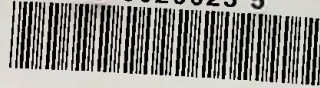


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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

'DRAWING WITH COLOUR IN THE WORK OF HELEN FRANKENTHALER'

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To Brendan whose support is never ending.

Also thanks to Moira who patiently typed this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION:

Helen Frankenthaler's emergence into the New York art world of the 1950s occurred during what was regarded as a colourless period in American Painting. It was an unastonishing period in comparison with the success of the Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s and the garish opulence of the Pop, Op and Minimal art of the 1960s. Her fresh and unique art is not typical of American Painting of the 1950s as she dared to be new by making the personal mark or gesture an objective reality.

The clarity and extraordinary character of Frankenthaler's artistic personality enables us to realise that the 1950s was not a time of colourless and ordinary art but one of encouraged individuality.

In order to grasp the nature of Frankenthaler's abstraction it is necessary first to examine the process by which she gradually evolved a vocabulary of abstract art vis a vis colour, form and space relationships. 'Process', here refers to her working methods, circumstances and influences - intellectual interests, theoretical preoccupations of other artists and critics' statements about art - which led her in turn to create such unique and influential works of art.

There were three artists who had a profound influence on Frankenthaler's formulation of Cubism during her college years, Paul Feely, Wallace Harrison and Hans Hoffman. Feely, a lecturer at Bennington College, was interested in Analytical Cubism, Harrison, who's particular interest in art was Synthetic Cubism and Hoffman, who introduced her to colour and was renowned for his 'push-pull' notion. To these artists she attributes the formulation of her own intense interest in Cubism.

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It is vitally important for an artist to digest and be aware of the art of preceeding periods and this was something Frankenthaler was conscious of from the very beginning.

During the early 1950's Frankenthaler was confronted with the dilemma of intellect and knowledge versus feeling and material, fearing that too much critical assessment of painting could stifle creativity. She realized it was necessary to break away from Cubism's encompassing claustrophobia, and in Provincetown in 1951 her breakthrough into Modernism was realized. New sources were sought, Kandinsky, de Kooning, Gorky, Pollock and Miro were investigated and Great Meadows, (Pl.2) 1951 was painted. The creation of this painting altered the course of her artistic life.

The artists Jackson Pollock and Juan Miro had the greatest effect on the next phase of her development. She believed their approach held the key to loosening the restrictions of Cubism and the development of a Post Cubist style.

What then was her contribution to art? She comprehended Pollock's drip technique instantly and deviated from his method by staining pigment directly onto unprimed canvas which absorbed it into the weave of the cloth. This is not to suggest that Frankenthaler invented stain painting, as the art movement known as Tachism meaning staining existed in France following the second World War. She cast aside painting by the conventional manner of brush and primed canvas. The stain technique assisted her in overcoming the problems of sculptural illusion, figure-ground oppositions and enabled her development of Post Cubist Abstraction through use of 'opticality' and 'openess'. What resulted was a fresh, spontaneous, direct and decisive statement. This breakthrough was important not only to her own development but also for colour abstraction in general. She transformed Pollock's technique into a means of creating an art of pure vibrant colour.

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Frankthaler is essentially an intuitive and natural painter more than an intellectual one. Her aesthetic operates from the assumption that there are images and feelings which live below the surface of consciousness and that at just the right moment the correct gesture will be formalized into a work of art.

Her paintings appear to conceal all effort and this comes across in the finished work which appears as an effortless unified positive impression, so much so that all genesis of the picture are lost in the joy of expression.

CHAPTER 1.

While at Bennington College during the years of 1946-49 the artist Paul Feely had a huge impact on Frankenthaler and the art she produced. Feely conducted seminars which introduced students to the work of Mondrian, Kandinsky, Picasso and Braque. Two of the works Frankenthaler remembers engaging in discussions about were Cezanne's Card Players (1890-92) and Matisse's Blue Window (1911). From Cezanne she acquired knowledge of illusion of depth and three-dimensional space within the picture frame which could be arranged and balanced on a two-dimensional surface.

In the Card Players (pl.1) the image is one of two contemplative figures looking fixedly at their cards. In the symmetry of the painting Cezanne overcomes the rigidity and obviousness of the two and yet preserves the intensity of their absorption in the game. Interestingly the painting is a rich and effective invention of form and colour. The colour schemes contrast from purplish-blues on the left hand player to blue-yellow on the right hand player and reds in the background. The painting is made up of many planes, of gradations of colour where volumes of figures and objects appear. The solid unity of composition shows that the intensity of colours has brought the painting together. The figures hold together because they are constructed of zones of colour. In his use of rhythmic compositions of colour zones Cezanne substitutes modulation for modelling. The overall effect is one of a well-balanced design of interrelated planes. Cezanne in a letter to Leo Languier wrote, 'Painting is not a matter of copying the object slavishly it is a matter of discerning a harmony between many relations and the unity arising from these relations is not physical but spiritual'. 1.

Barbara Rose in her work entitled Frankenthaler (1971) gives us a clear understanding of Feely's teaching methods and of how beneficial it was to Frankenthaler's concept of art. Analysis of painting in Feely's classes provided her with the concept of form of how open expanses of transparent colour could give a sensation of light and atmosphere and how certain areas

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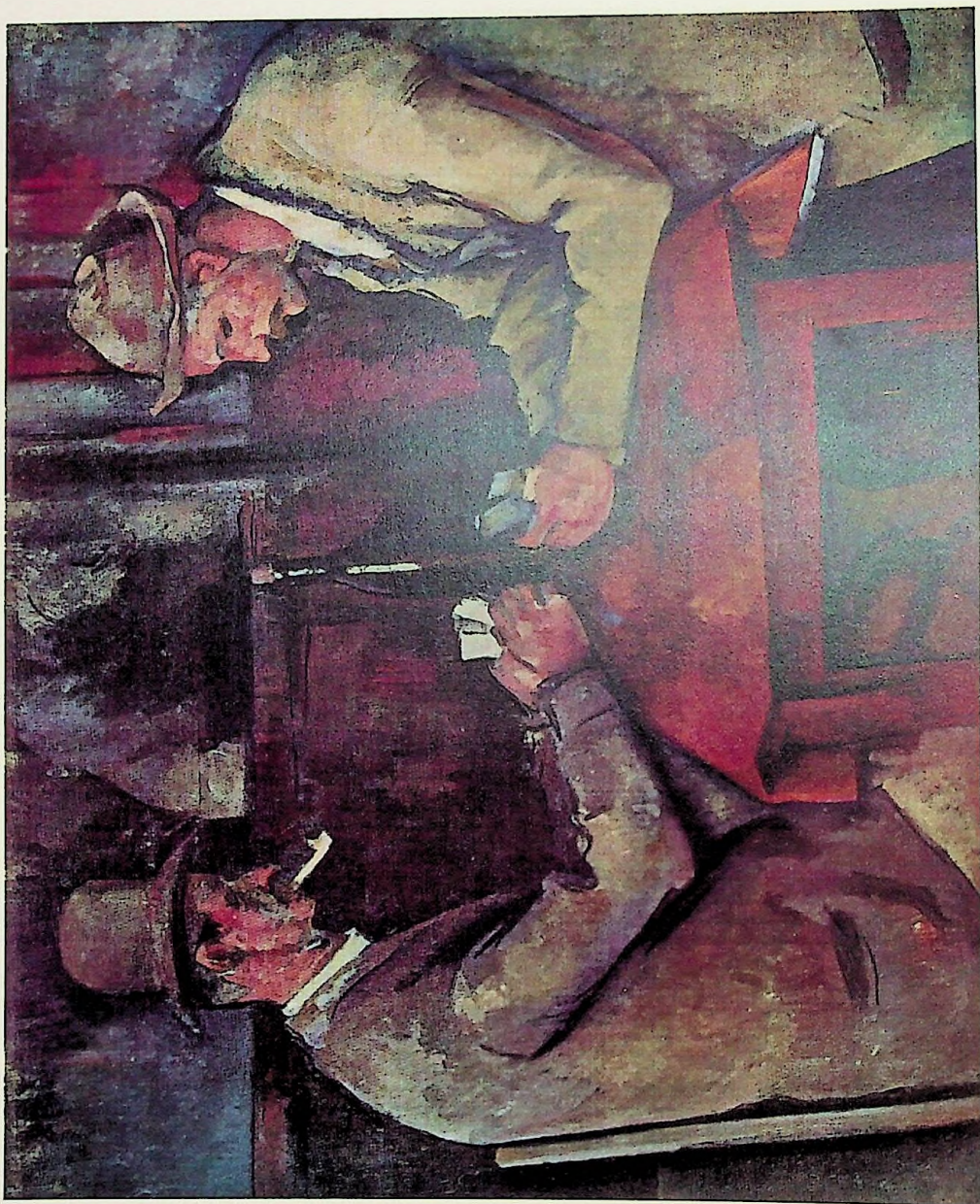


PLATE 1.

of uncoloured canvas created an empathy for colour, allowing the surface creation to expand and breathe spatially. Frankenthaler describes the analysis of a work of art in Feely's seminars:

'We would really sift every inch of what it was that worked, or if it didn't, why? And cover up either half of it or a millimetre of it and wonder what was effective in it....in terms of paint, the subject matter, the size, the drawing.... would it matter if you put it upside down? Many artists, Picasso, Braque, Miro, Mondrian, Kandinsky were dissected and discussed until they became part of one's own language' 2.

Feely's Cubist emphasis was reflected in Frankenthaler's Cubist-derived still lifes which she produced in her Bennington Painting Studio such as Still Life (1948), and Untitled (1948). What she learned from him was his fastidious analysis of Cubism, particularly analytical Cubism, painting dense tonal pictures on a small scale.

Cubism affirms the two-dimensional flat surface by the rejection of the perspective traditions of modelling, foreshortening, chiaroscuro (pictorial representation in terms of light and shade) and longstanding theories on the representation of nature. The artists who initiated this style, Picasso and Braque, were not concerned with imitating nature, but they realised a new reality in painting by depicting radically fragmented objects whose many sides could be seen simultaneously.

Analytical Cubism was the first phase in Cubism which relates to Picasso's and Braque's pre 1912 style of breaking down form. Right angle and straight line constructions are the two main elements of this concept. The second phase after 1912, referred to as Synthetic Cubism, derives from a combination or synthesis of forms in a picture. Colour plays an important role in the work, shapes while still fragmented and flat are now larger and more decorative.

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In the later part of the 1950's under Wallace Harrison Frankenthaler was to take on synthetic Cubist models and grade planes against each other while creating ambiguous and self-contradictory planes moving forwards and backwards in space, derived from the concept of pictorial illusion since Cezanne. In 1967 she wrote to Gene Baro and explained:

'how a picture works best for me involves how much working false space it has in depth...the colour and light in a picture work in terms of pseudo-perspective, whether it be a Cubist, Picasso or Braque or a Noland stripe painting. It's a play of ambiguities'. 3.

The memory of this goes back to Feely's seminars of which she says 'historically it was just the right moment for me to have received this knowledge'. 4.

E.A. Carmean tells us in Helen Frankenthaler, A Painting Retrospective (1989) that by the time she left Bennington she understood the mechanics of Cubist painting. Cubist style would be pushed aside but its pictorial lesson would stay with her. Carmean describes how the majority of her works have a tendency towards the symmetrical and asymmetrical, informed by Cubist ambiguous compositions where underlying elements of surface and depth counterbalance in the interaction she created between colour shapes and colour drawing, 'where shape and drawing become one' in what Frankenthaler describes as 'well-ordered collisions'. This perception remained a vital element through her working career. In Frankenthaler (1989) by John Elderfield, he makes the point that Frankenthaler found the ambiguities of Cubism intriguing. She enjoyed the ambiguity of geometrically arranged brushstrokes which could be interpreted on the one hand as a compositional scaffold while on the other as elements of an illustrated subject, this Elderfield says was fascinating to someone reading C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards on The Meaning of Meaning and acquiring knowledge on linguistic ambiguity. As mentioned earlier, it was the spacial more than the cognitive ambiguities of Cubist methodology that remained an engaging part of her understanding of pictorial composition.

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The mechanics of composition and space in Cubism enabled Frankenthaler to see the space-creating as well as the form-creating functions of line. Her style, a natural production of her Cubist roots is always basically concerned with the creation of a certain kind of pictorial space more than with the sensual, pleasurable colour experience.

Frankenthaler was concerned not with colour but with drawing placement. She starts with colour, its direction is a byproduct of drawing. Of concern is that the arrangement of colour should produce the correct drawing.

In an article entitled Concerning the Spiritual in Art by Sr. Wendy Beckett, Frankenthaler says 'If I was joining one colour to another to create a line, then some colour would work and others would not in terms of space around that line. But the other side of the coin, confusing perhaps was that in a sense colour didn't matter at all! In the end drawing and colour worked hand in hand'. 5.

She is often assumed to be an artist overwhelmingly concerned with colour and this idea can be applied to her paintings. She, however, claims the primacy of drawing in all her work. Likewise, she is esteemed as one of the artists who broadened the limitation of Cubist space thus creating a new concept of unbounded space in post-war American Painting, but Frankenthaler admits to her work being firmly rooted in Cubism. The above contradiction merely underlines the fact that her work contains many paradoxes: she states 'wrong things that make it right', spontaneity, intuition and inspired calculation describe her best paintings.

In the process of illusionism drawing and colour function initially, that they have many other functions does not alter this. Subsequently her concern for space protects her from being 'decorative'. She has produced the most lyrical and beautiful paintings on the one hand while on the other, some are deliberately brutal and uningratiating.

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The accuracy of these perceptions is seen in the vast volume of work produced which reveal her talent as both draughtsman and colourist, they verify her allegiance to both Cubist structure and post-Cubist openness.

Feely introduced Frankenthaler to the work of Expressionist landscape artists such as Dore, Hartley, O'Keeffe, Weber and Marin. These artists experimented independently with colour abstraction often working from nature or imagination rather than theory.

Critics have pointed to similarities between Frankenthaler's work and that of the Expressionists, Rose points out that while Frankenthaler discounts these links there are nonetheless similarities which she (Rose) feels are the result of Frankenthaler's and The Expressionists' interest in common sources. Frankenthaler claims that Kandinsky and Miro have influenced her more than the Expressionist artists, especially Kandinsky's early abstract landscapes, those of his Munich Period of which she has commented 'The tense intuitive placement of elements in these paintings fascinated me'. 6.

Nevertheless, an appreciation of art can only assist in the formulation of one's own identifiable art. According to John Elderfield, in the spring of 1950 the problem of intellect and knowledge on the one hand, and feeling and materials on the other preoccupied Frankenthaler. She remains a painter self-conscious of her vocabulary of expression, although she is adept at discussing the formal concepts of her paintings.

She is aware however of the danger of critical analysis in her own appraisal of her work leading to what she calls 'dotting the i's' or over-emphasising stylistic cohesion at the expense of sheer feeling.

