



“Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown,” Explores Intersection of Landscape and Abstraction, at the Parrish

July 30, 2019

by Hamptons Art Hub Staff

The Parrish Art Museum presents “Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown,” an exhibition that highlights Helen Frankenthaler’s (1928–2011) exploration of the relationship between landscape and abstraction through key examples of work that was produced in or references Provincetown, MA, on view August 4 through October 27, 2019. Through 30 paintings and works on paper dating from 1950 to 1969, “Abstract Climates” illustrates Frankenthaler’s transition from Abstract Expressionism to a more allusive form of abstraction.

Beginning with intimately scaled works from 1950, the exhibition focuses primarily on large canvases from the late 1950s through 1969 that reference the sea, the light, and the landscape she experienced in Provincetown. At the Parrish Art Museum, a robust schedule of public programs and seven monumentally scaled paintings augment the original exhibition, which opened at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) in the summer of 2018, curated by Lise Motherwell, a stepdaughter of Frankenthaler, and Elizabeth Smith, Executive Director, Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. The organizing curator for the Parrish is Alicia G. Longwell, The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator.

“Helen Frankenthaler was one of the most innovative artists of her time, and her work has continued to be influential to many who followed,” said Terrie Sultan, Director, Parrish Art Museum. “Her time spent in the seaside communities of Provincetown as well as the Hamptons clearly made an impression that carried through over the course of her long and productive career. These paintings are infused with light and energy—a feast for the eyes. We’re thrilled to present her work here at the Parrish.”



“Flood” by Helen Frankenthaler, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 124 1/4 x 140 1/2 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art. Courtesy of the Parrish Art Museum.

Lise Motherwell and Elizabeth Smith added, “We are extremely pleased that work created by Helen Frankenthaler during her Provincetown summers will soon be seen at the Parrish. Provincetown’s relaxed atmosphere and extraordinary landscape provided a place for her to move her experimental painting practice in new directions. The works and archival materials we have brought together reveal how her time there stimulated her artistic creativity and influenced her developing style.”

Frankenthaler first spent time in Provincetown in the summer of 1950, at the age of 21, studying briefly with famed Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann. *Abstract Climates* opens with works made during that summer at his studio school, from Cubist figure studies in charcoal to the oil painting *Provincetown Bay, 1950*—a play of intense patches of color.

In addition to Hofmann’s influence, it was the light, proximity to the sea, and mutability of Provincetown weather that proved to be a lifelong inspiration for Frankenthaler. During the next two years she traveled to other seaside locales, including Nova Scotia and East Hampton, New York, where a visit to Jackson Pollock’s studio opened her to broad possibilities.

Pollock was applying paint, often enamel, to canvas unfurled on the floor. Just one year later, Frankenthaler was pouring thinned paint onto unprimed canvas, also on the floor, where it soaked in, creating an effect that resembled watercolor—a technique she named “soak stain” painting. In her catalogue essay (co-authored with Parrish Director Terrie Sultan), Longwell, who has followed Frankenthaler’s career for decades, deftly outlines the impact of these visits on the artist’s work.

The risk-taking in materials and technique that Frankenthaler observed in Pollock’s Springs studio led to the evolution of her work in Provincetown, from the experimentation with various types of acrylic, as in *Summerscene: Provincetown, 1961*, to explorations in scale and process that engendered paintings like *Cool Summer (1962)*. Liberated from the restraints of easel painting, Frankenthaler created monumentally scaled works with highly expressive imagery.

