

FRANKENTHALER AT PAAM

AN ODE TO PROVINCETOWN SUMMERS

Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) is the subject of one of the most important exhibitions to come to the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) in its 104-year-old history. "Abstract

Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in artists, families (original or logical) and the light. The show begins with works dating from the time when Frankenthaler studied briefly with Hans Hofmann in Provincetown in 1950, and unfolds with expansive works created from 1960 through

Robert Motherwell, stepdaughter of Frankenthaler, and PAAM board president – and Elizabeth Smith, founding executive director of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. It includes intimately scaled early works and larger paintings referencing the

sea and landscape, with photographs, letters and ephemera. The curation, intensely considered and beautifully executed, reveals Provincetown's impact on Frankenthaler as an artist, a stepmother and a wife.

Although she considered herself an abstract expressionist, Frankenthaler was credited with spawning a new art movement, color field painting, when she began to use thinned paints poured onto raw, unsized canvas. "Mountains and Sea" (1952), the seminal example of this inventive way of painting, was made in her studio in New York, on West 23rd Street between 7th and 8th Avenues, after a trip to Nova Scotia. As with the work of Jackson Pollock, Frankenthaler's spill-stain innovation was a counter-

point, as in music, to his action drip; what defined a painting was becoming new again.

This was a critical moment for Frankenthaler as a creator. "Mountains

Provincetown," opening July 6 and on view through September 2, weaves together the fabric of what makes the very tip of Cape Cod a remarkable arts colony: working

1969, when she summered there with artist Robert Motherwell, her husband from 1958 to 1971.

The exhibition is co-curated by Lise Motherwell – a daughter of

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460 COMMERCIAL STREET

PROVINCETOWN, MASSACHUSETTS

JULY 6 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 2



Over the Circle, 1961, oil on canvas, 84 1/8" x 87"; Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1991.

and Sea" could have been a one-hit wonder – the fate of Cubist Marcel Duchamp and his "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2" (1912) – but she continued to take risks and develop her style for decades after. She was already an accomplished artist when she married Motherwell: She had had four solo shows at Tibor de Nagy Gallery; been included in "Young America 1957: Thirty American Painters and Sculptors under Thirty-Five," at the Whitney Museum of American Art; and in 1959 would win first prize for "Jacob's Ladder" at the Premiere Biennale de Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Her paintings retrospective in 1960 at The Jewish Museum, New York established her place as a groundbreaking talent within the Second-Generation Abstract Expressionists.

Many of the 25 paintings included in "Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown" were created from the ethos of a Provincetown summer, in the three different studios in which she worked. First, in 1961-62, was the barn at Days Lumberyard (now the Fine Arts Work Center, celebrating its 50th anniversary this year). In the catalogue essay "East End Light: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown in the 1960s," Elizabeth Smith references a letter sent to artist Grace Hartigan, where Frankenthaler indicated her feeling of being in a "desired void" and her hopes that it would stimulate untested directions: "The solution will be to paint and let it come from there ... I feel a tremendous desire for a 'new' development ... I hope to reach out from within and grow rather than give up and stop." "Over the Circle," 1961, was created here.

It was in her studio at "Sea Barn – named and built by Robert Motherwell at 631 Commercial Street in 1963, with



its wide expanses to the bay – that Frankenthaler painted "Low Tide" (1963), a work that could only have been conceived and executed in that space. She would paint mornings and then swim or prepare for dinner parties with visiting artists and dealers. Her third studio, which she moved to in 1967, was in a pine grove at Nelson Stables, away from the distractions of Commercial Street. Working on the floor, as was her method, she created works in quick succession. "Indian Summer" (1967) was made during this prolific time.

Christine McCarthy, executive director of PAAM, has a mission to bring art made in Provincetown back to Provincetown. "Our Motherwell, Hopper, and now Frankenthaler exhibitions show works in the place where they were created," she said. "This is what makes us a great arts center – that seminal artists came to work, play, and be with family here while changing the face of modern art."

Lise Motherwell and Elizabeth Smith stated, "We chose to exhibit Helen Frankenthaler's Provincetown paintings in the context in which

Blue Atmosphere II; 1963; acrylic on canvas; 72" x 69 1/2"; Smith College of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts; Gift of Sarah (Griswold, Class of 1954) and Richard Leahy.

they were created, providing a unique window onto the effect of the place on her life and work. There, where her professional, personal and social worlds intersected, the impact of her Provincetown summers was profound. The works that resulted evoke Provincetown's physical presence and atmosphere without overtly depicting the place, instead eliciting its 'abstract climates.'"

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with a foreword by Christine McCarthy and essays by Lise Motherwell and Elizabeth Smith; art historian Daniel Belasco; and Alicia Longwell, chief curator and Terrie Sultan, director, Parrish Art Museum. Also included is a chronology of Frankenthaler's years in Provincetown. Published by PAAM, the catalogue is distributed by Yale University Press.

The opening reception for "Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown" will take place on Friday, July 6, at 8 p.m., and is open to the public.

A series of public programs at PAAM tied to the exhibition begins on July 7 at 2 p.m. with John Elderfield – chief curator emeritus of painting and sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; distinguished curator and lecturer at the Princeton University Art Museum; and consultant for special exhibitions for the Gagosian Gallery – presenting "Helen and High Water."

July 14: Phyllis Tuchman, independent curator, scholar and art critic, presents "Helen Frankenthaler: From the Heart" at 2 p.m.


July 17: Author Mary Gabriel discusses her upcoming book, "Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art" (to be published in September 2018 by Little, Brown), at 6 p.m.

July 31: Lise Motherwell presents "Frankenthaler in Context" at 6 p.m.

August 11: Avis Berman, writer, curator and historian of American art, architecture and culture, presents "Helen Frankenthaler: Voices from the Archives" at 2 p.m.

| Laura Shabott

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SUMMER MEMBERS SHOW:
ANCHORS AWEIGH
JUNE 28–AUGUST 19, 2018
Juried by Carey Vose



James Weymouth, *Morning Light, Maine*, detail, oil on canvas




Caroline Pufa, *Wellfleet Harbor*, detail, oil on canvas



Lori Mahta, *Day Dream*, detail, oil on board

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Sunday 12-5