

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Frankenthaler: History Returns to Venice

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by Joachim Pissarro and David Carrier



Helen Frankenthaler, *Open Wall*, 1953. Oil on unsized, unprimed canvas, 53 3/4 x 131 inches. © 2019 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian.

“I wasn’t just looking at nature or seascape but at the drawing within nature
—just as the sun or moon might be about circles or light and dark.” — *Helen Frankenthaler*

Venice

Pittura/Panorama: Paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, 1952-1992

May 7 – November 17, 2019

In his luminous essay “The School of Giorgione” (1877) Walter Pater, asserting that painting “must be before all things decorative, a thing for the eye, a space of colour on the wall,” describes the art of Giorgione, as he imagines it. Aspiring to

the condition of music, this art aspires “to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material,” and thus achieve a “perfect identification of matter and form.” It’s hard to imagine a better prophecy of the painting of Helen Frankenthaler, whose magnificent show on the second floor of Palazzo Grimani, in Santa Maria Formosa a short walk from San Marco included fourteen large, mostly horizontally oriented works. Organized by Helen Frankenthaler Foundation and Venetian Heritage, in collaboration with Gagolian, it was curated by John Elderfield.

The second half of the twentieth century opened in New York with a couple of works that signaled a total sea change in the, then indeed, fast shifting art world: Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*, executed in 1950, and a couple of years later, Helen Frankenthaler’s *Mountains and Sea*, 1952. The two works are seldom brought together in the same context, but they carry more in common than one might think. They both were created at the crux of the Abstract Expressionist moment —*Mountains and Sea* was completed the same year as *Blue Poles*—while introducing radically new pictorial (or post-pictorial) idioms. Both artists, Rauschenberg and Frankenthaler were announcing the advent of a real sea change, the Pateresque aestheticization of nothingness, the fact that one can find contemplative gratification in watching next to nothing, or, whatever might happen to fall on these surfaces : “The White Paintings caught whatever fell on them,” said John Cage, in euphoria. They were like “airstrips for molecules.” Frankenthaler, born in 1928, invented her so-called “soak-stain” technique in 1952, a delight in restraint, in pausing, in letting the paint do its job, diluted into thin and translucent, almost ethereal, skeins of pigment, and slowly becoming absorbed into the fibers of the canvas. No more gestural bravura, painterly evocations of anger, violence, no more “action painting” – or, if action there was, it was given a wholly fresh meaning. The arena of vituperative machismo appeared to be seeing the beginning of its end. And, indeed, this verdict seemed to be sealed by history when, almost back to back, Rauschenberg won the Golden Lion in 1964, and Frankenthaler became, two years later, the first woman artist to represent the US Pavilion, in 1966 – an event from which, the present exhibition took its cue.



Helen Frankenthaler, *For E.M.*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 71 1/4 x 115 1/4 inches. © 2019 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian.

Palazzo Grimani, a discretely grand setting with very spacious, well-lit galleries enhanced the paintings. How dramatic was Frankenthaler’s development and how surprising her willingness to synthesize elegance with marvelous gawkiness. *Open Wall* (1953) opens a wall just right of center into a luscious blue field. *Italian Beach* (1960) with intensely colored irregularly shaped greens, blues and ochres on the white canvas shows her mastery of the aesthetic power of blankness. These earlier works are oils. And *For E. M.* (1981), which uses acrylic, cover the lower part of the canvas almost entirely with a darkening

field of tumultuous colors, set between dark blacks overhead. If the old master Venetians had painted abstractly, they would have done sensuously handsome works like these. It's hard to imagine more interesting times than the era in which these delicious aesthetic artworks were created. Here, as mostly is not the case in the Arsenale and Giardino, to again quote Pater, we find "a high-strung sort of poetry, caught directly from a singularly rich and high-strung sort of life . . . "

Poetry and history are interwoven within this exhibition in Venice, and it is accompanied with a beautiful catalogue, with an illuminating essay by Pepe Karmel, in itself worthy of its own review.

Endnote

1. "The School of Giorgione" appears in Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. The term "Sea Change" is the title of Elderfield's essay in the exhibition catalogue: *Helen Frankenthaler : A Decade of Paintings, 1974-1983*, Gagosian Rome.

Contributors

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David Carrier

is writing a book about the historic center of Naples.