Low Tide, 1963, a canvas saturated with paint, is a loose, airy landscape/seascape of organic shapes imbued with movement and color. The highly atmospheric *Flood, 1967*, expresses the experiential qualities of sky and water through light-infused shapes that seem to flow and breathe. *Indian Summer, 1967*, a simple composition of stacked horizontal bands, is filled with evidence of gesture. While Frankenthaler would continue to experiment for decades to come, these works show her in full command of a painterly language based on the observation of nature and an intuitive emotional and aesthetic use of gesture, color, and composition.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with a foreword by Christine McCarthy, Director, Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and essays by Lise Motherwell and Elizabeth Smith; art historian Daniel Belasco; and Alicia G. Longwell, Ph.D., The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator, and Terrie Sultan, Director, Parrish Art Museum. The catalogue also includes a detailed chronology of Helen Frankenthaler’s years in Provincetown. Published by the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, *Helen Frankenthaler: Abstract Climates* is distributed by Yale University Press.

About Helen Frankenthaler

Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011), whose career spanned six decades, has long been recognized as one of the great American artists of the 20th century. Born and raised in New York City, Frankenthaler graduated from Bennington College, where she studied with Paul Feeley. In 1951, she had her first solo exhibition, at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, and was included in the 9th St. Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture. Frankenthaler first used her “soak stain” technique to create *Mountains and Sea*, 1952 (not in exhibition), a breakthrough painting that influenced the artists who formed the Color Field school of painting.

Important works by Frankenthaler are in the collections of major museums worldwide. The artist’s numerous solo museum exhibitions and major retrospectives—many of which travelled internationally—include The Jewish Museum, New York (1960); the Whitney Museum of American Art (1969); The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1985); the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (1989); the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1993); Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami (2003); Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (2014); and the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA (2017). Frankenthaler was the recipient of many honorary doctorates and awards and is the subject of three major monographs and numerous scholarly articles.

About the Curators

Lise Motherwell is a retired psychologist who had a clinical practice for more than 25 years. She is President of the Board of PAAM, Vice President of the Board of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, and immediate Past-Chair of the Board of the Northeastern Society for Group Psychotherapy Foundation. A daughter of Robert Motherwell and a step-daughter of Helen Frankenthaler, she recently co-curated an exhibition for PAAM entitled *Motherwell: Beside the Sea* and has written articles and essays on various artists.

Elizabeth Smith, Founding Executive Director of the New York-based Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, is an art historian, curator, author, and educator. She formerly held curatorial positions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Throughout her career, she has organized exhibitions, published, taught, and lectured widely in the visual arts and architecture.

Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown was organized by the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

Related Public Programs at the Parrish Art Museum

Thursday, August 22 12-1 pm

TALK: *Brain Food: By the Sea, By the Sea*, 1950s

In the first of three talks on Helen Frankenthaler, Alicia Longwell, the Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator, discusses the artist’s summers in East Hampton, and in Provincetown with Robert Motherwell.

Friday, August 23, 6 pm

TALK: Alexander Nemerov and Clifford Ross on Helen Frankenthaler

Join a conversation between art historian Alexander Nemerov, who is working on a new book about Frankenthaler, and artist Clifford Ross, nephew of the artist and Chairman of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation.

Thursday, August 29, 12-1 pm

TALK: Brain Food: Studios Overlooking Cape Cod Bay, 1961-66

Alicia Longwell, the Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator, gives a talk on Frankenthaler's and Motherwell's work in their shared water-side studio in Provincetown.

Thursday, August 29, 5 pm

TALK: "Voices from the Artist's Archives" by Avis Berman

A talk on Helen Frankenthaler by Avis Berman—writer, curator and historian of American art, architecture and culture.

Thursday, September 5, 12-1 pm

TALK: Brain Food: Place and Space 1967-1969

Alicia Longwell, the Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator, talks about Frankenthaler's last summer in Provincetown and a move to a new studio that enabled her to create large-scale paintings.

Friday, September 13, 6 pm

GALLERY TALK: Artist to Artist: Amy Sillman on Helen Frankenthaler, with Terrie Sultan

Join Parrish Director Terrie Sultan in conversation with artist Amy Sillman about the work of Helen Frankenthaler.

BASIC FACTS: "Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown" is on view August 4 through October 27, 2019 at the Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY 11976. www.parrishart.org.

Copyright 2019 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved.