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Helen Frankenthaler:

The Calculus for Gender Neutrality

Within the Post Abstractionist Color Field Movement

By Alexandra H. Dodge

Introduction: Helen Frankenthaler's Education and Formative Years

In a decade marked by the omnipresence of black-and-white television, McCarthyism, the end of the Korean War and the fledgling sounds of rock n' roll, the 1950s invited American artists to utilize color in forms and abstractions to challenge the domesticated, safe boundaries established by European masters. The 1950s perpetuated dominate male, decision-making stereotyping while subordinating females as submissive, adorned homemakers. Sandwiched between the creative genius and evolution of the U.S abstract expressionist movement of the 1940s and the emerging pop artists of the 1960s, the 1950s signaled the development and the ascendancy of Helen Frankenthaler. As a woman artist who adapted elements of cubism into her earlier works, Frankenthaler abandoned this style in favor of abstract figurative painting that carried worldwide acceptance. As the daughter of New York Supreme Court Justice, Alfred Frankenthaler, Helen was both unapologetic and self-effacing to critics who genderized her openings and shows and attempted to marginalize her contributions to the canon of abstractionism.

Amidst the rancor of the Korean War, the emergence of Cold War politics and the advent of social and cultural conservatism in the United States, the rise of abstract expressionism was inspired by the formalized teachings of Hans Hoffman and Josef Albers. The European semantics of cubism and psychological underpinnings of surrealism injected a primacy of 1950s intellectual and artistic innovation into a distinctly American aesthetic. Focused on the psychological understanding of the collective unconscious, abstract expressionism adopted the spirit of European modernism to create

dynamic reflections of individual psyches. Mired in the political quagmire of McCarthyism and an activist Hoover-led F.B.I., abstract expressionist artists embrace the countercultural movements that subliminally influenced the liberalization of America. The birth of feminism, the awakening of environmentalism, the introduction of the anti-nuclear peace movement and the formation of the civil rights movement inspired the New York School of artists. Innervated by the writings of James Baldwin, the sermons of Dr. Martin Luther King, the segregationist images of Gordon Parks and the disruptiveness of rock n' roll, abstract expressionist artists championed culturalism, intellectualism and the thoughtful reinterpretation of "high" art to the American public.

Perspectives on Gender in Abstract Expressionist Art

The polemics of women's influence in the field of art petition scholars to investigate and to substantiate the social and economic constraints that have inhibited their success in the dominant male discourse of art history. The representational practices that fulminate definitions of sexual differences serve to instantiate the current configuration of sexual politics and gender issues within the milieu. Historic interpretations of masculine creativity and feminine passivity had compartmentalized women artists into the gendered vocabulary of craftsmen. "Artistic creativity increasingly came to be regarded as a kind of personal expression that externalizes the union of the individual artist in a work of autonomous value, craft, by contrast, aims at some practical use"¹. With the exception of a few heralded women, female artists were relegated to *de minimis* status. Recognizing select female artists; including Artemesia Gentileschi, Rosa Bonheur, Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe; art historians marginalized the creative contributions of women and perpetuated male dominated discourses and institutional prejudice. My Master's thesis engages Helen Frankenthaler's ascendancy to the mantle of post-abstractionist art hierarchy and her adaption of color staining as a technique to challenge gendered normative values. A detailed examination of Frankenthaler's artistic history will confirm her intentional obfuscation of sexual materiality while legitimizing the construction and advancement of female perspectives as validation of her contributions to abstract expressionism and the color-field movements.

As a system for building the social existence of men and women and delineating

hierarchical oppositions in the representations of art, gender is defined by culturally formed manifestations and perceptions of identity. The normative values of the Eurocentric, white, heterosexual male art canon witnessed a paradigm shift in the twentieth century. With a historical coronation of men to the well-varnished thrones of art supremacy, the postwar art market opened opportunities for differentiated movements (Surrealism, Cubism, Modernism, and Abstract Expressionism) and a stasis of gendered stereotyping that allowed female artists to market their visceral responses to an increasing appetite for abstractionist paintings. The nascent trajectory of Frankenthaler and other aspirational women artists in the early 1950s punctured the veil of male domination. Despite the historic sublimation and critical marginalization of female artists, Frankenthaler adhered to her own principles of art production. Frankenthaler created a female narrative that contradicted and competed with an inherently male genre. As one early-20th-century art critic noted, “So long as a woman refrains from unsexing herself by acquiring genius, let her dabble in anything. The woman of genius does not exist but when she does she is a man”ⁱⁱ. In order to avoid a pejorative of biologically determined art or a weakness of femininity label, Frankenthaler created non-conformist works inured to the benefit of the artist’s vision.

While restrictive language in the 1950s exacerbated the sexist typecasting of women artists, Frankenthaler forged a self-directed curriculum vitae by neither denying nor advancing her femininity. “Gendered language was used by critics as an attempt to contain the unstable body projected onto the canvases of women artists. It would seem that the only way to conceptualize and control these slippages between categories of gender was to somehow redeem them by incorporating them back into traditional

narratives of artistic mastery”ⁱⁱⁱ. The emotional qualities that punctuated Frankenthaler’s works of art were sensory contemplations of remembered habitats. Despite critical *cri de cœur* about her relationships with the art historian, Clement Greenberg, and her marriage to the artist, Robert Motherwell, and reviews of gallery and museum shows, Frankenthaler contributed unique iconography to the advancement of her soak-and-stain technique. Although Anne Wagner, in her essay, *Lee Krasner as L.K.*,^{iv} postulated that Frankenthaler’s femininity is connected to the topography of the artist’s making, an examination of these signatures confirms an intended ambiguity that sublimated the mantra of womanhood to a discussion about innovation in art.

Born into the rank and file of New York’s socioeconomic elite in 1928, Helen Frankenthaler first matriculated at Brearly School before attending the progressive Dalton School. Embraced by the renowned muralist, Rufino Tamayo, as a prized art student, Frankenthaler absorbed her mentor’s acute awareness of cubism, impressionism and Fauvism. Adapting Tamayo’s lifetime exploration of the method to create three-dimensional textured prints onto handmade paper, Frankenthaler replicated this effect in lyrical abstract compositions. Working with the Tamayo influenced medium of molten wax, Frankenthaler imbued her homage to mixographia with this alternative to print and ink, allowing her signature fluid patterns to incorporate elements of three dimensionality. The 1989 *Hermes* (fig. 1) illustrates Tamayo’s imprint from her early education at the Dalton School. Embarking on the next phase of her art education, Frankenthaler enrolled at Bennington College in 1946. Guided by the department chair, Paul Feeley, Frankenthaler dissected and analyzed the modern master works of Mondrian, Kandinsky, Picasso and Braque. Fundamental to her development as an artist, Frankenthaler

embraced the pictorial illusionism of cubism.

Intoxicated by the elixir of formative cubist works and the early-20th-century expressionist landscapes of Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove, Frankenthaler learned about the illusion of depth and the balance between the three-dimensional area behind the frame and the two-dimensional applied surface. “How a picture works best for me involves how much working false space it has in depth. The memory of this goes back to classes in cubism. The color and light work in pseudo-perspective; whether it be cubist Picasso or Braque—it’s a play of ambiguities. Titian is involved with ambiguity too”^v. Drawing upon her early relationship with cubism, Frankenthaler executed a series of introductory paintings that echoed the elusive abstract landscapes of Kandinsky and Gorksy. *Provincetown Bay* (fig. 2) is an early example of Frankenthaler’s adaptation of the push-pull method of balancing the visceral forms of flatness and depth. Employing a colorless black-and-white tonality, both *Provincetown Bay* and *Woman on a Horse* (fig. 3) highlight Frankenthaler’s early preoccupation with drawing images and landscapes that were familiar and evoked deep, personal emotions. The debut of Frankenthaler’s works at a 1950 Bennington benefit on 57th Street in New York attracted literary figures and art critics including Clement Greenberg.

The emergence of a female narrative in 20th-century art created a restrained rapprochement with the male-dominated milieu and introduced purposeful gendered optics through a neutral lens. As an artist who forged a heightened tension between image and abstraction, Helen Frankenthaler transposed a clearly personal interior landscape onto canvas. With her experimentation and abandonment of the masculine gesturalism in abstract expressionism, Frankenthaler pioneered the paint handling and formal lucidity of

post-painterly abstraction to develop the color field movement. As an ardent disciple of Pollock, Kandinsky, Miro, De Kooning and Gorky, Frankenthaler cloaked each work in an ambiguity that concealed a gendered perspective. Impregnating each of her canvases with singular pallets of earthly tones on vibrant landscapes, Frankenthaler altered the painting's gender balance without exposing a chromosomal signature. Oscillating between the insouciant lyricism of watery paints and the primal rawness of unbleached canvases, Frankenthaler mastered the gendered gymnastics of a woman competing on the high bar of abstractionism. "Obviously, first I am involved in painting not the who and the how To look at my paintings as if they were painted by a woman is superficial; a side issue...the making of serious painting is difficult and complicated for all serious painters. One must be oneself, whatever"^{vi}. The gravitas of Frankenthaler's action-influenced body of work transcends femaleness in art and requires a holistic appreciation of the evolution and importance of her contributions to art history without consideration of gender.

The struggle against the critical repression and inhibition of female artists in the post-World War II era propagated gendered stereotypes that were unavoidable and unsustainable. For Helen Frankenthaler, her heralded appropriation of the soak-staining technique introduced a decidedly free flowing, lyrical femininity to abstract expressionism. As a tour de force in the postmodern art movement, Helen Frankenthaler refined a compendium of unique talents under a specific female narrative disguised by ambiguity. An account of Frankenthaler's art within the womb of her milieu relies on a rhetorical and strategic view of the socioeconomic and historical contexts in which she painted. Bett Schumacher explores the biomorphic sexuality that Frankenthaler displayed

as she sought to bridge the individualism of modernism with the feminine interpretation of abstract expressionism^{vii}. Unresponsive to sexist characterizations, Frankenthaler focused on implementing and refining her technique and process. For Frankenthaler, “it was a relatively trusting and beautiful period. There seemed to be little that was motivated, threatening or contaminating... so few of the decisions of the ugly kind we are often forced to make today. It was far more trusting, pleasurable and very productive. There was judgment that goes with power and moralizing. It didn’t have to do with self-righteousness”^{viii}. In her earliest works, Frankenthaler’s gender-blind abstractions served to mask the ambiguity in her paintings and to assume feminine neutrality. When analyzed, Frankenthaler’s meditation on gender difference is a tutorial on an artist’s challenge to attain critical recognition while exploring the conditions and experiences of being covertly female.

Constructing a cultural elision to gender in her works of art, Frankenthaler navigated through a minefield of criticism and female nullification. Confronting a system that embraced hierarchical oppositions in texts, images and discourses about art, Frankenthaler perceived the repercussions that limited her potential and sought to affirm a genderless mantle of art recognition. As her art trajectory began to ascend in 1951, Frankenthaler was determined to avoid specific context in her art. As she wrote, “There are no flat rules for getting at the workings of a painting, but I feel more than ever the secrets lie in ambiguity: ambiguity that makes a complete final statement in the painting whole”^{ix}. The nascent collectivism and clubbiness of the male-dominated oeuvre suffused a libidinous vitality among its members and relegated female painters to “second generation” artists according to the noted historian Irving Sandler^x. As Saltzman notes,

gendered language was used by critics to contain, “the unstable body as projected onto the canvases of women artists. It would seem that the only way to conceptualize and control these slippages between categories of gender was to somehow redeem them by incorporating them back into traditional narratives of artistic mastery”^{xi}. In her contextually boundless experimental modes of execution, Frankenthaler both eschewed and embraced the artificiality of femininity. Frankenthaler avoided the confrontation with the politics of women while acknowledging the consciousness of self-representation in her art. In a career that spanned sixty years, Frankenthaler internally abridged femaleness with ambition while externally presenting visual discourses on artistic self-determination. By both accepting her femaleness and deliberately avoiding gendered categorization, Frankenthaler focused on producing timeless epistles of her artistic faith.

Not only did Frankenthaler counteract gender in her art but as a consort to the noted art critic, Clement Greenberg from 1950-1955 and the wife of the abstract expressionist artist, Robert Motherwell, from 1958 until 1991, Frankenthaler connected with and reciprocally influenced her male counterparts as a pioneer of the color-field movement. By intentionally introducing elements of her “femaleness” onto the canvas, Frankenthaler produced a heightened tension between the flatness of the surface and the celestial curvature of accumulated drips and mounds of paint. A forceful painter, Frankenthaler sought to replace the female as solely the inspirational muse for the male artist by physically kneeling, sitting and entering her work. This purposeful sexualizing of her canvases confirmed Frankenthaler’s need to stylistically borrow from the abstract expressionist masters while asserting her right to explore the relationship between the female body and the canvas. “She blurred the lines between geometry, order, chaos, the

body, atmosphere and ground. There was picture making, pure and simple, and beauty. Lots of it which of course made people run back to labels like feminine”^{xii}. As the biological vessels of life, women were not lauded for their creativity. As a female artist, Frankenthaler sought to overcome the gender moniker by allowing her artistry to titillate, to captivate and ultimately to challenge the preconceptions of art - not women’s art.

As a mentor and love interest, Greenberg introduced his ingénue to Hans Hoffmann and Jackson Pollock in a measured attempt to influence her originality by cultivating Frankenthaler’s innate talent. Frankenthaler aggregated the sum total of competing artistic styles from Pollock, Gorksy, de Kooning, Kandinsky and Miro to arrive at a stochastic process that reflected her intuitive processes. “There are no flat rules for getting at the workings of a painting, but I feel more than ever that the secrets lie in ambiguity; ambiguity that makes a complete final statement in the painting whole” (Frankenthaler quoted in Elderfield)^{xiii}. By introducing the artificiality of femininity, Frankenthaler created a highly subjective examination of a surrealist, cubist influenced series of paintings. The impatient expediency that vacated the priming or sizing of her canvases confirmed Frankenthaler’s risk taking as an innovator. As an emboldened female artist, Frankenthaler crafted esoteric symbolism and diffused representational forms of remembered places into a discourse on women’s intervention into modern art. Frankenthaler’s 1951 visit to Pollock’s studio in East Hampton and the observation of his drip technique fomented her desire to physically interact with the raw materials and to imprint each work with an ambiguous feminine signature.

While borrowing from Pollock’s method of commandeering the boundaries of the canvas and his relationship to materiality and process, Frankenthaler adapted the use of

color, nature and decoration to arrive at her heralded soak-stain technique. The binary coupling of Pollock's dripping of painterly fluids and Frankenthaler's massaging of turpentine, tube paint and enamel onto canvas celebrated imagistic risk taking.

"Frankenthaler's painting is manifestly that of a woman. Without Pollock's painting, hers is unthinkable. What she took from him was masculine; the almost hard-edged linear splashes of Duco enamel. What she made with it was distinctly feminine: the broad, bleeding edged stain on raw linen. With this translation she added a new candidate for the dictionary of plastic forms, the stain"^{xiv}. By establishing a sensual and seductive primacy to the appropriation and the personalization of the soak-stain method, Frankenthaler executed contradictory layers of diaphanous colors to create individualized works that reaffirmed her visceral impact. According to Clement Greenberg, with her earliest paintings, Frankenthaler infused color staining as a somewhat disembodied and therefore purely optical engagement of the senses.

The artistic dissidence that defined the abstract expressionist revolution against the status quo validated its meditation on art history with an expressive rapprochement with the collective social conscious of the 1950s. As the founders of the New York School, Pollock, Rothko, DeKooning, Motherwell, Kline, Newman, Gorky and Gottlieb energized their individualistic works with a masculine forcefulness that confirmed their collective commitment to navigating the political headwaters of a conservatively constructed governmental river. As recipients of WPA employment through the New Deal, the New York School of male artists executed a series of large modernist murals in the 1930's. This new vanguard of artists, sensitized by the great depression and World War II, expressed an immediacy and directness in their largescale, non-objective

canvases. “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act-rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or express an object actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event”^{xv}. The imagined pictorial performances and testosterone-fueled machismo produced by the New York School celebrated the triumph of American painting as a universal commentary on the condition of the modern man.

Devalued by the economic forces that instantiated male art supremacy in the 1950s, female painters produced individualistic works that flirted with the sensuous physicality and salubrious intimacy that underscored their ordination as great artists. Handcuffed to the existing male art institutions and mainstream traditions, the female art movement was a precursor to feminist ideology that inspired political, social and personal discourse. In order to influence cultural attitudes and transform stereotypes, feminist artists challenged conventional art norms to question the sociopolitical perspectives of women. With overwhelming economic and critical incentives to de-gender their contributions to the postmodern art canon, the New York School of women artists rejected a feminist imprimatur and embraced ambivalence toward patriarchal authority and art hierarchy. For artists like Louise Bourgeois, who “chose not to engage directly the Promethean ambition and sometimes macho rhetoric of abstract expressionism, nor feed on its resentment”^{xvi}, female artists relied on patience and an unwavering belief in memorializing their inner tensions onto canvas. Although they were subjected to the misogyny of the male-dominated abstract expressionist movement, the Female School of abstract expressionist artists reconstructed damaged egos and unsatisfied libidos to establish a bastion of female inseparability. The female school of abstract expressionism

subsumed its DNA to the incremental advancement of parity with the male art establishment.

Krasner and Pollock: A Contrast

Emerging from the shadows of the abstract expressionist “male room,” the female pioneers embraced pictorial expressions of the distinctly American art discipline. Infusing their works with an emotional “femaleness” that echoed representational yearnings, Krasner, Mitchell, Bourgeois, Nevelson, Elaine de Kooning, Hartigan and Frankenthaler translated gestures, figures and memories into an artistic order. Discounting that, “AbEx detractors would have it that the whole kit and caboodle is nothing but bad politics and steel-welded around a chassis of machismo—that the paint stroke, the very use of the arm, is equivalent to a phallic spurt”^{xvii}. The coterie of female abstract expressionist artists sought validation for challenging the male centric censorship of their contributions. By being measured against a patriarchal standard of male artistic values and achievements, the combative group of women artists individually voiced inherent disapproval of their renowned art brethren. For Hartigan, who adopted the pseudonym George, “I find that the subject of discrimination is only brought up by inferior talents to excuse their own inadequacy as artists”^{xviii}. The creative and nurturing subtleties implicated in the female abstract expressionist oeuvre challenged the forceful gesturalism and subordinated role playing that polarized gendered alignments.

By subsuming their chromosomal identity to the calculus of their works, female abstract expressionist painters harbored the masculine construct of the movement within a distinctly female narrative. Married to the provocateurs of the fledging American aesthetic, Krasner (Pollock), Elaine de Kooning (de Kooning), and Frankenthaler (Motherwell) embraced the gestural, physical and performative attributes of their partners

and encrypted their paintings with the dialogic of female perseverance. While the cult of abstract expressionist masculinity confirmed a gendered fantasy steeped in the power and knowledge of a heterosexual division of labor, the female pioneers of the movement performed their traditional subordinated domestic roles while advancing fiercely independent aesthetic voices. The entrenched sphere of conservative masculine ideology in the canon of art history faced a destabilizing intrusion from the sanctity of the bedroom. “The authentic serious high-modernist culture has generally been identified with masculinity and self-restraint and is structurally opposed to a mass culture that is itself represented as intrinsically feminine”^{xix}. Excluding women from cultural and institutional opportunities in art reinforced a gender bias and polarized women abstractionists to produce qualitatively superior works. (fig. 4,5). The restless ambition of these artists abetted them in avoiding an artistic ghettoization of their corporeal talents.

Wielding paint brushes in lieu of curling irons and skillets and diapers as weapons to combat sexist criticisms of their works, the female abstract expressionists masked feminist intonations by inscribing oedipal signatures of desire. As the product of a generation of women who were socially conditioned, these artists symbolized the struggle against self-prejudice. For feminist authors like Linda Nochlin, “women must conceive of themselves as potentially, if not actually, equal subjects, and must be willing to look the facts of their situation full in the face, without self-pity; at the same time they must view their situation with that high degree of emotional and intellectual commitment necessary to create a world in which equal achievement will be not only made possible but actively encouraged by social institutions”^{xx}. Transcending the quagmire of gendered assignments in abstract expressionism, Helen Frankenthaler emerged as a woman painter

who sought to redefine the sexual differences of power and politics that had legitimized the masculinist discourse in art history. For Goossen, “Helen Frankenthaler transcends any sexual categorization. She uses everything that she’s got in her as a woman but in a way that belongs to the world of art which is not divided into sexes, which is sexless”^{xxi}. By asserting a temporal asemitic to her paintings, Frankenthaler viscerally telegraphed mark-making that diffused gendered principles and allowed women’s art to reach for and at times to attain egalitarian participation.

While Frankenthaler embarked on a journey apathetic to male hegemony, her colleague, Lee Krasner, experienced a tumultuous relationship that compromised her engendered artistic identity. Shadowed by the overarching influence of her husband, Jackson Pollock, Lenore “Lee” Krasner sympathetically echoed the gender-neutral label attached to Frankenthaler by eschewing all-women art shows and delivering a synthesis of abstract forms and psychological content. Inspired by Piet Mondrian’s *Grid paintings* (fig. 6), Krasner innovated the “all-over” technique formalized in her 1949 work, *Composition* (fig. 7). In her highly animated state of controlled chaos, Krasner showcased the significance of intricate lines and gestures. Like Frankenthaler, Krasner’s *Little Images* (fig. 8) series of works allowed her to physically control droplets of paint to form overlapping skeins that illuminate the canvas. As the product of a generation of women who were socially conditioned as wives and mothers, Krasner symbolized the struggle against self-prejudice. Krasner’s transformative denial of originality abetted her adaptation of Motherwell, Still, Rothko and Newman into tempestuous larger-scale abstractions while managing the asymmetrical dysfunction that confounded her personal and professional life, Krasner calculatingly cloaked herself in a gendered mask of

ambiguity.

Ignoring the controlled biomorphic forms of Hans Hoffmann, Krasner adopted allegorical body parts and illusions that were cast by the restraint of brushstrokes and pigments. As her career languished beneath the aura of Pollock's meteoric trajectory, Krasner deliberately signed her works as L.K. to mitigate critical bias and to allow her works to be viewed through a gender-neutral lens. "Of course Krasner knew she was a woman and, I think, sometimes viewed that fact with horror, but both the knowledge and the horror were militantly kept out of her art"^{xxii}. By fighting to establish a separate identity from Pollock, Krasner committed her paintings to artistic self-hood. Incorporating strategies of self-definition and ambiguity, Krasner navigated through the gendered intersections of abstract expressionism and modernism. While her artistic ambitions demanded an abridgment of European influenced modernism with Pollock's visceral subjectivity, Krasner's art ultimately is "that of a woman, the autobiography it inscribed invents its subjects as the bearer of a fictional masculinity"^{xxiii}. Krasner's creative dialogic resonated from an artful reading of the innovation of Pollock and the New York School of painters. Despite her stereotyped female identity, Krasner's gender blind abstractions served to mask the ambiguity in her paintings with her reluctance to assume any strident female point of view.

While the complexity of Jackson Pollock's abstract canvases seduced Krasner and inspired Frankenthaler, the Bennington College graduate was transfixed with the dense, complex imagery painted by Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Vasily Kandinsky and Joan Miro. By adapting the staining technique of these pioneers of expressionism, Frankenthaler imbued an emotional charge onto her large canvases by combining an

exuberance of colors with a tactile approach to placement. “Her feeling for texture keeps the paint surface generally interesting, while the fact that she rarely lets the attractions of accidental embellishment lead her far away from the basic image gives her work a good deal of directness and power”^{xxiv}. Frankenthaler’s experimentation with the dilution of acrylic paint transformed her color field works with a vibrancy and ethereal quality that further defined her soak- staining technique. Appropriated from her observation of Jackson Pollock’s watered-down enamel paint leeching into his black-and-white paintings, Frankenthaler refined this technique by pouring a color wheel of diluted acrylic paints onto unprimed, virginal canvas creating a saturation of moods and emotions. By physically pouring, pushing and smoothing gestures onto the canvas, Frankenthaler adopted a female entrance into a sexual hierarchy occupied exclusively by male artists. Resoundingly forceful, assertive, strong, direct and bold, male physiognomy translated easily onto canvases painted by men. Frankenthaler’s ability to imbue paintings with stamps of emotional strength blurred the lines of gender inequality and ordained subjectivity within the art world.

The Dialectic of Gender Ambiguity

While building a foundation for the acceptance of women artists, Frankenthaler denied her femaleness as an exegetical device. Frankenthaler relied on her ambitious entreaty into a hierarchical male art society to establish her acceptance into artistic parity. With a unique perspective on reinventing and reimagining her world in its totality, Frankenthaler visually pronounced, “No one picture announces itself as the only picture; or as the end of the world. Painting is not finished or destroyed, it does not end with the picture painted, it can go on”^{xxv}. Enamored with the surrealist elements of Pollock’s works, Frankenthaler adopted their allusive psychological content as the marriage between representation and abstraction. Incorporating essential elements of formal aesthetics, multiplicity of meaning and color saturation into the canon of post-modern abstractionism, Frankenthaler continued to avoid testosterone inflected biases that unfairly gendered her work. Oscillating between beautifully balanced paintings, *the Maud*, (fig. 9) and others that are unresolved, *Untitled 1968*, (fig. 10), Frankenthaler adhered to individualistic self-determination in her explorations of materiality, space and depth. Frankenthaler’s pursuit of a conditional boundlessness validated a capacious inclusion of social, intellectual and physical interpretations.

Throughout her career, Frankenthaler battled for relevance in the art world. Romantic ties to titular male art stars (Greenberg, Motherwell) marginalized her contributions to art history and exposed her to unfounded criticism based on her perceived inferior gender. As a testimonial to gendered categorizations, women critics included verbiage to instantiate biological differences. As Emily Genauer noted in 1969,

Frankenthaler's paintings are the embodiment of a "legitimate, feminine sensibility that is comprised of feminine whispers and dainty rustlings heard over a loudspeaker"^{xxvi}.

Described by the art historian Alice Rewald as a cold, conventional woman, reserved and abstract by^{xxvii}, Frankenthaler faced a cavalcade of sexist stereotyping as a pioneer of post-abstract expressionism and heiress of a new tradition. Allowing her representations to reflect the confluence of other artists, movements and interjections, Frankenthaler reaffirmed a general vagueness about herself and her art. "Only when the world put those labels on me, I did not have a vision or a notion about color per se that would make me or my pictures work or operate"^{xxviii}. As an artist who refined and personalized an interpretation of the soak and stain technique, Frankenthaler dismissed gendered interlocutions in order to further her artistic *raison d'être*.

Frankenthaler expressed her strong emotions by articulating a response to critics with applications of thinned paint that let waterlight fill her works. "I had the landscape in my mind and shoulder and wrist"^{xxix}. This admonition of physical presence was directly attributable to Pollock's influence over her early career. Frankenthaler substituted smoothing techniques for Pollock's documented paint flinging allowing her to better relate the subtleties of the woman's hand to the finished work. By incorporating a seductive and feminine color wheel into her canvases, Frankenthaler maintained her outward appearance of gender neutrality while allowing the paintings to radiate a distinctly female quality. "Being female is one of many in a long list for me, but has never been a specific issue by itself. What you call female quality is a serious fact that I enjoy and part of a total working picture"^{xxx}. While critics sought to differentiate the iconoclastic ejaculative splatters from Pollock with the menstrual color lubrications of

Frankenthaler's paintings, it was the decision to abandon geometric structure that shepherded her works into the pantheon of art greatness. Morris Louis called Frankenthaler a bridge between Pollock and what was possible. Throughout her career, Frankenthaler attempted to think through her femininity and to overcome the issue of gender in a male dominant milieu. Liberating the female calculus from her works allowed Frankenthaler to attack the raw canvas with a physicality and artistic strength that served to establish a new style of painting and more importantly to create great art, not singularly great female art.

Frankenthaler's crafting of imperfect resemblances of bodies and landscapes heralded the inclusion of marks that completed the topography of each painting. Whether representational or depictive, new illustrations of self-descriptive images or the pooled anomalies of heavy brushstrokes, Frankenthaler's marks are a "practice that is both arbitrary and intended as well as both figurative and abstract-evidence that Louis and Noland ignored in their own interpretations of Frankenthaler's art, as a bridge allowing the oneness and homogeneity of Pollock's paintings to be conveyed through the medium of color"^{xxxii}. With the unveiling of, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952 (fig. 11), Frankenthaler reinforced her pictures with the abstract dreamscapes of her memories. An excursion to the cliffs of Nova Scotia inspired the placement of colors and lines to recreate a hilly landscape complete with a wild surf breaking against the rocky shoreline. Frankenthaler's 1950s works are an estimable grouping of preternatural gestural abstractions that demonstrate the masculine physicality of her wrist technique while coyly investigating her contemplation of femaleness. These paintings decant the abstract expressionist saturation of colors into a carafe of watery, diffused recollections.

Frankenthaler's experimentation with poured skeins of different kinds of paint onto unprimed canvases permitted an exploration of abstractly imagined pastoral gardens and dripping interiors of bodies. Frankenthaler's rare departure into the gender explicit investigation of animation in the shape and surface of color saturated paintings was confirmed in the 1952 painting, *Scene with Nude* (fig. 12). The oil on charcoal unprimed canvas features a figurative image of a woman that Frankenthaler sprinkles with strategically placed orangeish/reddish dots emanating from her open legs. The later 1959 oil on canvas, *Woman's Decision* (fig. 13), reaffirmed the subconscious intonations of Frankenthaler's sexual prevarications. In a self-directed schism between femaleness and ambition, Frankenthaler subsumed to an incoherence of identity in order to emancipate her artwork from gendered bias. "Frankenthaler most often rejected the implications of such questions, at least in public contexts, even as she spoke with female friends about the travails of the woman artist, or struggled to accept the lightness and wit of her work, it's feminine aspects, as positive attributes, despite the negative connotations of these features at the time"^{xxxii}. Despite protestations, Frankenthaler adhered to an independent artistic ethos to complete the coda of color field stain painting.

What Do We Mean by ‘the Feminine’?

Helen Frankenthaler’s gender identity as a woman was invariably the aperture through which her viewers saw her works; like virtually every midcentury woman artist, her works were, in every sense—the lyricism, hues, form—distinctly ‘feminine.’ In 1966, B.H. Friedman referred to her signature soak-stain technique as “‘free, lyrical and feminine’ and her color palette ‘seductive and feminine’”^{xxxiii}. Other 1960s critics chimed in with a similar response. James Schuyler, wrote that Frankenthaler’s oeuvre was characterized by a “sensibility altogether feminine”^{xxxiv}, much to the chagrin of women artists and critics alike. Frankenthaler, abhorred the feminine status that the patricentric art world stamped on her work, finding artistic means of gender erasure or achieving a sense of gender ambiguity in everything from her subject matter to her color palette and forms. This begs the question, beyond the temporal, patriarchal definitions of the word, what do these resounding voices mean by ‘feminine’?

The notion of the ‘feminine’ has, over centuries, acquired semiotic value that is steeped in thematic configurations of oppression, purity, fertility, corporeal idealization and the simplification of women’s bodies. Historical definitions of femininity—expressed on canvas, propagandized advertising images, in film and virtually every medium—have been markedly devoid of female agency. The narrative of what constitutes the feminine has been expressed as a gendered dichotomy that casts women as non-male, at the mercy of phallogentric logic, rather than supplying a genderless, individualist and self-sufficient conceptual framework in both art and society. For many women, the skewed conceptualization of the feminine, both pictorially and ideologically, informed their own

understanding of what it meant to be a woman. This is an exceedingly problematic distortion that artists like O'Keefe and Frankenthaler grappled with by circumventing the temporality of such obfuscated feminine representations. Through her critically acclaimed works on feminist cultural studies, woman artists and the role of the feminine particularly as it relates to modern culture and the avant-garde, feminist art historian and cultural theorist Griselda Pollock offers a rereading of the feminine that challenges the exclusion of the authoritative woman artist. Pollock underscores the politics of representation and the aesthetic resistance by woman artists—revising the meaning of the feminine beyond the fallacious confines of patriarchal, phallogocentric logic.

Griselda Pollock calls for a rethinking of the feminine, moving away from stereotypes and generalizations that prescribe a gendered “Otherness” to femininity to embrace an understanding of the asymmetry and residual status that women and women’s work bears textually, socioeconomically and psychologically. Arguing that pictorial representations of the feminine have restricted the woman artist to the chromosomal “nature” of her womanhood, Pollock argues in order to “avoid the embrace of the feminine stereotype, which homogenizes women’s work as determined by natural gender, we must stress the heterogeneity of women’s art work, the specificity of individual producers and products. Yet we have to recognize what women share—as a result of nurture not nature, i.e. the historically variable social systems which produce sexual differentiation”^{xxxv}. Conceptualizations of the feminine, from Pollock’s worldview, have been insufficiently homogenized and confined to Betty Friedan’s concept of the “Feminine Mystique”. Artistic tropes of woman as the housemaker, muse, in the nude, or at a brothel; contribute to a systemic iconography that propagates up gender power

relations in ways that subordinate women under their male counterparts, defining the feminine as Other. The label of Other was also a product of the schemata of sexual hierarchies that effectively mapped out gender power relations in a stratification that placed the woman artist at the bottom tier and her male counterpart at the top. The feminine was a passive, only to be set in motion by the ingenuity and discretion of men.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963, introduced groundbreaking discourse on the socially derived meanings of the feminine. Friedan exposed how the domestic, docile and passive representations of women became concrete qualifiers for women's gender identity. Marriage, fertility and childrearing were, at the time, the only means of functioning and succeeding in society. A woman's value was only to be understood in relation to the man's and his sole ability to 'activate' such was accepted as a normative pillar of American society. One might question why this polarization of gender roles became synonymous with the homemaker. Ideas about the feminine were fostered by centrifugal socioeconomic forces precipitated by the postwar boom, whereby "the prosperity of the postwar economic recovery, the erasure of women's experiences in the war effort, and the sustained rise in the birth rate postwar were contingent structural formations"^{xxxvi}. A nation realizing for the first time its quixotic American Dream, with all of the trappings of suburban utopia, failed to envision a life and identity for women that was outside the kitchen or nursery. Moreover, this society privileged the conceit of the male breadwinner and placed immense value on his successes, at the expense of hers. When women artists such as Frankenthaler began to captivate the art world, dissenting from the feminine stereotypes outlined in *The Feminine Mystique*, critical reception saw her abilities and artistic innovations as only

made possible through her male predecessors. For critics, such was the only logical explanation as to how a woman could possibly achieve a level of creative authority akin to that of a man. Yet, such reception was not limited to the postwar era. As recently as 1998, Roberta Smith wrote, “She had taken Pollock’s dripped-paint technique and de Kooning’s open-ended improvisation, along with Arshile Gorky’s overripe organicity, adding paint thinned to a watery liquid ... in saturated or pale colors that seemed innately hot and new”^{xxxvii}. Even long after Friedan’s *Mystique* was written and decades after the gleam of 1950s domesticity has lost its luster, women were still perceived in the context of men, partially if not completely devoid of appreciation on an individual level.

