

‘Abstract Climates’: Helen Frankenthaler’s Ode to Provincetown

From painting to pouring: how an artist’s Color Field masterpieces took shape at a summer retreat in this seaside town.



Helen Frankenthaler in her studio “in the woods” in Provincetown, 1968. Working on the floor, she poured thinned paint directly onto raw, unprimed canvas, a technique that established the Color Field movement. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; J. Paul Getty Trust; via Alexander Liberman Photography Archive; Getty Research Institute

By Karen Rosenberg
Aug. 29, 2019

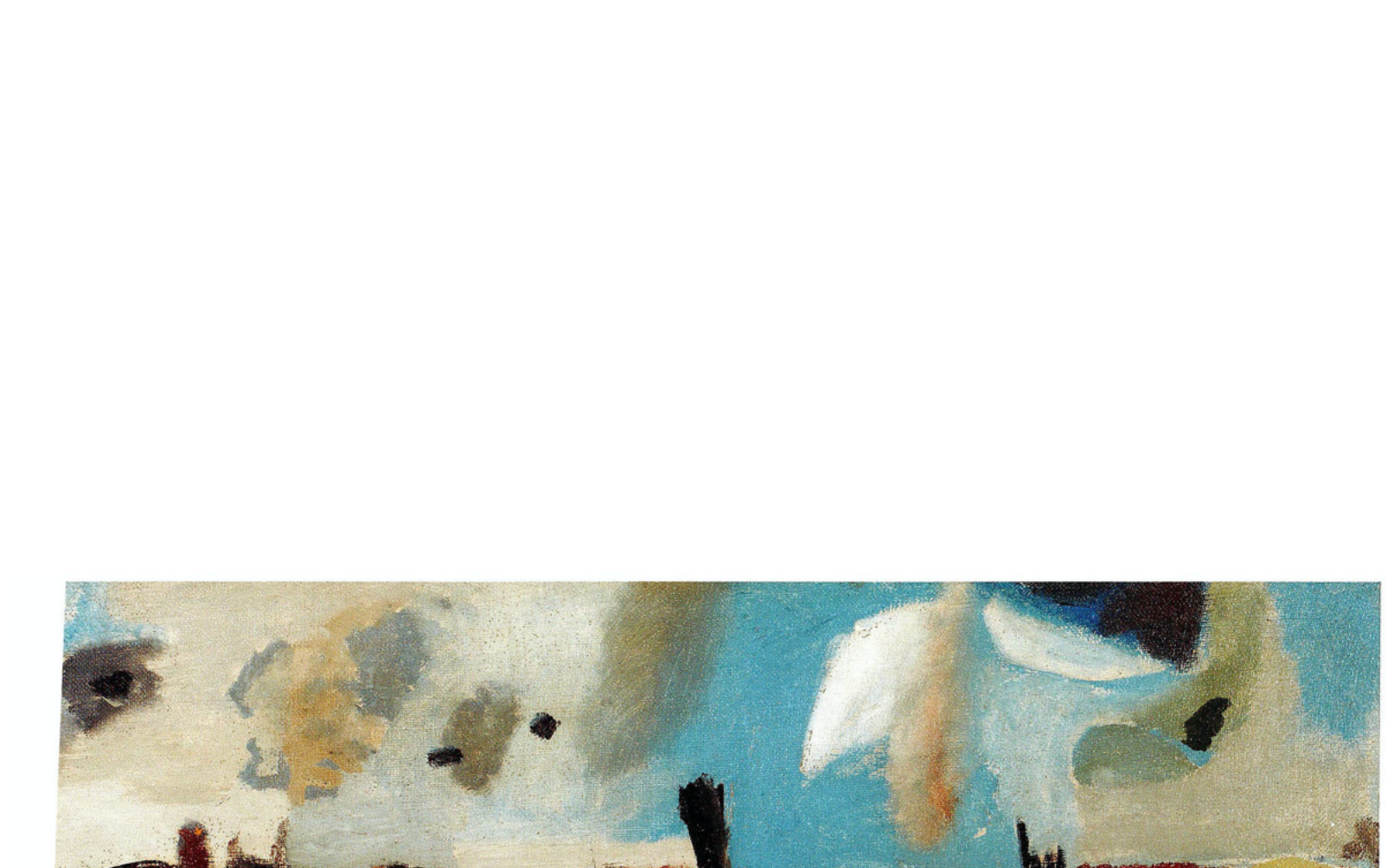
The Abstract Expressionist and Color Field painter Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) had a way of ignoring boundaries. As a child, she drew a line in chalk on the ground from the Metropolitan Museum to her family’s apartment on 74th Street. Later, she did away with the idea of “paint on canvas” by essentially fusing the paint and the canvas: saturating unprimed grounds with liquidy, thinned-out oil and acrylic.