Elderfield described the dilemma Frankenthaler was experiencing. The exhilaration achieved in painting was accompanied by a sense of nervousness if she put aside her reliance on critical and intellectual understanding of the elements which made painting successful. Her critical education at

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Bennington created problems as well as benefits, particularly for someone so ambitiously determined to concretize her vision. Perhaps she did 'know too much' to give free rein to her imagination.

This problem is of concern to most artists. A good grounding in the mechanics of art is essential to an artist's education and can only be gained from a practical, combined with a critical understanding of art. But this knowledge can hinder as well as be instructive because what one learns is the solutions to other artists' problems and not one's own. Confidence gained in acquiring the rules of painting is important to the artist in creating a positive attitude to one's own ability to produce works of art while not being specifically subjected or reliant upon them. But at the same time this acquired knowledge can be spontaneously chosen to suit specific requirements, this is the only way this problem can be resolved.

She decided her process should negate colour temporarily with its obvious tendency to separate planes into divided areas, consequently she worked on the tonal concept of painting. The process of freeing herself from the Cubist style began in Provincetown where she concentrated on drawing, not in a studio, but from nature and in testing 'modern art' ideas against the resistance presented by direct confrontation with nature. She made a series of sketches among them Provincetown Bay, Princetown Harbour and Black Mountain (1950). In these drawings her experience of modernism intervenes in her transcription of nature but according to Elderfield, not unduly so. In a water colour of Princetown Harbour we see a method of stained-in colour which permits the wash to flow across the picture plane. This study seems to prophesise her later stained works.

She then considered artists who worked in non-geometric ways, whose imagery was more ambiguous mor biomorphic and less cerebrally derived than Cubist artists. Arshile Gorky's work interested her and also Kandinsky's work

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from 1910-1920. Coinciding with interests in the latter she was attracted to the allusive qualities in Miro and Gorky's imagery which suggested dreamlike and deeply felt emotions depicted in an abstract manner. Each of these artists, says Karen Wilkin, in Frankenthaler Works on Paper (1984) had different associations for her; Kankinsky with landscapes and cities, Gorky with rooms and situations, Miro with worlds and attitudes.

During her last non-residential year at Bennington College in 1949, Frankenthaler worked in the New York studio of Australian Artist Wallace Harrison, who demanded that his students abandon colour in favour of tonal ranges, in pencil, in order to achieve the mastery of Cubist structure. In her book Frankenthaler Works on Paper (1984) Karen Wilkin presents us with a picture of the extent to which Harrison impressed the concept of Cubism upon his students and she quotes Frankenthaler's recollection of agonizing over relationships of 'plane to plane' in drawings she executed under his direction. The drawing had to be reduced to schematic rectangles, and irregular forms could be evolved from the rectangular structures. The geometry of the drawing required that each plane, because of it being a part of a flat pattern in a two dimensional scheme, i.e. of the picture, had at the same time to exist in plausible relation to its cohabiting planes. Harrison taught her to create ambiguous and self-contradictory spaces that moved forward and back in depth. His approach was thorough and provided her with an invaluable foundation. There are four paintings which Elderfield attributed to Harrison's tutelage in 1949 but unfortunately each is titled Untitled, she later in 1950 executed two pencil studies entitles Female Figure, 1 and 11.

Hans Hoffman encouraged her use of colour and she found her drawing more spontaneous and free while at the same time her spacial concerns had not altered. She spent three weeks studying with him in the summer of 1950 at his school in Provincetown. She was interested in his famous 'push pull' notion, a term applied to balancing the planes of a painting. Hoffman introduced the priority of colour to her, but for her, Elderfield explains, colour itself would never become the primary structural element in painting

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as it was for Hoffman. She said 'my conscious interest was more in drawing and the drawing of colour than in colour alone'. 7.

She was educated in the tonal characteristics of Cubism and when colour was used it was to define the delineation of space and not for its effective or decorative qualities alone. Had she followed Hoffman she would have realized more quickly a broader effective use of colour while retaining her Cubist design. In hindsight, it was better that her development into colour came later.

It was necessary at this point in Frankenthaler's development to seek alternatives and free herself of Cubism, specifically synthetic Cubism, she realised that her training so far was too restrictive and didn't offer enough scope for further development.

By now Frankenthaler had found her distinctive style as can be seen in her work of the early 1950's, 21st, Great Meadows, (pl.2) The Sightseers and The Picnic. They have elements of Cubism, biomorphic imagery and passionate expressiveness. These paintings have recognisable qualities assimilated from her chosen mentors but are challenging in their own right. In The Picnic (1951) (Fig.1.) soft-edged floating shapes are reminiscent of Miro, Gorky, Kandinsky, and perhaps de Kooning, but the colour range is distinctively her own. From the beginning her colour was inherently personal, a chromatic collection of delicate hues, pinks, off-greens, yellows, blues and browns, but the influences from artists were mainly structural ones. Her early works allude to private feelings and events, presented as abstract, yet referential configurations. They provoke wide ranging associations while being indecipherable in any particular way. Landscape and the body are evoked in her imagery but they exist just as firmly as Frankenthaler's pure markmaking.

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Figure 1.



PLATE 2.

Although her work is quite individual her drawings of soft organic shapes have similarities with de Kooning's work of that period. She was aware of his work, which was impressive because of his use of line, space and in particular the appearance of effort and spontaneity. She admired de Kooning's drawing ability because it was her main concern also. She soon became disinterested in his conservative approach and found it inhibiting. de Kooning was concerned with his work showing its making or evolution, a finished piece must appear as if it were still 'in progress', indicative of past states and future possibilities. This evidential transience did not much appeal to Frankenthaler.

John Elderfield cites a number of works which can be attributed to de Kooning's style. August Weather, (1951), The Sightseers (1951) and The Jugglers (1951). Frankenthaler uses de Kooning's method of enclosed shapes delineated by scaffolding with areas subsequently painted in. Barbara Rose also references the similarity of Ed. Winston's Tropical Gardens (1951) to de Kooning's in that she used brushed passages and biomorphic shapes.

Painted around the same time as Mountains and Sea (1951) Frankenthaler's most famous painting was Great Meadows, (pl.2). Like Mountains and Sea it is loosely based on the landscape of New Jersey. There are not specific naturalistic representations but its looping rhythms and luminous colour evoke a powerful image. The painting appears free and spontaneous, uncalculated lines appear floating as does each transparent patch of colour, yet each area, whether bordered by line or enclosed by a patch of colour sits separate but declares its distinctiveness to every other plane. Here Frankenthaler deals with ambiguity in the sense that the space these planes inhabit is unbounded and one feels that each element is exactly where it should be. In Great Meadows (pl.2) the open shifting space does not relate to any pre-existing relationship of elements of real space, as is found in Synthetic Cubism but Frankenthaler's training in Cubism is

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implicit in the lucid structure of the painting. Within Cubist practice, far and near, up and down may be pushed and pulled around but figure relationships or figure/ground relationships are carefully preserved. In comparison Frankenthalers Great Meadows (pl.2.) appears totally free from outside reality.

Great Meadows (pl.2.) is a sketch from nature. It is a landscape image with a field in the centre, trees in the upper left hand corner and a yellow ochre sun at the top. The composition flows freely from the edges of the paper. The medium is watercolour and naturally transparent but Frankenthaler is concerned to have much of the white paper visible. She deliberately exploits the special qualities of watercolour and uses this medium for the effects of freshness, translucence and openness. Her methodology indicates her rejection of 'orthodox' Abstract Expressionist density but is not specific to only one medium, but to all media she used. Later the technique she achieved was similar to watercolour in which diluted colour was absorbed into unprimed canvas, this staining method required that she be both decisive and direct. Errors of judgement could be catastrophic as too many applications could create opaque, dense layered accumulation of paint. Mountains and Sea possessed the immediacy and transparent expansiveness of watercolour but Great Meadows (pl.2.) was instrumental in Frankenthaler reaching this point and subsequently led to her creating a huge number of paintings in this vein. A new beginning was revealed in this picture. Elderfield singles out this work as a prophetic work which Frankenthalers made in advance of her stained oils.