Frankenthaler sought to defy the ossified cultural obsession with locating gender and skewed social constructs of the feminine in mid-century canvases by challenging the qualifiers of the feminine aesthetic. Often relying on terms such as “dainty,” “delicate,” “precious,” writers and critics in the postwar era constructed a narrative to underpin the woman artist’s work that defined the feminine style as conflicting with the aggressive, frenzied “masculine” style. If the man’s work was deliberate, critics maintained that “Frankenthaler, in contrast, merely allowed accidents to happen, passively staining the linen canvases with the seep and ooze of bodily fluids”^{xxxviii}. The qualities that were deemed feminine served as a vehicle for male artists and critical voices of the time to, according to Griselda Pollock, negate and delegitimize women’s artistry. Frankenthaler’s and other women artists’ intentions to evade this disparaging gendered characterization undermined their authority and command over the art world.

Women artists like Frankenthaler set out to resolve the issues brought about by the Othering that was encoded in their work. By recoding and disembodimenting the

feminine, Griselda Pollock refers to the ‘creative woman’s body’—a means of bridging the debilitating dichotomy of male and female in art and establishing neutral, genderless territory in the problematic hierarchy that sustained men’s privileged position at the top and enforced women’s position as muse, as Other. By suspending the femininity embedded in the work, Frankenthaler was able to envision a “new ‘third term’ within the conventional dyad of (masculine) painter and (feminine) muse”^{xxxix} and the ‘creative woman’s body.’ The term Pollock famously ascribed to this concept became a mechanism through which the woman artist could enter the same playing field as her male counterpart without her work suffering the label of feminine. “The creative woman’s body was an imagined body onto which women artists could project their femininity; the fantasy of the creative woman’s body became the receptacle for the female artist’s gender identity. This psychic ‘body’ allowed the ‘body’ in the canvas to seem neutered, and the painter’s body outside the canvas to be invested within all the authority modernism usually grants men”^{xl}. This third body allowed artists like Frankenthaler to destabilize the binary of gender that had characterized the art world that borrowed from the forms and gestural proclivities that were previously limited to male artists.

Photographs of Frankenthaler taken in 1969 by Ernst Haas reveal how Frankenthaler was able to effectively negotiate the ‘creative woman’s body’ onto her canvases. There is a forcefulness, an athleticism and physical dynamism that can be seen in her creative process and that directly translated onto her works. One Haas photo “show Frankenthaler on tip-toe, leaning into her canvas, supporting the weight of her body with one arm while she extends the other as far as she can to make a mark. Her remarkable

physical strength allows her to hold her body close to the canvas while remaining just outside of it [...] the photographs indicate the presence of something like a creative woman's body in the way. They reveal to us the *ambiguity* of Frankenthaler's bodily relation to her work"^{xli}. Yet, Frankenthaler was never able to fully shed the overt feminine reception of her work, despite her conscious efforts to suspend gender in working toward a genderless aesthetic. Even today, almost a decade after her death, the text on the late artist's website describes her work in terms of "a gentle, almost poetic harmony despite its powerful spontaneity"^{xlii}—reifying the feminine quality that, for most of her life, overshadowed Frankenthaler's artistry and undermined an appreciation of it that was detached from her gender. Using corporeal orientations, she actively worked to transpose the perceived lyricism, understood as the feminine, into gender-neutral vestiges. "The significance for the painting comes from her decision to leave the marks, near the heart of the painting, rather than to obliterate or reconfigure them. The handprints thus become implicated within the pictorial action in a way that dusty footprints or knee or hip indentations do not. The red fingers demonstrate that, at least this once, the artist actively contemplated the different ways her painting was embodied. In *Madridscape*, then, we see Frankenthaler contemplating her own discrete bodily orientations to the canvas. In Griselda Pollock's terms, she displaces her femaleness onto a fantasized third term body, leaving the canvas and the painter gender-free"^{xliii}. The gender ambiguity that Frankenthaler sought to achieve through their oeuvre raises questions about the meaning of gender neutrality and the ways in which artists could circumvent a gendered reading of their works.

Often criticized for being too much of a woman for men and too inadequately

feminist for women, Frankenthaler found herself in a position where the expression and extent of her gender identity in her work—and others’ relentless scrutiny of it—obfuscated her endeavors as an artist. “Ultimately, Frankenthaler was attempting to ‘think through’ femininity in her art—to overcome her gender, seeking to replace her female/feminized presence with a gender neutral one [...] By actively engaging her beholder with pictorially ambiguous effects, as well as segmented compositions that must be read piecemeal, she extricated herself from her canvases, leaving only the viewer him- or herself”^{xliv}. Under this vision, aesthetic ambiguity could facilitate gender neutrality, which, in this sense, is the absence of gender in a way that redirects critical attention away from notions about the artist’s gender. The absence of gender, however, presents a catch-22 dilemma. It is an idealistic conception that, as feminists might argue, dilutes and detracts from the activation of equality and equity of women. The implication of gender neutrality is that men and women are on equal playing fields, which is, far from true. Attempts to eradicate gender inevitably engage with it. Whether Frankenthaler expressly stamped her gender on her canvases or blurred it ambiguously to confer a gender-neutral ethos onto them, she found herself at once unable to satisfy the feminist agenda and unable to attain unbiased recognition as an artist.

Ideas about the feminine and how females have historically been regulated within the binary matrix of gender are best illuminated through the lens of Judith Butler’s conceptualizations of heteronormative hegemonies. The construction and departure of the male-female dichotomy is one of the core pressure points of modernism, at a time when society was first exploring alternatives to the binary construct of gender but also whereby the institutionalization of modern art “actively fabricated a monogendered, selective

narrative of modern art, even in the living presence of the women who defined their moment of modernity through their massive participation in all areas of culture.”^{xlv} Judith Butler’s explorations of gender and how it is ubiquitously referred to in terms of hegemonic heteronormative matrices sheds light on how representations and performances of gender are embedded in the inequitable gender power relations that routinely position men as superior and active and women as inferior and passive. Butler argues that the feminine is constructed in this manner through social processes that normalize such. “‘gender’ is not something singularly possessed, but something continually created and recreated through everyday social practices [...] Butler’s emphasis on the dynamic and citational nature of identity, where gender is actualized through (and thus an effect of) a series of repetitive performances that constitution the illusion of a ‘proper,’ ‘natural’ or ‘fixed’ gender, has been hugely influential”^{xlvi}. This illusion of gender as “nature” is, in reality, according to Butler, a matter of “nurture” that only appears as natural and innate as a result of the invisible norms that sustain this warped understanding of gender. In response, Helen Frankenthaler and other female artists took a gender-neutral approach that allowed them to evade the mark of their femininity so that their works could be appraised based solely on the artistry at hand without their ‘femaleness’ presupposing their artistry. They adopted both gender neutral and gender ambiguous techniques to circumvent such labeling that bound and confined their artistry to their gender identity.

