

Art Review: Fay Lansner Weaves Beauty from Charm of Color and Confident Line

July 31, 2018

by Charles A. Riley II

Long live the tradition of the figure in abstract painting! For a classic example, consider the seamless way that [Fay Lansner](#) integrates the academic ethic of the life class with the sensuality of Abstract Expressionism. In “Fay Lansner: Figure and Form”—the intelligent and sensuous exhibition on view until August 23, 2018 at the [Quogue Gallery](#)—the artist reconciles what are conventionally held to be disparate aesthetics with the charm of appealing color and the authority of confident line.

Works such as *Sacred and Profane Love*, one of many strong moments in the show, convincingly argue for the persistence of the figural tradition even in Modernism’s most abstract hour. The painting’s liquid fields of blue and overlaid bands of pink, violet and gold drift toward Joan Mitchell or Richard Diebenkorn clouds of abstraction, even as the anatomy of the standing and reclining nude figures (usually women for this artist) anchor the work in the life drawing class. It is a contrapuntal statement on art’s ability to reconcile polarities.

For all the classy blues Lansner deploys in this work, my eye lingered on a pair of grisaille figures walking along, seemingly in conversation. Color and line, figuration and abstraction, in dialogue. As William Blake declared: “Without contraries there is no progression.”



Fay Lansner, "Sacred & Profane Love," 1960-61, Oil on canvas, 76 by 96 inches.
Courtesy of Quogue Gallery.

As Lansner's work attests, Abstract Expressionism never abandoned the figure. In addition to the notorious return to buxom women with which [Willem de Kooning](#) annoyed the guardians of abstraction in the 1950s, there are discernible nudes in works by artists as different as Fritz Bultman and Lee Krasner, and [Diebenkorn](#) himself transformed superb diagonal figure studies into pure geometry. Delve into the sketchbooks of most of the bigshots of AbEx and you will find life studies.

The magisterial influence of [Hans Hofmann](#)—who looms as a major influence and was Lansner's teacher beginning in 1948 in Provincetown and continuing for years—is an inescapable part of the show. Hofmann, particularly when he was teaching in New York, was adamant about the need to work from the figure. His influence is plainly evident in Lansner's *OC 1241*, in which I recognize the floating red square that was a mobile element in so many Hofmann paintings, as well as in the curtains of blue washes over which she lays a figure in white, limned in yellows and blues. Even the straightened line of the arm and the curve of the thigh recalls the life drawing habits of such Hofmann students as Bultman. It was the house style.



Fay Lansner, "OC-1241," 1974, Oil on canvas, 70 by 90 inches. Courtesy of Quogue Gallery.

Bookish as it sounds, this reviewer is partial to Lansner's interpretative portraits of historical figures, such as the great French novelist and aristocrat George Sand, looking less mannish than usual and more seductively bemused on a silken blue background, or the actress and sculptor Sarah Bernhardt, coyly resting her cheek on hand.



Fay Lansner, "Portrait of George Sand," 1988, Charcoal and pastel on paper, 50 by 38 inches. Courtesy of Quogue Gallery.

Lansner offers us Dora Maar with a nod to Picasso and a distinctively Matissean set of open line drawings. [Matisse](#) is all over this show, especially in the fields of color and the division of the background of *Models in the Studio* or the mountainous red curves of the right-hand nude in *Sea, Earth and Sky*, one moment of sheer wall power in the exhibition.

It is no surprise to read in Lansner's biography that her father took her as a child to the [Barnes Collection](#) regularly. This painting is a great example of what Matisse meant when he talked about liberating color from mimesis: "I had to get away from imitation, even of light. One can provoke light by the invention of flats, as with the harmonies of music. I used color as a means of expressing my emotion and not as a transcription of nature."



Fay Lansner, "Sea, Earth & Sky," 1960-61, Oil on canvas, 76 by 100 inches.
Courtesy of Quogue Gallery.

The glowing blues and greens of *WP-780*, which the gallery roughly dates to the '50s, anticipate the landscapes that [David Hockney](#) bangs out on his iPad these days, printed in inks vibrant enough to catch some of the onscreen pulsation of color. Lansner is working with that pure and seemingly innocent attraction to a spectral range of hues and supersaturation of chroma. The elevated point of view, opening distant golden meadows to her gaze, is like the Fauve paintings of André Lhote.



Fay Lansner, "WP-780," 1950s, Pastel on Paper, 25 by 19 inches. Courtesy of Quogue Gallery.

Maybe it is the female figure in Lansner's works, intimate even if not necessarily a self portrait, or the psychological riddles of the portraits, but there is something about these pieces that begs for a deeper dive into the artist's biography. The life story is compelling. Lansner was born in 1921 in Philadelphia, the daughter of Russian émigrés. In 1947 she moved to Manhattan to study at Columbia (where she read Susanne Langer, a passionate philosopher whose books on aesthetics, such as "Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art," are now unjustly neglected). She joined [Wolf Kahn](#), [Larry Rivers](#), and Grace Hartigan as a Hofmann student.

After marrying in 1950, she moved to Paris (her husband was a pupil of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and studied in the ateliers of Lhote as well as Fernand Leger (whom she found too strict), leading to her first solo show in 1951.

In the thick of the New York AbEx group, she followed them out to the East End as well. After renting a place in Springs, she and her husband settled in an old farmhouse in Bridgehampton where many of the works in this show were made. Kahn had started the Hansa gallery in New York, where Lansner, on her return, had her first American show in 1954. She died in 2010. Despite more than [30 solo shows](#) and works in the Corcoran Museum, Guild Hall, the Metropolitan Museum and the Philadelphia Museum, the Quogue Gallery show represents an introduction for many, including

me.

Lansner, with her vivid colors and painterly panache, lies right in the sweet spot of the [Quogue Gallery's program](#), which zeros in on the lesser-known artists of the AbEx movement with consistently impressive results. This exhibition gets airborne right at the start, soars over the not-uncommon hazards of sloppy technique or derivative composition that Lansner so adroitly avoids, and lands on that elevated plateau where the most commanding artworks are to be found.

BASIC FACTS: "Fay Lansner: Figure and Form" is on view July 19 to August 23, 2018 at the Quogue Gallery, 44 Quogue Street, Quogue, NY 11959. www.quoguegallery.com.

Copyright 2018 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved