

Abstraction in Venice – Jean Arp, Arshile Gorky and Helen Frankenthaler

Three powerful museum shows echo the Venice Biennale's themes of migration and exile

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Helen Frankenthaler's 'Open Wall' (1953) © ARS/Gagosian

In Venice, a breath of historical reflection: after last weekend's gaudy Biennale opening, some exceptional new museum exhibitions come into their own, shining bright, countering the glitz, yet strongly connected to Biennale themes of migration, exile and global tension.

The Nature of Arp at the Guggenheim and Ca Pesaro's Arshile Gorky each star one-time stateless artists who became foundational for modern hybridity and crossover forms. Both shows movingly unpack connections between radical invention and geopolitical crisis.

"Maimed and Stateless", a fragile, bandaged hulk of a papier-mâché figure drifting on newsprint, is a surprising 1936 self-portrait by Jean Arp. Arp is usually playful, optimistic, as in the glowing, bulbous, coiled, abstracted brass "Head and Shell", which "Stateless" mimics in torn echo. Celebrating nature, energy, imaginative freedom, "Head and Shell" was the first artwork Peggy Guggenheim ever bought — straight from the foundry in 1933.



Jean Arp's 'Plastron et fourchette (Shirtfront and fork)' dated c1922 © Bild-Kunst & VISCOPY, Australia

Twentieth-century art is inconceivable without Arp's defining shape, that soft, irregular, curving silhouette, shifting fluidly between abstraction and representation. It recurs through the oeuvre of sculptors from Henry Moore to Alexander Calder, painters from Joan Miró to Ellsworth Kelly, and including Gorky, whose rare "Smiling Lady" depicting an Arp-like white marble sculpture on rounded points, twisting into a lopsided face, is a highlight at Ca Pesaro.

Perhaps because his forms are so pervasive, Arp himself has remained under the radar. Light of touch and understated, he aimed to be quietly disruptive rather than show-stopping. He takes the limelight now in the ideal context of the modernist Guggenheim, and the anxiety fuelling his whimsical manner becomes clear.



Jean Arp's 'Daphne' (1955) © ARS/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



Jean Arp's 'Marital Sculpture' (1937) © ARS/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Early reliefs, from 1916-30, look effortless and oddly contemporary. Smashing the body into crazy shreds in painted wooden shapes, they interlock like a toddler's puzzles. "Manicure Relief" tapers to an outrageous set of nails. A doleful grey face emerges from the absurdist juxtaposition "Shirtfront and Fork". "Torso, Navel, Mustache-Flower" is a sexy joke: white ovoid, thrusting red upright form.

None of it is innocent. The moustache indicated Prussia's destructive Kaiser Wilhelm II. Arp's flight from human to organic imagery was a horrified response to the first world war. His figurative/abstract mash-ups, his endless metamorphoses, insist on dissolving, shifting identities:

the limestone “Self-dissolving Shell” (1936); the zigzag rise of white marble buds, like a plant twisting to catch the sun, in “Growth” (1938).

The lyricism feels infused with tragedy: beauty wrought from catastrophe, with romantic hope yet a sense of heroic doom

Born 1886 in Strasbourg — a city passed between Germany and France — Arp called himself both Jean and Hans, rejected nationhood, and fled to Switzerland in 1914. Drafted, he scribbled dates across the paperwork, stripped and ran naked into the army office. Declared a lunatic, he retreated to the lucid madness of Dada. Later he moved to Paris, touched surrealist circles, then became a refugee of Nazism. His postwar work here is a joy of late-

classical modernism: the bronze “Evocation of a Form: Human, Lunar, Spectral”, the slashed column “Daphne”, commemorating the nymph who escaped violence by transforming into a tree. Arp speaks of collective trauma, but marvellously achieves unity through broken elements.

Arp, wrote Hannah Höch, “cuts the horizon/out anew each morning” — which could also describe Arshile Gorky’s enchanted transformations of natural and figural motifs into freewheeling, all-over, exultantly spacious compositions.