CHAPTER 2

Frankenthaler's friendship with Clement Greenberg, Friedel Dzubas and Grace Hartigan developed her critical judgements through her own work and through comparing notes and opinions on all types of art. Greenberg introduced her to the New York Community, the first generation of American Expressionists who were dealing with radical formal inventions and suggested imagery which later established their reputations.

Those in the vanguard of any movement in art must understand and appreciate fully the important works and developments immediately preceding that movement. In this respect the American Abstract Expressionists had the advantage of having regarded seriously the works of Miro and Klee several years before either became an influence in Europe, Matisse's work was held in high esteem also in New York and Kandinsky's early abstractions were on show at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum. Frankenthaler mentions in Interview with Helen Frankenthaler by Henry Galdzahler, (1965) that she returned to the Guggenheim Museum on many occasions to view Kandinsky's paintings. It was an exciting time for American Artists who were aware of contemporary art developments.

The Abstract Expressionists or Action Painters as they were named were received by the public with equal amounts of admiration and scorn. This small pocket of painters and sculptors who invented an emotionally charged kind of expression were soon to be recognised as the new leaders of modernist art, but they had not yet fully cemented the ground beneath them. They were extremely controversial. The hostility aimed at them succeeded in keeping this group together by reinforcing their aesthetic beliefs in opposing a conservative public, critics and reactionary museum dictates. Vital to this group was the comforting support of the world of 10th Street galleries and bars. Through Greenberg, Frankenthaler entered

this world at just the right moment and this interaction was crucial to the formation of her work in determining the direction in which she would proceed and by critical discussions which developed her sense of professionalism. In researching the history of modernist American art, it becomes obvious that its major goals and aesthetics were formed from the art of Miro, Picasso, Matisse and Mondrian.

In Miro in America (1982) Barbara Rose states that in 1945 an exhibition in the Matisse Gallery, New York caused a great stir. It was entitled 'Constellations', and consisted of work by Miro executed between 1940-41, making its first visit to the United States. Reviewers and critics realised a new direction in the work and commented on the 'all-over' compositions. This work had a profound effect on post World War II painting in America.

'.....Miro has spun on the surface plane 'all-over' patterns of his incisive, brilliant symbols, the familiar stars, the crescent moons, the gyroscopic balls, triangles, beads, the sperm-like shapes the little clusters which look like the chemist's atomic structure diagrams, all these are woven together in taut relationship and tied by thin electric lines'.¹

Miro, in a letter to his companion Picart expounded his theories on painting since Impressionism and asserted:

'I believe our "School" will grasp the essentials of painting of the future. It will be stripped of all concern for pictorial problems, it will vibrate in harmony with the pulse of the spirit.....These modern analytical movements will ultimately carry the spirit into the light of freedom' ².

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Miro's paintings were radical in their conception of space, drawing and imagery. His invention of a new kind of pictorial space places him among the great metaphysical modern painters such as Klee, Pollock, and Kandinsky.

In Miro's synthesis of form and psychological content American Abstract Expressionists encountered a precept for the resolution of their problem of dealing with 'subject matter', i.e. psychological and symbolic content in the areas of non-objective art. They gained inspiration from Miro's technical experiments with materials and media which gave them an example of risk-taking. They could surpass Miro's intentions and extend onwards from easel painting, from this intercession between accident and control and his assertion on 'direct' painting and the personal, even bodily participation of the artist with his art, simultaneous with the total existential commitment to which they themselves were engaged and this seemed exemplary to American Artists searching for an exit from the Cubist rut.

Miro influenced Frankenthaler both in her concept of landscape and in the use of biomorphic shapes. He was versatile in experimenting with sandpaper, cardboard and masonite in an effort to emphasize the texture of the surface while modulating forms and ignoring illusive depth. In 1951 Frankenthaler followed his explorations by texturing her canvas with various mixed media devices, The Picnic (1951) (Fig.1) is one such work. This painting also refers to another of Miro's devices of dividing up the surface. Based on Person Throwing a stone at a Bird, Miro, (1921), Frankenthaler divides the picture into two opposing horizontal zones and introduces new floating biomorphic elements into her painting. Barbara Rose in Miro in America (1982) points out that Frankenthaler's spurting images of hands and ladders in the late 1950's recall Miro, specifically Eden (1957), (pl.5) (this painting is discussed in the next chapter).

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Later Frankenthaler used Miro as a source reference when in her painting Blue Rail (1960) the outlines of Miro's Portrait of Mistress Mills in 1750 Ref. Miro (1929) were appropriated. Rose states that 'Frankenthaler's reaction to hard-edge painting was similar to Miro's reaction to Cubism, she humanised the form making it organic and natural'. 3. But for Frankenthaler Miro's creations were freer, more romantic, subjective art which offered a more challenging alternative for exploration than Picasso and Mondrian.

Miro's work was considered Post-Cubist because of its originality. Frankenthaler like many artists perceived his style of swinging organic rhythms as a key to loosening the tight geometric style which was the essence of Cubist Abstract Artists. His apparent resolution of the problem of reconciling figuration with flatness demanded by American Modernist painting encouraged an avant-garde alternative to abstract art which was taken on board by the New York School.

Picasso also had enormous influence on the Abstract Expressionists, in particular through his works of the 1930's. They realised it was necessary to loosen the demarcated illusion of shallow depth in his ambitious pictures. They also had to free themselves from lines and curves that Cubism imposed having dominated art since the 1920's. His work was reproduced in many journals and his art suggested many new possibilities of expression for abstract painting.

In an article entitled Significance of Miro by Robert Motherwell, (excerpt from Art News, 1959). Miro states that his method is essentially Surrealist which was a movement of ideas. Surrealisms' greatest expression was through French Literature and The Surrealists were first to recognise the importance of Freud's Theories on psychology. They were interested in gaining access to the irrational by means of dreams, away from the world of the 1914-1918 war through which they had lived and from a

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system of thought where they believed, reason and rationale led to disaster. There were many painters and sculptors associated with this movement in Europe, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, and Juan Miro. It was the right moment for Miro; painting was liberated from tradition and stripped of all concern for pictorial problems, and therefore of illusion as well.

Every painting is both a surface and a space, shapes, forms and artists' imagery must be brought together in unity and reconciled with this concept.

Miro's canvases are well balanced, with areas of mass calculated in relation to empty space, effective division of the surface with lines, forms relating to each other and an obedience of the natural laws of painting.

The fact that the Parisian Surrealists were in New York during the war had an effect on the movement known as Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock discussed Surrealist automatism with Robert Motherwell in 1941/2 and Pollock along with others also wrote automatic poetry. Miro is the direct link in his automatism through to the work of Pollock to Frankenthaler and so on.

Miro's influence on Pollock was liberating, it assisted his achievement of realising his goal of combining a volatile, angry spirit of protest and revolt with a concentrated attitude towards control and accident. In 1946 Pollock made a series of 'all over' paintings carried out by means of dabs of creamy paint. Later he started using skeins of enamel paint making blotches of laced and interlaced inscriptions which created a power unlike anything previously achieved. Pollocks 'all-over' painting was a desire to achieve a more immediate, dense and decorative impression that the Cubist convention had allowed. Also he wanted to control the oscillation between the physical surface of the canvas and the indication of depth beneath it as clearly and evenly as possible. Clement Greenberg

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in his essay American Type Painting (1982) says of Pollock, 'Analytical Cubism is always somewhere at the back of Pollock's mind'. 4.