In “[Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown](#),” at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y., we see her develop this signature method by immersing herself in the landscape on the Massachusetts coast (sometimes literally, as in a photograph of Frankenthaler swimming right outside her waterfront home and studio). At the same time, we see a young artist responding to the pressures of increasing fame and a new family life by trying to set some limits.

Spanning the years 1950 to 1969, “Abstract Climates” (which [debuted](#) at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum last summer) deftly interweaves creative and personal breakthroughs with a combination of artworks and ephemera. It culminates in a rapturous, triumphant gallery of the large-scale “soak stain” paintings that gave rise to the Color Field movement — works like “Flood” (1967), with its translucent pink-and-orange waves lapping at strips of blue and green.



Frankenthaler’s “Flood” (1967) in “Abstract Climates,” which focuses on the work she created in Provincetown from 1950 to 1969. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Whitney Museum of American Art



Frankenthaler’s “Provincetown Bay,” from 1950. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via Portland Museum of Art

She had hit on the stain technique some years before “Flood,” in the airy pink-and-blue fantasia of “[Mountains and Sea](#)” (1952), which was painted in Manhattan and inspired by the landscape of Nova Scotia but is sufficiently influential to have made it into the show. In Provincetown, however, Frankenthaler used this method more freely and on ever larger canvases — emboldened, perhaps, by more capacious studios and proximity to water, but also by the more relaxed atmosphere. It was a place where Frank O’Hara or Henry Geldzahler might drop by for lunch, but an artist could work for hours undisturbed by what Frankenthaler called the city’s “influx” of dealers, critics and reporters. (It undoubtedly helped that she chose not to install a telephone.)

Although the show focuses on the work Frankenthaler made in Provincetown, it looks very much at home in the Hamptons (where she spent several summers in the 1950s, as evinced by a marvelously casual 1952 photograph of two art world power couples: Frankenthaler and Clement Greenberg, the art critic who was her boyfriend at the time, enjoying a day at the beach in East Hampton with their friends Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock.)

It was Greenberg who prompted Frankenthaler’s first trip to Provincetown, in 1950, with a suggestion that she study with the revered teacher of abstract painting Hans Hofmann. A small oil from that time, “Provincetown Bay,” appears cautious with its muted gray-greens and distinct horizon line.



From left, Jackson Pollock, Clement Greenberg, Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, and an unidentified child at the beach in East Hampton, July 1952. via The Dedalus Foundation, Inc.



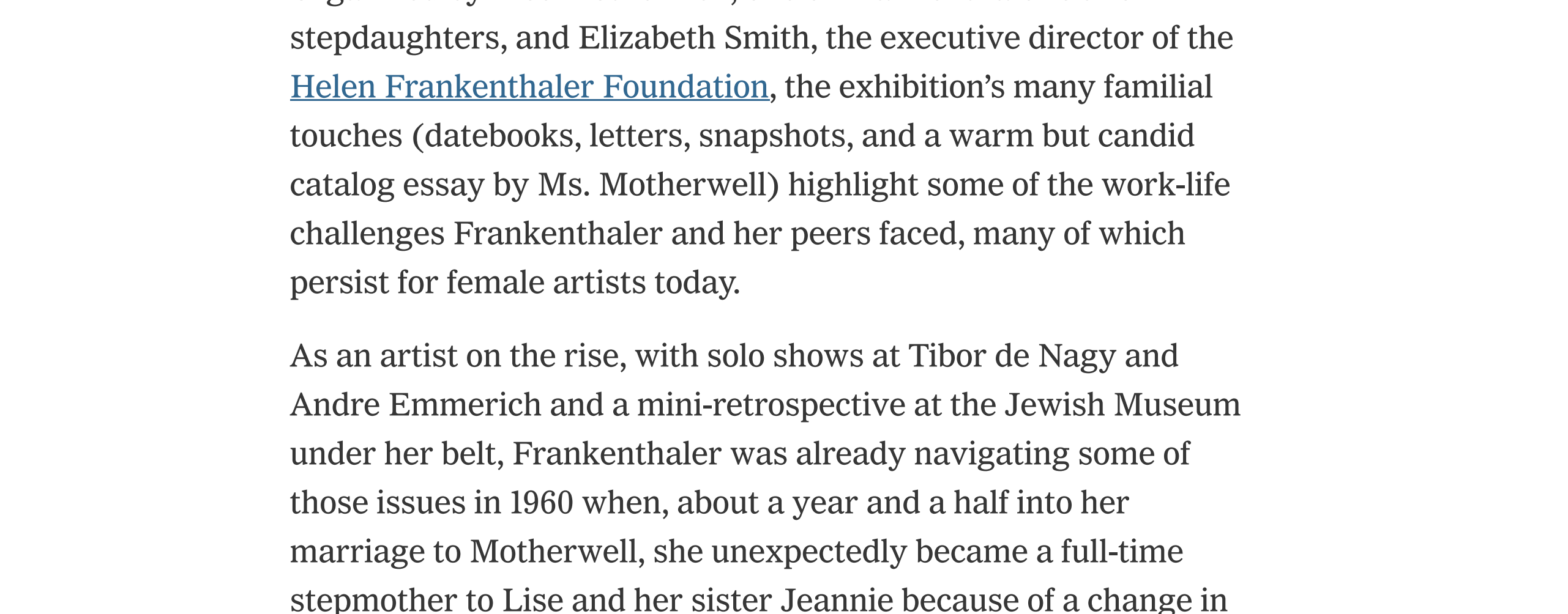
Frankenthaler’s “Orange Breaking Through,” from 1961. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Collection of Audrey and David Mirvish

