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Gender and Fluid: A Reconsideration of the Stain in the Painting of Helen Frankenthaler

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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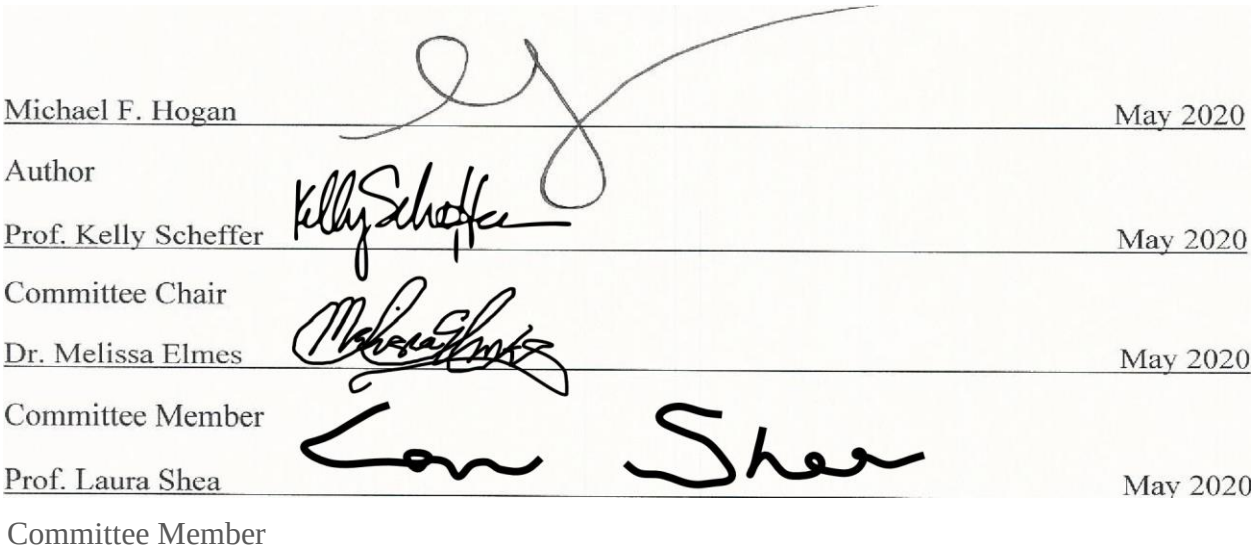

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ABSTRACT

GENDER AND FLUID: A RECONSIDERATION OF THE STAIN IN THE PAINTING OF HELEN FRANKENTHALER

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This paper explores the stain technique of Helen Frankenthaler through a reconsideration of its novelty and innovation. Recent scholarship has assessed the technique and its critical acceptance through a primarily feminist lens, focused on either assessment of the gendered language utilized by critics or application of a uniquely feminist approach in determining its meaning. The singular focus applied in recent criticism is consistent with past approaches that have typically isolated a particular methodology – formalistic, technical, comparative, or historical – to the exclusion of broader consideration of other methodologies. Moreover, prior critical efforts frequently limited analytical consideration to her groundbreaking work *Mountains and Sea* and the extent of Jackson Pollock's influence on it. Yet Frankenthaler's oeuvre is rich with formal and technical nuances that create a denser and more complex art than these approaches individually expose. Through consideration of a multiplicity of critical methodologies, this paper will reveal the complexity of Frankenthaler's work broadly and the uniqueness of her approach specifically in *Mountains and Sea* when considered on its own as well as in comparison to the work of other artists. The paper will suggest a different reading of the stain that recognizes the implicit calm yet intense power of water and liquid as a metaphor for the intensity of the artist as a woman painter undeterred in her professional aspirations to create a place for herself in a man's world.

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Introduction

Helen Frankenthaler numbers among the most important artists of the twentieth century. Born and raised in Manhattan, she returned to New York following her college years at Bennington College and quickly immersed herself in the world that was the New York School. She self-confidently made important connections in this "man's world," demonstrating from the outset that she would not be constrained by her gender notwithstanding the challenges to entry and acceptance. As a child of relative privilege growing up in New York City's Upper East Side, Frankenthaler was afforded opportunities to study with prominent artists of the time as well as to engage directly in the various cultural offerings New York City offered in the earliest stage of its ascent to preeminence on the world art stage. As such, she was no stranger to the world she entered after college and, with the benefit of familiarity coupled with drive, was able to enter with advantages most artists – especially women artists – at the time did not possess.

At the age of twenty-three, she painted *Mountains and Sea* using a new technique in her work, one she acknowledged as adapted from that of Jackson Pollock but imbued with a process and visual vocabulary entirely her own. The idiom she explored in *Mountains and Sea* and her subsequent creative output has become known as the stain technique. Clement Greenberg, the prominent art critic with whom she was romantically involved at the time, famously took her to Pollock's studio on Long Island where she claimed to have been importantly inspired to develop her own idiom. Frankenthaler was inspired to take Pollock to the next level with what has become known as her breakthrough work, *Mountains and Sea*. Greenberg introduced Kenneth Noland and Louis Morris to Frankenthaler's breakthrough with a similar visit to her studio. Morris claimed a similar inspiration from Frankenthaler as she had received from Pollock. The lore that has developed around these visits has been engraved in the art historical narrative that is

unquestioned today in the story about developments in the New York School following the first-generation Abstract Expressionists. I will argue that this lore, in conjunction with the many additional mythical stories that have become part of the critical narrative of Frankenthaler, has played a significant role in excusing Frankenthaler from consideration among the innovative and influential artists of the period by constraining the focus of scholarship on several themes.

While both Noland and Greenberg appeared to hold her work in high esteem, a broader critical appreciation for her breakthrough would not come until the early 1960s. This critical welcome can be traced to two important events of the time: the publication of Greenberg's article on Noland and Louis in 1960, and the solo exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Frankenthaler's work from the 1950s. The combination of events appears to have heightened awareness of her work such that *Mountains and Sea* would be acknowledged by artists, critics and art historians alike for its value as a significant artistic breakthrough. Although Greenberg's essay has been considered as a generally positive factor in the critical reception of Frankenthaler, it introduced an element of ambiguity to her status, for where she had previously been consistently considered an Abstract Expressionist, Greenberg's characterization placed her at the point of departure from Abstract Expressionism in a category he later termed Post Painterly Abstraction. Thus began the first of several important labeling issues that has thematically predominated critical and academic discourse concerning the oeuvre of Frankenthaler.

Criticism and scholarship on Frankenthaler's oeuvre have in large measure focused on singular perspectives of art analysis. Critics during the 1950s and 1960s focused almost exclusively on formal and technical analysis of her work. A few notable exceptions include critics who take an art historical perspective in adopting the lore about the extent of her inspiration by Pollock's technique. These commentators tend to focus on technical aspects to

contextualize her in an art historical context where influence and innovation are paramount to the neglect of other aspects, thus concentrating the discussion on whether and to what extent her technique can be considered either imitative or derivative of Pollock. Critics also use her departure from Pollock as a basis for questioning the extent of her influence on Morris and Louis. This history has led to the well-documented problem of Frankenthaler's continuous assessment in terms of "other" – other that preceded her (Pollock) and other that succeeded her (Louis and Morris).

As she painted in the 1960s, Frankenthaler continued both to develop and to refine the stain technique, as well as to experiment with movement away from it. By design, she did not constrict herself to painting in a fixed mode within a readily identifiable visual idiom. Her work thus took on a more varied fabric that was praised at the time by her followers. Throughout this period, art historians and critics continued to categorize her primarily as an Abstract Expressionist. In the 1980s and later, however, the ambiguity introduced by Greenberg became more pronounced as Frankenthaler was categorized less as an Abstract Expressionist and more as a Color Field Painter in comparative analyses and exhibits. At the same time, there was limited scholarly attention to the importance of her work, a development which appears attributable, at least in part, to the on-going ambiguity about the appropriate stylistic characterization and thus her consideration in the canon.

Although her work had been well-received, Frankenthaler has remained notably absent from consideration as a major artist of the era. Irving Sandler identified this gap as early as 1977. He included Frankenthaler among the second-generation Abstract Expressionists who were "acclaimed" in the fifties, went into "decline" by the end of that decade, and were ultimately

"eclipsed by a third generation, the innovators of Pop, Op, Minimal and Conceptual Art.[1]" Thus, for Sandler, Frankenthaler's absence from critical focus was symptomatic of a generational issue, not a gendered one.

Despite Sandler's astute observation, Frankenthaler and her peers remained absent from subsequent canonical works. She (and they) were absent from William Seitz's 1983 tome *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, as well as Douglas Shultz's 1987 compilation *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*. The muted attention paid to her work began to be noticed by feminist scholars beginning in the 1990s. Combining the desire to reconcile the male-dominated world of Abstract Expressionism with the images painted by Frankenthaler during the period, they identified a cause in the critical writings about Frankenthaler. In the words of Lisa Saltzman, "categories of gender and their stabilization were a persistent, if unacknowledged, critical preoccupation."[2] The response from these feminist critics was two-fold: frame the critical discourse that Frankenthaler consistently encountered as gender-biased, and rebut it directly in gendered terms. This introduced another characteristic that prevails in critical discourse around Frankenthaler's work – gender. This outcome is ironic given Frankenthaler's clear acknowledgement that, while her gender was a variable in the production of her work, she preferred that it not be taken as a prevailing factor.

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1. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970), 9.

2. Lisa Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Painting," in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 373.

The history of scholarship and criticism about the oeuvre of Frankenthaler can, then, be characterized by a consistent focus on labels and on the reconsideration of certain myths that have become entrenched in the art historical narrative. As a result, art critics and historians have lost sight of the important contribution of Frankenthaler as an artist. Ambiguity about her style – is it Abstract Expressionist, Post Painterly Abstraction, or Color Field? – appears to be a considerable factor in her exclusion from canonical studies because she does not neatly fit into the style boxes the authors set out to describe. Moreover, while the most recent scholarship applying several feminist ideologies is an important contribution to the field, it has, in the work of Gohari and Griselda Pollock, reinforced the topic of gender in scholarship about Frankenthaler without taking up the fundamental question of her technical innovation.[3]

In questioning the absence of Helen Frankenthaler from much of the art historical narrative of mid-twentieth century art in New York, recent criticism and scholarship has been offered though a feminist lens in which she may be seen implicitly as a victim of circumstance defined by her gender. It is true that scholars who adopt a feminist approach have objectives beyond those of technique, form and artistic comparison. For example the first-generation feminist art historian Griselda Pollock described her objective to "reject evaluative criticism" in favor of concentration on "historical forms of explanation of women's artistic production."[4] More recently, Janet Wolff set out to strive for "not so much a filling-in of gaps in the story of

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3. I acknowledge this may in fact be by design, at least in the case of Pollock. As Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews have observed, Pollock and Rozsika Parker "took fundamentally new directions from earlier surveys by rejecting evaluative criticism altogether." Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (Sept. 1987): 328. I will argue later that this approach has unintentionally contributed in part to the lack of inclusion of Frankenthaler in the canon.

4. Griselda Pollock, "Women, Art and Ideology: Questions for Feminist Art Historians," *Woman's Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1983): 42.

the modern, but rather the analytics of a sympathetic but critical engagement with that story."[5] Such has been the situation with much of recent scholarship on Frankenthaler. While this scholarship has offered important insights into socio-cultural and psychological factors that proffer partial explanations for Frankenthaler's absence from the canon, it has not resulted in her inclusion therein, three decades or more after its initial earliest publications. This, of course, is not the objective of contemporary feminist criticism: as Pollock also observed, "the desire is not to integrate 'women artists' within the dominant narrative of art history."[6] There is an inherent irony in Pollock's articulation of objectives – which remain laudable, important and productive – within the broader art historical narrative, for such scholarship on Frankenthaler often is initiated *because* she is not in the canon, yet the objective of such study is not to bring her in but instead to expose broader societal biases that explain the exclusion.

Feminist criticism has contributed importantly to a broader understanding of some of the latent biases that women artists have faced. But despite these successes, Frankenthaler remains absent from recent canonical works. Notably, she is absent from works by authors whose set out to address the very absence of women artists from the canon, including Ann Eden Gibson in her recent publication *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*. The critical timeline I have described above calls into question the argument made in recent scholarship that Frankenthaler's absence is directly related to the issue of her gender in the historical moment of Abstract Expressionism, suggesting that the reason is more complex and nuanced.

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5. Janet Wolff, "The Feminine in Modern Art: Benjamin, Simmel and the Gender of Modernity," *SAGE* 17, no. 6 (2000): 47.

6. Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women," 284.

But the singular focus of feminist criticism is not alone in the history of scholarship and criticism about Frankenthaler. For as long as she has been a subject of criticism, critics have often approached her work through a single critical lens, frequently identifiable as a brand or trademark of the critic herself. Gregory Battcock alludes to the implications of this development in his observation that "[t]oday's critic is beginning to seem almost as essential to the development – indeed, the identification – of art as the artist himself."[7] While the symbiotic relationship that has developed between the two can advance the artist's career, it can also stifle it through codification of a narrative early on in one's career with such firmness that it cannot be undone as it becomes, in essence, the default narrative.

I accept as foundational to this assessment that the collective critical past (and present) are facts that have contributed to the established narrative. But, as the critic may have an interest and motive beyond that of the artist, the critic likely exposes her own biases in her product. My objective is not to address the broader biases but instead to ask why today Frankenthaler is not recognized as firmly in the narrative. In other words, my objective is about a specific artist and not about a broader social, psychological, sociological or feminist analysis. In approaching my subject in this manner, I will demonstrate the limitations of the silos of criticism that form Frankenthaler's critical past and present, as well as evidence that certain early limitations remain embedded in the Frankenthaler story that is told today.

If scholarly attention alone is understood to be a sign of artistic achievement, then Frankenthaler is likely destined, at best, to remain a footnote in the art historical canon, a mere bridge between the Abstract Expressionists and the 1960s Color Field Painters. Yet another

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7. Gregory Battcock, *The New Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966), 13.

prevailing force has emerged during this same period – that of the museum and its curatorial discretion. Frankenthaler has, especially during the last two decades, been the subject of several informative shows at regional museums and galleries. These exhibitions, frequently arranged around output from specific periods, have served to maintain a sharp historical focus on the importance of Frankenthaler as an artist with a unique contribution. They have done so through thoughtful curatorial decisions and accompanying catalog discussions that focus less on an historical assessment of critical reception and comparative assessment against Pollock, Louis, or Noland in favor of a contemporary assessment of the unique idiom she developed and employed with relative consistency throughout her career. The number and frequency of these exhibitions gives hope that Frankenthaler can and will be recognized in the art historical narrative for the significance of her contribution. Yet they alone will not suffice to remediate her absence. History has shown that important and varied scholarship, in conjunction with curatorial attention, leads to and sustains an artist's placement in the canon. If scholarship continues on its present path with its concentration on her gender, then I believe she will continue as a footnote in art history, perhaps even losing her status as the bridge between Pollock and Color Field Painting and instead representing a "bridge to nowhere"[8] as the myths remain unchallenged.

8. Suzanne Hudson, "A Comma in the Place Where a Period Might Have Gone," in *"The Heroine Paint" After Frankenthaler*, ed. Katie Segal (New York: Gagosian, 2015), 226.

Contextual Analysis

Important contributions have advanced a deeper understanding of Helen Frankenthaler's work, process and style in four principal categories: documented assessment by art critics, monographs and exhibition catalogs dedicated to her oeuvre; chapters and references in studies of eras, styles, or groupings of artists; and scholarly articles assessing her work, primarily approached from a feminist perspective. Embedded within the chronological progression of these publications are critical points of art historical relevance, from the discovery of Frankenthaler as an artist to be noted and followed, to a gradual erosion of critical appreciation of her status and value in the contemporary canon, to a scholarly dialogue about her gender that seeks to understand its role in her failure to be recognized in the canon. An analysis of the various categories of writing about Frankenthaler shows the movement away from formal and technical analysis, to art historical and contextual analysis, to gender-focused analysis. While commentators have observed the lack of recognition of Frankenthaler in the 'history of art' as early as 1977, she remains absent from the broader historical tale today. I will argue that this is due in significant part to the shift away from innovative formal and technical analysis in favor of a concentration on revisiting the various myths that have developed in the art history of Helen Frankenthaler.

Analysis of the body of work that addresses Frankenthaler also shows that museums and art critics in large measure have been the principal sources of meaningful contributions to the body of literature concerning the artist. Scholarly journalism has been notably scant and, as observed above, primarily from feminist art historians. There is evidence to suggest that the lack of acknowledgment of Frankenthaler as an important artist during the 1960s by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg may lie in an underlying gender bias. Yet acknowledgement of the absence of her and her second-generation colleagues from the art historical narrative was

identified as early as 1979 by Irving Sandler, and his observation did not result in a change. It may be that scholars do not in fact believe Frankenthaler's work rises to the level of importance that I believe it warrants, but there is scant evidence to support this argument, as one would expect to see more contemporary conclusions of her lack of importance. These do not exist, and instead the body of literature in this vein rests again on the comments of Greenberg and Rosenberg from almost a half a century ago. The lack of scholarly attention thus seems to be part of the broader problem of the lack of recognition of women artists from the early to mid-twentieth century in the canon. While scholars have successfully highlighted this issue, rehabilitation is more challenging because of the number of women artists who warrant attention and the resulting choice that the writer must make about which to include for consideration. I will address this point in greater detail in Chapter 3.

The earliest analyses of Frankenthaler's work appeared in art reviews in newspapers and periodicals, with the first notable commentary following the exhibition of the now-iconic *Mountains and Sea* (Fig. 1) in 1953. While *Mountains and Sea* is universally understood today to mark a critical step in her accession to artistic maturity through the establishment of a signature style that would inspire a new generation of artists, including Morris Louis and Kenneth Nolan, its initial critical reception was unfavorable on formal and technical grounds in large measure because she was criticized for characteristics that were *not* imitative of Pollock. Phyllis Rosenzweig later noted this phenomenon in her observation that "Frankenthaler's new work was initially greeted without enthusiasm by critics who judged it according to standards of action painting, and thus found it thin, decorative, and 'uninvolved.'"[9] Similarly, Stuart Preston of the

9. Phyllis Rosenzweig, *The Fifties: Aspects of Painting in New York* (Washington: The Smithsonian Institution, 1980), 17.

New York Times called the show an "imprudent exhibition," with little of significance beyond the "most adequate . . . sweet and ambitious landscapes."[10] Sam Feinstein, in his review of the show in *Art Digest,* was no less critical: "Dated 1952, *Mountains and Sea* is lyric, washy, a composite of fluid spontaneities."[11] In other work from the exhibit, he observed – unfavorably as well – color relationships between the pale, spotted colors and the more jarring blacks and browns, interactions that were troubling given the white unpainted areas.[12] Rosensweig's observations almost thirty years later pinpoint the onset of the ironic critical dilemma that Frankenthaler faced: while Frankenthaler sought to move from Pollock to something beyond, critics initially bound her to the restrictions of Pollock's style of Abstract Expressionism by criticizing her for failing to imitate it.[13]

As a young artist in search of her own style, Frankenthaler continued painting experimentally, and critical reception began to turn modestly in her favor with her 1957 exhibit also at the Tibor de Nagy gallery, also on formal and technical grounds. A New York Times review was generally positive, calling out her use of "diluted paints which sink deep into the canvas like dyes," while [t]ans, whites, soft reds, blues merge in veil-like surfaces."[14] Elizabeth

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10. Stuart Preston, "Diverse Showings," *New York Times*, February 8, 1953.

11. S[am] F[einstein], "Fifty Seventh Street in Review," *Art Digest* 27 (February 15, 1953): 20.

12. If his 1953 review was unfavorable, it was also prescient in its identification of these two aspects of Frankenthaler's painting that would later be most appreciated.

13. Rosenzweig characterized the issue as "the emphasis that certain critics placed on the gestural aspects of Abstract Expressionism throughout the decade and the degree to which this resulted in their imposing similar critical language on very dissimilar paintings." Rosenzweig, *The Fifties,* 9.

