Figure and Ground

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AMERICA WANTED THEIR OWN PICASSO, someone to heave painting to its new shores, and along came Jackson Pollock, just America's type, a cliché cowboy, sulky and Brandoesque. Art historians added their own benedictions for both ends of Pollock's work, from its brash *hauteur* to its vulgar *bassesse*, about how the abject materials he flung from a can with a stick or squirted from a turkey baster conjured an "almost Rococo fragility and grace," the uninhibited process metamorphizing into an "opulent and . . . homogeneous visual fabric" as sumptuous and "well contained in its canvas as anything by a Quattrocento master."[1] His vision was likened to freedom itself, though he worked down and dirty on the tensile surface of the floor.[2] The man himself was a mess, with a psyche like an emergency vehicle roaring down the highway, its back doors open and a desublimated stew spilling out onto the ground in a crazy puddle of clotted paint, minotaurs, she-wolves, shamanic totems, biblical-level struggles of birth and death, Indigenous sand painting, and the whole lava and ash of the id. The literature about Pollock configures him as "the central hinge between the century's two halves" and situates him on the modernist family tree with all the guys—obviously skipping over Krasner, as modernism does—from the ever-looming Oedipal father Pablo Picasso and tracking through Édouard Manet's self-reflexivity, Claude Monet's diaphanous alchemy, Paul Cézanne's tactile values, Wassily Kandinsky's detachment of line from volume, Cubism's infrastructures, Piet Mondrian's pulsations, André Masson's doodles, Joan Miró's curves, Mark Tobey's calligraphy, Clyfford Still's craggy edges, Barnett Newman's scale, Willem de Kooning's hot pockets, and even Philip Guston's shimmering fields.[3] (Note to self: men.) Pollock, the link between the past and future, is where the performativity of Allan Kaprow and Yves Klein meets the seriality of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns's numbers, Andy Warhol's grids, Frank Stella's objecthood, and Helen Frankenthaler's stains, as well as the cutting of Robert Morris, the pouring of Lynda Benglis, the knotted webs of Eva Hesse, the globby accumulations of Claes Oldenburg, and on and on.



FIG. 44 Lee Krasner. *Courtship*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 51 × 71 in. (129.5 × 180.3 cm). Private collection

And one of the few people who could actually talk about *all* of this stuff with him was Lee Krasner, who was upstairs painting in the bedroom, the figure to his ground, the ground to his figure.

It's hard to see what Pollock's work is really about when the art-historical cart gets to you before the horse, and it's hard to parse in hindsight the whole field that Krasner called "that big loose loophole" of Abstract Expressionism.[4] That period of painting is often congealed under a totalizing critique of toxic masculinity, marketing, and CIA funding—fair enough, but this makes it hard to understand the upheaval that gestural painting was trying to deliver (and often did, successfully). And it was definitely hard to be that other painter, the one married to the one being crowned as the genius. "Unfortunately, it was most fortunate to know Jackson Pollock," Krasner remarked years later.[5] So I'll say it right away: I regard Krasner as the other genius of the household and as one of my painting heroes. But it can be hard to unearth her achievements, too, until you get the chance to see what she did over the decades, especially post-Pollock, when she seems to have gathered up everything they both did into one big ball that she ran with—way out into the next field (figs. 44–46).

Back in the day, though, Krasner was not in the running for next big painting hero, nor were any other women, no matter how great they were. She was routinely left out of major museum survey shows in the 1960s (including *Post-Painterly Abstraction* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1964, curated by Clement Greenberg, and *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1969–70, curated by Henry Geldzahler), and her work is not mentioned in many tomes on the history of Abstract Expressionism, including Irving Sandler's 1970 *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*. She still doesn't appear as a player in major shows at the Museum of Modern Art, such as *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800–1950*, in 1976, or *A Century of Modern Drawing, 1881–1981*, in 1982. Greenberg's remark to Rosalind Krauss in 1974, "spare me smart Jewish girls with their typewriters," could have been uttered about girls with typewriters *or* with paintbrushes, in any era from Krasner's to Krauss's, smart broads who harbored, as Krauss noted, a "streak of defiance."[6] Krasner certainly had that streak, which she developed while working in the "spare room" of American painting.

Literate and canny, Krasner came from her own nowhere, working-class Brooklyn. A leftist from a Russian Jewish family with a big schnozz, a big vision, a big mouth, and a jutting lower lip, she knew everyone on the scene. She read poetry, philosophy, art history, and Marx; was involved in activist politics; and was already





FIG. 45 Lee Krasner. *Twelve Hour Crossing, March Twenty-First*, 1981. Oil and paper collage on canvas, 68 × 75 in. (172.7 × 190.5 cm). Private collection

FIG. 46 Lee Krasner. *Visitation*, 1957/73. Oil on canvas, 88½ × 58½ in. (224.7 × 148.5 cm). Berardo Collection (UID 102-324)

making ambitious modern paintings by the time she met Pollock, having worked her way through Hans Hofmann's school and absorbed carefully how Cubists built space and how Henri Matisse employed color and flatness. Krasner was a tough and courageous painter making ambitiously kinesthetic paintings—more shape-based than Pollock's, more compositional, more complicatedly polychromatic, and with more intensely constructed drawing. She always stuck close to the language of the organic and of her own body, though in various periods she branched out in other directions, thinking about grids, sculpture, decorative patterning, language, signs, glyphs, Pop, and systems. But in 1941, when Krasner visited Pollock's studio for the first time, it was she who reported feeling elation. "Then I met him, and that was it."[7]

She had been such a good student; meanwhile, Pollock was roughing it out on an oblique angle from the French line, making something weirder looking and more uncouth, a strange mix of symbolism, Surrealism, automatism, Mexican muralism, and Regionalism, all of which probably gave her a kick in the pants. Here was a badass, but she was pretty badass herself, so game met game.

Theirs is a story of two painters with twinned impulses, sometimes at odds, sometimes even, alternating respective periods of floundering or breaking through, feeling blocked or being productive. She was sometimes nowhere while Pollock was everywhere, and vice versa. Sometimes this exchange process was conspiratorial and sometimes one led the way, but there can be no doubt that each contributed to the other's work at a fundamental level. Both wrestled with the inchoate slab of the picture plane. Both were deeply frontal composers—but he's more concave; she's rather convex. She was the Matisse fan; he was a Picasso guy. He had tone and shine; she was polychromatic. He made angles; she drew arcs. She had push and pull; he had build up. He worked expansively and propulsively; she worked through redaction and various slow rounds of editing. Both were draw-ers—drawing *under* painting, drawing *into* painting, drawing *against* painting. He hung effulgent webs of line in space; she erected sweeping linear architectures on the wall, arabesques that became increasingly starker after him. Both had a handwriting, a calligraphic impulse; both of their gestures ran through language variously expressed as scribble, hieroglyph, or grammar. His line was jumpy, excessive, nervous, sometimes a skein of notation laid over an underlying figure or ground, sometimes clusters of strokes mobbed into clouds, weathers, thickets. Her paintings were built as tension structures with guylines that moored the picture plane to its edges. His paintings implied an inner scaffolding on which he could hang things, suspended like laundry against a cosmic void. He was throwing arrows, painting critically against the fray; she was a cyclone, resuscitating and salvaging the past as needed. He had a trancelike rhythm, a casting downward of relentless motion; she kept coming back around the mulberry bush to re-edit and reassemble. She fiddled with positive and negative spaces, using cuts, slices, fragments, wedges, bulges, teardrops, and striations. He threw his lines down on top of negative space and left them that way; his ground is a background. Her ground is a puzzle. She assembled; he accumulated. She painted labile and foliate forms, fauna, flora, fluid, in the process of propagating. He made characters, animals, monsters, and gods, covered in tangles and ashes and layers. He was pneumatic; she was churning.

Who knows exactly who came up with anything first—who made a mosaic table for fun and then made a tondo, or who broke the plane up into bits first, compressing strokes into a tight hash or squishing hieroglyphs into a grid? Whose paintings suggested what kind of all-over first? Who knows who read a line of a poem that started a conversation that the other finished, who put a thought in whose head, who saw something and flagged it, or who found an evocative thing on the beach? They shared space, time, and painting, and I think one can rightly argue that painting is always a circular and diachronic affair made of echoes, rejoinders, dropped threads, reinvestigations, and returns; that the clock of painting keeps cycling round. Michael Fried wrote in 1965 that "the most ambitious modernist painting of the past decade has [turned] most of all to Pollock and Newman for its inspiration."[8] But art history's laws are not immutable, and the greater unfurling of their work shows that neither Krasner nor Pollock followed any dogmatic diagnosis simply.