Most of the show’s paintings, however, date from the 1960s, when Frankenthaler and her first husband, Robert Motherwell, were regular summer residents in Provincetown. Her progression from small canvases to large ones, drawing to painting, tight brush strokes to pooling stains, is rapid and exhilarating. In a group of expansive works from 1961, as in “Orange Breaking Through,” unwieldy splotches of tangerine and crimson disturb simple black outlines of squares and circles.

By 1962, the stains — with their uncontrollable, feathery edges — have taken over; corralled into tight, centralized clusters, they evoke landscapes (with some help from titles like “Breakwater” and “The Cape”). Then they expand and merge into each other, as in “Low Tide” (1963), with its aqueous blue-green mass partly engulfed by yellow.

Organized by Lise Motherwell, one of Frankenthaler’s two stepdaughters, and Elizabeth Smith, the executive director of the [Helen Frankenthaler Foundation](#), the exhibition’s many familial touches (datebooks, letters, snapshots, and a warm but candid catalog essay by Ms. Motherwell) highlight some of the work-life challenges Frankenthaler and her peers faced, many of which persist for female artists today.

As an artist on the rise, with solo shows at Tibor de Nagy and Andre Emmerich and a mini-retrospective at the Jewish Museum under her belt, Frankenthaler was already navigating some of those issues in 1960 when, about a year and a half into her marriage to Motherwell, she unexpectedly became a full-time stepmother to Lise and her sister Jeannie because of a change in custody arrangements. (They later went back to live with their mother but continued to spend summers with their father and stepmother in Provincetown.)



Installation view of “Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown” at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Parrish; Gary Mamy

A difficult period of adjustment followed, as Frankenthaler described with unflinching introspection in a letter to her friend and fellow artist Grace Hartigan: “after the numbness and crisis came the shock, then the resentment, the bravery, the real and false tries, the examination and self-examination, the reaction of selfishness, the anger ... and now, finally, a kind of peacemaking turning point that is rewarding and marks many changes ... in me.”

The catalog essay by Ms. Motherwell, a retired psychologist, describes many charming moments of summer fun and family bonding: Frankenthaler helping the sisters set up a lemonade stand, teaching them to do the twist to Chubby Checker, inviting them into her studio to draw and paint. And it hints at the ways in which Frankenthaler established routines, for their benefit and hers: The girls, for instance, had to be home at 1 p.m. every day for lunch and to “check in.”

It also does not shy away from some of the more complex, contradictory aspects of Frankenthaler’s image and self-concept. “Helen would have hated to be called a feminist,” Ms. Motherwell writes, “and yet as a female artist in a male-dominated art world, she encountered plenty of resistance and still broke down barriers.”

“Abstract Climates” is ostensibly about the particular coastal landscape that helped to nudge Frankenthaler into her mature style, and in places it’s quite specific. The imposing 1969 painting “Blessing of the Fleet,” for instance, pays homage to a local seafaring ritual with festive red and green, the colors of the Portuguese flag. But overall, it presents Provincetown as more of a psychic space, one of negotiation and self-discovery, with new family responsibilities but not too much structure — a “desired void,” as Frankenthaler wrote in a 1962 letter to Hartigan. “I hope to reach out from within and grow rather than give up and stop.”

Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown

Through Oct. 27 at the Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, N.Y.; 631-283-2118, [parrishart.org](#).

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 30, 2019, Section C, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: A Rapturous Ode to Provincetown. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)