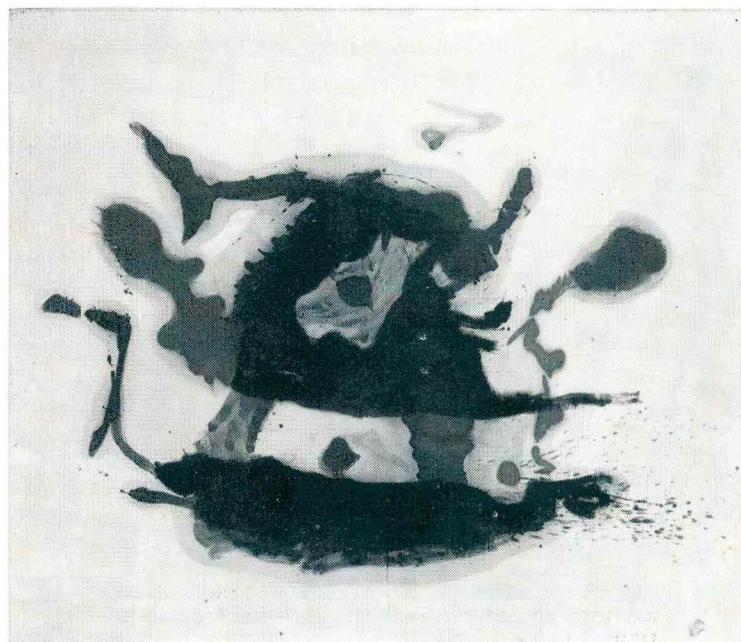


# HELEN FRANKENTHALER

BENNINGTON COLLEGE, MAY 1962

The strongest thing a painter's art can do is speak to a painter. This Helen Frankenthaler's art has done. And the effect of that voice — some drudgery has turned to cheer, some pedantry to common sense. It is a voice spoken in the middle of the day in the full light of the sun — which now and then asks night-time riddles.

—Paul Feeley



Vessel 1961

There are three main types of exhibition by which an artist can expect to reach an audience: the group exhibition, the one-man show, and the retrospective. The group show serves introductory purposes, such as the Paris Biennial and Documenta II in Kassel, both in 1959, which gave Europeans their first sight of Helen Frankenthaler's paintings. The one-man show gives a more comprehensive statement, a group of works unified in time, such as the show of Frankenthaler's paintings seen in New York last winter which were done in solid paint on primed canvas. The retrospective presents the work of the artist as a totality, but such a show can occur only occasionally and after the accumulation of works and the passage of time.

An exhibition like the present one is intended as a supplement to the types listed above. It is a selection, spread over more time than a one-man show covers, an interim report designed to present, in compact terms, some information about the artist *in time*. Given the diversity of modern painting, shows like this which, though provisional in character, are not limited to a topical review of an artist's latest work, aid the definition of an individual artist's style. Such an exhibition can indicate the direction in which an artist has been working and thus make possible recognition of the constant factors of an individual style.

The usual access we have to a painter's work (i. e., clumps of new work every year or two) has the effect of fracturing one's sense of development as a unity. Memory and generalized impressions of earlier shows are compared with the vivid data of the present phase, which is a poor way of detecting and sharing a continuous process. A show like the present one is an invitation to consider the achievement of continuity in Frankenthaler's work.

I know from my own experience, seeing Frankenthaler's work only in group shows in Europe, that I had formed a misleading impression of her style. A composite idea formed of delicacy, open-ness, and fragility, which was convincing in memory and conversation, did not survive when, in New York, I was faced with her work of a decade. Her paintings, for all their fluent, improvisational character, have a firmer, planar character than one had realized. Thus, the later work, with its solid planes of color can be logically related to her earlier work; there is a shift in emphasis but not of direction.

This exhibition of the work of Helen Frankenthaler, a graduate of Bennington College in 1949, samples, briefly but with characteristic works, the period 1952-1962. In addition to the lyrical, coloristic values that are usually celebrated in her work, this historical paraphrase reveals a development which is sustained, resourceful, and purposeful.

—Lawrence Alloway

For seven or eight years I used nothing but unsized canvas,<sup>1</sup> and a medium of turpentine and tube pigments and sometimes enamel, and that produced a very thin stain, but now I'm much more involved in getting a harder edge rather than a blotted edge, and I found I want a surface that is sized and primed, and I find the paint — while it can still get into a pool — the paint is thicker and more compact.