Shifting between exterior and interior, colour sweeps over skittering black lines, tracings, flat patterns where figures half-assert their presence in “Landscape Table”. Turpentine-thinned green paint cascades over biomorphic forms and hints of body parts in “Waterfall”. In the slippery pastoral “One Year the Milkweed”, fragmentary details — including paired red curves grinning out as a menacing mouth, heralding de Kooning’s women — are brushed within loose painterly films, by turns light and dark.



Arshile Gorky's 'Portrait of Myself and My Imaginary Wife' (1933-34)

These major 1940s paintings, impressively assembled at Ca Pesaro, were decisive for American abstraction. How they came about unfolds splendidly here, beginning with big-eyed 1930s portraits and self-portraits, hieratic, monumental as Ingres, statuesque as Picasso — Gorky's models — and grave as the Byzantine icons the artist encountered growing up in poor rural Armenia. Already he plays with fused forms: "I painted my eyes the shape of leaves. The leaves told me constantly, yes, yes!"

Vostanik Adoian, as he was born, arrived aged 16 at Ellis Island, refugee of the Armenian genocide which had claimed his mother. Reinventing himself as a Georgian noble related to writer Maxim Gorky, he was never fully at home in America, and clung to childhood recollections, explaining of fat luscious semi-allusive works such as "Image in Khartoum" (1934-6) that: "Memories have become iconography, the shapes, even the colours: millstone, red earth, yellow wheat field, apricots."



Helen Frankenthaler's 'Maelstrom' (1992) © ARS/Gagosian

The lyricism feels infused with tragedy: beauty wrought from catastrophe, with romantic hope yet a sense of heroic doom — expressed by Gorky's chosen pseudonym Arshile, Achilles. And fate pursued him horribly. Cancer, a car accident damaging his right (painting) arm, a fire destroying his studio, his wife's infidelity, are the background to the final crescendo here, in 1947-48, before his suicide: "Soft Night"'s lilting textural greys in India ink and crayon, the claustrophobic grandeur of vanishing forms "Dark Green Painting", the stark "Last Painting" with its high, distanced vantage point, looking down on a disintegrating black and white surface.

"I am glad it is impossible to get away from his powerful influence," de Kooning wrote. In Venice that impact blazes in Palazzo Grimani's small, perfect pitch Helen Frankenthaler, spanning four decades of work by the colour field painter who evolved Gorky's drips, blurs, pools and sumptuous

veils, into her own idiom, at mural scale: “Pictures,” she wrote, “as explosive landscapes, worlds and distance held on a flat surface.”



Arshile Gorky's 'Dark Green Painting' (1948)

The opening work, “10/29/52”, is elusive, teasing and extremely Gorkyesque: undulating curves, swelling lines, diaphanous pink/yellow/blue staining, hints of concentric rose petals, fluttering leaves. “Open Wall” (1953) has bronze and pink passages which could be trees or walls, wide/contained as a vista from a window. From the 1960s “Riverhead”, executed on the floor on long boards, paint settled densely into the grooves, billows like a translucent cloud: Frankenthaler at her most luxuriant. The minimalist graphic impulse of “New Paths” (1973) marks a shift in register, as, again, does “Brother Angel” (1983), the iridescent gold on white with pale blue orbs inaugurating a new richness.

Frankenthaler changes, reconsiders, dares and, like many women artists, saves the best for last: blizzards of white paint mixed with gel, dragged, raked, clotted, turbulent but luminous with submerged colours breaking through, in “Snow Basin”, “Maelstrom”, “Barometer” (both 1990s). Evocations of water and sky, these accord magnificently with the Venetian setting, and in Frankenthaler’s dramatic late language also keep alive painting’s abstract/figurative ambiguities forged from mid-20th-century upheaval.

‘The Nature of Arp’, Guggenheim, to September 2, guggenheim-venice.it; ‘Arshile Gorky’, Ca Pesaro, to September 22, capesaro.visitmuve.it; ‘Helen Frankenthaler’, Palazzo Grimani, to November 17, palazzogrimani.org/the-museum