Another reason for his progression in this direction was his early interest in American Indian Art. Pollock believed that the American Indians have a true painters capacity of get hold of appropriate imagery in their understanding of what constitutes painterly subject matter. Pollock had a fascination for the ancient imagery of the native Indian which gave him access into the unconscious. The Indian concept of 'discovering one's own image' he knew and the world of the spirit is the ultimate nature of the self which could be realised in dreams and visions. Autumn Rythm (1950) (pl.3) may refer to Native American Art in which Pollock abandons figuration in favour of poetic gesture. The process whereby the violent energy on the surface of the canvas and the spontaneity of the gestural suggests an anxious discovery of the self. The automatic quality of the linear movement in this painting was an attempt to uncover the intangible contents of his unconscious mind. The painting has a unity and a wholeness. Pollock must have thought that the pictorial realisation in Autumn Rythm (1950), (pl.3) was his transformed consciousness. His drip paintings are a coming together of opposites. The image and the pictorial ground combine into one, as do gesture and image, drawing and calligraphy become painting by means of a ritual process. The drip paintings were made between 1948 and 1950 when he sought to unite primitive instinct and conscious decision which he encountered in Native American Art.

Abstract Expressionism was perceived by those with an uninitiated eye to rely much on accident and haphazard effects. An apparent undisciplined spontaneity exists and a gestural impulsiveness which registers as blotches and scrawls. But once one realises that there is a good and bad abstract expressionism it becomes apparent that there is rigorous discipline to be found only in good art.

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PLATE 3.

Pollock created images so unique that they were quite impossible to imitate. But what he had to offer Frankenthaler and others was his way of working, his technique, an inherent rejection of the conventions of easel painting. Helen Frankenthaler was the first to absorb and deviate from Pollock's ethos. She visited his home in Springs, Long Island, and saw his work in progress. She was overawed by what she saw. Immediately she understood and valued the importance of his work method. He worked on unprimed, unstretched canvas on the floor, he worked from all sides walking around and standing over it. By dripping paint directly onto canvas Pollock indicated another way of making flatness explicit - by making obvious the canvas weave and physical character of the support as a piece of cloth identified as being flat by its known quality. Pollock's drip technique enabled him to reconcile flatness with a purely optical illusion by freeing a shape creating contour. This was also something which Frankenthaler's stain technique was able to do.

In 1952 she deviated from Pollock's method and began staining diluted oil paint on to raw duck so that not only was it absorbed onto the surface but it sank right into the weave of the cloth. The great advantage of this process was its ability to render the background neutral by absorption of pigment directly into the ground thus identifying figure with ground. Frankenthaler's achievements with staining allowed her adjust her format from light to dark in varying intensities of saturation without creating any illusion of distance behind the surface plane. This process necessitated a thinness and transparency in media control. This technique of staining paint onto canvas while working from all sides made it difficult to compose a work in advance. The movements became automatic and mechanical, a technique which had an appearance of uncontrolled naturalness, a sense of unity spontaneously considered and created.

Clement Greenberg has pointed out that it was Frankenthaler's early understanding of Pollock's technique and not his imagery that was a

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revolutionary aspect of her work which gave her an advantage in overcoming the problems of sculptural illusion, figure-ground oppositions and the development of Post Cubist Abstraction based on delimited shallow effects and figure-ground interaction through the use of opticality and openness. This breakthrough for her was critical to her development and also to colour abstraction on the whole says Barbara Rose in American Painting 20th Century (1986). In his prophetic book on aesthetics entitled Systems and Dialectics of Art (1937) John Graham states 'that a change in technique determined a change in form'. 5. And when, continues Rose, Frankenthaler, under Pollock's influence, put aside painting with a conventional brush on a primed canvas and applied pigment directly onto the canvas it was inevitable that she produced a spontaneous fresh statement. The result of this approach was an original flowing and unfolding of images. Perhaps this development could have derived from Impressionism or Post Impressionism but especially from Matisse whose large floating forms with their boldness and simplicity impressed American Artists during the 1960's such as Polynesia - The Sky (1946), The Acanthi (1953), The Sorrows of the King (1952).

Frankenthaler's contribution to the 60's art movement was not that she invented stain painting but that she could transform Pollock's technique to a means of creating an art of pure and vibrant colour.

Another dimension of art which Frankenthaler learned from Pollock was how to compose a painting without recall to the Cubist 'grid', that conglomeration of horizontal and vertical grids with scaffolding effect for shapes and curves and restrictions of frontality with compositions requiring balancing in all directions. Compositions were based on the interaction between similar forms to one another and their relationship to the rectangular frame. Pollock's drip paintings challenge these conventions, of easel painting as fixed-focus, and section to section as well as subject to frame relationships. This he achieved by painting on

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the floor. By walking around his canvas, he was able to bring into being an 'all-over' image, a composition worked from all sides, which was balanced in relation to a single image rather than disparate part to part relationships. Frankenthaler comments on her new attitude towards working compositions. 'When one made a move towards the canvas surface, there was a dialectic and the surface gave an answer back, and you gave it back'. 6 In a sense she had interpreted Pollock's rhythmic loops and arches as a freer, physical reformulation of Cubist Concepts i.e. surface and depth correlations.

What she also liked about Pollock's methodology was that his procedure permitted certain random and accidental qualities to come into his 'all-over' design, since dripping and pouring paint is not as totally controllable as applying paint with a brush. His manner of process resulted in an image, spontaneously generated rather than the controller and manipulated imagery of Cubism, something which Miro deliberately considered in his approach to painting.

In Visual Dynamics in Jackson Pollock's Abstractions, (1984) Matthew L. Rohn discusses the idea that Pollock fostered a repertoire of strokes, this he thought would disturb his readers as his opinion would imply a systemisation at odds with the spontaneity associated with his abstraction. It is well known that oriental artists spend many years cultivating a vocabulary of strokes enabling them to select specific types where necessary which are more spontaneously manifested and when combined with other strokes appear to have been created spontaneously. Rohn puts forward Robert Herbert's thesis on Monet's middle and late period landscapes which show Monet's ability to create a sense of spontaneity and vitality called from the artist's means of well-practiced procedures rather than from his capacity to invent imagery on the spot, out in the landscape. Herbert who examined a number of Monets recently, being restored by the

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museum of Fine Art, Boston, found that they had layers of different types of strokes, and the types of imagery they evoked were so consistent that Herbert could categorise them. For example, when painting water, it would be physically rendered by a specific stroke using local colour effects. He discovered that Monet's spontaneity lay not in his talent for appreciating the scene before him and translating it into pulsating newly invented strokes but from his ability to choose from a repertoire of strokes and their specific dynamics, which he used to infuse his scenes such as water lilies. The selection of strokes relied upon by Monet in no way precluded spontaneously inspired procedures. Monet refined his repertoire as he concentrated on it and explored its potential and used it as a foundation upon which he could build facets of his paintings.

Jackson Pollock also intuitively devised many marks which he used again and again throughout his painting abstractions. By developing them into a repertoire of dynamic effects it enabled him to draw upon them automatically, experience giving him the desired essential qualities and therefore giving him the facility for greater sophistication to boldly explore the many variations he could create from them.

Rose puts forward the argument that Frankenthaler was an intuitive and natural painter rather than an intellectual one. She was familiar with surrealist poetry and read surrealist magazines. She says that Frankenthaler would not have made the paintings of the 1950's had she not grasped intuitively the principle of automatism and how Pollock had applied it to his work. Later it became obvious that neither Pollock or Frankenthaler could have loosened the disciplined Cubist approach to more spontaneous and free works without the precedent of Surrealist automatism.

While her paintings are unique experiences, Frankenthaler doesn't rely simply on her ability to handle paint to create characteristic configurations and coherent series. Instead she has gathered together a vocabulary of recurring motifs, making them her own, floating squares,

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loops, arching lines, splatters, and floating pats of colour as seen in her '50s allusive, biomorphic works. Her imagery is non specific and always appears filled with evocative overtones, contrary to this her pictures are always positively flat but implying the imaginability of limitless space.

The floating squares appear in Nude (1958), (pl.4) Fabritius Bird (1960), Bolton Landing (1960) and Open Wall (1953). In Nude (1958), (pl.4) the body outlined in red is topped by a square floating head. Dore Ashton discusses the head on the figure in an article entitled Helen Frankenthaler (1965)

'In Nude of 1958..... Frankenthaler introduces an idea which gradually assumed great importance in her work. The idea is symbolized by the presence of a square form. The square, still open, still relatively ambiguous serves as an abstract pictorial device'. 7.

Another aspect of Frankenthaler's approach is that of spontaneity and swiftness with which she proceeds in making a picture. In Karen Wilkin's book, Frankenthaler is quoted as saying 'I will start a picture feeling, what will happen if I work with 3 blues and another colour'. 8. As with Monet and Pollock, Frankenthaler's spontaneous works can be converted into formula-like categories: 4 strokes, each a separate colour, each at a tangent to the edge and so forth. There are a great many of her works that appear transient and unpremeditated which can be analyzed into this kind of 'system'. While the paintings can be rationalized into specific compositional 'categories' they still remain basically spontaneous and individual. As Karen Wilkin points out in Frankenthaler Works On Paper (1984) 'We may be able to state the programme but it is not repeatable, since every mark dictated by the generating idea is a response to an unpremeditated series of changing conditions'. 9. Frankenthaler always remains close to the visual concerns as the picture progresses, she is open to interpretation encountered by chance and accident. 'The picture always takes precedence. I'll always scrap the "formula" in favour of the dialogue with the picture'. 10.

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PLATE 4.

Sometimes Frankenthaler forces pre-established notions to provoke her intuition. In a work of art achieved in this manner its apparent lack of premeditation superabounds other considerations and the inherent "system" disappears. Her process of repetition, variety of form and colour placements can be interpreted into expectations of symmetry which she deliberately omits or challenges by unanticipated elements. When we think we know her process 'system' and understand her reasoning she throws us to make us look again. As in works such as Bolton Landing (1960), Bingo (1962) and Blue on one Side (1962), where the similarities and dissimilarities are related components and important dramatic occurrences. The essentials of Frankenthaler's works of this period are easy to grasp, but in varying degrees it is the foundation upon which her career has developed. Her deep rooted training in Cubist structure enables her to transform a flat surface of planes of saturated colour into two dimensional planes. Her appreciation of self-imposed programmes invigorates her most spontaneous works with a harmoniously powerful structure.

Until 1951 Frankenthaler's paintings were derivative. This she no doubt must have been conscious of and as Greenberg was her companion, one can assume that they would have discussed this matter often. What she had acquired from these artists was a vocabulary she swiftly adapted and interpreted into highly individual and accomplished paintings. During her first solo show in 1951 the critics wrote of the derivations of her work but also praised her for being among the most talented of her generation. Paul Brach's Review in Art Digest (1951) was perceptive:

'Imaginative, fearless and immensely talented Helen Frankenthaler, in her first show explores vital areas of Abstract Expressionism. Her frequent borrowings - from de Kooning, Gorky and Pollock - is never of discipleship. The motifs she takes serve as points of departure for her own explorations'. 11.

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In John Elderfield's opinion, it was Frankenthaler's re-examining of her current sources (Pollock, de Kooning, and Miro) and her wish to push aside as well as build on areas of personal achievement, which profoundly altered not only her method of painting but her comprehension of painting which developed into artistic maturity within the short period of a year. Two works carry signs of this maturity, Cloudscape (1951), (Fig.2) and Great Meadows (1951) (pl.2). The former has a horizontal landscape composition and the latter a central one. Cloudscape (Fig.2) is the first painting to present a sense of place. It is reminiscent of Beach (1950) with its sand surface and open drawing. This looser vaguely biological image with drawings of broken line and sometimes shapes pieced together by tonal contrasts evokes images of crowded de Kooning's blown apart, a fresher less crowded airy spaciousness which Elderfield indicates is a 'far more sophisticated understanding than existed before'. 12. He quotes Frankenthaler on what she took from Pollock 'The real concern with line, fluid line, calligraphy, and my thoughts and experiments with line not as line but as shape, or play on shape, or connecting shape, or colour shape acting as the line'. 13 Cloudscape (Fig.2) was the first based on her interpretations.

These are some of Frankenthaler's strengths. She was most perceptive and discerning in her assimilation of European artists and American Abstract Expressionists sources. She was responsive to the surface and the workmanship of painting, she had an innate fascination with symbols, intrigued by their ambiguity and their many interpretations.



FIGURE 2.

CHAPTER 3

'Unity is the first requirement of a work of art'

Clement Greenberg 1.

'Unity is the sure sign of originality'

M. Friedlander 2.

Donald Kuspit writes in an essay entitled Unity (1979) based on the critical judgements of Clement Greenberg that he (Greenberg) believed that we 'feel and judge' the work of art 'in terms of its all-over unity', its 'quality' as a function of its existence 'as a whole' and in considering a work of art he looks for 'that understanding unity', 3.

Frankenthaler, as pointed out in an earlier chapter, was introduced to the first generation of American Abstract Artists by Greenberg and she acknowledges him in an article entitled Concerning the Spirit in Art.

(1989) She says 'Clem's values made total sense to me. And I looked and worked hard to understand....he helped develop my eye, whether it was looking at old masters or at my contemporaries. But my wrist has always been my own'. 4. Frankenthaler's paintings are complexities in which the elements of composition, symmetry, imagination and spontaneity created dynamic abstractions unified by control, experience, truth to feeling and her considered approach. An understanding of these features of her methodology is considered in this chapter.

According to Greenberg, Cubism was 'that purest and most unified of all art styles since Tiepolo and Watteau'. 5. It was the basis for all modern art and the starting point for art of any real quality and also it was a good meter in determining the greatness of modern arts' interpretations of form

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and feeling. As with Frankenthaler the knowledge gained from understanding Cubist unity was invaluable.

In order to achieve content and 'feeling', or as Kuspit describes in the essay on Unity (1979) with reference to Soutine 'the violence of the will to direct emotion creates distortions.....too exclusively and too immediately dictated by feeling and, in evading plastic controls, destroys unity'. 6. He says that the importance of unity in art comes from the created tension within it and that the fundamentals of the unity within modern art has its reasoning in a new kind of decision making - it is the innate tensions of a painting's construction, and its recreated surface flatness which creates a powerfully strong image of art. Helen Frankenthaler's work since the 1950's has been a collaboration of the materials of her trade, i.e. canvas, paint, colour with spacial relations and created tensions. The texture of the canvas is considered an important constituent of the picture while the paint preserves its fluidity, transparency and flow. Each movement of colour brings forth new responses, further articulations of space are required and carried out until colour becomes complex and resonant as she refines the process. Painting requires continuous decision making as there is no knowable goal, each stage of development is an open situation where created tensions are dealt with and resolved. Frankenthaler is not mastering the canvas but is manipulating, guiding, reflecting, coaxing and responding to appropriate situations.

In reference to Jackson Pollock, Greenberg speaks of this tension within flatness, or the combining of 'the plane surface with astounding force', to be the measure by which we gauge modern unity. This assertive engagement of flatness is the basis of what he calls modern arts' 'more reverberated meaning' than was made possible by the emphasis on unity in earlier art.

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From Pollock Frankenthaler realised that a mould had been broken and there were new possibilities out of his vocabulary. Pollock believed that a painting had a life of its own. The focus of unity in representational art was mainly on the figure presented or the characteristics of the world they occupied. But in Frankenthaler's art her ideas are more generalized in one sense while on the other hand, she is more involved with the actual physicality of painting, its shape, size, surface flatness and so on, from the use of colour and its interaction to the dynamic arrangements of each. All of these exert tensions for the artist which are manipulated until they echo the desired feeling.

For Greenberg, the desire of artistic unity is imperative. Attainment of artistic unity is the main requirement, which surpasses the essentiality of any medium, for interpreting real life and nature. In attaining this goal one creates order from disorder, or in effect, creates areas of order within a general disorder. In unifying a painting the artist brings it under control by way of conscious thought or resistant reality, whether in relation to the inner reality of emotion or the external outer reality of impression. Greenberg had indicated on many occasions that artistic unity is the one means of survival for coping with both excesses and limitations. Another aspect of Greenberg's thinking is that implicit in art is 'the triumph of intention over resistant matterthe task of art is to impose the greatest possible unity upon the greatest diversity'. 7. The gauge of achievement is not only the degree of unity or perfection of form - any piece of kitsch has that - but also the resistance of a material unified. The joy to be derived from art according to Greenberg comes from the extended possibilities of the medium and of tradition, not to contend with this means to allow lack of control take over, resulting in raw accidental work without form or assimilation and devoid of style. Mountains and Sea (1952) was a unique breakthrough in this respect.

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According to Barbara Rose, Frankenthaler's sources for this painting derived from Pollock, Kandinsky and Cezanne; first from Pollock's black and white paintings, secondly from the compositional aspects of Kandinsky's work and thirdly from the late painting of Cezanne. She developed the black and white drip paintings of Pollock in which his technique was the absorption of figure with ground. She also took from him his open and direct approach in the act of painting. The compositional aspects of the painting relate to Kandinsky. His technique was to spread areas of colour delineated from each other by line and gathered together in the centre of the canvas. Another distinguishing feature of his work was the use of thin, fluid paint. The areas of unpainted canvas recall Cezanne's later works and her chosen palette was similar to his also. It was known that she was particularly interested in Cezanne at that time.

Greenberg points out that one of the lessons learned from the Expressionists is that personal emotion is unmanageable and difficult to control for the person who experiences it. Therefore it is vitally important that style exists to cope with one's own emotions and in Frankenthaler's case she has developed her own personal style with a structure which enables her to give form to its existence and establish its originality fervently.

In an essay entitled Impressionism and Symbolism in Cezanne and the End of Impressionism by Richard Shiff (1984), he stresses the importance of emotion and impression in art. Both arise immediately and spontaneously to the artist and cannot be separated. They are the truths of immediate personal experience and are also known by the single term, sensation. Shiff says that 'sensation' signifies both emotion and impression. The spontaneous automatism with which Frankenthaler works is an ideal vehicle for this "sensation" which is the essence of truth and purity in her work.

The desire for purity comes from the straining force of dense feeling which requires that it stand independently of its sources. Its close concentration takes it further than its objective cause just as a unified work of art stimulates, as Greenberg points out, 'a "reaction" which cannot be "defined" or limited by its cause on a canvas'. 8. The emotion converts into abstraction and is desirous of abstract tangibility which can be achieved through the medium thereby becoming expressively loaded. Feelings therefore become substantive in themselves, existing within the abstract medium and creating tension. In the process of painting 'rightness of form' made as plain and obvious as possible is in Greenberg's opinion the ultimate achievement of abstraction. The same can also be applied to emotion. In a way our idea of 'rightness of form' has much to do with our idea of its expressive power. Abstract art refines the figurative content of painting with the physicality of the medium in the creation of emotional rhythm. He says 'It is the energy of this rhythm that animates aesthetic experience'. 9. One could describe Frankenthaler's painting as pure sensibility if it were not for the fact that each painting has a mysterious energy of its own. She has an ability to make pictures from a deep subconscious level in a swift spontaneous manner, her materials become an extension of herself, each colour and combination has a special vitality of its own. Trains of thought and feelings are explored, from abstract thought to abstract tangibility, it then become difficult to distinguish interior emotions from what is being produced on the canvas. The painting communicates itself, which is one of the most engaging characteristics of Frankenthaler's work. She produces paintings that are open and frank, the physical spontaneity and actuality of her engagement in painting is obvious in all her paintings.

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Frankenthaler is particularly interested in Gestalt and in an interview with Cindy Nemser, she discusses this approach in relation to her painting. Every picture is a new beginning, a fresh experience within a growing framework. It is a result of built in experiences not regularised or limiting in attitude. When painting a picture

'one prepares, bringing one's weight and gracefulness and knowledge to bear, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually and physically. And often there is a moment when all frequencies are right and it hits....very often from the "hitting point" on, you can pursue that moment and follow it with a whole future aesthetic vocabulary. One produces the moment and hopes to have the ability to let that moment guide from there. You guide it and it guides you. Every picture - somewhat of an experiment'. 10.

Frankenthaler's work is described in this text, further understanding can be achieved by looking at the perceptual means governing our understanding of the work.

What are Gestalt principles and how have they been applied to Frankenthaler's work?

One of the key practitioners of Gestalt psychology Rudolph Arnheim has had particular success in analysing art especially modern art. Gestalt perceptual psychology originated at the beginning of this century, and according to Matthew Rohn in Visual Dynamics in Jackson Pollock's Abstractions (1987) offers explanations of how the mind makes sense of the infinite amount of sensory stimuli it experiences by laying down the mind's capacity of gathering the simplest, most coherent relationships under given circumstances. The mind, including the sensory mechanism, finds its own means of imaginatively interpreting relationships and then enabling

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expression in another form, or Gestalt, that any factors in a situation of perceptual stimuli might provide. In general most research by Gestalt psychologists have centred on determining responses to differing stimuli and to finding theoretical explanations as to how and why organisms effect these stimuli.

Arnheim explains, 'We recognise the exalted kind of seeing that leads to the creation of great art as an outgrowth of the humbler and more common activity of the eyes in everyday life. Just as the prosaic search for information is "artistic" because it involves giving and finding shape and meaning, so the artists conceiving is an instrument of life, a refined way of understanding who and where we are.....There was a wholesome lesson in the discovery that vision is not a mechanical recording of elements but rather the apprehension of significant structural patterns. If this was true for the simple act of perceiving an object, it was all the more likely to hold also for the artistic approach to reality'. 11.

Arnheim's work in relation to the visual arts involves analyzing the perceptual and cognitive activity which has revealed itself. When artistic vision operates at its best, he believes it provides us with an evolved level of human perception and thought. While Arnheim's Gestalt approach takes cognisance of the arts being an ideal model for human perception, his analysis has not been effected by prejudices of Renaissance art. Arnheim's open approach has considered all forms of art searching out insight into how the mind functions. He has been able to recognise structural organisations actively used in modern art and has arranged them within a perceptual, psychologic~~al~~ context that is applicable to Renaissance art.

Good works of art provoke the 'interested' mind into functioning in an enquiring manner. In analyzing a work of art we seek to understand the mental organisation of structure and meaning evoked by the artist.