The term ‘gender neutral’ refers to the extraction of a gender identity, a non-feminine or non-masculine identity. Gender *ambiguity*, in contrast, blurs the lines of gender specificity and the binary landscape of gender to shake up the traditional

representations of male-female dichotomy—not to remove it altogether in the spirit of gender neutrality—but to abstract the heteronormative delineations of gender identity. Both gender neutrality and gender ambiguity expose the instability of gender categories and serve as a means of defying the heteronormative matrix that invariably disenfranchises women and pits them against men. Butler proposes a new paradigm for understanding gender that reveals its freedom to lean toward both ambiguity and neutrality, as it is not anchored in a locked identity but liberated by performance. From her perspective, gender is not fixed but free and fluid, adaptable based on context, able to change based on how it is enacted and the occasions and ways in which an individual chooses to frame their identity. In her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler writes that “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”^{xlvii}. Gender is a performance that makes up who we are, the very expressions of gender reflect our identity, not the rigid gender norms that have historically prescribed gender identity based on sex. The imposition of the heteronormative gender matrix is thus socially, not biologically, driven; the concepts of the feminine—in the art world and beyond—fit into the ideal of gender that the patriarchal, phallogocentric institutions have perpetuated, which artists like Frankenthaler fought, however unsuccessfully, to defy.

The inescapably gendered readings of Frankenthaler’s oeuvre—no matter her efforts to erase the feminine in her works or evade such readings—reveal the extent that critical reception of artists in the 1950s and ’60s prioritized gender identity. An artist’s work could not be received without a metaphorical inscription of their gender identity,

failing to affix larger societal concerns to works in prioritizing the feminine or masculine, the woman behind the work as opposed to the sociocultural implications of said work. The decidedly ambiguous subject matter of Frankenthaler's work does not undermine or eliminate a feminist reading, as her critics rarely failed to render her work through a gendered lens—regardless of how gender-neutral or gender-ambiguous her artistic endeavors—but it does open up interpretation to a more individualist approach.

Ideas about the feminine and gender as a social construct have percolated feminist theory and gender studies for decades. The feminine is inherently performative, a free-floating expression that is malleable and not rigidly confined to notions of 'delicate' or 'beautiful' or 'lyrical'—terms that the art world has effectively pigeonholed the woman artist in and still continues to today. Through the mechanics of gender neutrality and gender ambiguity, Helen Frankenthaler attempted to subvert ideas about the feminine. These ideas inevitably became a precursor for critical interpretation and cultural appreciation of her works, in order to gain acceptance and agency without bearing the burden of her gender and all of the negative social consequences that arose. Critiques of Frankenthaler's work, endlessly conflicted with a gendered bias, positioned her as a follower of prominent male figures, and effectively diminished her value and influence by conferring onto her works a decidedly feminine quality. While she rejected the women's art movement and the feminist goals of women before and after her, Frankenthaler's legacy and career sheds light on the art world's hypersensitivity to and obsession with the artist's gender. Moreover, her contributions to the art world extend far beyond it, reifying the malleability of gender in every aspect of social life, paving the way for a new way of thinking about gender that had been limited to the confines of

binarism.

Mountains and Sea

The debut of Frankenthaler's groundbreaking work, *Mountains and Sea*, was both lauded and excoriated by critics. Arthur Danto cited the monumental work as "a painting too beautiful and too compelling to see only as a work that influenced some important artists to begin staining canvas"^{xlviii}. Conversely, Grace Gluck commented on "its thinness in substance, uncontrolled in method to sweet in color and too poetic"^{xlix}. "The currency of the trope at this particular moment may be a thought to be a sign of discomfort of such critics—even admiring ones—with the ascendance of women artists, and of Frankenthaler in particular which also began to be widely acknowledged during the same period. Even so, when Frankenthaler's stain paintings were first exhibited, to an unfavorable response, people commented that *Mountains and Sea* looked to many like a paint rag"¹. Displaying a salubrious palette of watery translucent colors orchestrated by the jackhammer physicality of Frankenthaler's force of artistic will, *Mountains and Sea*, delivers both a delicate and vibrant urgency to questions about feminine sensibility. With Clement Greenberg guiding her entry into the salon of abstract expressionism and her quick exit into the "men's room" of color field painting, Frankenthaler explored the implications of Pollock's poured webs while imprinting unmodulated pools of transparent colors into *Mountains and Sea*. The blues, reds and yellows fold together in the pillowy softness of an artfully crafted meringue. With the use of untreated cotton duck sailcloth as a medium for *Mountains and Sea*, Frankenthaler expounded upon the painterly abstractionism of the New York School of artists. By abdicating the gendered institutions and rhetoric of previous generations of women artists, Frankenthaler articulated a self-expression devoid of the lightweight, delicate, small scale attributes ascribed to

“feminine” works of art.

While celebrating the lyrical assemblage of memories, Frankenthaler avoided the politicization of her works. Instead, Frankenthaler portaged colors from nature’s landscape onto raw canvases. By personalizing various hues and arriving at a diluted modulation of colors, Frankenthaler functionally married studio leftovers into a mélange of billowing and flowing movements. “I will buy a quantity of paint but I hate it when it dries up and I haven’t used it. If I have a pot of leftover green and a pot of leftover pink, I will very often mix it just because I want to. I use it up if it doesn’t work-well, that’s a loss. For every painting that I show, there are many, many in shreds in garbage cans” (Frankenthaler Interview by Rose)^{li}. Avoiding the patriarchal hierarchy of constituents and mentors, Frankenthaler pioneered distinct and decipherable images within the vortex of action painting and post-cubist art. The innovation of staining advantageously allowed Frankenthaler to render the background of each painting neutral by sinking the image directly onto it. While *Mountains and Sea*, with a dense composition of color in the middle of the work, echoes strong cubist influence, Frankenthaler quickly extended color to the four margins of, *Open Wall* (fig. 14), one year later. Borrowing from the archives of surrealism, Frankenthaler imitated the processes found in nature by allowing her images to organically grow and evolve as she knelt over each work and dynamically moved colors across and into the canvas.

The evolutionary path that guided Frankenthaler from figurative abstractions to a principal force in the development of the color-field movement is well represented in her anthology of work. Frankenthaler’s iconic *Mountains and the Sea* painting from 1952 symbolized a confluence of ambiguity and randomness and introduced her concoction of

house paint, enamel, kerosene, and oil paints onto an unprimed canvas. The bleeding of paint onto the dry canvas elucidated a menstrual quality of change that was interpreted by Frankenthaler's use of movement and viscosity. Transitioning from oil to acrylic and liberating the canvas with the introduction of magna acrylics, Frankenthaler abandoned abstract expressionism and began to compose her paintings with richly saturated colors. By allowing the force of the paintbrush to glide across the canvas, Frankenthaler liberated colors from their natural palette and formed pools of abstract stains that imagined landscapes. Drawing upon her childhood love of moving water, the sky and surrounding nature, Frankenthaler produced monumental works in the 1960s. The epochal *Canyon* (fig. 15) painted in amorphous pools, stains, swirls and fields in 1965 was created by Frankenthaler utilizing a squeegee and then working the paint with her hands. The meditative and soft composition echoed a distinct feminine aesthetic by showcasing a unique translation of color and surface.

Evolution of Soak-and-stain Technique

The flatness and the two-dimensional appearance of Frankenthaler's works were defined through her soak-staining of the raw canvas. Both the staining and the rawness of her medium are indicative of a feminine interpretation to the use of color in her evolution of abstractionist art. "Frankenthaler's painting is manifestly that of a woman and the broad, bleeding-edged stain on the linen was what made it distinctly feminine"^{lii}. Female artists are often associated with a delicate, sensitive application of color to a canvas or paper. The panoply of early Frankenthaler works requires that the words personal and suggestive are added to these attributes. Frankenthaler risked experimenting with "techniques and forms that consistently contradicted the prevailing tastes"^{liii}. The various splatters, swirls and stains in earthly tones of green and blue reveal the intimacy that Frankenthaler connected to her canvases. Representational shapes and figures in homages to *Venus* (fig. 16) and *Eden* (fig. 17) conveyed the subtleties of motion in works ascribed to women. Frankenthaler's 1950's portfolio of canvases clearly stated the vocabulary of a young female artist exploring the landscape of elusiveness and vulnerability as both a painter and a woman.

By purposely avoiding the decorative objectification of women artists, Frankenthaler evinced her prima facie role as the principle architect of the shift away from abstract expressionism. Combining the male construct of forcefulness with the inclusion of self-discovery, Frankenthaler abandoned the boundaries of abstract expressionism to forge an independent narrative. In a review of a 1956 gallery show, art critic Parker Tyler rebuked Frankenthaler for "supersaturating color as though it was a

dye and for condensing it, on the other hand, in straight arm statements or powerful tools that chafe in their captivity”^{liv}. The masculinized references to straight arm and powerful devalued Frankenthaler’s individualistic attempts to produce differentiated meanings and subjective reflections in her oeuvre. Drawing upon assembled poetic fragments and a diaristic approach to picture making, Frankenthaler broadcast personally imprinted figurative memories of landscapes and destinations onto her canvases. By adopting a pastoral voice in her art, Frankenthaler allegorically infused these works with broad swaths of atmospheric colors that resonated the beauty and sensibility of an artist who happened to be a woman. From the epochal *Mountains and Sea* to the stain soaked, *Red Square* (fig. 18), Frankenthaler’s large format paintings celebrated a mélange of atmosphere, space and ambiguity.

