House of Frankenthaler

I had an intense and visceral reaction to the show of Helen Frankenthaler's paintings from the 1950s, and I feel like I saw her work really clearly—for the first time, maybe.[1] I realized that they were both more and less like one-shot paintings than I had thought before, or they have what appears to be a one-shot base, then a one-shot middle, then a one-shot top—paintings constructed in layers, where each layer both upholds and contradicts the layer below it . . . the way Photoshop is constructed actually. In other words, a process that's surprisingly familiar to us now. The attitude it implies is both caring and uncaring. The position that Frankenthaler adopted through these contradictory layers was one of engaging with the ground or given of the previous layer, with what was there, and at the same time just dismissing it in the next layer, contradicting it, not being too nice to the layer right below it, still being in relation *to* it but not in relationship *with* it. Kind of like being in a bad relationship.

And then I realized that Frankenthaler was in a very combative relationship with not only her earlier layer but also with her predecessors, painters like Picasso and Matisse with whom she'd served a productive internship early on. The thing she was adding was an unfinishedness, a kind of "Let 'er rip," as she says in the film *Painters Painting*.[2] She starts to make paintings on the floor, paintings that are not very controlled, are not micro-managed, paintings that are determined by procedures set out in advance. This feels very related to the so-called conceptual painting of today, but she was doing these things in the *1950s*. I guess she's famous for this, that's why it's important, but when you realize the form and how it's done it still strikes you as so new. It's partly about working via strategies, an attitude of not fiddling around. A decisive action made kind of offstage, and then just done. You know how in theater the stage has wings? This is about activating the offstage area of painting, but not the traditional, studio-based, romantic wing, where you're in there preparing your palette in your beret and smock, preparing to make a work of greatness, genius, and talent. In this scenario, while offstage, there's a kind of ambivalent, flippant, performative attitude. I understood immediately what Frankenthaler's "Let 'er rip" implied temporally.

This position of disregard for other people's approval and conventions, as well as having exquisite taste, maybe comes from being extremely confident, as Frankenthaler was. You're not a bottom—"No, sister, I'm a bitch, I'm a top." Like voguing or something: a goddess. Potent and self-assured. Not in an apprenticeship at all. You could see that breakthrough where she's saying "I'm my own guideline." Her attitude—her way of working, her speed, her confidence, her trust—all of this stuff is going to be

her materials. She still wields that wealth of formal information about line, texture, transparency, but all of a sudden the formal terms are inverted, so that the attitude controls the material rather than the material controlling the attitude. The idea that this process is "just" feminine grace is silly—what I could see about the work was that Frankenthaler's taste and grace are tough, like ballerina grace: those women aren't sugarplum fairies but muscular athletes, with machinelike, disciplined bodies. Frankenthaler is in an incredible athletic decision-making process while working, not futzing around. That's really hard to do.

For some people it's considered good politics to recuse oneself from too much color, as a gesture of solemnity and gravitas. The politics of color are really interesting to me, and complicated, because on one hand you could say, Doesn't it work in black and white, do you need all that cladding to make it important or strong? And on the other you could say that the campness and the excess and the insane deliciousness of gradient gold and lavender (it's kind of like being a foodie) are amazing. *Lavender Mist* was Pollock's title, but he could not get it to happen. *She* did it, her work is diaphanous. It's an experiment with the alchemic and extreme reliance on color as material and as optics. Actually this reminds me of my own discomfort and skepticism about fashion, or about fancy things in general: fashion, food, cosmetics, perfume. They're expensive, you have to be thin or rich to be involved in those luxuries. But if you meet someone who actually makes clothes, cuts the cloth, invents the fabrics or the shapes, you know the surprise and delight and invention involved. And the work. Then it doesn't seem luxurious but like incredible work.

When I hear the limited critique of Abstract Expressionism, or of color, like fashion, I look at the person and ask, Have you updated your politics since 1959? We're not beatniks anymore. It's not a feminist position anymore. We're not Maoists. So we can accept Helen Frankenthaler, even with her Rolex ads. Maybe it works best if you think of her as if she were starring in *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's 1990 movie about drag balls. She's great—she's like the House of LaBeija. You should call the whole project "House of Frankenthaler." Hello, bitches.

Amy Sillman

Endnotes

1. *Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler from 1950 to 1959*, organized by John Elderfield, Gagosian Gallery, New York, March 8–April 13, 2013.
2. *Painters Painting: The New York Art Scene 1940–1970*, 1972, directed by Emile de Antonio.