

GAGOSIAN QUARTERLY

BUILDING A LEGACY

THE HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION ON COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDING

The *Quarterly's* Alison McDonald speaks with Clifford Ross, Frederick J. Iseman, and Dr. Lise Motherwell, members of the board of directors of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, and Elizabeth Smith, executive director, about the foundation's decision to establish a multiyear initiative dedicated to providing \$5 million in COVID-19 relief for artists and arts professionals.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Cool Summer*, 1962, oil on canvas, 69 ³/₄ × 120 inches (177.2 × 304.8 cm), Collection Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

ALISON MCDONALD

The Helen Frankenthaler Foundation is providing \$5 million in grants dedicated to COVID-19 relief over the next three years. How do you see this act of generosity and outreach as reflecting and furthering Helen Frankenthaler's legacy? In a way, this question addresses the mission of the foundation, but at this moment, with this struggle that we're facing, how does this generosity reflect what Helen would have wanted?

LISE MOTHERWELL

This pandemic is so much bigger than Helen that when the proposal was brought up, there was no question it was the right thing to do. Helen would certainly have wanted us to support the arts and to

offer help to artists who are struggling.

FREDERICK ISEMAN

Helen was always very aware of current events, including medical issues. She would have been horrified by what's going on.

AMCD

How did the conversation start? What turns did it take along the way?

CLIFFORD ROSS

The public health crisis fell on all of our shoulders collectively, as a team, including Michael Hecht, our treasurer. Working together, we developed a pretty simple idea: our job was to determine how generous we could be in this crisis and still be able to attend to our mission in relation to Helen's work. It was clear that we had to do something extraordinary, and we were united in our vision. The right number for us, which was a leap far beyond anything we'd done previously, was \$5 million. COVID is a health and economic disaster, and from what we could see, there's at least a three-year window of need. When we decided to take a leading role, it meant giving at a scale that was uncommon for us.

And really it fell to Elizabeth to research where these funds could best be given and at what scale. The board was unanimous in supporting Elizabeth's vision of where to give the money.

LM

Clifford just described our three-year commitment. As a foundation that has provided grants to various organizations, we've realized that providing a grant every so often doesn't work very well. We understood that the devastation from the coronavirus was significant and we wanted our support for organizations that support artists and the arts community to last a significant period of time.

FI

Helen was a mixture of great discipline and impulse. Obviously that's reflected in her painting, but it also shapes the way we think about the foundation. We have to be disciplined, and yet, when something like this comes along, it's very much in Helen's spirit to be creative and passionate in responding to it. And those two things coalesced in this instance—a combination of discipline, because we're giving the money in a disciplined way, and an impulse to respond to an urgent situation. We're all related to Helen; we incorporate her spirit of both spontaneity and creative discipline in a good way. That's part of our DNA and part of our mission.

AMCD

Your response was both swift and thoughtful. You offered clarity and led by example. The money seems to be reaching a range of institutions, artists, and people who work in the arts. Elizabeth, how did you select organizations for the grants? What criteria did you set and how did you narrow it down?

ELIZABETH SMITH

We worked hard to conceive and implement a response in a way that was both timely and considered. Of course we measured each opportunity by what would make the most direct impact, particularly for artists and arts workers. Early on, we became aware of efforts being developed by a few organizations. One of these was the Foundation for Contemporary Arts [FCA], where we had recently established the Helen Frankenthaler Award for Painting. They wanted to put together an emergency COVID-19 relief fund in addition to the emergency fund for artists they already operate. We also heard from the Drawing Center, where we have supported programs and operations. They had aligned with a group of small New York City-based arts institutions to collectively fundraise for operating support. That also felt vital—we appreciated the collaboration among these organizations, their recognition that banding together is necessary in times of crisis.

We were also approached by the organizers of a newly created fund called Artist Relief. We had no prior connection with the groups involved in spearheading that but we knew several of them by reputation. So that effort also got our attention.

Several weeks later, as part of a group of four foundations, we contributed to launching a relief fund dedicated to art workers: the Tri-State Relief Fund to Support Non-Salaried Workers in the Visual Arts. That gift was initiated by our colleagues at the Willem de Kooning Foundation, who invited our participation. And in June we contributed to another artist-relief fund organized by the Hamptons Arts Network [HAN], acknowledging Frankenthaler's connection with the Hamptons during her lifetime.

CR

One of the interesting things that has happened from this is a renewed level of communication among artist foundations, with new ideas being generated and shared. The Frankenthaler Foundation was able to swing into action early, and to join with other foundations to start a movement. The sentiment that we needed to help members of our creative community in need feels like it's ricocheting around the larger art world now.

AMCD

Most of the organizations you are giving to are concentrating on the economic impact of COVID specifically in the arts and culture space. There also seems to be a focus on helping people in New York and the United States. Was that part of your plan? Will that evolve as you consider where to put the monies moving forward?

FI

We're thinking about this in both a national and an international context, but we want to focus on the United States. Internationally, many governments offer arts funding, whereas here, support of the arts is primarily based on individual giving. We therefore think our role is most needed in the United States. We started in the New York region because that's where we're based, and because it was an epicenter for the health crisis.

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Clifford Ross

LM

We started in New York in part because it was the hot spot, but it was clear to us early on that we didn't want to be New York-centric; we wanted to make sure that the monies got distributed nationally. That's why we partnered with some of the organizations we did: the FCA and Artist Relief have been distributing emergency funds to artists all over the country. It was great to work with organizations that had the ability to distribute money very quickly, which we don't have. That way we knew the people who were most in need could get support right away.

CR

America's notable tradition of philanthropy is particularly critical in the cultural world because, as Fred was saying, we are not a country that has given governmental support to the arts in a significant way. Frankly, it's anguishing that our country doesn't do more for the folks that we're trying to help. These new grants differ from the other work we do because this is about survival; we're not helping to publish a scholarly book, or supporting a scholarship—that's important work too, but this is about people who don't have the resources to get by. All of us felt moved on a fundamental, humanitarian

level for our colleagues in the art world.

AMCD

And if people working in the arts don't give to those in the art space who are struggling, then it's very unlikely others will, right?

ES

The first four funds we chose to support are directed to very vulnerable populations—individual artists and art workers and small but vibrant institutions.

AMCD

How do the funds differ in terms of who is eligible and how need is determined?

ES

FCA's Emergency Grants COVID-19 Fund provides emergency grants of \$1,500 each to artists to offset income losses resulting from canceled performances or exhibitions due to the pandemic. Artist Relief offers direct grants of \$5,000 each for general financial hardship. The Tri-State Relief Fund, which is administered by the New York Foundation for the Arts, provides \$2,000 grants to behind-the-scenes workers in the art world—freelance art handlers, registrars, archivists, and others. And the HAN fund supports artists and others in creative fields with grants of \$1,000 each.

FI

I happen to be familiar with a lot of the government funding programs, whether it's the PPP [the federal Paycheck Protection Program] or loan guarantees or whatever. In general this is a population that is not going to get government money. It's one thing if you work at the Met or a big institution like that, but individual artists are not going to get government money. They might get a \$1,200 check signed by Donald Trump if they happened to file a tax return last year, but they may not have had enough income to need to file a tax return. So we're addressing a population that the government is not. And that was part of our plan. There's a huge amount of need, a huge amount of suffering. Millions of people have applied for unemployment benefits, but not everybody files; so I don't know, and nobody knows, what the real number is, but it's massive. So we're trying to go where there is no help. And that was part of our plan. Think of Amedeo Modigliani: exactly one hundred years ago, he died starving and sick in a garret surrounded by rejected masterpieces that today are worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Starving artists still exist, and we have to take care of them.

LM

It's also true that the arts are a huge driver of the economy. According to the National Endowment for the Arts and the US Bureau of Economic Analysis, the arts contribute \$763 billion to the US economy and are a bigger share of America's GDP than either construction or agriculture. Five million people work in the field; half of them are artists. And many of those jobs are now gone. It's crucial that we value their contribution to the economy and recognize what the wreckage will be without them.

Not only that, but the arts can be healing at a moment like this, and it's important for people to get through these times. Hopefully this period will generate an enormous amount of creativity. We're going to change our lives dramatically, and artists will show us the way.

AMCD

To that point, do you think this moment will change the Frankenthaler Foundation's mission moving forward?

CR

None of us know what the future holds, but it's certainly going to be different from what we all thought

it would be.

FI

And yes, the mission was intentionally designed to be broad enough to allow for change, and we're like-minded enough that we can be flexible. So we'll see it evolve.

LM

Helen knew us all very well and she entrusted us with her legacy. We all come from very different perspectives but we respect each other and appreciate the conversation, so we trust each other to make good decisions.

AMCD

Do you have any thoughts about next steps? Where might you be directing the next round of funding?

LM

Well, there's certainly going to be more rounds of funding. We want to see the impact of this round and then ascertain where the need is greatest.

ES

We are remaining responsive and open to other possibilities that might come our way. And we're also continuing to research.

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Lise Motherwell

AMCD

Are your recent collaborations with other arts foundations similar to anything you've done previously?

LM

We typically have people propose projects to us. This is really the first time we've worked closely with other organizations to provide funding as a group.

ES

In 2014, though, the Dedalus Foundation invited us to join them and some others in providing support for a project by the art magazine the *Brooklyn Rail* centering on the impact of Hurricane Sandy.

AMCD

Did the COVID crisis put any of your other projects on hold?

ES

When we were pivoting to figure out how we could do what we felt was necessary, we decided that certain things no longer felt like pressing priorities. Several upcoming shows were postponed and we also chose to step back and put some projects on hiatus. But we're continuing to work on them. And it's been extraordinarily satisfying to be able to take a leadership role with this COVID-19 relief effort without sacrificing the core programmatic mission of the foundation, which is to steward Helen's legacy, to lend to exhibitions, to undertake and foster scholarship, and to get all of that out in the world.

CR

And of course the catalogue raisonné—

ES

Yes, that work is ongoing.

CR

The plans and dreams still go forward, yes.

AMCD

To stay with Helen, is there an artwork, or a quote from her, that's been inspirational during this time?

FI

Helen was a mold breaker. She always spoke disparagingly about the "Shoulds," meaning people who said "You should do this, you should do that." You should you should you should you should you should. Her rejection of that conformity has always served as an inspiration to me. She taught me this when I was sixteen. I had the benefit of forty years of her message that it's okay to break the mold.

LM

A painting I've looked at over and over again since the pandemic started is *Cool Summer*, which was painted in Provincetown in 1962. It's a colorful painting, full of hope, and it represents the values that Helen imparted to me as a child: the importance of friends and family, a sense of community, time and space for creativity, and a simple, fulfilling life. So for me, it's going back to the basics and really simplifying everything.

CR

Even with the optimism and radiance that Helen could summon as an artist, she was also a realist. Among all the colorful pictures there were dark ones as well. To address a dark time, we've broken some new ground for ourselves with our COVID response, and it feels very much like the kind of thing Helen would have believed in.



Frederick Iseman is chairman and CEO of CI Capital Partners LLC. A nephew of Helen Frankenthaler, he serves on the board of the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, and is on the chairman's councils of the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Works from his collection are on loan to the National Gallery, London, and the Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Alison McDonald has been the director of publications at Gagosian since 2002. During her tenure she has worked closely with Larry Gagosian to shape every aspect of the gallery's extensive publishing program and has personally overseen more than five hundred publications dedicated to the gallery's artists.



Dr. Lise Motherwell is president of the board of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, where, with Elizabeth Smith, she recently cocurated the exhibition *Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown*. A licensed psychologist, she is a stepdaughter of Helen Frankenthaler.



Clifford Ross is a multimedia artist whose work has been widely exhibited in the United States and abroad, including a midcareer survey at MASS MoCA in 2015. His next exhibition will open at the Portland Museum of Art in 2021. He is a nephew of Helen Frankenthaler.



Elizabeth Smith joined the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation in 2013 as its first executive director. Previously she held curatorial and administrative positions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. She is an adjunct professor at Bennington College. *Photo: Scott Rudd*