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Accordingly the work of art must be enriched with a sense of unity: In An Essay in Aesthetics (1982) Roger Fry, says 'One of the chief aspects of a work is unity, unity of some kind is necessary for the restful contemplation of the work of art as a whole, but if it lacks unity we cannot contemplate it in its entirety...'. 12.

The artist arranges elements from specific research subject matter and works towards his/her intentions in the most revealing manner possible. The ability of art confirms the critical Gestalt simplicity principle which reads 'Any stimulus pattern tends to be seen in such a way that the resulting structure is as simple as the given conditions permit'. 13. This understanding of the stimulus pattern must not be considered as diminished simplicity. In particular when applied to a work of art, the simplicity principle is seen as the mind endeavouring earnestly for clarity, a fundamental which is often overlooked. These are important issues for consideration of aesthetic matters in relation to Frankenthaler's work.

Frankenthaler is a daring painter, ever willing to risk the big gesture, she employs huge simplified formats in exploring her intimate adventures of line and colour. She makes declarations of exotic sensual and sentimental preoccupations in a large scale and with full conviction. Frank O'Hara has commented that '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'. 14.

Each artist brings different distinguishable elements into his/her work that create directed dynamics i.e. tensions which create oppositions between conflicting ideas and forces. Frankenthaler has often used a diagonal form which appears to lean away from one position and towards

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another (Eden 1957) (Pl.5) To achieve such dynamics artists use forms which appear to rise or fall, by degrees, these are called gradients. Visual gradients may arise when two parts of the work are juxtaposed in a particular way, but their character depends on the inherent possibilities of different dynamics within the visual field. Matthew Rohn in Visual Dynamics in Jackson Pollock's Abstractions (1987) explains the importance of anisotropic effects, that is the quality of showing differences of property or of effect in different directions. He says 'we perceive certain things as striving upward or floating in space, and we experience a progression that runs from the right to left across the visual field as action that flows against us. Centres, by contrast, become important visual anchors'. 15. There are many possibilities. But of particular importance to our perception is the centre or visual stabilizer. There are many possibilities for variations of 'centres' in a visual composition, for instance the gravitational centre which relates to anisotropic dynamics, and the actual physical centre of a form. There are also centres which are arrived at through the interplay of various elements on the surface of the canvas. Mountains and Sea (1952), Great Meadows (1951) (Pl.2), Swan Lake 2, (1961) Cape (Provincetown) (1950) are just a few of Frankenthaler's centred compositions. The dynamic the artist achieves is dependent upon the versatility of elements deployed for a particular subject matter. In creating these dynamics the artist enriches the work with structural order comprising of catabolic effects (elements introducing reduction in tensions) dominated by anabolic tendencies (structural dynamics) supporting the artists thematic efforts and endeavours. The construction of a work of art thus reflects a vital energy necessary to the relationship between anabolic-catabolic energies whereby the coming together of directed dynamics continuously invigorates or dissolves the tensions, creating careful and significant structures that relative conditions attain. Rohn states 'But the structures of living

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organisms and works of art differ in several important respects'. 16. A living organism is subject to the environment by its constant interaction with it. On the other hand the work of art is a product of the mind and therefore has a more significant status as having been acquired through self orientated and directed tensions.

Frankenthaler's work entitled Eden (1956), (pl.5) ^{is an} example of anabolic tendencies. It has been described by E.C. Goosen as a 'provocative but abandoned landscape'. 17. It is one of her best paintings of the 1950's and is large and physical in its presentation. The painting is an open and spontaneous adventure containing a wealth of intimate detail and daring in its attempt to make the personal mark or gesture an objective reality. It abounds with the gestural richness which has become Frankenthaler's signature. Many of the motifs carry landscape association. An olive diagonal on the lower left of the painting leads us to a horizon-like armature, underscored by a red horizontal stabilizes the painting and takes us across to the blue diagonal on the right of the composition. Up in the far left corner a yellow burst of colour resembles the sun and the two olive vertices suggest the gates of the biblical paradise. From the narrow foreground we enter the middle distance of the painting where most of the activity is and where it hovers above a yellow terrain. Two elements create a sense of depth, the blue diagonal on the right and the sun image in the left hand corner. Frankenthaler's technique in the work is an identification of figure with ground therefore recognising the flatness of the canvas support, spacial movement is suggested throughout and often structured in accordance with landscape conventions. The paintings main ingenuity exists in the spontaneity of its gestural drawing. Some strokes are full sweeping movements and others are delicate flicking actions. Many strokes are indicative of impulsiveness expressing fleeting inspirations while others seem thoughtful and reflective of the process of dialogue between artist and canvas support. The gestures in the painting are mainly abstract, signs of her

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inventiveness yet many are simplistically referential, the glowing sun, the two '100's', the forbidding red hand that rises from the background above all other images. In view of the title of the work there is a freshness and lively quality about which also establishes Frankenthalers confidence and willingness to tackle major configurations. Her achievements with this painting were a combination of the possibilities of gestural drawing and feelings evoked. It is a joyously involved creativity in its variety of gesture and luminous colour.

The two '100's' came, she states 'because at that point I wanted to contrast a straight line with a curved one - in as much of the composition. A single straight vertical line followed by the two circles becomes "100". I made the 100 and liked it and, because I wanted a play of symmetry added another reflective "100", 18. she says. This is her commentary on Eden, (1956) (Pl.5) 'its about arabesque and linear divisions and about symmetry and non-symmetry' 19.

Throughout her career Frankenthaler has striven for unity, clarity and perfection which are encapsulated in the many considerations she makes in the production of her work.

CONCLUSION

During the period dealt with in this text Helen Frankenthaler established herself as a seminal artistic force by developing a freely constructed, gestural style of painting. She was unique in her method of pouring thinned pigment onto unsized canvas, her work was imbued with a specific kind of fluidity and immediacy of colour unknown in the Abstract Expressionists or Cubist derived works of her contemporaries.

Her work is also unique insofar as it shows its allegiance to both Cubist structure and Post Cubist openness. What she retains from Cubist practice is her use of symmetrical and asymmetrical compositions, the interaction between colour shapes and drawing and the ambiguity of Cubist style, while her Post Cubist approach of imagery implies spontaneity generated rather than controlled.

While she was regarded as a colourist and has even been acclaimed as originator of colour-field painting she has affirmed that colour is not the primary consideration in her painting, but that colour is the first message on the picture plane which then becomes a consideration in both scale and drawing. Therefore the medium of colour in both scale and drawing is an important aspect of her process, which is drawing with colour.

It cannot be denied that she is an inventive colourist. She explored colour at a time when few New York painters with the exception of Rothko were giving it much attention as their priorities lay in other directions. But Frankenthaler had the advantage of having an insight into the "new openness", she experimented by flowing and unfolding transparent paint onto raw canvas. She challenged the sombre and crisis-ridden moods of the New York painters by bringing colour back into painting through the use of soft pastel pinks, lilacs and limes reminiscent of an Impressionist Orchard scene.

Great Meadows (Pl.2) (1951) was a major breakthrough for Frankenthaler and also for the art world in general. It was unique because of its openness,

freshness of colour and originality of imagery. Mountains and Sea (1952) which soon followed was historic in that the painting introduced Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland to staining techniques. Louis and Noland pursued her colour explorations and devoted themselves solely towards exploring the absolute potential of colour and its interrelationships on the canvas. They realised her ability to create a unified image that communicated a Gestalt image immediately and directly, Noland called this technique a 'one-shot' image. They further explored automatism in the form of an automatic mechanical and impersonal technique and according to Barbara Rose in Frankenthaler "carried (it) to its logical conclusion"

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