FIG. 47 Lee Krasner. *Blue and Black* (pl. 52, detail), 1951–53

FIG. 48 Jackson Pollock. *Easter and the Totem* (pl. 94, detail), 1953

Pollock's genuinely revolutionary "drip" paintings of the forties were in part a renunciation of the very methodologies that Krasner had so carefully studied, and in 1942–46, Krasner was in her harrowing "black-out" period, making small, obdurate gray paintings from which she was never able to wrench an image. Finally in about 1945 came a breakthrough, a Pollock-like painting called *Image Surfacing* (pl. 34), rhyming almost exactly with the structure of his 1942 painting *The Moon Woman* (pl. 69). Clearly he was a source for her then. In the fifties, the tables somewhat turned as Krasner began to establish her own surer footing, and it was she who rejuvenated Pollock while he was in his own years of crisis, looking to revisit some of the very practices that he was credited with making redundant. Krasner had stalwartly hung on to such things as tactility and composition, silhouettes and saturated color, and she had deeply absorbed Matisse, whom Pollock was looking at in the fifties. In 1953–55 Krasner made her breakthrough collage works, begun with a Pollockian crisis: She tore up a studio full of finished drawings, left them on the floor in heaps, and returned later to glue the pieces onto the paintings from a previous show, resulting in a riotous alphabet of recycled shape and color and a newly and wildly activated surface. Meanwhile, her monumental painting *Blue and Black* (pl. 52) from 1951–53 clearly summons her love of Matisse, with its vertical and patterned zones moving across a horizontal space, and with black used both as a color and as a spatial division (fig. 47). So when you see Pollock's extremely Matissean 1953 painting *Easter and the Totem* (pl. 94), it also looks utterly Krasnerian with its vertical, totemic figures and forms in black and saturated colors, accentuated in parts by clusters of scribbled line (fig. 48). You wouldn't be off base to wonder which of them painted it.

FIG. 49 Lee Krasner at work on *Portrait in Green*, Springs, 1969. Photo by Mark Patiky



FIG. 50 Jackson Pollock at work, Springs, 1949. Photo by Martha Holmes



> The brushes are used more as sticks and do not touch the surface.
> —Jackson Pollock[9]

But what about this small but strange difference between Pollock and Krasner, that his brushes did not touch the canvas, and hers did? I find the contrast interesting because it shows them flipping the same coin—heads, it's opticality, and tails, tactility (figs. 49, 50). Just at the moment that would ordinarily be the moment of truth for an Expressionist painter, that instant when the brush hits the canvas, Pollock withdraws and lets the paint fly out of his reach toward an abyss, momentarily unhooking himself from control. In that moment he allows something else to emerge: the unconscious, which produces its own, different kind of materiality. Greenberg called this moment of Pollock's process volatilized, i.e., unpredictable, dangerous, like a fire or a bad stock market.[10] The very horizontality of the canvas amplifies the psychological volatility of relation between Pollock and his objects—the canvas lies flat on the floor, open and vulnerable, like how an analysand lies on the couch, also to allow for the unconscious to be heard. Or, as he hovers and bends over it, the horizontal canvas could be like a prone body in bed, a lover seen in sleep or desire, or a patient who is sick; or like a garbage pit; or like a grave with dirt being hurled down into it; or a volatile mix of all of these imaginaries. Pollock's detachment from touching opens him and his materials to a situation not so pure, to the pulsatile rhythm, to the blink of unconsciousness, and to whatever may appear next, which he doesn't control directly. Krasner said "Pollock popped the lid" of painting.[11] Think of that "lid" as the eyelid, sealing and unsealing vision, and the eye as the "I" in Pollock's trancelike state, an ego oscillating between knowing and not knowing. Pollock's work made palpable the sensation of a free fall—toward the lower depths, toward the belly, past the ass, near the stubby feet—and the weight of anything that might emerge along with the clotted and puddled paint, even contamination, taint, seepage. This physicality brings him closer to that "other" painter, the female, with her full body and her boobs and her own churning arcs and back-and-forth time frames, she who painted just like him but totally differently. Krasner complicates Pollock perfectly, adds to him, completes the picture, flips the coin, adds the mark of her own thinking and her own way of addressing the unconscious in an intelligent corporeality. In both their ways, painting is a handcraft, a method of groping, grasping, appearing, revealing, being embarrassed, covering, and shuttling forward and back between ambivalent states. The real abstraction in painting is thought: How does material become thinking, how does matter become, in the blink of an eye, a moment of change, and how does thinking work when we are partly not thinking, not guided by grace or clarity? If you consider their paintings corporeally, anything like purity is a ridiculous proposition. And then any accounting for Krasner or Pollock without the other as critical interlocutor, a very crucial "other" who contradicts the essential singularity of the next, is impossible.