Vacillating between a working man’s artist in canvas slacks and paint splattered men’s oxford shirts and glamorous gowns replete with jeweled bodice, Frankenthaler artfully crafted her image to evoke the elusive and the unavailable. “The sexual symbiology of Miss Frankenthaler’s work is subconsciously intentional, that is, she has tried to show it and not show it at the same time”^{lv}. Frankenthaler’s staining of the surface, with its unquestionable female implications, still managed to obfuscate the sexualization and the gendering of her paintings. *Dawn After the Storm* (fig. 19) reimagines a landscape flooded by nature’s detritus while hinting at the dripping interiority of women. Frankenthaler’s visual analogue of a watery, organic landscape unsheathed a feminine esthesia concealed within a distinctively masculine subject. In the perceived struggle between femaleness and ambitiousness, Frankenthaler rejected any anointment as feminist in residence. “Indeed her refusal to accept the role of “woman

artist” led her on occasion to rebuff younger women artists who wanted to connect with her as a model and inspiration”^{lvi}. Frankenthaler’s abdication of an ordained feminist throne emancipated her from gendered constraints and allowed her work to evolve between the tectonic plates of male and female art.

By interpreting the stain within the gendered boundary of masculinity, Frankenthaler established, “a magnitude of realized ambition that only Pollock, among Americans had previously achieved”^{lvii}. Refusing to be contained or categorized in any art historical time capsule, Frankenthaler embraced surrealist notions of randomness, post abstractionist assertions of flatness and the action art association with color liberation. With a reoccurring thematic repose towards the lyrical and pastoral celebration of places traveled and experiences remembered, Frankenthaler’s paintings champion the iconography of a singularly voiced artist influenced by a coterie of male mentors. Symbolically and fraternally associated with the New York School of women artists, Joan Mitchell, Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan; Frankenthaler maintained a shared female artistic sensibility while projecting a certain male connectedness. Independent of her colleagues, Frankenthaler insinuated her soak and stain methodology into the consciousness of gender-neutral art appreciation and the subconscious of feminist narrative. Abandoning the formulaic structure of abstract expressionism, Frankenthaler inhaled deep breaths of watered-down pools of richly hued paints and exhaled imagistic amorphous masses of remembered landscapes. Frankenthaler’s contribution to art history was her invitation to challenge normative gendered values and to embrace her art purely for art’s sake.

In homage to the materiality of the colored medium and a testament to innovation

and reinvention, Frankenthaler forged a connectiveness to the canvas that elevated her into the forefront of the color field movement. By engaging the compositional elements in her paintings and agglutinating them to the exposed stretchers, Frankenthaler confirmed and challenged the two-dimensionality of the painted surface. Advancing her soak and stain technique, Frankenthaler created a series of *floorboard paintings* (fig. 20) in the early 1960s as an innocent mistake. Frankenthaler experimented with overly saturated canvases by placing them face down on the floorboards of her New York studio. The next morning, “Frankenthaler saw on their reverse sides the familiar sight of the softly disembodied color surprisingly trapped in the imprint of the floorboards. She subsequently added more opaque, intense areas to sharpen the softness, usually to frame it, and thereby produced extremely commanding, stately works that unquestionably bear her mark and affirm her stylistic continuity”^{lviii}. By creating a veil of shadows under which bodies and outlines take form, Frankenthaler crafted sensual works that confirmed the importance of light as the metaphysical locus of each work.

Seeking respite from the discourses on gender bias, the politics of feminism and sexist reviews, Frankenthaler relied on the quality of her art production and the quiet solitude of her weekend retreat in Stanford, Connecticut. By the early 1960s, Frankenthaler’s works were included in the permanent collections of MOMA, Brooklyn Museum, the Whitney Museum, the Albright Museum and the Carnegie Institute. Despite institutionalized critical categorizations such as the announcement of her “one-man” show at the Albright Museum and the “vocal girls” in a 1960 *Time* magazine description of the New York School of female artists, Frankenthaler opted to allow the ambiguity in her works to obscure any generalization of gendered norms. A 1969 *New York Magazine*

article pointedly described Frankenthaler's moist and rosy body clad in a Sergeant Pepper jacket in response to a 40th-birthday celebration at a recent opening of her works.

Consequently, Christopher Andrase, in his 1969 *Christian Science Monitor* article, extended the gender discourse on Frankenthaler's feminine approach to abstract expressionism as a prejudicial omission of Frankenthaler's contributions to the genre^{lix}. Vacillating between character assassinations and crowning exaltations, Frankenthaler's reviews lauded the daring and the adventurous while demonizing the erotic and the sensual.

With a preternatural fixation toward Frankenthaler's relationships with Clement Greenberg and Robert Motherwell, art critics and national media perpetuated a gendered predilection towards her. Whether Peter Schjeldahl's inflammatory missive that credited Clement Greenberg as the innovator of the stain painting or the 1969 *Time* magazine article that celebrated the Motherwells at home, the art world glamorized Frankenthaler's attachment to empowered men. Intimating that structural male elements in Frankenthaler's paintings were influenced by her personal relationships, art historians denied Frankenthaler's formalized training, her adaptation of significant artists, movements, and trends and an individual ferocity to challenge ordained color norms. The gendered displacement of Frankenthaler also fails to account for her physical presence kneeling onto each of her formidable canvases.

In the dominant male territory of the New York art cognoscenti during the 1950s and 1960s, Frankenthaler responded to criticism with increasingly disembodied, fresh saturations of canvases. With each work, Frankenthaler advanced her idiosyncratic soak staining technique to include a poetic dynamism and a conscious extension of

abstractionist principles. With a focus on delineating large, visually stimulating pieces, Frankenthaler imbued her moving landscapes with explosive gestures that allowed the two-dimensionality of her works to remain intact but not confined. In a review of her works at the New York Jewish Museum in 1960, Frank O'Hara commented "Frankenthaler is a daring painter. She is willing to employ huge formats so that essentially intimate revelations may be more fully explored and delineated. She has the ability to let a painting be beautiful, or graceful, or sullen and perfunctory, if these qualities are part of the force and clarity of the occasion"^{lx}. Unchallenged by criticism and exhibiting an aristocratic stoicism, Frankenthaler explored the cavities of her imagination to create lubricious pools of colorful images.

In each of her works, Frankenthaler imbued the social, physical and symbolic constraints of mark-making to construct the architecture of abstract painting. Harnessing the fluidity and sensitivity of re-imagined places, Frankenthaler anatomically married her wrist with a sponge, a mop, a brush and a rag to create a vulnerable composition that exudes the impulses of color expression. Emancipating her works from the distinctive gesturalism of abstract expressionism, Frankenthaler advanced the two-dimensionality of her fellow artists to achieve a purposely ambiguous sensation of space and depth. According to Frankenthaler, "pictures are flat and part of the nuance and often the beauty or the drama that makes a work, or gives it life...is that it presents such an ambiguous situation of an undeniably flat surface, but on it and with it an intense play and drama of space, movements, light, illusion and different perspectives"^{lxi}. Infusing watery remembered landscapes with anomalous additions of impasto, Frankenthaler implicates her staining and signing signature with clusters of self-inscriptive patterning. The

topography of Frankenthaler's paintings contemplates her femaleness as lyrical assemblages of color while confirming a masculine physicality that occurs in the making of serious art.

While exhibiting the temerity to explore and to conquer line, texture and transparency, Frankenthaler deployed the discipline and workmanship of a competitive athlete. Frankenthaler not only mastered the politics of color but also experimented with its alchemy to create multilayered veins of seductive paint. Evoking a vitality and wit in her paintings, Frankenthaler faced misogynistic contretemps when crossing into the imagined aesthetic of feminine staining. Vacillating between the sexualized persona of a female artist and the avoidance of a feminist label, Frankenthaler eschewed the intellectual roots of abstract expressionism as she journeyed towards the individual freedom and modality of color field staining. Infusing each of her works with a feminine dialectic that balanced a decidedly one-sided patriarchal culture and allowed the artistry to "symbolize the essence of human relatedness, whose source lies in the primary relationship to the mother"^{lxii}. Frankenthaler unconditionally rejected the implications and artificiality of the feminist moniker while obliquely invoking the elusive and the unavailable.

Conclusion

The masculine rhetoric of abstract expressionist artists compelled female painters to explore authentic, powerful expressions of emancipated symbolisms. The juxtaposition of culturally specific notions of femininity intersecting with cool, tough rigorous implications of objectivity forged a dichotomous interpretation of gendered intent in Frankenthaler's oeuvre. In the mathematical study of change, the calculus for gender neutrality focuses on the convergence of infinite sequences to a well-defined limit. For Frankenthaler, the adaptation and appropriation of a series of art influences promulgated her foray into individualistic art making within the canonical sphere of abstraction. As the lioness of the post abstractionist color field movement, Frankenthaler chose to insulate herself from the flowing, soft metaphors used to contain and categorize her anthology of works as both feminine and female. Executing moving arts of restraint, Frankenthaler abstained from active engagement in gender theory and the polemics of women in art history.

Exhibiting a lifelong ambivalence toward authority and the mechanisms of power, Frankenthaler elected to avoid the fecund ambitiousness and unrestrained testosterone of abstract expressionism. As an artist who squeezed sentiment and nuance onto each centimeter of the unprimed canvas, Frankenthaler negotiated the differential social and ideological discourses on gender. Unwilling to defer to the phallogocentric symbiology of art hierarchy, Frankenthaler repressed gendered critiques of her creative processes and in turn developed intuitive compositions of nature's melodies. A pilgrimage to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC to "gender-flect" at the altar of *Mountains and Sea*

validates the cubist influenced painting as a work undeniably painted by a woman. Standing before the elegiac aquarelle, the imagined notes of turpentine, enamel, kerosene and house paint waft into the senses and glorify diaphanous veils of celestial colors. The celebration of beauty and the contemplation of pastoral colors evoke spontaneous *joie de vivre* in each of Frankenthaler's works. Immersed in the playful ambiguities of symmetry, Frankenthaler's soak and stain paintings circumvent gendered conflagrations while promulgating a muliebrous tenor. In a candid self-evaluation, Frankenthaler declared, "I have had so many things mirrored gingerly in my face-health, age, being a woman, wife, artist, independent and free, attached (and often feeling trapped). The truths and choices get so blurred at times" (Rose interviewing Frankenthaler)^{lxiii}. Frankenthaler's personal reflection confirms a body of work that incorporates the visceral and the sublime portrayed in sensuous ambiguities. With no apologies for her female imprimatur, Frankenthaler instantiated amorphous skeins of paint as remembered landscapes while escaping gendered preconceptions of art. Frankenthaler created a dialogue for abstract expressionism that succeeded by inserting women into the androcentric discourse by the quality and significance of their artistic contributions. Frankenthaler's anthology was her Rosetta stone—beseeching us to investigate, to question and to decode her encrypted tidal pools of pastoral memories. Frankenthaler's abstractions confirm the sanctity of an artist's aestheticism and implore us to accept the gendered neutrality of her optics.

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- ⁱ Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 37.
- ⁱⁱ Octave Uzanne, *The Modern Parisienne*, (London: Ballantyne and Company, 1912), IX.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lisa Saltzman, *Reconsidering the Stain*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 373.
- ^{iv} Anne M. Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K," *Representations* 25 (1989): 48.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928466?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
- ^v Helen Frankenthaler, and Frank O'Hara, *An Exhibition of Oil Paintings*, (New York: Jewish Museum, 1960), 7.
- ^{vi} Henry Geldzahler, "Helen Frankenthaler," *Artforum* 4, no. 2 (1965): 38.
- ^{vii} Bett Schumacher, "The Women Problem: Gender Displacement in the Art of Helen," *Women's Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (2010): 15.
- ^{viii} Eleanor Munro, *Original American Women Artists*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 207.
- ^{ix} John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 15.
- ^x Irving Sandler, *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 1.
- ^{xi} Saltzman, *Reconsidering the Stain*, 373.
- ^{xii} Jerry Saltz, "Helen Frankenthaler: A Wind That Lashes Everything at Once," *Artnet*, December 28, 2011, 1.
- ^{xiii} Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 15.
- ^{xiv} E.C. Goossen, "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art International* 5, no. 8 (1961): 77.
- ^{xv} Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *ArtNews* 51, no. 8 (1952): 22.
- ^{xvi} Louise Bourgeois, "Gender and Possession," *Art in America* 71 (1983),
<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/louise-bourgeois-gender-and-possession/>.
- ^{xvii} Amy Sillman, "AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," *Artforum* 49, no. 10 (2011): 321. <http://yaleunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/abex.pdf>.
- ^{xviii} Grace Hartigan, "Oral History Interview with Grace Hartigan, 1979" Smithsonian Institute, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-grace-hartigan-12326>. 28.
- ^{xix} Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 53.
- ^{xx} Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artist," *ArtNews* (1971):
<http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/>.
22.
- ^{xxi} Goossen, *Helen Frankenthaler*, 77.
- ^{xxii} Wagner, *Lee Krasner as L.K*, 48.
- ^{xxiii} Wagner, *Lee Krasner as L.K*, 189.
- ^{xxiv} Henry McBride, "Fifteen Unknown Modernist," *ArtNews* 49, no. 8 (1950).
- ^{xxv} Sonya Rudikoff, *Helen Frankenthaler's Painting: School of New York*, (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 12.
- ^{xxvi} Emily Genauer, "Art and the Artist," *New York Post*, March 1, 1969, 34.

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- ^{xxvii} Alice Rewald, "Helen Frankenthaler at the Whitney Museum," *Gazette de Lausanne*, March 29, 1969, 2.
- ^{xxviii} Elizabeth Smith, *Helen Frankenthaler and Painting in Early 1960's New York*, (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2014), 28.
- ^{xxix} Munro, *Original Artist*, 207.
- ^{xxx} Schumacher, *The Women Problem*, 15.
- ^{xxxi} John Elderfield, *Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler from 1950 to 1959*, (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2013), 53.
- ^{xxxii} Katy Siegel, *The Heroine Paint: After Frankenthaler*, (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2015), 8.
- ^{xxxiii} Bett Schumacher, *The Women Problem*, 12.
- ^{xxxiv} Bett Schumacher, *The Women Problem*, 12.
- ^{xxxv} Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 55.
- ^{xxxvi} Roth, "Real Housewives with Real Problems?," 111.
- ^{xxxvii} Gohari, "Gendered Reception: There and Back Again," 35.
- ^{xxxviii} Gohari, "Gendered Reception: There and Back Again," 24.
- ^{xxxix} Bett Schumacher, *The Women Problem*, 14.
- ^{xl} Bett Schumacher, *The Women Problem*, 14.
- ^{xli} Bett Schumacher, *The Women Problem*, 14.
- ^{xlii} Frankenthaler Foundation. <https://www.frankenthalerfoundation.org>.
- ^{xliii} Bett Schumacher, *The Women Problem*, 18.
- ^{xliv} Bett Schumacher, *The Women Problem*, 19.
- ^{xliv} Griselda Pollock, "Moments and Temporalities of the Avant-Garde 'in, of, and from the feminine,'" 795.
- ^{xlvi} E. Renold, "They won't let us play ... unless you're going out with one of them': Girls, boys and Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' in the primary years," 492.
- ^{xlvii} Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 33.
- ^{xlvi} Arthur Coleman Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays & Aesthetic Meditations*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), 25.
- ^{xlvi} Grace Gluck, "Helen Frankenthaler, Abstract Painter Who Shaped a Movement, *New York Times*, December 27, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/28/arts/helen-frankenthaler-abstract-painter-dies-at-83.html? r=0>.
- ⁱ Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*, 15.
- ^{li} Barbara Rose, "Oral History Interview with Helen Frankenthaler 1968," *Smithsonian Institute*, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-helen-frankenthaler-12171>.
- ^{lii} Goossen, *Abstract Painter Who Shaped a Movement*, 77.
- ^{liii} Barbara Rose, *Frankenthaler*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1968), 91.
- ^{liv} Parker Tyler, "Helen Frankenthaler," *ArtNews* 54, no. 10 (1956): 49.
- ^{lv} Anne Seelye, "Helen Frankenthaler," *ArtNews* 59, no. 1 (1960): 57.
- ^{lvi} Linda Benglis, "Up Against the Wall with Linda Benglis," *Art in America* 97, no. 11 (2009): 102.
- ^{lvii} Michael Freed, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, (New York: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 112.

^{lviii} Elderfield, *Painted on 21st Street*, 53.

^{lix} Christopher Andreae, "Art: The Fresh, Feminine Frankenthaler Touch," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 28, 1969.

^{lx} Frankenthaler and O'Hara, *Exhibition*, 7.

^{lxi} Cindy Nemser, "Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Arts Magazine* 46, (1971): 54.

^{lxii} Siegel, *Heroine Paint*, 99.

^{lxiii} Rose, *Oral Interview with Frankenthaler*.

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