I think most of my accidents are pre-determined accidents, in other words I might want a blob of blue that is two feet square; now when I throw a blue on the canvas it might turn out to be an S-shape that is not two feet square, and I have something else, and I either proceed from that or I feel, no I can't work with that. And I stop. Or I leave it and then come back to it in a few weeks or months.

I think — for myself anyway, and I guess that is my view on all painting — that a really good picture looks as if it's all happened at once. It's an immediate image. For my own work, when a picture looks labored and over-worked, and you can read in it — well, she did this and then she did that, and then she did that — there is something in it that has not got to do with beautiful art to me. And I usually throw those out, though I think very often it takes ten of those over-labored efforts to produce one really beautiful wrist motion that is synchronised with your head and heart, and you have it, and therefore it looks as if it were born in a minute.

Quotations from an interview with Helen Frankenthaler by David Sylvester made for the British Broadcasting Company, London.

1. This simplifies too much: in fact, Frankenthaler has used and continues to use both primed and un-primed canvas, but with a consistent move towards more compact areas and a harder edge.

1. Mountain and Sea 1952 88 x 119

Morris Louis' 'first sight of the middle-period Pollocks and of a large and extraordinary painting done by Frankenthaler, called *Mountain and Sea*, led Louis to change his direction abruptly . . . the crucial revelation he got from Pollock and Frankenthaler had to do with facture as much as anything else. The more closely color could be identified with its ground, the freer would it be from the interference of tactile associations.'

Clement Greenberg: 'Louis and Noland', *Art International* IV 5 1960

2. Open Wall 1953 55 x 131½

3. Holocaust 1955 55 x 65 Coll. Mr. and Mrs. Ash

4. Venus and the Mirror 1956

'Pictures like *Madrid Scape* or *Venus and the Mirror* open out; but, despite their immense size, they project a specifically human space, responsive to emotion, tangibly realized . . . I don't think her pictures ever suggest scenes viewed by an airplane or a telescope: the visual cues are closer, more individual, and more specific.'

Sonya Radikoff: 'Helen Frankenthaler's Paintings', *School of New York*, 1959, editor B. H. Friedman

'The open, thoroughly achieved *Venus and the Mirror*: human or animal shapes, an image, a reflection, a mirror.'  
JS (James Schuyler): 'Reviews and Previews', *Art News* 55 10 1957

5. Towards A New Climate 1957 70 x 98

'Done, if I remember correctly, in despair, it sings freely and with originality of a new space and a new individual inhabiting that space, naturally and with unerring delicacy. It is single in event, yet enormously allusive and subtle.'

Frank O'Hara: *Helen Frankenthaler, an Exhibition of Oil Paintings*, The Jewish Museum, 1960

'*Towards a New Climate* is perhaps pointedly titled. One detects here the traditional geometric vocabulary, but on these ceiling-high canvases it is deployed in free thrusts, loose whorls, unclosed circles, and idiosyncratic zigzags which follows a minimum of schematic pattern and a maximum of motor impulse . . . the formal statement seemingly orients itself to the muscular reflex rather than the outline.'

PT (Parker Tyler): 'Reviews and Previews', *Art News* 56 9 1958

6. Jacob's Ladder 1957 113 x 70

Coll. Museum of Modern Art, New York

7. Eden 1957 102 x 120

'Somehow, with an awkward gesture, a slop which remains a slop, an amusing twist of form or an incongruous color, or even, at times, in the caricature of some part of the subject matter (the snake in *Eden*, not to mention the hand of God) wit is turned upon art as well as upon herself, but subtly, sometimes secretly, and almost always with the quality of philosophic irony.'

E. C. Goossen: 'Helen Frankenthaler', *Art International* V 8 1961

8. Mother Goose Melody 1959 82 x 104

9. Courtyard of El Greco's House 1959 Coll. E. C. Goossen

'The sense of landscape, she says, accounts for spatial orientation in her work. Certainly one reacts to the self-assertion of a segment of sky between sand dunes or of a peninsula having the restless personality of a continent of pigment . . . Miss Frankenthaler's main strength is her sensuous empire over emergent forms that seem to correspond closely to kinesthetic responses.'

PT (Parker Tyler): 'Reviews and Previews', *Art News* 54 10 1956

10. Swan Lake II 1961 93 x 93

Coll. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Slivka

11. Vessel 1961 98 x 94

12. Black with Shadow 1961 76 x 87

13. Key in a Cloud 1961-62 60 x 69

14. The Last Swan Lake 1962 90 x 70

Venus and the Mirror 1956

