

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

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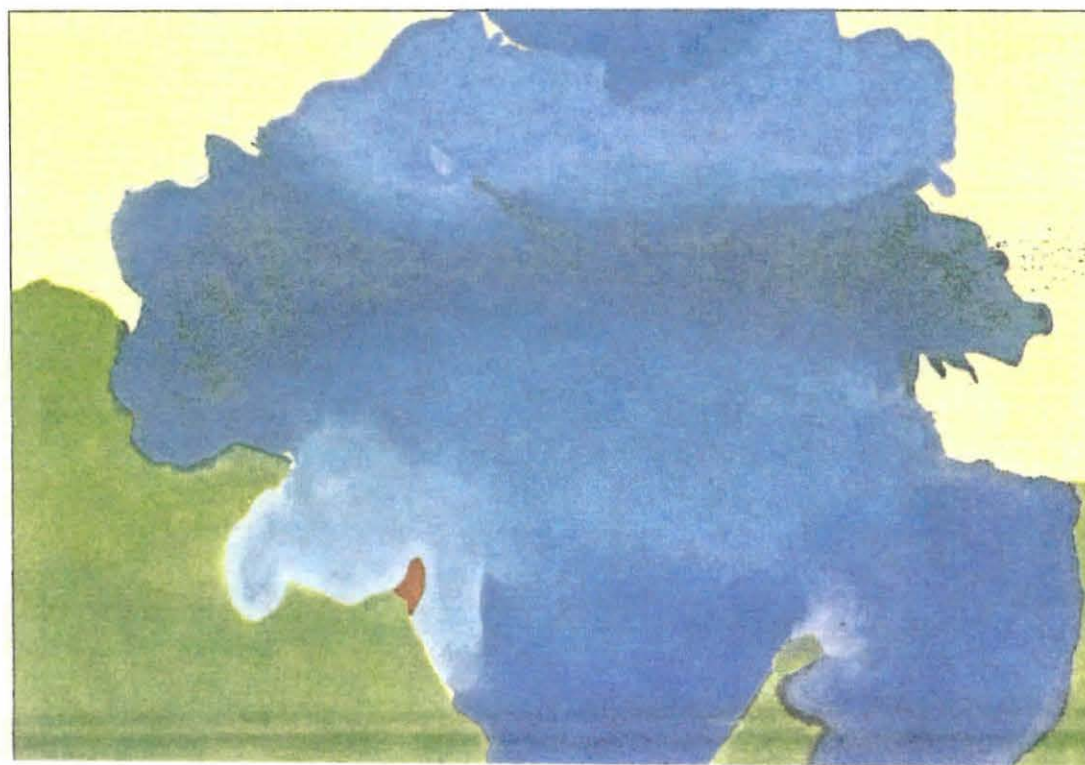
Provincetown through Helen Frankenthaler's eyes



Helen Frankenthaler in her Provincetown studio in the summer of 1968. A major exhibition of her work and life in Provincetown is opening on Friday at PAAM. [PHOTO © J. PAUL GETTY TRUST, COURTESY ALEXANDER LIBERMAN PHOTOGRAPHY ARCHIVE, GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES]

By Susan Rand Brown
Banner Correspondent

Newman. Highly disciplined and prolific, Frankenthaler established a studio in the arch-windowed warehouse at Days'



In photographs of Helen

In photographs of Helen Frankenthaler as a young painter, her liquid brown eyes appear to absorb textures and colors with the eager curiosity that marked her creative life. Frankenthaler's paintings, often monumental and characterized by uninhibited swaths of color suggesting a landscape, created a stir in the early 1950s within Manhattan's circle of abstract expressionists. Her method of pouring thinned paints onto raw, unprimed canvas, a soak and stain technique she began to use with "Mountains and Sea" in 1952, begat its own movement — Color Field. Around this time, she had been noticed by Clement Greenberg, astute art critic and tastemaker, who spotted an example of Frankenthaler's youthful painting style in a group show at Bennington College in 1950, shortly after her graduation, and thought it had potential.

Taking Greenberg's suggestion, Frankenthaler went to Provincetown to study privately with Hans Hofmann. Though she never considered herself a Hofmann acolyte, they remained friends, and their sessions opened the door to Frankenthaler's enduring town connections. Her Provincetown years began in earnest after her 1958 marriage to Robert Motherwell, who was summering in the East End of town in close proximity to the first generation of abstract expressionists, such as Mark Rothko and Barnett

windowed warehouse at Days' Lumberyard (now part of the Fine Arts Work Center), then moved to the iconic "Sea Barn," at 631 Commercial St., that she and Motherwell remodeled into studios, and ended up in a secluded, rustic cottage at Nelson's Riding Stables, with barely enough room to unroll a 12 foot canvas onto the floor.

With the opening at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum of "Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown" this Friday, a great many of the groundbreaking paintings that Frankenthaler produced here will finally return home. The show aims to illustrate how the light, the colors and even the traditions associated with the Provincetown art colony are part of Frankenthaler's work and grew out of her affection for the place.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime exhibition," one of the largest in PAAM's history, and "the first significant foray into linking Helen Frankenthaler as a Provincetown artist, because of the other artists she connected with in town, and the way the town's physical presence is conveyed in the paintings themselves," Christine McCarthy, PAAM's executive director, says. "I can clearly see the influence of Provincetown in these pictures — the water, the sun and the moon."

The art in the exhibit comes from all over the country, including the Helen Frankenthaler



"The Bay," a 1963 acrylic on canvas, about seven feet square, by Helen Frankenthaler, is part of the PAAM show. [DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS © 2018 HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK. PHOTO MIKE@MIKESTUDIO.ORG, COURTESY TURNER CONTEMPORARY, MARGATE, KENT, UK]



"Cool Summer," a 1962 oil on canvas, approximately six by ten feet, by Helen Frankenthaler. [HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, NEW YORK © 2018 HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK. PHOTO ROB MCKEEVER, COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY]

Foundation, "between 60 and 70 works, mostly paintings, some enormous — we had to enlarge one of our doors to get a crate into the building — plus sketches and drawings," McCarthy says. There are also memorabilia, letters she wrote to artist friends, dinner menus

and guest lists for the parties she and Motherwell planned. "What this show does is to personalize Helen Frankenthaler in a way that I don't think has been done before. It speaks to her routine, what she did when she was in town," McCarthy says. "She swam every day, went

Provincetown painter's homecoming

What: Opening reception for "Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown"
When: 8 pm Friday
Where: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 460 Commercial St.
Admission: Free

to the studio every day and, clearly, she and Robert were very social."

Frankenthaler's Provincetown life, especially from the late '50s through the early '70s — during the 12 years she was married to Motherwell — also involved her stepdaughters, Jeannie and Lise, both of them born in the early 1950s. Lise Motherwell, now a retired psychotherapist, is vice president of the board of

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the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation and board president at PAAM; she and Elizabeth Smith, the founding executive director of the foundation, are co-curators of the “Abstract Climates” PAAM exhibit. Jeannie Motherwell is an abstract painter whose recent large-scale acrylic paintings channel Frankenthaler’s legacy, though it’s fair to say that many painters and performance artists, especially younger women, also acknowledge a debt to Frankenthaler’s juicy, let ‘er rip attitude.

Jeannie paints seven days a week in her Joy Street studio in Somerville. Both she and Frankenthaler are considered process painters, but Jeannie’s strategy of directing the flow of acrylic as it spreads onto hard, white, paint-resistant Clayboard is entirely her own. (In Provincetown, she shows at AMP Gallery.) While the



Jeannie Motherwell holds a black-and-white photograph of her stepmom, Helen Frankenthaler, flanked by Jeannie (on right) and her younger sister, Lise Motherwell, that normally hangs on her studio wall. The painting on easel is Jeannie’s “Staccato,” a six foot wide acrylic on Clayboard. [PHOTO SUSAN RAND BROWN]

early years of being a blended family were difficult, Jeannie recalls, an interest in the arts established a common bond. “From an early age, Helen and Dad made us draw and write poetry,” she says. “We weren’t allowed to have coloring books. It was their way of finding out where we were,” since the sisters spent much of the year with their mother, Betty Little, Motherwell’s second wife.

“When we woke up in the morning, they would sit on the end of the bed and have us tell them what we dreamed the night before” — Jeannie pauses, then laughs — “which was not easy to remember.”

The art world’s golden couple divorced in 1971. “She was really festive, she liked to party and she liked to entertain, in a big way,” Jeannie says. “She had a great sense of humor.” There

was her Fiat Jolly convertible — white with wicker seats, purchased in Italy — which Frankenthaler drove in Provincetown. “It didn’t have doors or a real top,” Jeannie says. “She would drive to the Governor Prentice [now the Outer Reach Resort], where we would go swimming, and they had a steel band. We’d order hamburgers and Shirley Temples, and she’d drive us back, our hair soaking wet.” This exuberant 1960s road-trip energy is reflected in Frankenthaler’s Provincetown paintings.

“She could paint wherever she was, and take the memory of it with her,” Jeannie says. “When Helen was in Provincetown, and the same with Dad — they could be so prolific because they didn’t have the distraction of the business world, their New York lives. In Provincetown, there was no phone in the house. They were really focused on making their work.”

While critics have suggested that Frankenthaler’s “flag”

series, which is represented in the PAAM show, signaled her interest in the emerging minimalist movement, Jeannie believes that the flags and bunting of the Blessing of the Fleet inspired the colorful square and rectangular shapes of this work, painted toward the end of her time in Provincetown.

It was something they would do in late June to relax, having left the city: Motherwell, together with Frankenthaler and their two girls, would motor La Belle Helène along the shore for a mile and a half west to MacMillan Wharf, joining the nautical parade “just to have the boat blessed.”

Where else could this happen? A famous-painter Episcopalian father and a famous-painter Jewish mother bond with their two daughters while having their boat blessed in a traditional pageant of Roman Catholic fishermen, their senses filled with the impressions of Portugal’s green and red flags flapping in the breeze.