14. D.A., "Art: Metal Sculpture," *The New York Times,* February 12, 1957.

Pollet's review in *Arts Magazine* was unambiguously flattering, identifying some themes that would imbue critical writing on her work in the future including her imagination and creation of a "world almost totally divorced from any recognizable reality – much more so than in some of the other abstract expressionists." Pollet observes that her work is not singly directional, as some paintings are "[m]ore copious in color, paint and brushwork, in contrasted forms and textures – more expected, that is, from someone who has been influenced by De Kooning and Pollock."[15] Pollet's review notably offers a critical acknowledgement and tacit acceptance of Frankenthaler's desire to break from the Pollock tradition in her lack of a singular direction in painting, marking an important turning point in her career. Between 1953 and 1957, therefore, Frankenthaler consistently maintained a methodological approach that was inspired by Pollock yet revised with her own adaptations of liquidity, form and color. But this time, the critics were receiving her output more favorably.[16]

1960 was an important year for Frankenthaler as it was the year the Jewish Museum in New York mounted a solo show of her work from the last decade. Reviews of the show were tepid at best. Barbara Butler acknowledges Frankenthaler for the "particular vision" she had been expanding and refining over the decade. But she offers two criticisms that tip the scale of her review to the unfavorable: that the works in the exhibit are "fragile" individually and that they are not as impactful as a "canvas painted primarily with a brush or a palette knife." Moreover,

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15. E[lizabeth] P[ollet], "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 31 (March 1957): 54.

16. Rosenzweig's attribution of this development in part to "the shift in critical emphasis, about mid-decade, away from the emotional implications of gesturalism toward a concentration on formal values," is a logical conclusion given the emerging trends of the era. Rosenzweig, *The Fifties*, 9. However, Donald Judd's comments from 1960, which I will address later, suggest that Rosensweig's view was not universally accepted and that there were still important critical adherents to the Pollock-inspired gesturalism.

she characterizes the works as "quietly beautiful," echoing Butler's comments. In a related vein, Frank O'Hara's observed in the exhibition catalogue that they have a "Watteau-like sweetness." Ultimately, though, "the sensation is more like that of a watercolour than of oil painting," and O'Hara's comment suggests an unambiguous preference for the latter.[17]

A generally favorable formal and technical commentary by Donald Judd was offered in a review of the Jewish Museum show in *Arts Magazine*. Similar to Butler's suggestion but stronger in the tonal degree of praise, he also observes that the paintings "contribute remarkably to one another."[18] He compares Frankenthaler's work to Pollock's black-and-white paintings because Frankenthaler had acknowledged that work as her point of departure, yet his choice of language in this regard been construed in feminist criticism as evidence of his reliance on gendered language in his review. In fact, his commentary is quite technical, assessing the positivity of mark and bare canvas, the polarity between the viewer's perception of paint and canvas, and a diversity of elements that produces tonality. These words do not appear inherently gendered but are instead technical observations about style and process. Moreover, Judd cannot be faulted entirely for comparing Frankenthaler to Pollock since Pollock was Frankenthaler's self-selected point of departure. On balance, Judd's commentary on the Jewish Museum show prefigures his assessment that Pollock represented a pinnacle in art that few if any that followed him could ever attain, as demonstrated in his later enumeration of Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland and Olitski among those whom others have inaccurately, in Judd's view, compared in importance to Pollock. Thus, Judd's comments in context reflect more of a personal idealization

17. Barbara Butler, "Movie Stars and Other Members of the Cast," *Art International* 4 (February-March 1960): 55.

18. D[onald] J[udd], "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 34 (March 1960): 55.

of Pollock's idiom – a continuation, in effect, of the arguments offered by other critics in response to Frankenthaler's 1953 show – than an inherent bias about Frankenthaler as a female artist.[19]

The year 1960 was also important for Frankenthaler in a more subtle way, for it was during that year that Frankenthaler's former love interest, the critic Clement Greenberg, offered her a distinction of questionable impact in framing her role in the art historical narrative. As one of the foremost critics of contemporary painting, Greenberg had been relatively muted in regard to Frankenthaler and her work until this time notwithstanding, or perhaps because of, their relationship. While he had written about many first-generation Abstract Expressionists, including Pollock, Motherwell and Gottlieb, he offered little critical mention of those like Frankenthaler who were categorized as second-generation. This changed with his 1960 publication of the essay "Louis and Noland" in which he acknowledged Frankenthaler as a source of inspiration to Louis to "change his direction abruptly."[20] Greenberg praised Louis's use of color to create depth by "adapting watercolor technique to oil and using this paint on an absorbent surface,"[21] offering praise to techniques and effects that Frankenthaler used and for which she was judged harshly as not active enough or as feminine. Greenberg's inclusion of Frankenthaler has been viewed positively as opening the door for recognition of *Mountains and Sea* as groundbreaking, and the

19. In 1967, Judd enhanced the clarity of his high regard for Pollock: "The idea that Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland and Olitski form a line of advance from Pollock's work is ridiculous. There are new and different aspects in Louis' and Noland's work but in general it is not as unusual and remarkable as Pollock's." Don Judd, "Jackson Pollock," *Arts Magazine* 41 (April 1967): 32.

20. Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International* 4 (May 1960): 27.

21. Greenberg, 27.

critical reception she enjoyed in the years following seems to support this reading. Yet it also introduced an ambiguity to categorization of her work, no longer as an Abstract Expressionist but as a Post Painterly Abstractionist. Moreover, the irony of his writing about Noland and Louis when the myth about their artistic development established Greenberg himself as the link introducing Frankenthaler to them cannot be disregarded. In any event, Greenberg's article can be read as the onset of the artistic dilemma Carl Belz so aptly described: "Related to both camps but defined by neither, Frankenthaler's achievement in the 1950s became, like many other aspects of the decade, a cultural elision."[22] It should be noted that Belz's commentary about the 1950s is not framed as a gender question but more a generational one, a notion echoing by a similar observation by Irving Sandler which will be addressed later.

The year following the show at the Jewish Museum brought more consistently favorable reviews, still as an Abstract Expressionist notwithstanding Greenberg's new appellation but, at least, with her own clear and critically acceptable idiom. For example, John Ashbery called her out as "the most classic of New York Abstract Expressionists" in his review of her show at Galerie Lawrence in Paris, continuing her characterization as an Abstract Expressionist. Unlike Judd's technical assessment of diminished "action" effectiveness in his comparison of Frankenthaler with Pollock, Ashbery identifies action in the work "but it is directed at no one in particular." He observes that the sobriety of the palette and thinness of the paint contrast with the "exuberant action technique" to create an "appealing austerity."[23]

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22. Carl Belz, *Frankenthaler: The 1950s* (Waltham: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1981), 12.

23. John Ashbery, "Paris Notes," *Art International* 5 (20 November 1961): 50.

A critical breakthrough of overtly positive criticism was achieved with E. C. Goossen's 1961 article.[24] The critic positions Frankenthaler among a group of "fledgling" painters who identified that a new phase of art was emerging at the time they arrived in New York. He situates this group in the midst of Abstract Expressionism, with Frankenthaler seated "just about on dead center in respect to the stylistic polarities of abstract expressionism."[25] For Goossen, many within this group had been praised too soon and had failed to go beyond the stage of "apprenticeship," but Frankenthaler had matured nicely.

Going beyond mere compliment, Goossen makes several key observations of lasting import on the critical discourse on Frankenthaler's oeuvre. First, he discounts the length of time it has taken for *Mountains and Sea* and *Eden* to be recognized as important works from the fifties "given the careless manner in which our society makes reputations." The latter comment is resounding even today. Second, he credits Frankenthaler with having avoided being trapped by the "fashion" she helped create, a trap in which others had succumbed. She did so by having "kept the door open by painting pictures rather than variations on a theme."[26]

While Goossen's essay was glowing in so many respects, the impact of his critical support for Frankenthaler has been diminished in recent scholarship because of emphasis on his characterization of her work as "feminine."[27] Like Judd, he did so in the context of a comparison – albeit favorable this time – to Pollock. But, as with Judd's less favorable commentary, the

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24. Goossen, "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art International* 5 (20 October 1961): 76-79.

25. Goossen, 77.

26. Goossen, 79.

27. Goossen, 78.

prevailing positive assessment of his article has been overlooked in favor of a focus on the possibility of gender bias in his choice of words. In fact, the positive commentary by both Goossen and Judd has of late been associated with several exceptionally-biased commentaries. A Sydney Tillium review from 1959 criticizes Frankenthaler's work at the André Emmerich Gallery as both narcissistic and reflective of the influence of her husband, Robert Motherwell.[28] This review can be dismissed for the inherent inconsistency of the critics' points coupled with his lack of explanation for what he means – for example, how is her work narcissistic, and which elements reflect her husband's influence? – that do not even pretend to evaluate her art. In addition, comments by Donald Judd and Harold Rosenberg have been singled out for their criticism of the lack of "action" of the paint on Frankenthaler's canvases as compared with Pollock.[29] Other examples include comments by the critics James Schuyler and Anne Seelye in 1960, as well as B.H. Friedman in 1966. While several of these comments invoke clear gender stereotypes, the severity and number support a conclusion that they were the infrequent exception rather than the rule.

Critical reception at the time of Frankenthaler's first major retrospective at the Whitney in 1969 was overtly positive. In a review in the *Jewish Chronicle*, Peter Stone observes that, while she is a "limited artist" with a focus on color and color relationships, he praises her in this regard

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28. S[ydney] T[illium], "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 33 (May 1959): 56.

29. Belz cites two reviews of Frankenthaler by Donald Judd from the early sixties as examples. While he doesn't explain the issue directly, he suggests it lies in Judd's choice of words – "cool, tough and rigorous" for Pollock, and Frankenthaler's "softness" that "would be more profound if it were also hard." He also highlights Harold Rosenberg's comments that "with Frankenthaler, the action is at a minimum; it is the paint that is active." I will discuss Rosenberg's commentary in greater detail later in this paper. Judd and Rosenberg as quoted in Belz, "Field of Dreams," 91.

as "an absolutely ravishing colourist" who gives "the most exquisite pleasure."[30] A *Time* magazine article lauds her for her past and present work and foretells a continuing bright future as "an heiress to a tradition that reaches back beyond Pollock."[31] Hilton Kramer, in his *New York Times* review, speaks favorably of the exhibit as evidence of both solid curation as well as Frankenthaler's status as one of the best contemporary painters.[32]

It would be unfair not to comment on a 1969 article by Barbara Rose, an art critic and friend of Frankenthaler's, in which she reviews Frankenthaler's 1969 Whitney. While overall a positive review, Rose employed language that, when used by male critics, had been characterized as gendered by feminist critics. In particular, she observes the artist's movement from the lyricism of her early work to gravity, solemnity and restraint in the later work included in the exhibit.[33] As described below, a characterization of Frankenthaler's work as lyrical has been cited as problematic to the feminist critic. Moreover, Rose's focus on Frankenthaler's adoption of Pollock's technique marks the beginning of the myth of Frankenthaler's association with Pollock as *the* essential influence in her development, an assertion that will continue to pre-occupy critics and academics through modern times.

By the late 1960s, although Frankenthaler was praised by critics consistently in the art magazines and mainstream press, those critics who built their reputations on lengthier essays – who arguably built a personal brand around their approach to "isms" including criticism – took a

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30. Peter Stone, "Colourist of Ravishing Beauty," *Jewish Chronicle,* May 23, 1969.

31. "Heiress to a New Tradition," *Time,* March 28, 1969, 72.

32. Hilton Kramer, "Abstraction and the 'Landscape Paradigm,'" New York Times, March 2, 1969.

33. Barbara Rose, "Painting Within the Tradition: The Career of Helen Frankenthaler," *Art Forum* 7, no. 8 (April 1969): 28-33.

notably less sanguine view. Clement Greenberg, the critic and friend of Frankenthaler's with whom she explored art and nature shortly after college, reduces Frankenthaler to a parenthetical in his writings published between 1957-1969. In his essay on Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland cited earlier, Greenberg identifies the two as "serious candidates for major status." He carves Frankenthaler out as a special case, suggesting that she may be an important artist but leaving the reader hanging.[34] In a later interview, the roll call of artists who he believes are producing "major art" includes Louis and Noland and excludes Frankenthaler, effectively clarifying his earlier parenthetical and effectively eliminating Frankenthaler from the category of major contemporary artists.[35] The other prominent critic of the time, Harold Rosenberg, was more severe than Greenberg in his unwillingness to cede any attribution of innovation to Frankenthaler. Asserting that her reputation derives from her adaptation of Pollock's approach to pigment – restricting technical and formal analysis more than any previous critic to a question of pigment – he acknowledged the attractiveness of her colors but concludes that there is nothing in her work to see.[36]

The absence of Frankenthaler in the art historical narrative told by Greenberg and Rosenberg would be addressed by Irving Sandler in his 1978 publication of *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*. He attributes this outcome to the fact that important artists of the second generation of the New York School had been overlooked by

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34. Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," 28.

35. "Interview Conducted by Lily Leino," in *Clement Greenberg*, ed. John O'Brian, 4:303-314.

36. Harold Rosenberg, *The De-Definition of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

scholars and critics who were attentive only to the first and third generations. For Sandler, Frankenthaler's "breakthrough" was inspired by Pollock but was unique, especially as it developed following *Mountains and Sea*, in its reliance less on drawing than on "relating discrete areas of color."[37] This work represents an important point of departure in scholarship concerning Frankenthaler in that it is the first important identification of the gap of Frankenthaler and the entire generation of her peer artists from the art historical timeline of Abstract Expressionism.

The first significant tome dedicated to a comprehensive study of Frankenthaler's work to date was Barbara Rose's monograph published in 1972.[38] This volume provides a comprehensive biography of Frankenthaler's life, detailing her artistic early education in New York City at Brearley and Dalton, and as an undergraduate student at Bennington College. Rose supplements the biographical components with perspectives on the various influences and inspirations that were prominent in Frankenthaler's early years, including nature, Cubism, Cézanne, Kandinsky and Pollock, as well as the contemporary artists and teachers Tamayo Rufino and Hans Hofmann. With this examination of her education and artistic influences and experiences, Rose lays a solid foundation on which she builds a critical assessment of the significant contribution Frankenthaler made to American art in the mid-twentieth century. Rose's monograph was, at the time of publication, the most comprehensive biographical and critical work on Frankenthaler's career, and it remains important today for its establishment of a biographical timeline supplemented by information to support formal and technical analysis. It is important to note, however, that Rose was more a critic than a scholar. While her work remains important for its

37. Irving Sandler, *The New York School: Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties* (New York: Harper & Row: 1978), 23.

38. Barbara Rose, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972).

biographical content and critical analysis of form and technique, it does not achieve the depth of analysis one expects in a monograph dedicated to a great artist.

The art historical world would have to wait another twenty years for the publication of John Elderfield's monograph before this void would be addressed, as Rose's monograph maintained its status as the *only* significant publication dedicated to Frankenthaler until Elderfield's publication in 1989.[39] Elderfield supplements Rose's monograph with meaningful historical, biographical, technical, and formal analysis. Of particular importance is his exploration of the artists who influenced Pollock on the basis of his assertion that "[j]ust who first used stained paint is no more of an issue than who painted the first abstract painting, first striped painting, or anything of that sort."[40] In fact, his comparison of work by the artist James Brooks from 1949 to both Pollock and Frankenthaler underscores the point that staining as technique should not be read as the exclusive dominion of these two but part of a broader tradition that includes watercolor. It becomes, in essence, more about the effect than the technique itself. To this end, he includes Rothko, Newman and Still among her influences – names from the first-generation New York School that had notably been absent in other attributions. His discounting of the notion of who gets credit for first uses establishes the foundation on which he convincingly dispels the myth that Frankenthaler was not an innovator but instead an imitator of Pollock:

> Frankenthaler deserves credit not for "inventing" the stain technique but alone for seeing how it could be used not in imitation of some other technique but for the capabilities it uniquely allowed. This was her invention: to elevate to the production of important art a technique whose possibilities had hitherto been only dimly grasped. And it was as surely

39. John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971).

40. Elderfield, 76.

> hers as was the Cubists' "invention" of collage after centuries of its use in minor decoration.[41]

Yet while he asserts the novelty of her technical approach, he also supports its importance contextually with biographical, historical and formal discussions that demonstrate the breadth of her contribution beyond the technical.

Many exhibition catalogues with accompanying essays have contributed importantly to the evolution of scholarship on Frankenthaler both during her active years and since her death. In the catalog accompanying the 1960 exhibition at The Jewish Museum, Frank O'Hara observed that Frankenthaler "brings her own authoritative, and at time speculative, lyricism"[42] to each work. He elaborates on the concept of the lyrical –one which, as noted above, will become problematic in certain feminist analyses – in "the meaning of art to the artist, particularly to the artist in the act of 'receiving' lyrical insight."[43] As an exhibition catalog, his commentary is of course positive overall. But his categorization of her work as lyrical has been construed as a reflection of gender bias notwithstanding its common usage in criticism at the time of artists who were women and men.

Frankenthaler's work was included in the 1964 exhibition curated by Clement Greenberg and entitled *Post Painterly Abstraction*. Greenberg selected three of Frankenthaler's recent works to be included. While her inclusion in the show as an artist entering her second decade as a professional was important in her development, it marks the moment where critical ambiguity about her idiom is introduced: is she an Abstract Expressionist, or is she a Post Painterly

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41. Elderfield, 76.

42. Frank O'Hara, *Helen Frankenthaler Paintings* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1960), 5.

43. O'Hara, 6.

Abstractionist? Greenberg offers the designation as an appropriate characterization for the artists in the show who "all learned from Painterly Abstraction" but who have reacted against its standardization. In the case of Frankenthaler, this can be read as distancing her further from Pollock while acknowledging her own idiom that other critics had failed to see. Yet in its distinction of Frankenthaler and her peers from the 'traditional' Abstract Expressionists, Greenberg's creation of a new categorization complicated the art historical narrative of the 1950s and 1960s by obfuscating the broader category that remains prevalent even today. Moreover, Greenberg's decision to include both Morris Louis and Frankenthaler in this exhibit recalls commentary from his 1960 article on Louis and Noland in which he argues for their status as "major artists" while giving Frankenthaler status as a special case, as well as for inspiring Louis to "change direction abruptly."[44] He appears to suggest, but falls short of stating, that Frankenthaler is a great artist, and he reiterates a connection that has become the lore of Frankenthaler as a link between Abstract Expressionism and the 1960s Color Field Painting. Thus, the exhibit and the previously published article at best hint teasingly at the possibility of her importance but render ambiguous the precise reason why she should be granted this designation.

E. C. Goossen's contribution to the catalogue accompanying the 1969 Whitney exhibit is notable for its establishment of several themes: a description of the extent of Frankenthaler's 1952 "breakthough" original method of painting, the evolution of her application of this breakthrough with an emphasis on her development of color relationships as predominant over form, and the consistency of Frankenthaler's return to the natural world for inspiration

44. Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," 27.

throughout her artistic journey.[45] Importantly, Goossen highlights Frankenthaler's practice of approaching each canvas uniquely without necessarily a unifying idea or theme to bind a series, a prescient observation that would impact her perception over time by critics.[46]

The catalog essay by Carl Belz accompanying the 1981 exhibition at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University addresses his observation of the absence of work from the 1950s in the art historical narrative, the same theme Irving Sandler had articulated in 1978. Belz asserts that "[t]he rich, varied, and complex ideas and insights that shaped fifties art, its particular attitude, have been almost disregarded or forgotten. Thus, the few artists of the period who continued to command interest after 1960 rarely have been treated with reference to the aesthetic context in which they developed."[47] Belz seeks to correct this, at least in part, with his argument that Frankenthaler is "one of America's foremost painters" not only because of her "breakthrough" painting *Mountains and Sea*, but also because of her consistent production of paintings of quality. He establishes the two-fold challenges critical reception of her work has identified: the fact that her work does not fit neatly in any single side of the gestural versus formal debate, and the tendency of art historians and critics to "treat works of art as stages in an evolutionary progression."[48] Belz addresses these challenges by focusing on the paintings as experiences in and of themselves, albeit at an historical moment in time, instead of as moments

45. E. C. Goossen, *Helen Frankenthaler* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), 8-18.

46. Goossen, 18.

47. Carl Belz, *Frankenthaler: The 1950's*, 9.

48. Belz, 14.

in art historical development that can only be appreciated by reference to what happened prior to and following that moment.

E. A. Carmean prepared the catalog accompanying the 1989 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[49] In his contribution to this exhibit – the last major retrospective of Frankenthaler's oeuvre – he enhanced what was arguably the most important Frankenthaler exhibit to date with a novel approach to the catalogue. Rather than offer a chronological or thematic printed overlay to the visual offering, he documented deliberate and specific studies of individual paintings. This appropriately assisted the reader and the viewer in discovering Carmean's general view that "the visual diversity of Frankenthaler's painting from picture to picture is extreme."[50] Importantly, he establishes a foundational perspective in his discussion of the seminal work *Mountains and Sea* that frames consideration of her later work: Frankenthaler is an experimenter by nature, and thus one should not anticipate a consistent repetition of style and trope when comparing her work over the course of her career.

Subsequent exhibits and accompanying catalogues enhanced the scholarly contribution by predecessors including Goossen and Carmean. The catalogue published on the occasion of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's 1998 exhibit on Frankenthaler's work between 1956 and 1959 offers two important perspectives on this early period.[51] Susan Cross contextualizes Frankenthaler's arrival on the New York scene as an inheritor of a revolutionary approach to painting from the first generation Abstract Expressionists, as a significant contributor to the

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49. E. A. Carmean, Jr., *Helen Frankenthaler: A Retrospective* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989).

50. Carmean, *Helen Frankenthaler: A Retrospective*, 5.

51. Julia Brown, ed., *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1998).

revolutionary cause with her adoption of the Pollock ethos over the de Kooning, and her advance of technique with her novel approach to the integration of color and form.[52] Julia Brown continues with a convincing technical analysis of various aspects of her work including subject/image, process, drawing and color, and space. She concludes with a discussion about beauty – an interesting concept typically associated with femininity that contributes meaningfully to the on-going dialogue about Frankenthaler's contribution as a female artist notwithstanding its brevity.[53]

The American Federation of Arts sponsored a 2007 exhibit entitled *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950-1975*. Its accompanying catalogue included an essay by Karen Wilkin in which the author distinguishes Frankenthaler's work from that of Louis and Noland, the two artists she is said to have inspired: although they all shared the stain procedure as a technical preference, Noland and Louis worked with predetermined forms whereas Frankenthaler worked with spontaneous drawing informed by her keen intuition about color.[54] Wilkin thus sees Frankenthaler as a Color Field Painter who paints with the spontaneity of the gestural artists. In his accompanying essay, Carl Belz expounds on Wilkin's notation of Frankenthaler's color focus as well as on the individuality of her work. He cites the individuality of her canvases as the ostensible driver of the inconsistent characterization of her work as belonging to the 1950s or the

52. Susan Cross, "The Emergence of a Painter," in Brown, *After Mountains and Sea*, 11-25.

53. Julia Brown, "In Pursuit of Beauty: Notes on the Early Paintings of Helen Frankenthaler," in Brown, *After Mountains and Sea*, 49-51.

54. Karen Wilkin, "Notes on Color Field Painting," in *Color as Field: American Painting 1950-1975*, Karen Wilkin, ed. (New York: American Federation of Arts, 2007), 41.

1960, but he concludes that she effectively belongs to both decades and, by implication, to both categorizations.[55]

The exhibition catalogue published in conjunction with The Jewish Museum's 2008 exhibit *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning and American Art, 1940-1976* squarely situates Frankenthaler's breakthrough in *Mountains and Sea* in the broader context of Pollock's and de Kooning's tradition of Abstract Expressionism.[56] Yet it frames Frankenthaler within a subset of the overall Abstract Expressionist movement as a Greenbergian Post Painterly Abstractionist with clear roots in Pollock, with Frankenthaler as the leader who is credited with inspiring others in the category like Louis and Noland, while implicitly categorizing them as the second generation Color Field painters who followed Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt.[57]

Two recent group exhibitions that included Frankenthaler were accompanied by catalogues with scholarship that advances the case for Frankenthaler's importance. A 2016 exhibit organized by the Denver Art Museum entitled *Women of Abstract Expressionism* projects an art historical objective of demonstrating the important role several women, including Frankenthaler, played in the development of Abstract Expressionism. In his contribution to the exhibition catalog, Robert Hobbs argues that the significance of the work produced by these artists as second-generation Abstract Expressionists is distinct from that of the first generation in

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55. Carl Belz, "Field of Dreams," in *Color as Field*, Wilkin, ed., 90.

56. Maurice Berger, "Abstract Expressionism: A Cultural Timeline, 1940-1976, in Norman L. Kleeblatt, ed., *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2008), 25.

57. Norman L. Kleeblatt, "Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Postwar American Art," in Kleeblatt, ed., *Action/Abstraction,* 135-184.

their objective of metonym over metaphor. Hobbs approaches these tropes in a non-gender exclusive manner in order to make the case for the reconstitution of the canon of Abstract Expressionism to include these women.[58] He argues that their focus is distinguishable from that of the first generation "male-dominated" Abstract Expressionism that favored single works of individual brand significance over the "contextual affiliations of the world around them" offered by Frankenthaler and her colleagues.[59]

Another recent exhibit at the Provincetown Art Association Museum, in Provincetown, MA, featured Frankenthaler's works from the 1960s painted while she lived in Provincetown. The catalog's impact is less art historical and more contextual, formal and technical in its assessment of Frankenthaler's work from the period. The critic Elizabeth A. T. Smith offers a compelling distinction of Frankenthaler's work product from the 1950s to the 1960s, citing the natural environment of coastal Provincetown, where she lived during her marriage to Robert Motherwell, as meaningfully inspirational to her artistic development.[60] This comparative distinction demonstrates the fact – often used to excuse her inclusion in the Abstract Expressionist roster of artists – that Frankenthaler's art evolved technically as well as formally and inspirationally during her career, due not only to new artistic influences but importantly to environmental influences.

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58. Robert Hobbs, "Krasner, Mitchell and Frankenthaler: Nature as Metonym," in *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, ed. Joan Marter (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2016), 58-67.

59. Hobbs, "Krasner Mitchell and Frankenthaler," 65.

60. Elizabeth A. T. Smith, "East End Light: Frankenthaler in Provincetown in the 1960s," in *Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown* (Provincetown: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 2018), 32-43.

Edited collections offer a source for contextual information about the art historical approach to Abstract Expressionism and the 'isms' that followed. Two categories of relevance to the present discussion emerge: editions that incorporate Frankenthaler, and those that do not. In the former category, Eleanor Munro's *Originals: American Women Artists* is one of the earlier important commentaries intended to address the absence of female artists from the Abstract Expressionist roster. Published originally in 1979, a time which, with hindsight, appears early in the history of feminist scholarship, Munro argues for a more psychological and personal approach to the art produced by the artists she selected, one that seeks to achieve "the substitution – for the future – of the myth of the female artist as survivor, instead of the past, one too valid, of her as victim."[61] Out of this objective emerges, with respect to Frankenthaler, an appreciation for the importance of scale, and what is means, in her work. Moreover, Munro convincingly makes the case for the differences between Frankenthaler and Jackson Pollock in a technical sense in her adoption of tranquility over Pollock's "sublime excess, infernal spinning energy, linear turmoil, psychic contradiction and oncoming doom,"[62] as well as her abandonment of the "slow, gradual overpainting"[63] characteristic of much of the art of the forties in favor of the immediacy of impact akin to that of watercolor. Thus, through a masterly weave of technical, formal and humanistic analysis, Munro paints a clear picture of Frankenthaler as a survivor whose name should survive today in the art historical narrative.

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61. Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1979), 32.

62. Munro, 208.

63. Munro, 218.

Griselda Pollock's chapter entitled "Killing Men and Dying Women: A Woman's Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s" is another of the earlier important feminist commentaries on the period of Abstract Expressionism although it was published seventeen years after's Munro's volume. Pollock is among the most prominent of the first-generation feminist art historians, and her objective in this piece is characteristic of the broader mandate her generation understood themselves to act on. In what she calls a "feminist intervention" in art history, Pollock sets out to "confront the problem of how to 'see' what artists who are women produce." Pollock's effort offers less an art historical assessment of Frankenthaler's oeuvre that it does a view of Frankenthaler as a means to demonstrate the individuality of an artist who is a woman: "The project is to create a covenant – a kind of productive exchange – between two moments of femininity, modernity and representation."[64] Nonetheless, she makes several important assertions as she posits Frankenthaler, along with Lee Krasner, as representing two generations in the Abstract Expressionist category. First, she observes gender stereotypes at play in the comparative depictions of the techniques of Jackson Pollock and Frankenthaler. Pollock argues for a psychoanalytic reading of Jackson Pollock's processes – primarily in his use of aggressive gesture to cover completely the canvas – as a reflection of the "structural condition of modern masculinity" which applies broadly to the prevalent view of Abstract Expressionism as a man's world. Implicitly, the notion of the gestural prong of Abstract Expressionism is thus phallocentric. On the other hand, Frankenthaler represents for Pollock the feminine counterpart "'played in and on that same space – unframed canvas on floor of large studio" that reflects

64. Griselda Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women: A Woman's Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s," in Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, eds., *Avant-gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1996), 288.

sexual difference as a loss of the maternal in its minimal coverage of the canvas.[65] Moreover, Pollock highlights the issue of the language of criticism both in her suggestion concerning the link of the fluidity of Frankenthaler's painting to the female bodily experience, as well as in her observation of the "critical obsession with lyrical or pastoral references" in Frankenthaler's work.[66]

In a related vein, Lisa Saltzman, a contemporary of Griselda Pollock, progressed the themes of process and fluidity in her feminist analysis of Frankenthaler. She argues that the fluidity of Frankenthaler's iconic *Mountains and Sea* resulted in a critical focus on the fluidity of the sea to the neglect of the mountainous terrain, a focus that "provided the touchstone for what became a significantly gendered discourse."[67] For Saltzman, the fluidity evident in the staining process serves as the driver of the "tendency to ascribe femininity to the canvases of female abstract painters," the result of which was a "significantly gendered discourse."[68] She identifies stylistic equivalents in the work of Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, yet she observes significant differences in their critical reception. In sum, she asserts that critics described Louis's work terms associated with masculinity while Frankenthaler's work was described in words associated with femininity.

Consideration of historical overviews that do *not* include Frankenthaler offers additional contextual data to characterize Frankenthaler's place in history. William Seitz's publication from

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65. Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women," 247.

66. Pollock, 247-248, 250.

67. Lisa Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Painting," 376.

68. Saltzman, 373, 375.

1983 entitled *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* was considered an important contribution of scholarship to our understanding of the significance of this genre. [69] Its historical tale is built around six male artists, at least one of whom today is not often cited in broad art historical surveys for his role in this development. Moreover, Seitz fails to mention Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan or Helen Frankenthaler at all. Frankenthaler is also noticeably absent from Michael Auping's compilation *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Development* to which Ann Gibson and Michael Leja contributed. This volume does, at least, include Elaine de Kooning. Over a decade later, Ann Eden Gibson published *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* in which she sets out to re-view Abstract Expressionism through the lens of the politics of race and gender and thus challenge the historical view of the canon. She notably excludes Frankenthaler, Hartigan and Mitchell, however, "[i]n order to keep the number of artists I discuss manageable," the arbitrary line being those who "came to age in the forties."[70] Most recently, Bridget Quinn published her anthology of important women artists. While admittedly her criteria are less scholarly and more passionate – artists she loves – it is notable that Frankenthaler is once again omitted from the ranks of consideration.[71]

There have been few scholarly articles written on the subject of Frankenthaler, and the few that have been published adopt a distinctly feminist perspective. Not much dedicated scholarship of importance was published in journal format until the 2010 publication of Bett

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69. William Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1983).

70. Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xxxiv.

71. Bridget Quinn, *Broad Strokes: 15 Women Who Made Art and Made History (In That Order)* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2017).

Schumacher's article on Frankenthaler in which she contends that Frankenthaler was acutely aware of her gendered disadvantage and thus sought to overcome her gender by replacing it with gender neutrality. For Schumacher, this was an impossible feat to achieve, and accordingly there are inevitable allegorical traces of self on the canvas – for example, in the artist's footprints that appear on *Madridscape*. Ultimately, Schumacher concludes that the artist had to "banish part of herself to succeed," a notion to which I suspect the artist herself would have objected.[72] Schumacher does, however, acknowledge the shortcomings of prior feminist scholarship, arguing that the critical reception of Frankenthaler's work is much more complicated than scholars portray. She calls out specifically Griselda Pollock's claims for "their failure to account for variations, ambiguities, and identification in both the production and reception of her work."[73] Schumacher's scholarship thus seems to portend a shift away from the scholarly concentration on the language of gender in the critical reception of Frankenthaler's work but, as described below, subsequent commentators did not follow Schumacher's lead and instead reverted to the Pollock-esque approach.

Sybil Gohari argues that the gender-centric notions of mid-twentieth century viewers initiated a prejudice that was furthered by subsequent scholars and critics, rendering gender a fundamental notion associated with understanding Frankenthaler's work. She reverts to an analysis of the choice of words of certain critics in the mid-twentieth century concerning Frankenthaler, arguing that critics "frequently infused contemporary notions of gender and

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72. Bett Schumacher, "The Woman Problem: Gender Displacement in the Art of Helen Frankenthaler," *Woman's Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2010): 12-21.

73. Schumacher, 15.

gendered stereotypes."[74] For Gohari, this resulted in the critic's consistent identification of Frankenthaler in relation to others as a follower (in the case of Jackson Pollock) or an artistic link (in the case of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland). In perhaps her most notable observation, Gohari astutely asserts that a comment made by Carmean thirty years ago concerning the lack of important critical literature about her "style, output and innovation"[75] remains applicable today. This apparent call to a reversion to scholarly formal and technical analysis has not since materialized.

Two scholarly articles that do not address Frankenthaler directly but are nonetheless instructive of the critical world in which she painted inform the broader context. In "The Art of Dorothy Knowles: Greenbergian Femininity," Colleen Skidmore contextualizes the style of Canadian artist Dorothy Knowles who had ostensibly received "tremendous support" from Greenberg in the early sixties yet whose work has been read as implicitly feminine. Skidmore provides important evidence of Greenberg's apparent double standard in judging female artists, a standard that might explain why he had written so little about specific woman artists, including Frankenthaler.[76] Fionna Barber offers a relatively contemporaneous view of the critical reception of Willem de Kooning's *Woman I*, first exhibited around the time of Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea*. Astutely observing that "the meaning of a painting such as *Woman I* are determined by the nature of the discursive field which it encounters," she calls for a reinterpretation of de

74. Sybil E. Gohari, "Gendered Reception: There and Back Again: An Analysis of the Critical Reception of Helen Frankenthaler," *Woman's Art Journal* 35, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2014): 33.

75. Gohari, 38.

76. Colleen Skidmore, "The Art of Dorothy Knowles: Greenbergian Femininity," *Woman's Art Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1992): 10-14.

Kooning's iconic painting without regard to the significant history of feminist rebuke it has suffered.[77]

While not strictly linear, a few trends emerge from this summary of the state of scholarship and criticism concerning Frankenthaler. Criticism of Frankenthaler was ambivalent when she first began exhibiting in New York in the early fifties. Although she painted her "breakthrough" in 1952, it was not recognized fully as such until the early 1960s. Although she was generally well-received by critics in the 1960s, she was largely absent from critical consideration by two of the most prominent critics of the day, Greenberg and Rosenberg. There is evidence that, at least for Greenberg, her exclusion may be attributed to a double standard he applied to female artists. Moreover, as Irving Sandler has observed, Frankenthaler suffered the shared fate of artists of the second generation of the New York School by receding out of the critical eye. She remained there, with the exception of the 1989 Whitney Museum retrospective, until the feminist critics began questioning her absence from the canon. Apparently unconvinced by Sandler's conclusion that the broader issue was generational and not gender-based, they applied, and continue to apply, various feminist approaches to explain the absence. Notwithstanding the importance and the compelling conclusions of their work – which remains the most important body of scholarship on Frankenthaler in the recent past – Frankenthaler remains absent. It is my objective to explore a different perspective that, I hope, will explain the current state, and propose a solution.

77. Fionna Barber, "De Kooning and the Performance of Femininity," *MAKE* 77 (September-November 1997): 14-18.

Methodology

My thesis employs a generally qualitative approach to visual art and to written texts. Its objective is to demonstrate to readers that Frankenthaler's work represents a truly unique departure from that of Pollock and should be considered distinct from those of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, both of whom acknowledged her impact on their own development. Moreover, it will observe how written criticism of Frankenthaler's work moved in tandem with inconsistent categorizations of her work to create a background of ambiguity, the consequence of which has been a dilution of critical appreciation of her work in favor of a gendered analysis.

I will begin with a formalistic analysis of Frankenthaler's so-called breakthrough painting *Mountains and Sea* to isolate the most important and innovative characteristics of this work. Next, I will comparatively analyze her work with pieces from Pollock and from Louis to validate my argument that her work warrants consideration independent of the artist who inspired her and the artist who most visibly claims to have been inspired by her.

I will then apply a qualitative approach to analyzing written criticism of Frankenthaler up to the 1960s and from the 1990s through the present, comparing the textual analysis with a formalistic analysis of her artistic work where appropriate. My analysis will conclude with a discussion of the recent body of scholarship by feminist scholars along with a review of more recent exhibition catalogues to demonstrate that maintaining critical discourse about her technique is essential for the rehabilitation of Frankenthaler in the canon. While feminist scholarship is important, the work of the museums in focusing attention on Frankenthaler's oeuvre must be supported by scholarship independent of exhibition catalogues for the rehabilitation to be successful.

Results

CHAPTER ONE: THE BREAKTHROUGH

My most recent encounter with Frankenthaler paintings occurred in the summer of 2018 in Provincetown, MA. I was overcome with a zen-like calm upon entering the main gallery of the Provincetown Art Association Museum. Against the walls of white were hung several large canvases, each alive with a pastoral symphony of color and form floating on, yet embedded within, the fabric of the canvas. I stood in the middle, slowly turning in a circle to take in canvas after canvas. While I had previously viewed single Frankenthaler works on exhibit as part of the permanent collection of several prominent museums, I had never experienced a show dedicated to her work, no less her work from this particular period of the 1960s when she lived and worked in Provincetown. Although I stood in the middle of the gallery, I knew immediately that the work around me recalled a space by way of experience, specifically experience of the space which existed outside the museum walls. I recalled first thinking how fortunate we were to have this special exhibit in Provincetown, and second, wondering why the exhibition took place here and not at a larger museum given my assumptions about Frankenthaler and her stature. In any event, I committed at that point to write my masters thesis on Frankenthaler for the program I was about to begin that fall.

At the outset of my research, I encountered articles – among the most recent scholarship written on Frankenthaler – that questioned her absence from the art historical canon. As I continued my research, I became troubled by several realizations – by the dearth of journalistic scholarship on Frankenthaler, by the focus of the little scholarship that existed on the artist's gender, by the limited attention, at least in recent history, to questions of aesthetics about her and her work. The number of questions raised did provide an answer to one that came to mind as I

stood in the middle of the gallery that previous summer: I now understood why the exhibit was at the Provincetown Art Association Museum, and not the Boston Museum of Fine Arts or a museum of similar world renown.

What also became clear as I continued my research was that Frankenthaler's story as presently written in the narrative is based on several entrenched myths about her technique, her inspiration and her one painting *Mountains and Sea*. This painting, on its own, has an established place in history. As Alison Rowley observes, "[o]f course we cannot argue that *Mountains and Sea* is invisible in the formalist art historical discourse that has until recently defined the development of New York School painting in the 1950s: it has its place."[78] Rowley argues that the painting's meaning on the day it was painting was altered by subsequent criticism and thus remains obscured today. But her observation about the painting applies equally to the painter. That is, Frankenthaler as artist has become obscured from the painter she was by subsequent criticism.

How did this situation come to pass? In order to answer this question, understanding Frankenthaler contextually in the New York art world of the mid-twentieth century is essential. For within that story, three essential characteristics emerge: first, that Abstract Expressionism developed in order to allow the artist freedom of expression and that women were a limited yet important part of that world; second, that Frankenthaler and her women artist peers emerged out of the post-WPA world in which women were a part and in which they would be paid to produce art; and third, that Frankenthaler's personal drive and psychology led to her impact in the competitive world.

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78. Alison Rowley, *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting History, Writing Painting* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd, 2007): 19.

In fact, situating Frankenthaler as a woman artist arriving on the scene in New York in 1951 offers important context on which to build the narrative of her critical reception. The artists of the forties, who had loosely gathered at the Waldorf Cafeteria, sought an alternative meeting place – a club of sorts – where they could assemble to discuss their work in the rapidly shifting environment that saw Pollock rise to national prominence. Once they found appropriate space, they assembled with two important rules: no women, communists, or homosexuals because they were prone to clubbiness, and any two members had the veto power over any future member.[79] The atmosphere she landed in, then, was one in which exclusivity and misogyny were factors to be anticipated, yet she chose to engage.

That Frankenthaler came from a background of privilege gave her an advantage over other young artists of the era, perhaps especially other women artists. Her family wealth afforded her opportunities to study with preeminent art teachers of the day at an early age, as well as to partake of the artistic offerings of Manhattan at the time the art center had shifted from Paris to New York. She was thus armed with several distinct advantages over other less-fortunate but no less ambitious female artists of the time and, as we shall see, she utilized her privileged tools effectively from the outset of her engagement. As Anna Chaves observes, "Frankenthaler would all along embrace her class privilege,"[80] and evidence of this embrace appears importantly in her early years as a painter.

Women were present and active participants in the New York art world of the time owing in large part to the freedoms the WPA and war introduced. Notably, both Pollock and de

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79. Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swann, *De Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 287.

80. Anna C. Chave, "Frankenthaler's Fortunes: On Class Privilege and the Artist's Reception," *Women's Art Journal* 37, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 29.

Kooning had wives who were painters themselves, although in both cases it appears the wives gave priority to their husband's careers.[81] But this growing group of active woman painters, including Frankenthaler and others who did not have husbands in whose favor they might defer their own careers, found their way to cope. Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swann aptly describe this world:

> The strongest female figures of the period, refusing to be pitied, became remarkably tough survivors. They often did so not by rejecting the prevailing macho, but by embracing it, showing the world that they could out-boy the boys. Lee Krasner was manly-looking and had a blunt confidence. Joan Mitchell had a mouth that could shame a marine and could be especially cutting about other women. She called Helen Frankenthaler, who was known for staining her unprimed canvas with misty washes of paint, "that tampon painter." Elaine, in turn, drank as hard as any man, played the field like a male artist, and adamantly refused to accept the part of meek wife or mistress. She regularly repeated de Kooning's famous quip: "Vat we need is a wife."[82]

For her part, Frankenthaler appeared non-plussed by the environment, embracing both her friendships and competitive professional relationships with both woman and man artists.

The degree to which Frankenthaler approached her chosen field as a professional, and not as a victim, is evident in the prompt and direct manner in which she immersed herself in the New

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81. Barbara Hess suggests that Elaine de Kooning's critical eye was of benefit to her husband: "A committed critic and fellow artist, she furthered her husband's reputation and helped shape the couple's public image. A photograph taken by Hans Namuth in 1953 shows Elaine and Willem de Kooning at the residence of the dealer Leo Castelli in East Hampton, where *Woman I* was in large part executed. The photo reproduces a stereotype: the wife sitting in the background, the husband standing in the foreground and exuding self-confidence." Barbara Hess, *Willem De Kooning 1904-1997: Content as a Glimpse* (Koln: Taschen, 2004), 35, 41.

Elaine de Kooning and Lee Krasner were not the first wives to support and advance their husband's career to the detriment of their own. Gail Levin offers an insightful view into the relationship between Edward Hopper and his wife Jo, herself an artist whose work was not appreciated by her husband. Levin's portrait reveals not just a difficult relationship between the artist spouses, but a lack of appreciation of Jo's art upon her death – the likely reason the majority of her bequest of her own art to the Whitney was given away. Gail Levin, "Art World Power and Incognito Women: Jo Hopper," in *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*, ed. Amy K. Levin (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2010), 93-104.

82. Stevens, *De Kooning*, 345.

York art scene. Shortly after her arrival in New York after completing her degree at Bennington College, she was solicited to organize an exhibit of Feeley's former students at a local gallery. Barbara Rose noted that she created publicity for the exhibit by inviting "many art and literary figures,"[83] including people like Clement Greenberg whom she had never met, to the opening. As a result of this meeting, she and Greenberg embarked on a romantic relationship that lasted several years and that doubtless gave her exposure to aspects of the art world that most aspiring artists would only dream of, including introductions to Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb and John Meyers. The episode demonstrates two important characteristics: first, that Frankenthaler's drive and ambition were boundless from the outset of her career, and second, that she was astute in forming relationships that would be beneficial in her navigation of this man's world.[84] Her background of privilege in Manhattan no doubt contributed to her self-confidence in her actions.

The enthusiasm Frankenthaler exhibited in her prompt self-insertion in the midst of the New York artistic world is not surprising given her childhood exposure to the best New York could offer. The Frankenthaler residence in Manhattan's Upper East Side meant proximity to the many cultural offerings of New York in the city that had quickly become the center of the art world. Frankenthaler recalled an early experience of such cultural exposure in a visit with her sister to the Museum of Modern Art to see Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (fig. 2), his renowned Surrealist landscape that featured several melted watches. Although the painting evokes an unreal, dream-like state, Dali explained that he was inspired to paint it from his own memories of

83. Barbara Rose, *Frankenthaler,* 5.

84. Rose indicates that de Kooning was a friend of Frankenthaler's whom she would visit at times in his studio. Rose, 30.

the coastline of Port Lligat in his birthplace of Catolonia, Spain.[85] The art historian Barbara Rose remarked that Frankenthaler was "struck by the capacity of the human imagination to transform the images of the natural world into something strange and astonishing."[86] Although it is unclear how much Frankenthaler knew about Dali's inspiration for the painting, this episode frames an early identification of two dominant themes in her life and her work – the power of art to create a new experience of things from the natural world, and the association of paint with liquidity and fluidity as reflected in the melting watches as well as the coastline as inspiration – themes she continued to explore for decades.[87] It also denotes an early attempt of her own to create and perpetuate certain myths about her art, another theme that will be repeated throughout her career.

The Frankenthaler residence in New York also provided access to varied educational opportunities that exposed her to independent creative thinking and to the theories and practices that artists were debating in the early part of the twentieth century. The young Helen began artistic studies at early age with academic rigor, beginning with the "formal academicism" of Brearley, and continuing in the "more permissive atmosphere of the progressive" Dalton

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85. The work was acquired in 1934 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Its website states the following: "With its uncanny, otherworldly feel, and its melting pocket watches and mollusk-like central figure strewn about a barren landscape, Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* seems wholly imaginary. In fact, it sprang not only from the artist's imagination, but also from his memories of the coastline of his native Catalonia, Spain. As we once explained: 'This picture represented a landscape near Port Lligat, whose rocks were lighted by a transparent and melancholy twilight; in the foreground an olive tree with its branches cut , and without leaves.'" *The Persistence of Memory*, The Museum of Modern Art, accessed December 2, 2018, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/salvador-dali-the-persistence-of-memory-1931/.

86. Barbara Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 15.

87. Rose observed that "[p]erhaps the image of a form flowing and melting, changing into a fluid state, had special meaning for her even at an early age; eventually she would employ such fluid images, although in an abstract form, in her own paintings." Rose, 15.

School.[88] At Dalton, she studied under the Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo who, she said, taught her practical methods and practices in producing art. Tamayo himself was an integral part of the New York School that would emerge while Frankenthaler studied with him, participating in the exhibition organized by Howard Putzel in 1945 entitled *A Problem for Critics*, one of the earliest group shows dedicated to exposing the art world to contemporary developments in New York. She thus began her studies at Bennington College at the young of 17 with an acute awareness and first-hand experience of the formal and ideological debates about art that constituted the avant garde of the era – benefits that accrued to her because of her privileged upbringing.

At Bennington, Frankenthaler studied under Paul Feeley, the recently-appointed chair of the art department. Feeley accelerated her artistic formation with exposure to Fauvist, Cubist and Expressionist concepts that offered her a refined creative vocabulary and thus represented a significant contribution to the development of her own aesthetic. Under Feeley's mentorship, Frankenthaler embarked on an exploration of Analytic Cubism's efforts to address the interplay between three-dimensional reality and its depiction on the two-dimensional picture plane, especially of the ability of *color* to create depth perception, and the flexibility of the *line* to create both space and form. This was enhanced by exploration of works by Cubist predecessors like Cézanne. Recalling her detailed analysis of Cézanne's *Card Players* in Feeley's class, she learned "how the illusion of depth, of three-dimensional space behind the frame, could be checked and balanced by an equal emphasis on the two-dimensional surface design."[89] Finally, she was exposed to the practice of abstracting nature in the Expressionist landscapes. In her short

88. Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 14.

89. Rose, 16.

undergraduate career, then, she moved through an exploration of the key conceptual challenges thar artists had been addressing for years by the time she graduated in 1949.[90]

Although born and raised in urban New York, nature was an early, prominent inspiration for Frankenthaler that she cultivated while at Bennington and following her graduation. With her vivid recollection of the wonder and awe she felt in response to the artist's magical transformation of experiences from the natural world on seeing Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, it is no surprise that the rural beauty and peacefulness that surrounded her in Vermont heightened her sensitivity to nature's inspirational power over her as an artist. At Bennington, this power manifested itself in both Frankenthaler's own preferences for certain artists, as well as in practices and inspiration she actively sought for her own work. She frequently highlighted her preference for artists who painted landscapes over other compositional styles at Bennington, favoring the Expressionist landscapes, as noted above, over other important influences like Kandinsky she would later acknowledge.[91] With these artists as her internal inspiration, she sought external influence from nature in her own work, practicing outdoor painting in the *plein air* tradition. Thus, she left Bennington not only as an artist who rejected academic painting, but one who had fully embraced painting from nature as inspiration for the environment the artist

90. For a comprehensive accounting of Frankenthaler's studies under Feeley, see Rose, 17-20.

91. Rose sees Frankenthaler's affinity for landscape and eventual focus on Kandinsky as a natural fit: "Kandinsky's freely expressive line, looping around or cutting jagged paths through patches of transparent color, and his tendency to float motifs on an open white ground are constantly referred to in Frankenthaler's early abstract landscapes. It appears, moreover, that she was acquainted with Kandinsky's theory that the artist improvises form out of feelings, memories, and associations." Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 22.

creates on the canvas – a *place* or *space* as Rose and Carmean describe in their books.[92] This is an important foundational principle in her work.

Following her graduation from Bennington, she embarked on a period of intense exploration of the various styles she had studied over the years without the constraints of academic objectives. Her output during this period demonstrated that she was already a skilled painter able to move fluidly across a range of styles. In *Woman on a Horse* from 1949-1950 (fig. 3), she continued to experiment with Cubism, likely while she briefly studied with Meyer Shapiro at Columbia University. In this painting, the clear influence of Cubism remains prominent in the perspectival planes that establish the multi-dimensionality of the subject. The planar definitions are enhanced through the use of solid linear definition throughout, as well as the more traditional creation of linear perspective through the suggestion of a receding wall in the triangular mass on the lower right of the canvas. Yet her interest in color also begins to emerge as a dominant theme, with powerful color masses adding to the creation of form in a much more defined way than in traditional cubist painting.[93]

In early 1950, Frankenthaler would meet and quickly develop a friendship with an emerging figure in the artworld who would ultimately be the key to the unleashing of her artistic

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92. Rose argues that, despite her stylistic emphasis on color, Frankenthaler has always been "primarily concerned with creation of a certain kind of pictorial space." Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 19. E. A. Carmean, in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue accompanying the 1989 Frankenthaler retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, further refines the concept as "the intersection of two different kinds of place in her art." The first of these is the physical painting itself, and the second is the place of the real world. "It is this effect of place that merges with the abstract-picture place to create the underlying, sometimes irretractable sense of place – and thus feeling, mood, and emotion – in her art." E. A. Carmean, *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 7-8.

93. Susan Cross, "The Emergence of a Painter," 14.

potential. That year, she was asked to mount an exhibit of the work of Feeley's former students as a benefit for Bennington College. The precocious artist embraced the task ambitiously, seeking to maximize publicity for the exhibition by inviting many prominent art and literary figures to the opening. The critic Clement Greenberg accepted the invitation and was escorted around the gallery by Frankenthaler herself. She had not known him before that evening, but they hit it off and would spend the next five years in a romantic relationship, accompanying each other to various museums, galleries and other gatherings of artists.

In Greenberg, Frankenthaler found a companion with whom she would also continue to explore the inspirational qualities of nature. Throughout their relationship, he often accompanied her on trips outside the city to paint from nature, a practice she continued from her Bennington days. Moreover, he encouraged her to go to Provincetown in the summer of 1950 to study with Hans Hofmann. Hofmann had ranked for some time among the foremost teachers of art in the United States, and many of his students were important artists in the development of Abstract Expressionism. He taught his theory of counterbalancing forces at work on the picture plane: "Dubbed *push and pull*, Hofmann defined these as 'expanding and contracting forces which are activated by carriers in visual motion.' Hofmann noted that the most important carriers of *push and pull* were planes; others include lines and points."[94] While Hofmann had spoken about his theory extensively from the 1930's on, it had only been published for the first time in print only two years earlier in 1948.

94. Marcelle Polednik, "In Search of Equipoise: Hofmann's Artistic Negotiations, 1940-1958," in *Hans Hofmann Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings*, ed. Suzi Villiger (Surrey: Lund Humphries, 2014), 43.

This latter experience would be transformational in Frankenthaler's career not because she became a disciple of Hofmann's *push and pull* theory – she in fact commented that Hofmann's theory was effectively comparable to what she had learned so thoroughly from Feeley and Wallace Harrison – but because, while in Provincetown, she began to work from the inspiration of water. Merging her love for landscape painting with her on-going exploration of dimensionality issues on the canvas, she would paint *Provincetown Bay* (fig. 4) in 1950 from her porch, "flattening and simplifying its shape by tilting the bay on its side, shifting it to a position more parallel with the picture plane, as Cézanne had done with his table tops."[95] In this painting, she adopts a muted palette and an emphasis on formal relationships that evinces Cézanne. As Frankenthaler noted, the bay is tilted on its side, but the horizon line orients the viewer to ensure the place is clear. Unlike *Woman on a Horse,* defined line is less of an emphasis on this picture, with definition deriving more consistently from the interplanar relationships established with color and form. The scholar Susan Cross observed about that period that "[t]hough she was beginning to search for a new idiom, her early training remained evident."[96] While her idiom was under development as we see in this and other paintings from the year that markedly evince the work of other artists and the use of different styles, the importance of the inspirational quality of water was clear at this early stage.

Frankenthaler's introduction to Greenberg not only provided her a direct channel to the ideology of one of the most influential critics of the day, but also offered her introductions to important artists of the day. As a result of his seeing a Frankenthaler piece in Greenberg's

95. Polednik, 27.

96. Cross, "The Emergence of a Painter," 14.

apartment, Adolph Gottlieb invited her to participate in a group exhibition at the Kootz Gallery. This had the effect of empowering the young artist at the launch of her career. As she described, "I was off on my own. I had a history. I was developing, but I was also developing in the context of the New York avant-garde of 1951."[97] Imbued with an apparent consciousness of the historic moment during which she lived, she was inspired in that same year when she saw Pollock's exhibit at the Betty Parsons Gallery. She accepted Greenberg's invitation "[t]o help her learn the language"[98] with a visit to the Pollock home in East Hampton. This visit apparently cemented her decision to use Pollock over de Kooning as a point of departure:

> She had felt de Kooning's influence, but she was far more drawn to Pollock's involvement with nature and to the originality of his technique. "I thought that Pollock was really the one living in nature, much more than Bill, she later wrote to her friend, the poet and critic Gene Baro. For her, the difference was that "de Kooning made enclosed linear shapes and 'applied' the brush. Pollock used his shoulder and ignored edges and corners." Shortly, she would emulate Pollock, working not only with her hand and wrist, but with her arms and shoulder, and, eventually, in large works, with her whole body. The overt physicality of Pollock's method, the sense of the painting having been, as Frankenthaler puts it, "choreographed," made possible a large scale, a boldness and an openness that appealed to her.[99]

Following this visit, the young Frankenthaler thus put herself at the crossroads of the two most prominent artists of the day, selecting one not as a person to emulate, but as a method from which to depart on her own search for her unique style. She must have understood that, by electing such a path, she would subject herself to a significant degree of comparison to Pollock, a comparison that has been fundamental to scholarship and criticism since.

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97. Frankenthaler as quoted in Rose, 28.

98. Rose, 29.

99. Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 31.

Frankenthaler did not witness Pollock at work during this visit, but she did see several of his paintings in progress. Importantly, she saw enough to realize that his radical technique of removing the canvas from the easel and painting directly on the floor, using non-traditional implements to apply it, unshackled the artist and opened up new possibilities for achieving form on the picture plane. Upon her return to New York and to her studio, she began a period of experimentation with both the tools of this new technique and the creative freedom it allowed the artist that culminated in her merging three principle elements into her own contribution: the artist's entire body active on the canvas, united and guiding paint with picture plane; the thinned paint applied on the unprimed canvas, allowing the canvas to absorb the paint;[100] and a full acceptance and embrace of paint's liquid qualities for their own value as opposed to a mere means of recreating a pictorial experience of nature.[101] Within a few months of her encounters with Pollock, Frankenthaler's search for her own unique idiom, which began in 1949 with her graduation from Bennington, would materialize in what would become her signature style, known as the stain.

Exhibiting neither fear nor disadvantage in her place in this 'man's world,' Frankenthaler recognized the notion of friendly competition in her relationships with the artist David Smith and her former art teacher Hans Hofmann. In an interview with Julia Cross conducted in conjunction with a 1998 Guggenheim Museum exhibition, Frankenthaler acknowledged the duality of her

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100. Norman Kleebatt noted the "seamless integration of medium into canvas support" in Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea*. Kleeblatt, "Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Postwar American Art," 167.

101. Cross observes that Frankenthaler's mix of paint and either turpentine or kerosene gives "a sense of perpetual motion to her canvases" that "comes not from the movement of the painter, however, as in Pollock's dripping and pouring, but from the movement of the paint itself." Cross, "The Emergence of a Painter," 20.

relationships with Hoffman and Smith as both close friendships and symbiotic artistic relationships. In recalling Hofmann's brief shift to "very turpentiney paintings," she mused that "[i]t was if he were saying, 'I'll fix you, you kid. I'll show you how it's really done.'"[102] Her comment shows no sign of malice or hard feelings, and in fact reflects a healthy dialogue between apparent opposites – male and female, teacher and student, seasoned artist and newcomer – who treated each other as equals. Moreover, it acknowledges the flattery she felt because her artists friends Hofmann and David Smith wanted to see her work and, to an extent, incorporate it into their own.

From Frankenthaler herself, then, we have recognition that one of the potential barriers to entry she encountered was the competitive environment in the New York art world, as well as a tacit acknowledgement that, at least among artists, the "friendly competition" – which is of course an understatement – was in fact healthy.[103] It is notable that she attributed neither the barrier nor the competitiveness to her gender. While this should not be read as an absolute sign that gender was not an issue, it suggests that the accepted narrative of gender bias is more nuanced and complicated than has been suggested, at least with regard to her fellow artists. In fact, Frankenthaler willingly engaged with her peers as a benefit to being part of an artistic community where art could be debated. As Munro describes:

> Frankenthaler has used her influences well. If in her youth she took a magic trick from the masters Pollock and Marin and plied it in an original way to make works of freedom and beauty but perhaps less profundity than theirs, today she has taken stylistic manners

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102. Julia Brown, "A Conversation: Helen Frankenthaler with Julia Brown," in Brown, *After Mountains and Sea*, 29.

103. Susan Cross aptly captures the prevailing mood: "A close-knit community was formed among the second-generation New York School artists. . . In the early years, there was a feeling of fraternity and collaboration as well as competition, and ideas and passions were exchanged." Susan Cross, "The Emergence of a Painter," 11.

> from artists more limited than she and used them to move her art toward a searching statement.[104]

Relationships for Frankenthaler, then, were educational, inspirational, and highly competitive. Yet she demonstrated an acute awareness throughout her career that that competition would not be won through repetition, and that inspiration did not equate to replication. Instead, it would be a starting point for integration into her own personal painting idiom without her falling into a pattern of personal repetition.

Although relationships were clearly important and constructive for Frankenthaler, her interactions with Greenberg, many years her senior, raise questions about her intent. She has acknowledged that Greenberg opened up channels to her without ever telling her what to like or not like, suggesting that it was in effect a relationship of equals, at least on an intellectual level. Chave takes issue with the relationship between the two in at least two ways. First, she suggests an element of disingenuous intent of the part of Frankenthaler: "she was then a 'delicious young morsel,'" and "gaining close proximity to an influential man then represented the most time-tested strategy for attaining visibility in the world for a straight woman of any class." Second, she claims that Frankenthaler was oblivious to the extent of the benefits being privileged offers:

> So it was with Frankenthaler as regards the remarkable perquisites that followed from her tie to Greenberg. In her interview with Rose, the painter called it a point of honor that neither of them would ever use the other in the service of their careers. Yet, from one reply after the next to Rose's questions, it becomes blatantly clear that Frankenthaler's career must have taken another shape entirely were it not for the entrée Greenberg supplied.[105]

I am inclined to construe Frankenthaler's comments to Rose as more an intentional effort at personal branding than they were a result of obliviousness to the benefits of privilege. Chave in

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104. Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, 222.

105. Chave, "Frankenthaler's Fortunes," 30.

fact provides helpful evidence regarding Frankenthaler's efforts at personal brand control, a point to which I will return later. Whether or not there was a connection beyond the career benefits association with Greenberg would bring is irrelevant to the fact that he introduced her to many people whom any young artist of the time would want to meet.

Shortly after her visit to Pollock's studio, Frankenthaler painted what would become known as her "breakthrough" painting, *Mountains and Sea* (fig. 1). This work distinguishes itself notably from her previous creative output. As discussed above, in the years following Bennington, she continued to paint in a more academic and imitative manner, even if the manner was varied. As a more mature work, and unlike her more recent paintings, *Mountains and Sea* exudes characteristics that represent consistent themes through this point in the development of Frankenthaler's oeuvre, specifically the landscape theme she had unabashedly embraced since her Bennington days, as well as the abstracted imagery she had been gravitating toward in the two years since she left Bennington, and the formal planar dialogue that Fauvism and Cubism inspired. Moreover, it is notable in its full embrace of Pollock's methods of painting on the floor without the restrictions of the easel, and of using non-traditional methods of applying paint to the canvas. This facilitated her painting on a stretch of canvas much larger than her prior works.

Yet beyond these methodological innovations, *Mountains and Sea* marks a pivotal point in Frankenthaler's development through the establishment of the importance of nature – in this case, water and its liquid qualities – in Frankenthaler's work, in both theme and in her innovative technique. The novelty and significance of these developments is magnified through the interconnectedness of the inspiration that nature broadly, and water specifically, provided to Frankenthaler, with the liquid qualities of the paint enhanced by the thinning process she employed and then controlled on the canvas. Frankenthaler's election to paint *Mountains and*

Sea on cotton duck, an untreated canvas used for sailcloth, enhanced the liquid qualities of the thinned paint by allowing for absorption of the liquid paint into the canvas. Through her process, the paint thus became one with the painting surface. This embrace of liquidity in her work, thematically and methodologically, thus represents a much more real and impactful innovation in this important work than its mere adoption of Pollock's technique.

The name given this painting provides a framework for the viewer to experience the piece, and the viewer therefore embarks almost immediately on a journey to experience *place* through the canvas. Frankenthaler has commented that *Mountains and Sea* was drawn from memory following a trip she took to Nova Scotia and Cape Breton where she was mesmerized by the natural landscape of mountains alongside sea, and that acknowledgment is supported by the viewer's visual experience. On the upper right corner, a triangular image in bluish-gray grounds us with its suggestion of mountain; however, to its left we are disturbed by a similar image on its side, disorienting us momentarily until we glance below where we are reoriented by two pyramidal forms outlined in charcoal. We are drawn to the prominence of the blue forms in the left, right and upper center reminding us that we are by the sea. But again, there is no single horizon in the picture to experience the mountains by the sea. Thus, Frankenthaler has fully embraced the freedom that Pollock's process of painting on the floor offers, removing the restriction of up and down, left and right, in the composition, and enhancing an objective she identified in *Provincetown Bay*. She had described this objective in response to a criticism by the landscape painter, Kaldis, for not making the piles of wharf look as if they were really in the water. "'He couldn't understand that I didn't want the Bay that much in perspective. I wanted it to be a little flat, parallel in relation to the canvas itself.'"[106] In *Mountains and Sea*, then, she has

106. Frankenthaler as quoted in Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 27.

refined the idiom of shifting images parallel to the picture plane through the canvas serving the artist's purpose in conveying a sense or feeling, and not merely a pictorial representation, of the inspiration.

Water, or liquidity, is not only reflected in the color blue, but also in the forms the red, green and grays take. On the lower left of the canvas, a red form appears as a controlled spill of a very liquid paint. While it has spread, its tight format suggests a controlled spreading at the behest of the artist who likely lifted the canvas to guide the paint, but would not allow it the freedom to flow with gravity as in Pollock's drip technique. Rose noted that Frankenthaler disliked the general quality of Pollock's drip. She opined that, because Frankenthaler failed to adopt his drip technique, she was not able to integrate painting and drawing fully until much later in her career. [107] While I agree with Rose's broader point that *Mountains and Sea* is not Frankenthaler's most refined application of her idiom, I disagree with her suggestion that it fails to integrate painting and drawing fully. Indeed, the controlled liquid color formations in *Mountains and Sea* are likely the result of the painter's method of applying the paint and then guiding the paint's liquid qualities to achieve the desired effect. While this technique might not have reached its ultimate level of sophistication in this particular work, it suggests an early but successful attempt to merge painting and drawing that Frankenthaler will refine in her later work.

The notion that Frankenthaler's technique is a simple imitation of Pollock's is further undermined in her application of paint, for Frankenthaler has modified the Pollock method in which paint is directed by the painter but is overcome by chance and gravity once it leaves the painter's object. In her method, the artist retains control over the paint, working not in defiance

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107. Rose, 33.

of, but rather in conjunction with, gravity to achieve the desired effect. The artist's full body, not just her wrist, establishes the control given the breadth of the plane on which she works. Her technique, then, employs the full body, but in a much more controlled and intentional manner at the moment the paint hits the surface. Because she also dismisses the layered overlay of paint reminiscent of Pollock and Clifford Still, she relies on both chance and precision to create a final work with no room for treatment of errors with overpainting.

Revolutionary though it is in the context of her previous work, *Mountains and Sea* is not an example of Frankenthaler's most refined use of the stain technique. For example, there are traces of Frankenthaler's Cubist education in the charcoal lines that define some of the forms in *Mountains and Sea* recalling exercises she conducted under the tutelage of Feeley of creating depth with color and line with form. In this regard, *Mountains and Sea* is not a dramatic departure from her earlier work but is instead a demarcation of the beginning of her arrival at a personal artistic idiom. The charcoal lines are interestingly limited to the center of the hung canvas and appear intended to supply pictorial definition with the landscape as they did in her earlier painting *Woman on a Horse* (fig. 3). In his catalogue summary of *Mountains and Sea*, Carmean highlights this aspect: "Even more ignored to this point is the drawing in the picture. Indeed, this linear element determined much of the somewhat symmetrical compositional layout, for as the artist recalls: 'I put in the charcoal gestures first because I wanted to *draw* in with color and shape the totally abstract memory of the landscape . . . the charcoal lines were original guideposts that eventually became unnecessary.'"[108] These lines disappeared entirely by 1953,

108. E. A. Carmean, *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective*, 14.

likely a residual element from her Cubist education that, while not detracting from the work's success and novelty, are not additive as fundamental elements in her stylistic idiom.[109]

The success of this work, then, lies not only in its effective conveyance of the artist's experience of nature, but in its novel incorporation of water in title, theme, action, process, and – perhaps most importantly – effect. Frankenthaler borrows the painting's theme from nature and enhances it through a combination of the artist's exaggeration of the liquidity of paint on canvas and the action of the artist to control the natural liquidity of the paint to create form. As Rose noted, Frankenthaler "creates form by allowing paint literally to flow, spread and unfold to create an image."[110] The artist herself stated that she needed more than Pollock's application of paint on unprimed cotton duck: she needed "fluid color."[111] Her words support the evidence drawn from the canvas itself that demonstrates how novel her painting was – that it was not a merely imitative effort to reproduce what she had witnessed at the gallery and on Long Island.

The significant body of critical writing about *Mountains and Sea* has resulted a concentration in art criticism on this single work as Frankenthaler's breakthrough. As Anna

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109. Carmean suggests that formal Cubist traces never fully disappeared from her works. He observed that, in the works in the 1989 MoMA retrospective, "[a]lmost all are informed by her use of the Cubist compositional device of blocking out space, with its attendant ambiguities of surface and depth and its counterbalancing elements. This often occurs in the dialogue she establishes between color shapes and color drawing, "where shape and drawing become one" in what she calls her "well-ordered collisions." Carmean, *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective,* 7. I think Carmean overstates the lingering traces of Cubism in her later work. She ends up avoiding the use of sharp angles to denote perspective, relying much more on the aggregations of color to achieve spatial and planar experience than the Cubists. In this regard, it seems to me her later work evinces more Cezanne than the Cubists.

110. Rose, *Frankenthaler,* 38.

111. Frankenthaler as quoted in Alicia G. Longwell and Terrie Sultan, "Drawing and the Drawing of Color," in *Abstract Climates,* 27.

Chave has astutely observed, "[a]rt historians typically isolate a given interval or so within any artist's oeuvre as key, but in her case that interval could finally amount to but a single painting."[112] It thus engenders debate about whether and to what extent Frankenthaler's technique is borrowed from and imitative of Pollock's, with the predominant message be one of limited or unimportant innovation contextually by comparison with Pollock. Its characterization as such inhibits consideration of Frankenthaler's later work. Moreover, when the technical novelties of *Mountains and Sea* are downplayed, the focus becomes one of comparison with Pollock, unfortunately re-igniting the debate dismissed by Elderfield about who first painted the stain. Consequently, much of the art historical assessment of Frankenthaler begins and ends with consideration of this work.

Even Rose, one of Frankenthaler's earliest critical supporters, downplayed the importance of this work through her overemphasis on Pollock's influence on Rose as well as on the evidence of line in its formal vocabulary. In an article inspired by the 1969 Frankenthaler retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York, Rose acknowledged the importance of *Mountains and Sea* but downplayed its success at innovation. She instead sees its success in its "breadth of scale, freshness of color and originality of image."[113] Otherwise, she observes that it "remains a conventional work exhibiting a discontinuity amounting to an opposition between the linear and the painterly." While I agree with Rose's assessment of the conventionality of the use of line in *Mountains and Seas,* I do not agree with her conclusion that the painting is

112. Chave, "Frankenthaler's Fortunes," 31.

113. Rose, Barbara Rose, "Painting Within the Tradition: The Career of Helen Frankenthaler," *Art Forum* 7, no. 8 (April 1969): 29.

conventional, and implicitly, unimportant.[114] Her focus on these few lines undermines the novelty of Frankenthaler's more expansive embrace of the liquid qualities of paint and the effect it achieves on the unprimed canvas.

Limiting, and even concentrating, the discussion about Frankenthaler to technique and to Pollock constrains any analysis from consideration of other important elements in *Mountains and Sea* as well as in Frankenthaler's subsequent body of work. So much remains to be explored. What about the size of the painting? What weight should be given to the painting's title? Is there meaning embedded within? Of what significance is her painting in the context of simultaneous art historical developments in New York? Exploration of these important questions both reveals the limitations of this view of historical scholarship and criticism, as well as exposes their contribution to the circumstances that led to Frankenthaler's exclusion from consideration.

One of the threshold questions to be considered beyond the technical aspects of the work arises out of contemplation of the painting's title and Frankenthaler's own description of the trip to Nova Scotia that inspired her. The two taken together suggest that the work is one of

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114. Rose equivocates further on the novelty of Frankenthaler's technique in her 1971 monograph. She first notes the innovation of *Mountain and Sea* as "Frankenthaler's managing to change the facture and surface of painterly painting by *dissociating for the first time the painterly from the loaded brush*." Rose, *Frankenthaler,* 57. But she later confuses the significance of her innovation: "The importance of *Mountains and Sea* is that Frankenthaler added light and color to Pollock's technical breakthrough. In a sense, it means little to credit her with the invention of a revolutionary new technique already largely posited in Pollock's 1951 Duco enamel works. . . In most practical respects, then, Pollock's black and white paintings remain the first "stain" paintings. At any rate, they were the first pictures to enlist the viewer's awareness of the actual physical character of the surface to identify flatness." Rose, *Frankenthaler,* 58. While I appreciate the sensitivity to the extent of Pollock's innovation, her latter explanation neglects the innovative qualities I have described that, I maintain, derive in large part from her "*dissociating . . . the painterly from the loaded brush*." The ambiguity in Rose's perspective on the comparative analysis of Frankenthaler's innovation against Pollock is unconvincing and, in the art historical context, represents a missed opportunity to clarify the significance.

figuration, a depiction extracted from memory of a natural environment. A conventional assessment at the time it was painted would have anticipated a negative response – that it is not intended as figuration but instead as abstraction, for the debate about pure abstraction and figuration was a lively one at the time of its creation. The question had been raised during the days of the American Abstract Artists (AAA), and Sandler summarized the situation thereafter:

> An issue that was argued again and again concerned the merits of "pure" as against "subject matter" abstraction: Did the introduction of imagery – the expression of things – into a picture detract from the expressiveness of the picture as an object itself? After 1937, the consensus was that it did, but the matter of degree was troublesome and factions arose.[115]

By most measures, any lack of consensus from the late 1930s had been settled in the latter half of the 1940s in favor of pure abstraction, the prevailing style in which the major artists of the day – including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko – had worked and which the critical community had accepted as the only acceptable approach. It is notable that Frankenthaler came to age during the prevalence of this approach; yet, once she began her movement away from more academic and imitative painting styles, she immersed herself within the debate that was reopened in the 1950s concerning figuration and abstraction.

As the two most celebrated artists of the time, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning had settled in as the preeminent representatives of the New York School following their critical successes – Jackson with his drip paintings, and de Kooning with his successful display of *Excavation* at the Venice *Bienniale* in 1950. These works, on which their reputations were largely built, were, to borrow from Sandler, painted in a manner of pure abstraction. The viewer was not drawn to focus on any particular area of the canvas or aspect of the image. Instead, the

115. Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 15.

viewer took a leap of faith into the canvas as a whole – as an experience evoked by the painter's all-over painting style as well as the lack of identifiable traces of iconography that relate squarely to human experience in nature. Even the work's title did not necessary conjure up an image from nature, as in *Excavation*, but instead recalls an action, a naming convention that recalls the practice of Kandinsky.

The commitment to pure abstraction was not firm in the art world, however, and cracks began to emerge in the early 1950s. Sam Hunter describes the situation as one of fatigue:

> The most persistent criticism is that of the narrowness and parochialism of abstract idioms. Such adverse criticism assumes that an art identified with specialized forms of abstraction must soon wear out its impulse, decay from within, and give way to humanistic modes that take in more of common reality and recognizable subject matter. When a certain kind of improvisatory figuration did emerge in Abstract Expressionism (its prototypes were de Kooning's *Women* and Pollock's intermittent anatomical fantasies), a vast sigh of relief was audible on all sides.[116]

De Kooning had been struggling with an obsession over *Woman I*, a painting to which he had dedicated three years of artistic focus. This reversion to figuration shortly following his success with *Excavation* placed the artist at odds with Greenberg, a supporter of abstraction at the expense of any figurative indications. Sam Hunter's descriptions frames the contemporary issue in terms of Pollock, but the young Frankenthaler had immersed herself in the debate and made her commitment clear at the same time as de Kooning's *Woman I* was shown. For de Kooning, his return to figuration was greeted by an understanding that he was an artist in decline,[117] while for Frankenthaler, it was a timely and auspicious beginning.

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116. Sam Hunter, "New Directions in American Painting," in *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1966), 57-58.

117. In Chapters 22 and 23 of their biography, Stevens and Swan describe in detail the internal and external challenges de Kooning faced, including the influence of Greenberg and Myer Schapiro, that ultimately resulted in this view. Stevens, *de Kooning*, 301-343.

At the same time Jackson Pollock was suffering from a similar decline, if not in artistic inspiration and excellence, at least in critical reception. After his highly successful drip painting series from the late forties, he too embarked on a new direction, the same "black and white" series that Frankenthaler saw at the Betty Parsons gallery in 1951. These much smaller paintings were, in the words of Justin Spring, "among his most refined, but they lack the dash and excitement of the earlier drip works, and critics who saw the shows in the following seasons were lukewarm in their appreciation."[118] Moreover, while Harold Rosenberg, who had supported Pollock's achievement of near cult status with his favorable reviews, was growing disenchanted with him because of his drinking.[119]

The shifting landscape at the beginning of the 1950s thus created an opening for new artists. As Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan observe: "By 1950, the trailblazing was complete. De Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Smith, Kline, and Still had each arrived at a mature style. . . The eternal question of the ambitious, 'Why not me?' now asserted itself with increasing urgency in the studios of New York."[120] With Pollock and de Kooning, the two artists from whom she thought she could choose her own artistic direction, now in decline, an opening for a young artist and a new direction became obvious, and the astute Frankenthaler thus entered the fray with *Mountains and Sea*.[121] The events of the time were proof that another shift was likely on the

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118. Justin Spring, "Jackson Pollock, Superstar," *New England Review* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 52.

119. Stevens, *de Kooning*, 335.

120. Stevens, *de Kooning*, 301.

121. It is worth recalling here the close relationship Frankenthaler endured with Greenberg during this period. While she had consistently cited Pollock's influence on her, it is highly probable that she discussed the state of the field with him and knew of his warning to de Kooning not to abandon abstraction. Stevens, *de Kooning*, 313.

horizon in the competitive New York art world, and her connections and ambition made her as aware of the possibilities created by this opening as any young artist on the scene.[122]

Frankenthaler seized the moment in another meaningful way in her adoption of the large-scale canvas. In his characterization of the "Big Canvas" as "a peculiar phenomenon of our period," E. C. Goossen cites the first big canvases of the post-war period as those by Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, although each used the large scale to different effect.[123] From a critical perspective, the use of such large canvases did not apparently stand out as a particular innovation since there is scant evidence of critical comparisons to determine who gets credit for first use. Instead, as Goossen demonstrates in his article, it is a tool in the artist's box that can be used for effects as in Pollock's use for the psychological liberation it afforded the artist, or in Newman's use for its power in evoking emotions. Frankenthaler's use is more akin to Newman's in its role in creating a large space in which an experience plays out – one that evokes emotion and nostalgia. Frankenthaler thus figures among the early adopters of the large-scale canvas, a fact that has received no more than passing mention in scholarship yet warrants greater attention. Moreover, the experiential impact its use has in her work connects her to Newman, another area that has not received the critical attention it warrants.

Another aspect of *Mountains and Sea* that is apparent in a less Pollock-centric analysis is its notable shift away from Frankenthaler's previous emphasis on Cubist-inspired idioms in favor

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122. E. C. Goossen calls out Frankenthaler for her participation as a forward thinking young artist newly arrived on the scene: "A dozen or so years ago there were a number of fledgling painters who had the insight and the opportunity to read the beginnings of a new phase of art as it first appeared on the walls of a few courageous galleries. . . One of the fledglings was Helen Frankenthaler. . ." E. C. Goossen, "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art International* 5 (20 October 1961): 77.

123. E. C. Goossen, "The Big Canvas," *Art International* 2, no. 8 (Nov. 1958): 45.

of forms that recall the biomorphic emphasis of the surrealists and the Indian space painters. The charcoal drawn lines, as discussed, are residual elements of the Cubist influence. Yet they do not constrain nor define the color-based forms. These forms instead exist on the own, in some cases creating a tension with the linearity of the line that, in juxtaposition, seeks to constrain the form with linear definition. The tension is resolved in favor of the form, and the results become much clearer in works that follow *Mountains and Sea*, including *Shatter* (fig. 5) from 1953. *Mountains and Sea* thus establishes the initial contours of Frankenthaler's mature style in its use of color to establish form and evoke emotion.

The critic who begins their analysis with a debate about the extent of Pollock's influence on Frankenthaler risks establishing roadblocks that prevent exploration of other aspects of influence and innovation in *Mountains and Sea* and the more mature works that followed. Likewise, the critic who espouses a singular critical approach will miss the nuance and complexity of Frankenthaler's work. The analysis above is intended to demonstrate that, while the accepted narrative instructs that Frankenthaler adopted Pollock's staining technique, she in fact did much more, building on the openness of Pollock's method, extending and morphing the technical freedom it offered into her own idiom, and audaciously adopted the large painting format that had only recently been used by few artists with proper emotional and experiential effect. With the flexibility created by these techniques, she straddled the debate on abstraction and figuration with a tableau that recalls the biomorphic abstractions of the 1930s with more familiar associations with nature encouraged by the paintings title. The fact that a single one of these achievements might be accomplished by a twenty-three-year-old who was at the onset of her toward development of a personal idiom would be noteworthy. The incorporation of all three

by a single artist in a single painting – her own art historical moment – doubtless warrants inclusion in the art historical narrative of the time.

CHAPTER TWO: THE ENTRENCHMENT OF MYTH

With *Mountains and Sea*, Frankenthaler's artistic voice began to emerge in a clear, convincing, and personal manner. While she knew she had achieved something important, broader recognition of its importance would only occur several years later. John Elderfield astutely observes *Mountains and Sea* not as a painting that represents the artist's maturity, but instead as one that unlocks the potential that is realized in the artist's later works:

> Frankenthaler's description of making *Mountains and Sea* tells us that immediately after its creation the artist did sense the importance of what she had made. (She was "sort of amazed and surprised and interested" by it.) However, she did not *realize* its importance until she had successfully achieved paintings based on what it revealed . . .[124]

Following her instincts, she continued to paint and experiment with her style, and she thus approached the 1960s with a minor tailwind of positive criticism helping to move her career and her respectability as an artist forward. The variety of criticism and scholarship that developed at this time raised barriers to wider acceptance, however, that remain fundamental critical assumptions today. Four broad themes arise from the body of criticism that addressed her work – a body that, in significant measure, has been consistently positive. First, Frankenthaler is regularly compared to three artists within criticism – usually either for analysis of her technical innovation as compared to Pollock, or for her thematic importance as a link to Louis and Morris as the most prominent of the Color Field Painters of the 1960s. Second, Frankenthaler is notably absent from the critical output of the most influential art critics of the day. Third, stylistic

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124. John Elderfield, "'After a Breakthrough': On the 1950s Paintings of Helen Frankenthaler," *MoMA* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1989): 9.

ambiguity prevails in discussions about her: she is inconsistently considered either an Abstract Expressionist, a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, a New York School artist, a Post Painterly abstractionist, or a Color Field Painter. Finally, several critics who analyzed her work – most often with positive commentary – did so with a choice of words that, with the advent of Feminist criticism, has been deemed gender-biased and, thus, negative within the art historical narrative. Each of these themes represents a significant critical barrier for any artist to overcome. Yet each has become engrained as a myth in the critical and scholarly history that has reviewed Frankenthaler. They collectively represent a formidable challenge to her entry into the broader canon. Moreover, each point has been addressed in passing at various points, yet there has been no meaningful assessment of their impact which, I will argue, has been the establishment of deeply-entrenched myths within the art historical narrative that collectively have kept Frankenthaler out of the canon.

I have observed that Frankenthaler has exhaustively been compared with and analyzed through the lens of Jackson Pollock. As a threshold matter, such a comparison is not a surprise given the foundational role Pollock played in the development of a distinctly Abstract Expressionist idiom. Moreover, Frankenthaler herself contributed to the development of the myth of Pollock's influence on her in various interviews she granted. However, her influences were many, including contemporaries (de Kooning, Still), art teachers (Rufino, Feeley, Hofmann), and predecessors (Cezanne, Marin). With the benefit of a clean slate, early critics took a less doctrinal view of the question of influence, focusing less on the stain technique than on broader formal and technical aspects. Over time, however, the critical focus locked in on Pollock. In a review from 1957, Elizabeth Pollet framed her critique of Frankenthaler as that of

an artist influenced by both de Kooning and Pollock.[125] Sydney Tillium observed the influence of her husband, Robert Motherwell, in his 1959 review.[126] Donald Judd tied Frankenthaler more directly to Pollock, justifying his basis of comparison to Pollock with his assertion that "Pollock's black-and-white paintings of 1951-52 are the initial source of Frankenthaler's."[127] A review of a 1962 exhibit at the Galérie de l'Ariète traces Frankenthaler's style not just to Pollock, but to Kandinsky and Gorky.[128] Thus, in the earliest critical attention she received, the notion of comparative analysis – a common method in art historical analysis – was introduced more as a typical observation of influence than as a determination of extent and establishment of who was the first to stain.[129]

As noted earlier, Frankenthaler herself contributed often to the entrenchment of the myth regarding the extent of Pollock's influence on her through her own discussions about the topic. In her earliest interviews, she appeared to take an intentional, active role in establishing a personal brand. If she was at all concerned about the comparative direction criticism of her work had adopted, she had an opportunity to influence it in her an interview with Henry Geldzahler published in 1965. When asked if seeing Pollock influenced her work, she indicated that it did, but not immediately. In a lengthy description of the various artists who influenced her, she

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125. E[lizabeth] P[ollet], "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 31 (Mar. 1957): 54.

126. S[ydney] T[illium], "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 33 (May 1959): 56.

127. D[onald] J[udd], "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 34 (March 1960): 55.

128. "Les Exposition à Milan," *Arts International* 6 (April 1962) : 58.

129. A perusal of pages from the *Arts Magazine* section "In the Galleries" in which the Pollet, Tillium and Judd reviews appeared reveals that comparative analysis was by no measure the norm. Instead, its use is exceptionally limited, with the typical review adopting a purely formal analysis of the work on its own merits. This topic warrants further exploration.

makes two important points. First, acknowledging the commentary of the 1962 critic in *Art International*, she stated she was led into Abstract Expressionism by Gorky and Kandinsky but that she the experience "combined to push me on." Second, she "looked at and was influenced by both Pollock and de Kooning and eventually felt that there were many more possibilities for me out of the Pollock vocabulary." Lest the latter point be misunderstood to suggest that she was electing, in effect, to imitate Pollock over de Kooning, she proffered the following: "You could become a de Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror, but you could **depart** from Pollock."[130] Her choice of words signals clearly that Pollock was not a point of imitation but of departure from which she would build her own artistic vocabular. Unfortunately, however, the comments would become misconstrued as the basis for an entrenched assumption about her debt to Pollock and the related debate about the extent of her innovation of Pollock's technique. Thus, where in the course of traditional art historical analysis the historian seeks to identify the various influences that are suggested in an artist's oeuvre, in Frankenthaler's case, critics and historians have misleadingly focused on the myth of the outsized influence of Pollock on her.

While the earlier critics compared Frankenthaler to her predecessor and contemporary artist peers, those who approached her work once she began to receive critical acclaim would also link her to the next generation, so to speak. A comment by Morris Louis in 1961 demonstrates the peril a comment can entail regardless of intent. Louis, who was inspired by Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* on a visit to her studio with Clement Greenberg and Kenneth Noland, seems to offer a compliment as well as acknowledge a personal debt to Frankenthaler in

130. Henry Geldzahler, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Artforum* 4, no. 2 (October 1965): 37.

his recognition that she was "a bridge between Pollock and what was possible."[131] In the apt words of art historian Katie Siegel, Noland's comment is "a bit of a backhanded compliment—it turns her into a midwife for history, rather than an inventor."[132] It is plausible that Noland's comment could have been inspired by the friendly competition that compelled him to offer a subtle compliment without downplaying his own importance in the history of art – that is, that the bridge Frankenthaler represented spanned from the innovator Pollock to the innovator Noland, with Frankenthaler providing structural support. Regardless of its inspiration, Noland's comment signals the beginning of another myth that plagues the history of Frankenthaler's critical acceptance – that of being a bridge between movements, or a link between geniuses, but neither movement nor genius herself.

In the art world in which Frankenthaler came to maturity, the critic played a very significant role in determining the critical reception and commercial success of any artist. Henry Geldzahler, the same critic whose interview of Frankenthaler gave voice to her own distinction between the predecessor as influence versus the painter as acolyte, ironically observed in the same year as his Frankenthaler interview that the art critic "is an unfortunately necessary link in the communication between the artist and the public."[133] He rationalizes this development as necessary given the "progressive loss of art's audience" due to the fact that "[a]rt has increasingly become the concern of the artist and the bafflement of the public."[134] If one accepts

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131. Carl Belz, "Fields of Dreams," 90.

132. "After Frankenthaler: An Interview with Katie Siegel," *Gogosian*, accessed on April 6, 2019, https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2015/07/14/after-frankenthaler-interview-katy-siegel/.

133. Henry Geldzahler, "The Art Audience and the Critic," *The Hudson Review* 18, no. 1 (1965): 106.

134. Geldzahler, 105.

Geldzahler's notion of the importance of the critic to the public's understanding of art, then the minimal consideration Frankenthaler received by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, the two most influential critics of the time, is at least in part responsible for her failure to be considered as a canonical artistic. A review of their treatments reveals two specific observations, neither of which is necessarily supportive of Frankenthaler. First, commentary by Greenberg expanded the notion of comparative analysis of her against other artists beyond others' influence on her to include her influence on other artists. Second, review of the critical writings of both underscores a dearth of significant critical commentary by either critic about Frankenthaler.

As one of the most influential critics during Frankenthaler's formative years, Clement Greenberg's endorsement of an artist assured the artist at least attention, if not financial success. He wrote glowingly, for example, about de Kooning, Pollock, Hofmann, Louis, and Nolan. It is notable that, despite their romantic relationship, there is little mention of Frankenthaler in Greenberg's extensive writings, although he thought well enough of her to introduce her to other artists and to introduce other artists to her work. Moreover, the few references that do exist are ambiguous at best about his views on her work.

One of the few written references to Frankenthaler appears in Greenberg's essay on Louis and Noland in which he makes the case for them as the only two candidates for designation as major artists in the field of contemporary painters. His support of Louis and Noland is unquestionable and unambiguously positive, yet he mentions Frankenthaler as a 'special case' with no description of what this means.[135] Greenberg does acknowledge that Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* led both Noland and Louis to change the direction of their art abruptly, yet

135. Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," 28.

when it comes to categorizing this influence, he aggregates it with that of Pollock as a single "crucial revelation."[136] In a gallery entry to the 1963 exhibition catalog accompanying *Three New American Painters: Louis, Noland, Olitski* at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, Greenberg further sanitizes Frankenthaler's influence on Louis and effectively re-attributes her technical innovation to Louis:

> Matisse, later on, resorted to consistently thin paint: in order, that is, to exclude reflections, tactile associations, and anything else that might detract from the sheerness of color. Louis, going further in the same direction, diluted his paint (for which he chose acrylic resin) to an extreme, and *soaked* it into untreated sailcloth so that it became one with the fabric – a stain instead of a discrete covering coat. Up to this point he was still taking hints from the Pollock of 1950, and from Helen Frankenthaler, herself influenced by Pollock; the next steps in his procedure became entirely his own, however.[137]

Greenberg's choice of words here unapologetically exposes evidence of a double standard. He at once diminishes Frankenthaler's importance by framing her work as influenced by Pollock while attributing the soak/stain process that Frankenthaler employed and that impressed Louis on his visit, not to Frankenthaler, but to Matisse. He then notes how Louis innovated by adding to the procedure in a way that makes it "entirely his own," thereby establishing "Louis's originality on the American art scene."[138] In Greenberg's assessment, then, Frankenthaler borrowed a process but couldn't innovate whereas Louis borrowed the same process and made it his own. What started off as a suggestion by Greenberg that Frankenthaler was a special case to consider in the

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136. Greenberg, 29.

137. Clement Greenberg, "Introduction to an Exhibition of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4:152.

138. Clement Greenberg, "Introduction to an Exhibition of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski", 152.

debate about current influential artists thus shifts character to a more muted suggestion that she was only a second-tier player who was not herself an innovator, but more a bridge between the true innovators – reminiscent of and consistent with Noland's own comment about her role.[139] Greenberg at once, then, both diminishes Frankenthaler's importance in art history as an innovator, and recasts her not just as a follower of Pollock, but a mere link to true innovation in the work of Noland and Morris.

Greenberg eliminated Frankenthaler from his canon of great art by omission without providing specific reasons for it. The reason for his treatment could perhaps be attributed to the personal relationship he had with her in the early 1950s, but evidence for such a rationale is lacking. Moreover, his failure to include her could be unintentional, but such a negligent error of drafting and inclusion is highly unlikely for a critic known to choose his words as carefully as he does the artists whom he holds in high regard. There is perhaps another more plausible explanation that derives from significant traces of gender bias found in some of his other writings. A particularly acute example is found in his writings relating to the Canadian artist Dorothy Knowles. Not one to shy away from broad strokes, over-generalizations, and cultural biases of his own, Greenberg undertook to categorize all of Canadian prairie art by province in

139. There seemed to be a chronological movement by Greenberg away from consideration of Frankenthaler as an important artist. The two examples shown above demonstrate this movement between 1960 and 1963, and comments Greenberg offered during an interview with Lily Leino in 1969 represent the final chapter. When asked about the influence of American Pop and Minimal artists abroad, Greenberg offers his definition of major art: "And when I talk about Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Motherwell, or Hofmann – confining myself to Americans – or Sam Francis, Morris Louis, Noland or Olitski – again confining myself to Americans – I'm talking about major art." Greenberg, 308. Despite the promise of treatment as a "special case", Frankenthaler is thus banished from the Greenberg canon of major art.

"Painting and Sculpture in Prairie Canada Today."[140] In his brief synopsis of art in Saskatoon – which he notably observed was the only place in the Canadian prairie where he "saw the prairie itself really tackled as a subject for landscape" – he concluded that the two qualities he found characteristic of Anglo-Canadian art, diffidence and modesty, were the handicap of the art of this region. Diffidence, in Greenberg's view, could be detrimental because it "entails the reluctance to take oneself seriously enough as an artist."[141] It is this affliction with which he diagnoses Knowles; his treatment plan involved not taking "further advantage of the 'liberties' offered by modernist art," but instead coming "closer to nature and literalness" – directing her, in effect to return to landscape painting of the prairie he found so appropriate a subject for the genre.

Greenberg's recommendation that Knowles adopt landscape as her painting style is highly unusual for such a strong advocate of modernism. In context, his comment can be read as gender bias. As the scholar Colleen Skidmore astutely observed, Greenberg's treatment of Knowles was a reflection of the "aggressive and overt expectation of their femininity" that female artists had to address.[142] Further comments by Greenberg cited in Skidmore's article offer a disturbing picture of a critic who held a natural bias against female painters based on cultural assumptions about what their domestic role should be and the painterly qualities that should emanate naturally from their femininity. It is difficult to assume, against this background, that

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140. Clement Greenberg, "Painting and Sculpture in Prairie Canada Today," 153-175, in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). First published as Clement Greenberg, "Clement Greenberg's View of Art on the Prairies: Painting and Sculpture in Prairie Canada Today," *Canadian Art* (March-April 1963), 90-107. O'Brian noted that the editor of Canadian Art received many letters from readers who disagreed with Greenberg's account. O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg,* 175.

141. Greenberg, 170-171.

142. Skidmore, "The Art of Dorothy Knowles: Greenbergian Femininity," 10.

Greenberg's exclusion of Frankenthaler from his canon of great artists was not in a significant way influenced by his cultural biases toward women in the profession.

Greenberg's personal relationship with Frankenthaler may have enhanced any latent gender bias, as he would have been well aware of her privileged upbringing and her ongoing embrace of class privilege. Chave contrasts Frankenthaler's financial independence with "the enduring trope of the struggling or bohemian artist whose life and art stand as a rebuke to bourgeois values,"[143] but perhaps a contrary bourgeois logic is at work with Greenberg. He clearly enjoyed having her as a gallery, museum and travel companion, all of which required means. But companionship does not equate with work equality. As Skidmore has shown, Greenberg apparently held traditional views about domestic roles for women: it is not much of a stretch with such an approach to conclude that, if a female artist like Knowles needed to paint as employment, then she should stick to pretty pictures, but if a well-off woman like Frankenthaler painted, it was purely for enjoyment and thus could be dismissed without consideration.

While Greenberg initially held out the promise that Frankenthaler might be considered a great artist, another important critic of the period, Harold Rosenberg, never seriously considered Frankenthaler for his canon of great action painters. In his critical volume entitled *The De-Definition of Art*, Rosenberg espouses an approach to art that values not just the idea of art as the *act of the artist*, but also the idea of art as the *action of the artist's materials* as its complement (emphasis added).[144] He praises de Kooning and Pollock for their successful integration of both ideas: in de Kooning's work, "the animated paint takes its form from the artist's personality,"

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143. Chave, "Frankenthaler's Fortunes," 29.

144. Harold Rosenberg, *The De-Definition of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 61.

and in Pollock's, "the Action paintings . . . represent a union of the artist's action with that of his pigment."[145] Neither of these comments offers substantive analysis of their form or technique but instead represent value-laden perspectives painted in broad linguistic strokes.

Rosenberg's approach to de Kooning and Pollock sharply contrasts with his commentary on Frankenthaler in which he systematically attacks the lack of innovation in her art as well as the lack of activity in her technique. On the question of innovation, he first asserts that her "reputation" rests on her "adaptation of Pollock's 'liberated' fluid pigment on unprimed canvas," implying that her reputation rests on an inappropriate attribution of Pollock's novelty to her, then discounts the notion that "a new way of using materials can be inherently significant and even progressive."[146] This comment contradicts his premise that half of the equation of good art is how the artist uses materials. It also follows that, if a new way of using materials is not significant, and Pollock should be attributed with the soak/stain technique, then his development too would not be significant. Why all the fuss then? Rosenberg is clearly applying a double standard to his analysis of Frankenthaler with traits quite similar to Greenberg's, ostensibly approaching her with an eye to comparable formal and technical analysis, yet in a manner that is inconsistent with, and arguably more stringent than, his approach to de Kooning and Pollock.

On the topic of "activity" in her work, Rosenberg contrasts Frankenthaler with a lesser-known painter, Lester Johnson. In Johnson's work, Rosenberg observes the "action emanat[ing] from the artist in a decisive locking of forms, lyrical rhythms, tension between image and scale, compression of surface by color."[147] As in his earlier commentary on de Kooning and Pollock,

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145. Rosenberg, 61.

146. Rosenberg, 64.

147. Rosenberg, 64.

he avoids substance with laudatory language that is effectively opinion without explanation or evidence, observing the action as emanating from the canvas. In Frankenthaler, however, he observes that "the artist's action is at a minimum; it is the paint that is active."[148] Thus, Johnson could allow action to emanate from the canvas in form and rhythm, but Frankenthaler would be judged negatively because the artist is not active. This approach could be a mere point of disagreement if it reflected an aesthetic preference, but the context suggests other variables, such as gender-biased expectations in the work of an artist. Rosenberg continues with the observation that Frankenthaler's part is "limited to selecting aesthetically acceptable effects from the partly accidental behavior of her color." This recalls the Greenbergian femininity that Skidmore astutely observed rendered more objectionable with a patriarchal final warning: "Apparently, Miss Frankenthaler has never grasped the moral and metaphysical basis of Action painting, and since she is content to let the pigment do most of the acting, her compositions fail to develop resistances against which a creative act can take place."[149] The cadence of Rosenberg's comments builds to a crescendo that underscores a fundamental bias in his approach to Frankenthaler, a bias that would prevent him from seeing any redeeming value in her work because he has concluded that there is a fundamental immorality in her act of painting which produces, in his estimation, purely decorative work.[150]

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148. Rosenberg, 64.

149. Rosenberg, *The De-Definition of Art*, 64.

150. Gohari observes that, in a later commentary, Rosenberg included Frankenthaler among his list of 'cool' painters. While promising, its general reference was insufficient to undo the damage his prior highly charged criticism had. See Gohari, "Gendered Reception," 37.

It is incontrovertible that the lack of full support by either Greenberg or Rosenberg impaired critical consideration of the nature and extent of Frankenthaler's importance in the art historical canon. There is the suggestion of evidence, at least in Greenberg's case, that his approach was informed by a male-centric view of 'the artist' that left little room for serious consideration of women. Whether or not one agrees with this latter point, the failure by both to embrace Frankenthaler has further contributed to the myth of the weighty influence of Pollock on her work, and has resulted in the development of another myth, that of Frankenthaler as a footnote in the historical narrative.

Given their outsized role in the "art world" during the mid-twentieth century, it does not surprise that the critic not only could impact an artist's career, but also could establish a lens through which any artist would be consistently viewed and analyzed in his articulation of artistic categories. Michael Leja has defined such lenses as "the fundamental structural units in the art-historical analysis of the modern period," wondering whether they are "an inescapable fact of artistic production in the dealer-critic institutional system" or "structures of the art-historical mind."[151] The lack or ambiguity of definition within these categories is an issue also created by critics – and one that is prevalent in the body of critical writing about Frankenthaler. In Frankenthaler's case, the troublesome extent of the critic's influence is evident in Clement Greenberg's categorization of her in the early 1960s that created confusion where there had previously been a fairly consistent critical approach to her work.

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151. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 19.

The earliest critical treatment of Frankenthaler categorized her as an Abstract Expressionist, a characterization that prevailed into the 1960s.[152] Ambiguity was introduced, however, in 1964 by way of the Greenberg-curated exhibition entitled *Post Painterly Abstraction*. The show brought together a collection of artists including Frankenthaler who, for Greenberg, began a movement away from the more classic Abstract Expressionists. To define the distinction he intended to make, he called the style in which the classic Abstract Expressionists worked Painterly Abstraction. Abstract Expressionism had "turned into a school, then into a manner, and finally into a set a mannerisms,"[153] and Greenberg saw in this younger group of artists who painted in a style he called Post Painterly Abstraction "a reaction more against standardization than against a style or school, a reaction more against an attitude than against Painterly Abstraction as such."[154] Greenberg's comments on the surface appear well-intentioned and aligned with his goal of demonstrating the development of art produced by these painters. But in Frankenthaler's case, they introduced another category with which critical reception of her work would have to contend. The resultant ambiguity would be further compounded as other styles like the New York School, Second Generation and the Color Field Painters were introduced, effectively inserting another comparative element of significance in

152. For example, Stuart Preston of *The New York Times* covered Frankenthaler's 1953 exhibit at the de Nagy Gallery under his "Abstract" rubric. Stuart Preston, "Diverse Showings," *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), February 8, 1953. Almost ten years later John Ashbery boldly claimed that Frankenthaler was "the most classic of New York Abstract Expressionists." John Ashbery, "Paris Notes," *Art International* 5 (20 November, 1961): 50.

153. Clement Greenberg, *Post Painterly Abstraction* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964), 2.

154. Greenberg, *Post Painterly Abstraction,* 2.

scholarship on Frankenthaler as scholars sought to define the contours of the category through the artists who were determined to be practicing in the style.

Whether or not Greenberg's introduction of a new category was the cause, it certainly foreshadowed the ambiguity of characterization ultimately given to Frankenthaler's. In the years following, her work range in categorization from second-generation Abstract Expressionist, to neither hard- nor -soft-edge, to neither Abstract Expressionist nor color abstractionist but some vague category as a bridge between them.[155] The trend by the end of the sixties, then, shifted away from Frankenthaler's primary characterization as an Abstract Expressionist, opening the door to the ambiguity that remains in current scholarship.

As the first substantial volume dedicated to her oeuvre, the publication of Barbara Rose's 1971 monograph of Frankenthaler was a prime opportunity in the art historical narrative to correct some of the ambiguity raised by the lack of attention by the major critics as well as the question of characterization of Frankenthaler's work. Rose contributes significantly to the critical appreciation of the importance of the artist's work as she aptly summarizes in her conclusion:

> Courage and staying power are rare in any age. In our own, Frankenthaler's combination of these qualities is an incalculable asset not only to American art but also to the future of painting in general. Her paintings are not merely beautiful. They

155. Gene Baro's highly laudatory 1967 review adopts the approach of Frankenthaler as a second generation Abstract Expressionist, distinguishing Frankenthaler as one of the few who were able to emerge successfully because "her work is clearly the product of her own sensibility, and the method she has developed ins consistent with her vision and feelings and with her aesthetic concerns." Gene Baro, "The Achievement of Helen Frankenthaler," *Art International* 11 (September 1967): 33. A year later, James Mellow introduced another concept in characterizing her work as "neither Hard-Edge nor precisely Soft Edge." James R. Mellow, "New York Letter," *Art International* 12 (15 May 1968): 67-68. The New York times review of the 1969 Whitney Museum show acknowledges her derivation from Abstract Expressionism but positions it more reliably as a "link between the art of the Abstract Expressionists and that of the color abstractionists of the sixties." Hilton Kramer, "Abstraction and 'The Landscape Paradigm,'" *The New York Times* (New York, NY), March 2, 1969.

> are statements of great intensity and significance about what it is to stay alive, to face crisis and survive, to accept maturity with grace and even joy.[156]

Although this conclusion is laudatory, it underscores the failure of the monograph to establish a well-honed argument for Frankenthaler's inclusion in the art historical canon on the merits of her innovation, mastery and productivity, leaving the reader instead with the notion that she was a tenacious person – an admirable personal trait, but one that falls short of describing the end to which it could lead.

Tenacity was important in Frankenthaler's establishment of a place for herself in the New York art world of the 1950s as discussed above. But it was a means to an end – specifically for her to be accepted as an artist. Rose fails to highlight the end goal, instead emphasizing the means as if the end failed but the means were at least well-intentioned. The impact of Rose's failure here is further enhanced by her treatment of Pollock's influence on Frankenthaler. She did establish the courageousness with which Frankenthaler established herself in the New York art world at a young age: she possessed a strong inclination to independence and was "far too ambitious and original an artist to be anyone's follower."[157] Unwilling to follow in Pollock's footsteps yet recognizing that his approach to painting on the floor without brushes opened up new possibilities to the development of form, she began her own experimentation, ultimately settling on the thinning of her paint: "Extending Pollock's method by thinning down her medium so that paint not only sank into but soaked right through canvas, she created a stained image that was not literally on top of or illusionistically behind the picture plane but literally in and of the ground."[158] Rose characterizes Frankenthaler's innovation as the adoption of Pollock's

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156. Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 38.

157. Rose, 31.

158. Rose, 34.

"revolutionary new *technique*" in order to achieve her "radical approach to form" through which the image and picture plane become one.[159] Rose thus appropriately frames Frankenthaler's innovation as one of technical *effect*, whereas Pollock's was one of *technique*.

Although Rose establishes the foundation for this compelling case of innovation by Frankenthaler, she undermines the overall message with an excessive emphasis on Pollock. Enmeshed within the eleven or so pages she dedicates to the Pollock influence are not just claims about her indebtedness to his technical innovation, but commentaries on the extent of her indebtedness ("enormous"); the number of mentors he replaced ("Picasso, Gorky and Kandinsky"); her acceptance of his message ("she was *prepared*, both artistically and psychologically, to understand and accept Pollock's message"); his displacement ("a new attitude toward composition"); and his appreciation of Surrealism ("the emphasis on psychological content"). This exhaustive – and exhausting – litany of Pollock's power and influence elevates him, unfortunately, to a god-like stature that undermines her depiction of Frankenthaler's independence as an artist and thus raises the bar even higher than Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Judd.[160] Consequently, this first monograph dedicated to Frankenthaler further entrenches the myth that Frankenthaler was heavily influenced by – and was indebted to –

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159. Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 30.

160. Rose had issued an almost apologetic claim in her 1969 statement that "[i]t took a shift in taste brought about by the recognition of Louis and Noland to allow the quality of Frankenthaler's work to become generally apparent." Barbara Rose, "Painting within the Tradition," 30. Thus, between her effusive attribution of influence to Pollock and her apology that it took Louis and Noland to make "apparent" the quality of her work, Rose participated in the long history of identifying Frankenthaler in comparison to others, "with the effect of downplaying her originality and agency, and positioning her as a talented follower." Gohari, "Gendered Reception," 35.

Pollock over all other artistic influences firmly and early in scholarly discourse about Frankenthaler.

The critical emphasis on Pollock – the very masculine image of the Abstract Expressionists in the public's eye – also lays a foundation on which more recent scholarship has assessed the language critics have used to analyze Frankenthaler's work, in some cases pointing to this emphasis as a symptom of the broader artistic environment's hostility toward women painters. Carl Belz asserts that much criticism was stated in "the words of men generally, stereotypes for how men living in a man's world looked upon women at a time when qualifiers such as 'She's a pretty good painter, for a woman' were commonplace."[161] Belz's comments reflects the presumption in much contemporary scholarship on Frankenthaler that gender bias represents, in the words of Bette Schumacher, a "principal lens through which Frankenthaler's early audiences regarded her work."[162] A close examination of word and context reveals that the situation was in fact much more nuanced, with many of the critics who employed the language at the center of the focus staunchly supporting Frankenthaler by making the case for her importance in the art historical moment. This has unfortunately embedded yet another myth in the art historical narrative – that of the gendered lens through which critics "principally" viewed her work, thus concentrating historical analysis on negative language from the 1960s and 1970s without regard for the positive reviews she received.

There are notably a few commentaries that exhibit clear bias. Yet these are not from the most important critics of the day, nor did they appear to receive much traction in detracting from

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161. Carl Belz, "Field of Dreams," 91.

162. Bett Schumacher, "The Woman Problem: Gender Displacement in the Art of Helen Frankenthaler," 12.

Frankenthaler's generally positive critical reception. Sydney Tillium's review from the 1959 Andre Emmerich Gallery exhibition inconsistently derides the show for its narcissism as well as reflection of the influence of Robert Motherwell, Frankenthaler's husband at the time. One detects a distinct hint of sexism in the latter. Moreover, Tillium fails to make a case for how the alleged influence of her husband transforms to narcissism on the canvas.[163] Several reviewers specifically reference Frankenthaler's gender in their assessments. For example, review by James Schuyler's 1960 review highlights Frankenthaler's feminine sensibility,[164] and Anne Seelye observes evidence of a "hysterical temperament" in Frankenthaler's "romantic, hypersensitive, sulky" paintings.[165] Although these represent a significant minority of the critical commentary of the era, they have been offered as evidence that they represent "a principal lens" through which not only critics, but Frankenthaler's audience more generally viewed her work.

By framing the lens in this manner, scholarship has exposed some of the more favorable critical support Frankenthaler received to disapprobation, including the writings of Donald Judd and E. C. Goosen, two prominent critics of the time. In his 1960 review of Frankenthaler's show at the Jewish Museum, Judd distinguished Frankenthaler's work from Pollock's 1951-52 black and white paintings, the critically acknowledged source for Frankenthaler's idiom. He saw a "massed ambience and warmth" in her show that contrasted with the "hardly quiescent" method of Pollock that produced works that were "cool, tough and rigorous" and, thus, "objective." [166] He acknowledges the validity of both approaches but suggests that Frankenthaler may need more

163. S[yndey] T[illium], "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 33 (May 1959): 56.

164. J[ames] S[chuyler], "Helen Frankenthaler," Art News (May 1960): 13.

165. A[nne] S[eely], "Helen Frankenthaler," Art News (March 1960): 39.

166. D[onlad] J[udd], "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* 34 (March 1960): 55.

objectivity to continue. Judd's expression had been read with a gender bias given his focus on action works, but this reading ignores the broader point he is making about his preference for objectivity over subjectivity. This latter point has been the subject of great and unresolved debate, including with Michael Leja's review dedicated to the question of subjectivity in Abstract Expressionism. Judd's point is a technical one, and some recent scholarship has missed the mark in reading it as linguistic evidence of gender bias.

If there is any doubt about Judd's motives in this review, he offered clarity in his broad assessment of Pollock published in 1967. His stated objective is not to write a comprehensive summary of what should be written about Pollock, but instead to assert just how good an artist he believed Pollock to be. To do so, he attacks the very basis of so much of the analysis that has attended Frankenthaler – that of comparison to other artists – but draws in a larger group:

> I want to make clear, even as just an assertion, how good I think Pollock's paintings are. Almost everyone thinks he's a great painter, but they also seem to give equal standing to quite a few other people. The quickest assertion of ability is of the comparative kind rather than through a complete discussion: I think Pollock's a greater artist than anyone working at the time or since. That gives him the edge on Barnet Newman, which I hate to admit. Most painting since Pollock's is somewhat conservative in comparison. The idea that Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland and Olitski form a line of advance from Pollock's work is ridiculous.[167]

Judd thus categorically dismisses not just Frankenthaler, but other acknowledged great male artists from the era in his attempt to ensure Pollock's exalted status in the canon. His article on Pollock contextualizes his previous review of Frankenthaler and its cautious endorsement of her 'valid purpose,' supporting the notion that his motivation is less to exalt Frankenthaler and other contemporary artists than to draw a necessary distinction between them and Pollock in order to sustain Pollock's vaunted status.

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167. Don Judd, "Jackson Pollock," *Arts Magazine* 41 (April 1967): 34.

E. C. Goossen published an article the year after Judd's Jewish Museum review that has also diverted scholarly focus away from its positive commentary due to its linguistic use of gendered terms. In this controversial passage, Goossen seeks to emphasize the differences between Frankenthaler and Pollock:

> Everyone immediately sees the connection between the late work of Pollock and Frankenthaler's but few note the vast chasm which separates them. Without Pollock's painting her's is unthinkable. What she took from him was masculine: the almost hard-edged linear splashes of duco enamel. What she made with it was distinctly feminine: the broad, bleeding-edged stain on raw linen. With this translation she added a new candidate for the dictionary of plastic forms, the stain.[168]

This choice of words – which I believe most historians would agree, with hindsight, was regrettable – diverts attention from the broader argument he makes to demonstrate the significant differences between Pollock and Frankenthaler and to celebrate Frankenthaler as being "in possession of the most developed, inimitable and flexible approach in American art today."[169] His acknowledgement of the debt owed to her for her unique development of the stain argues for a more strenuous contribution to the art historical moment that many critics, including Judd, were offering at the time. His argument is thus an essential development in the positive direction critical acceptance of her work had taken, yet it remains denigrated in recent scholarship seeking to explain Frankenthaler's absence from the canon through his establishment of a link between Frankenthaler's gender and the stain motif she utilized.[170] Goossen's comment is frequently cited in support of the myth that the weight of criticism, including that which was most favorable to

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168. E. C. Goossen, "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art International* 5 (20 October 1961): 78.

169. Goossen, 77.

170. I will explore this paradigm in more depth in the next chapter.

her work, was gender-biased and, as a result, contributory to her failure to be included in the canon. His positive commentary is thus ignored.

As Frankenthaler developed and grew in her chosen career as an artist, she received significant critical attention upon her arrival in New York following her college years. Over the course of time, several myths developed and were further entrenched in the art historical narrative, establishing formidable barriers to her recognition. Collectively, these and other myths – the outsized influence of Pollock on her oeuvre, her status as a second-tier artist who was a bridge between the top tier, her failure to be included in the canon because of an inherent gender bias among critics broadly, including her most ardent supporters – weigh Frankenthaler the artist down in the historical narrative with unique factors. Her situation demonstrates two critical realities of the contemporary art world. First, the role of critics is essential to an artist's success but can be perilous to the artist's development in the critic's use of characterizations. For Frankenthaler, the failure to receive critical approbation from the 'major' critics of the day meant that her recognition as an important innovative artist would remain in doubt, ultimately impacting her inclusion in the canon. Second, the critics' inconsistent assignation of Frankenthaler as an Abstract Expressionist, second generation Abstract Expressionist, Post Painterly Abstractionist and other similar categorizations created an unlevel playing field for assessment of her work, always in relation to others and with the goal of assigning a category taking on greater importance than an assessment of the advanced technical and formal qualities of her work. The convergence of these two influences early in Frankenthaler's career established deeply engrained assumptions in the art historical narrative that remain today. The role of the critic who seeks to rehabilitate Frankenthaler's position in the canon is thus more complex because she must first successfully rebut the embedded myths and presumptions before even

engaging in meaningful critical dialogue to move her case forward. This challenge is clear in the evidence offered in later scholarship on Frankenthaler.

CHAPTER THREE: DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

It is a symptom of her current place in art history that Frankenthaler has not been the subject of a major retrospective since 1989. As the role of the critic in ensuring the success of the artist grew in prominence in the mid-twentieth century, so did the blockbuster exhibit rise to establish the importance of an artist in the eye of the broader art consumer who was representative of the increased societal awareness of art in the latter quarter of the twentieth century. Despite not having been recognized with such an outward acknowledgement of importance in a show that could be considered a blockbuster, there have been several important shows that highlight the important artistic contribution of Frankenthaler. These shows have also created opportunities for scholars to fill the void created by the dearth of journalistic scholarship on the artist and to begin the process of rehabilitating her reputation away from the entrenched myths. For example, important scholarly contributions have accompanied the 1998 Frankenthaler solo exhibit at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, a triad of shows in 2013, 2014 and 2017 at the Gagosian Gallery in New York and in Paris, and the 2018 exhibit at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) in Provincetown, MA. Each of these exhibits highlights particular periods of Frankenthaler's development as a painter.

In what appears to be uncoordinated curatorial decision-making, exhibits at these several institutions offer a breakdown of the two decades following Frankenthaler's completion of *Mountains and Sea* into smaller subsets of time in which stylistic similarities appear as the artist moved quickly to maturity. In addition to each offering distinct aspects of the progression of her development, these smaller time units also collectively make the case for the historical

importance of Frankenthaler's oeuvre from the late 1950s and 1960s – not just of *Mountains and Sea*.

The Guggenheim, Gagosian and PAAM exhibits offer a chronological survey of the development of Frankenthaler's paintings following her breakthrough in *Mountains and Sea* through her years painting in Provincetown in the 1960s. The first show at the Guggenheim in 1998 covered the period immediately following the inception of her critical acceptance from 1956-1959. In her contribution to the exhibition catalog, Susan Cross offers a comprehensive foundational exploration of the influences that are crucial "[t]o understand how a painter could achieve such a breakthrough at the precocious age of twenty-three"[171] in order to establish the originality and uniqueness of Frankenthaler's work from this period.

Three exhibits at Gagosian New York and Paris between 2013 and 2017 chronicle Frankenthaler's developments from 1950 through 1963. The 2013 exhibit covers the period from 1950 through 1959, broadly capturing her emergence as an important artist in the New York scene prior to and following completion of her breakthrough work *Mountains and Sea*. The 2017 exhibit at Gagosian Paris takes up the period in her oeuvre between 1959 and 1962. In his contribution to the catalog, John Elderfield documents Frankenthaler transition during the period from "a set of 'think-tough and paint-tough' canvases" to "a set of the quieter, more open paintings that followed in 1961-62."[172] Elderfield notes the coincidence of Frankenthaler's tougher paintings with the publication of Greenberg's essay on Louis and Noland in which he

171. Susan Cross, "The Emergence of a Painter," 13.

172. John Elderfield, "Think Tough, Paint Tough, Move On: Helen Frankenthaler after Abstract Expressionism, 1959-1962," in *Helen Frankenthaler 1959-1962* (Paris: Gagosian, 2017), 6.

carves out Frankenthaler as a special case. He also considers certain similarities in the work of Frankenthaler and Motherwell, whom she had married during this period and with whom she had travelled to Europe on her honeymoon. In short, Elderfield enhances our understanding of the influences that Frankenthaler experienced as she moved further toward maturity as an artist. The 2014 exhibit concentrates on the period from 1962-63 following the "think tough" years – the period when color emerges as a mature element of compositional value.

The 2018 exhibit at the PAAM picks up chronologically where the Gagosian series ended, exploring the artist at arguably the point when she attained perfection of her idiom. The context for the exhibit is set in the Provincetown art colony where, as Christine McCarthy, the PAAM's executive director, observes, "[w]omen artists have always maintained a position of importance."[173] Several essays in the catalog build on and refine previously suggested contributions concerning Frankenthaler's ability to draw with color through gesture, and to incorporate natural influences of water and light effectively in her painterly medium.

Whether intentional or not, the chronological movement explored in these recent showcases of Frankenthaler's development has given voice to a deeper understanding of Frankenthaler's movement to maturity during these critical years with a laser focus on the artist and her artistic output. Instead of limiting the dialogue to consideration of the extent of Pollock's or other artists' influence on Frankenthaler, these exhibits, through their visual journey and the documentary assessments offered in support of the journey, focus on technical and formal analysis with *Mountains and Sea* as a point of departure and growth. Embedded within this history is a compelling reminder that her work stands on its own as powerful and moving – much

173. Christine McCarthy, "Foreword," *Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown* (Provincetown: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 2018), 5.

as the artist herself was a powerful voice on her immersion in the New York art world of the 1950s. These exhibitions, then, through their combination of curation and scholarship through the exhibition catalog, support the notion that recognition of Frankenthaler must take into account formal and technical analysis of her work in its own right in order for the embedded myths to be debunked. This collective effort contrasts with the journalistic scholarship that was published during the same period – approaches that are heavily concentrated on sociological and psychological factors in lieu of the formal and technical.

During the same general timeframe during which these regional exhibitions have been hung, there has been limited journalistic scholarship on Frankenthaler. Several feminist critics, however, took up the cause beginning in the 1990s, ensuring that Frankenthaler was not a forgotten figure while she was quietly working away, participating in periodic shows. Several influential feminist scholars advanced two notions that would constitute a significant corpus of academic attention to Frankenthaler during the period. The first pertained to assessments of the gender bias that prevailed in criticism of her work and had the effect of distancing her from the canon of great artists. The second addressed her technique of painting, seeking to find in her adoption of the stain idiom a female artistic distinction.

Griselda Pollock was the first influential art historian to take up this cause as an opportunity ultimately to correct the problems of the past with a new approach to art history by "learn[ing] how to read painting by Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler as works by painters to were American, Jewish, New Yorker, immigrant or bourgeois women."[174] Pollock embarked, in

174. Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women" 223.

effect, on a project to develop a language that would facilitate an understanding of the work of Frankenthaler as a woman by tying technique to the physical female body.

Pollock's chapter – or short book, as she suggests at the Chapter's introduction – from the 1996 volume she edited with Fred Orton draws on Marxist methodologies to "confront the problem of how to 'see' what artists who are women produce."[175] As Pollock's analysis unfolds, she asserts that Frankenthaler's practice of painting on the unframed canvas on the floor suggests a "differentiated relation to absence, and the loss of the maternal body."[176] She also instructs that "art history has to learn how to read paintings by Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler as works by painters who were American, Jewish, New Yorker, immigrant or bourgeois women."[177] What Pollock offers, then, is an argument that the audience has to learn how to read a painting by an artist who is other – that is, not a white male.

Griselda Pollock's work was followed by scholarship that built on her notion of instructing the reader on how to interpret the work by the artist who was a woman, but that did so ostensibly to combat the gendered discourse that defined and interpreted Frankenthaler's work from the outset. Around the time of Griselda Pollock's publication, Lisa Saltzman published an essay in which she argues that, during the turbulent era of the second-generation abstract expressionists, critics responded to the painting of woman artists through the use of gendered terms selected for the purpose of maintaining the previous order. In Frankenthaler's work, Saltzman observes that "the aspect of the liquid areas of color, the perceived fluidity of Frankenthaler's soak-stain technique" established the foundation for what followed as a notably

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175. Pollack, 223.

176. Pollock, 258.

177. Pollock, 287.

gendered discourse. Citing as evidence both the Rosenberg passage on Frankenthaler's failure to grasp the "moral and metaphysical basis of Action painting" as well as the Gordon Parks photograph of her sitting "demurely atop a canvas," Saltzman concludes that Frankenthaler has been denied "her self-consciousness and her agency in the symbolic field." She then proceeds to demonstrate broadly how very few canvases of New York School artists are "exclusively masculine and feminine in their characteristics."[178] Thus, while criticizing the approach critics took at the time Frankenthaler painted – employing gender-based words to describe the visual imagery Frankenthaler created – Saltzman, by her own admission, has done the same decades later in a reappropriation of the stain technique that the male critic E. C. Goossen had, twenty years earlier, denoted as feminine. Saltzman has, in effect, added another myth to the dialogue – that of the stain. I will explore this concept in greater depth at the end of this chapter.

Pollock and Saltzman adopt the same paradigm to offer complementary objectives and means to the similar end they seek but, as early generation feminist art historians, their approach has not been universally accepted. This may be in part attributable to the fact that it prescribes a different reading of a text based on gender and thus ironically perpetuates the idea of gender as essential to the art historian's reading of a painting's iconography. In her 2010 article on gender displacement, Bett Schumacher addresses yet another aspect of gender through analysis of Frankenthaler herself, arguing that Frankenthaler dealt with the issue of her gender by effectively denying it – that is, replacing her female presence with a gender-neutral one.[179] By first breaking down Griselda Pollock's notion of the psychic projection of a female artist's femininity onto a

178. Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain", 178-79.

179. Schumacher, "The Woman Problem: Gender Displacement in the Art of Helen Frankenthaler," 12-21.

"creative woman's body," Schumacher disagrees with Griselda Pollock's conclusion that Frankenthaler's techniques were markedly different from those of Jackson Pollock. Where Griselda Pollock sees Jackson Pollock "dominating his canvases, towering over them and practically assaulting them with a paint-covered stick" in opposition to Frankenthaler's "entering, kneeling, and sitting upon the canvases and using 'pouring, pushing, smoothing gestures,'" Schumacher observes in Frankenthaler's technique an activity that is "much more athletic, her painting method even more physical and vigorous that Jackson Pollock's."[180] Moreover, where Pollock sees Frankenthaler's painting as a "mediation on differentiation which happens psychically through procedures of identification," Schumacher notes "engagement with differentiation happening within Frankenthaler's paintings themselves."[181]

Although Schumacher offers a reasonable reading that builds on and enhances the scholarship of Pollock and Saltzman, her framing of the debate unfortunately maintains the tradition of defining Frankenthaler through comparison with Pollock, reinforcing the relevance of this decades-old question to contemporary art historical analysis. Moreover, she perpetuates the relevance of the artist's gender to an understanding of her work in identifying, in Frankenthaler's "conflicted feelings about the role of gender in her work," a veiled effort "to overcome her gender, seeking to replace her female/feminized presence with a gender neutral one."[182] Her conclusion discounts Frankenthaler's own comments about the presence of gender in her work and, further, perpetuates the notion that consideration is central to an understanding of Frankenthaler's work.

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180. Schumacher, 14.

181. Schumacher, 15.

182. Schumacher, 19.

In 2014, Sybil Gohari offered another perspective on the myth Saltzman identified of pervasive gender bias toward Frankenthaler demonstrated by critics from the fifties and sixties. Citing the comments referenced earlier by Don Judd, E.C. Goossen, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, Gohari offered a foundation on which to build the claim that "[i]n their interpretations of her nonfigurative paintings, reviewers frequently infused contemporary notions of gender and gender stereotypes."[183] In addition to the gendered language, Gohari cites the failure of these critics to acknowledge Frankenthaler's innovation, instead "pegging her as a follower and not fully crediting her as the innovator she was."[184] She cites as examples the critic James Schuyler's comment in a 1957 review that Frankenthaler style is in effect a continuation of Pollock, and William Berkson's comment a few years later that establishes Frankenthaler as the link from Pollock to Morris and Noland.[185] Her piece does not add significant depth to the scholarship that predated its publication, however. Gohari's version is thus essentially a contemporary recounting of previously-told anecdotes – a compendium of what is known and agreed, falling short of its purported and laudable goal to "contribute to a re-assessment of Helen Frankenthaler in American history."[186]

Although it does not add materially to what is known about the critical past, Gohari's review of the history of art critics' reception of Frankenthaler since her earliest shows subtly suggests that rehabilitation has progressed in part. Her account notably ends in the 1990s with

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183. Gohari, "Gendered Reception: There and Back Again: An Analysis of the Critical Reception of Helen Frankenthaler," 33.

184. Gohari, 33.

185. Gohari, 34-35.

186. Gohari, 34.

comments made by Holland Carter, followed by commentary from the feminist critic Zillah Eisenstein. This co-location of two critics from two very different persuasions is remarkable in the contrast it creates and in the direction of critical discourse it anticipates. The contrast is magnified in Gohari's selection of quotes from these two scholars. Carter is noted as calling some of Frankenthaler's work "one of Jackson Pollock's bad dreams," while Eisenstein is acknowledged for her recognition that "[h]owever differentiated gender may be, gender oppression exists."[187] This comment suggests that the "gendered reception" of Frankenthaler ended in the 1990s and a less gendered reception began, announced by Eisenstein's publication. Yet Eisenstein's comment augurs the beginning of a period of intense feminist analysis that emphasizes the past reception of Frankenthaler's work with interesting – but fundamentally consistent –approaches that accept gender as the starting point of analysis.

A common trend appears in the scholarship described above in its attentiveness to word choice as evidence of gender bias, particularly words like liquidity and fluidity that have been assigned definitive feminine connotations. John Elderfield supports the observations of Saltzman and others in his own assertion:

> First, in Western art criticism, femininity has long been an available metaphor to describe such qualities of painting as lyricism, delicacy, colorfulness, and restraint; and Saltzman is correct in pointing out that toward the end of the 1950s, staining was added to these qualities, to become the principal code word for femininity in the writings of certain male critics on Frankenthaler's paintings.[188]

While there is some truth in to his statement based on its qualification – "certain" male critics – it speaks of critical overreach given the importance of the words he calls out in the broader critical

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187. Gohari, "Gendered Reception," 37.

188. John Elderfield, *Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler from 1950 to 1959* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2013), 25-26.

vocabulary of the time, words that had been applied to many artists without direct or indirect evidence of gender bias in the word choice.

The term lyrical offers an appropriate example, as Frankenthaler herself expressed hesitation at its implicit meaning. Yet it was a commonly used critical terms of the period, having been applied at some point to most of Frankenthaler's male contemporaries, and it remains so today. The concern about its use in the context of Frankenthaler's oeuvre derives from her comment during an interview with Henry Geldzahler during which he asked her feelings about being a woman painter:

> Obviously, first I am involved in painting not the who and how. I wonder if my pictures are more "lyrical" (that loaded word!) because I'm a woman. Looking at my paintings as if they were painted by a woman is superficial, a side issue, like looking at Klines and saying they are bohemian. The making of serious painting is difficult and complicated for all serious painters. One must be oneself, whatever.[189]

Frankenthaler's comment is ambiguous, as it is not clear whether she is asserting that her painting is lyrical and wondering whether the cause is her gender – a plausible yet admittedly unlikely interpretation – or questioning whether others have called her work lyrical because she is a woman. In either case, the word was used at the time to describe male artists. For example, the critic John Ashbery profferred that Kenneth Noland's wheel paintings of 1961 may be "descendants of Villon's lyrical but self-contained abstractions of the twenties,"[190] connecting lyricism of a prior era to the current. Additionally, Michael Fried's 1965 review of Jules Olitski's spray painting asserts that this series is "inconceivable without Noland's and Stella's prior achievement," observing further the "lyric exercise of [Noland's] superb and wholly distinctive

189. Henry Geldzahler, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Artforum* (October 1965): 38.

190. John Asbhery, "Paris Notes," *Art International* 5-6 (June-August 1961): 92.

coloristic gifts."[191] Frankenthaler's hesitation notwithstanding, these are but two illustrations of the use of the term in the context of male painters that denotes a positive assessment of work as was the case in its use in Frankenthaler's oeuvre.

In what appears, in the history of Frankenthaler scholarship, almost as an act of critical re-appropriation, Robert Hobbs provides a compelling assessment of the lyricism of Frankenthaler's work following *Mountains and Sea*, asserting that the in and out movement in her work supports its categorization as "lyrical abstraction" – yet another distinct bucket in which to consider her work.[192] The power of Hobbs's argument lies in its establishment of the "metonymical relations" of Frankenthaler, Krasner and Mitchell with themselves as artists whose work evinces self as co-extant with the otherwise male-dominated Abstract Expressionist history. In other words, he convincingly posits Frankenthaler's lyricism as a positive contribution to history.[193] His comment is supported in the premise behind the 2016 exhibit *Hartung and Lyrical Painters* at the Fonds Hélène & Édouard Leclerc pour la Culture in Landerneau, France in which Frankenthaler's lyricism was favorably compared with that of Hans Hartung, a French-German artist who painted a continent away in a comparable style.

Where the meaning implicit in the word lyricism was seen to take on gendered tones through use and context in the 1950s, the word stain appears to have entered into the art historical vocabulary related to Frankenthaler with its use by E.C. Goossen in 1961, categorizing her use of the "bleeding-edged stain" as "distinctly feminine."[194] Saltzman reprises the theme,

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191. Michael Fried, "Jules Olitski's New Paintings," *Artforum* 4, no. 3 (1965): 37, 38.

192. Robert Hobbs, "Krasner, Mitchell, and Frankenthaler: Nature as Metonym," in *Women of Abstract Expressionism,* ed. Joan Marter (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2016), 63.

193. Hobbs, "Nature as Metonym," 65.

194. Goossen, "Helen Frankenthaler," 78.

arguing for the stain's importance not only as an iconographic element to understand Frankenthaler, but also as a "sign through which to delineate categories of gender" in the critical reception of Color Field Painting more generally.[195] Salzman's effort represents a re-appropriation of a theme often considered as a representation of femininity and first used, in the critical context, by Goossen. But Goossen was not apparently the first to make the association with bodily fluids: if Stevens' account is accurate, Joan Mitchell can be credited with establishing the reference to Frankenthaler's style and her gender by calling Frankenthaler "the tampon painter."[196] If this latter account is true, the stain's association with femininity may have begun with a woman, complicating the argument about the gendered nature of critical discourse on Frankenthaler.

More recently, Barbara Baert offers an interesting exploration of the stain as an iconographic element that has been present throughout the history of art, denoting that its power as visual sign goes beyond simply the gendered association invoking bodily fluid. Her reflections are premised on the notion that the stain "is evidence of something that was." [197] Moreover, in her assessment, "[a]s a paradigm of the image, the stain also runs parallel with the image."[198] In her analysis, then, the stain is evidence of something else that no longer is – it "was" something but is now reduced to "image," or reproduction. This aligns with Salzman's argument for the

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195. Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain," 374.

196. Stevens, *De Kooning*, 345.

197. Barbara Baert, *About Stains or the Image as Residue* (Peters: Leuven, Belgium, 2017), 3.

198. Baert, 95.

stain as something reflective of a broader sociological phenomenon in respect of gender, linking the canvas and its embedded image to something beyond the artist and the viewer.

The symbolic and metaphoric meaning of the stain can be argued in multiple contexts, as Baert demonstrates, but several problems emerge from these considerations. In the context of Frankenthaler's art, approaching her work on the basis that the stain implies something that "was" assumes that the painting has a meaning beyond itself at the time it was painted, and that the challenge in reading the painting is to figure out what exactly this referent is (was). This would practically force a psychological reading of the painting in which things such as time, place and gender will matter. Thus, the stain painted by Frankenthaler will, perforce, mean something different, because of the exteriorities of the painting, than one painted by Taro Yamamoto, a male Abstract Expressionist artist from the 1950s who also employed a staining technique. Although different readings may be possible regardless of how one approaches the stain, the fact that this iconographic reading compels a gendered analysis is troublesome.

Moreover, the notion that the stain runs parallel to the image necessitates a conclusion that stain is different from image. This notion on its face runs counter to the nature of Frankenthaler's technical achievement in marrying image to canvas surface. For Frankenthaler, stain and image are one and the same, and they represent their own natural environment created by the artist on the canvas and made available for the viewer's unique experience. In the tradition of the modernists who preceded her, Frankenthaler draws inspiration from nature to paint, but does not seek a recreation of the natural experience on canvas. A reading of the stain as running parallel to the image suggests otherwise: it undermines the technical achievement she sought in embracing the natural consequence of allowing a liquified paint to be absorbed into an untreated canvas.

While the work of Pollock, Saltzman, Gohari and Schumacher represents an important contribution to scholarship in art, they can be viewed collectively as adding another complexity to the placement of Frankenthaler in the canon for her innovation in their collective assertion of gender as a necessary component to explain the reason for her lack of status. This is not to say that their work does not have a broader place in the art historical context – in fact, it is only through more thorough scholarly assessment in all genres of analysis in conjunction with curatorial attention that Frankenthaler's importance will be indelibly etched in the art historical narrative. Yet Eleanor Munro's comment warrants reconsideration: "[O]ne reason women's art has not been honored enough is that it has too often been considered just that – women's art – and not searched for revelations of the Zeitgeist. In this one respect, Feminism may even serve the enemy."[199] Munroe reminds her reader convincingly, without ignoring the past, that scholarship can acknowledge the challenges faced by women artists and still find the importance of their contribution to Zeitgeist. Her approach stands as evidence that, when criticism seeks not only to acknowledge its role in identifying problems in art history but to suggest solutions to redress them, it can work cooperatively within the art historical tradition to make its case. Munro achieves this objective by incorporating the artist as person within the narrative. The messages conveyed by the recent exhibitions noted above reminds us that form, style, and content remain relevant in the art historical context. Form, style, iconography and socio-cultural analysis are all essential contributions to the development of an enduring art historical analysis. In Frankenthaler's case, the focus of scholarship in the last two decades has been almost exclusively on socio-cultural analysis. While this may not explain why Frankenthaler has not

199. Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, 19.

achieved more notable recognition, it must certainly be considered as a potential contributing factor.

Recent shows of Frankenthaler's work suggest that Munroe's notions about the failure of criticism to seek the Zeitgeist has merit. In each of the shows discussed above, the characteristics of the art selected and the content of the accompanying publications seeks to define Frankenthaler's relevance by way of the current aesthetic experience they offer as opposed to reframing it in terms of the past. Neither Pollock, nor characterization of her style, nor consideration of her gender are central to the experience. Moreover, *Mountains and Sea* was not featured. This is not to suggest that any consideration of the past is inappropriate; doing so would be naïve and disingenuous. But the value of Frankenthaler's art is the present experience it evokes, and the work of art is best left on its own to make its own case with the viewer without giving an instruction sheet about how the signs are to be read.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE FREEDOM OF MATURITY

Few artists merit a place in history solely on the basis of a single painting absent other significant factors that are likely motivated less by artistic concerns than by historical events. The weight of the historical discussion on Frankenthaler, however, concentrates its examination on the relevance of a single painting and a single artistic influence on her inspiration to complete it in the manner and technique she did. John Elderfield observation about the outsized attention it receives remains as relevant today as it was when he penned it in 1989: "It is hard to think of another picture in recent times that has come so narrowly to define an artist's identity as this picture has come to define Frankenthaler's, or another whose influence has overshadowed appreciation of the work itself."[200] Perhaps this explains or excuses Frankenthaler's continued

200. Elderfield, Frankenthaler, 65.

absence in historical assessments that seek to play a role in formation of the canon – including her notable absence from compilations written by feminist art historians with the stated objective of correcting the absence of important women artists broadly.[201] Yet absence does not obviate the impact of the painting itself, and the recent exhibitions described in the previous chapter have filled this gap in the scope of their coverage and in their enhancement to scholarship by way of the formal, technical and historical contributions of the exhibition catalogs. In so doing they support the proposition that Frankenthaler's importance as an artist derives more from what she produced after *Mountains and Sea* than from the innovation of that work in itself. Moreover, these shows make the case for consideration of Frankenthaler as a unique contributor to art history. This does not undermine the impact she may have had on other artists like Noland and Louis, but it does speak in support of consideration of the specific formal and aesthetic contribution she made. Review of her work in the later 1950s and 1960s, as well as a comparative analysis of her work against that of others, will reveal its import.

Mountains and Sea is most often cited as Frankenthaler's first stain painting. Assessment is thus constrained to the stain process and its relationship to Pollock. Yet it is worth considering its role in Frankenthaler's journey to establishing her own artistic idiom not as an end point but as a beginning. While its novelty at the point in her career at which she painted is obvious, it includes other traces that suggest it is not representative of a mature idiom. For example, traces of her Cubist background, an influence that was hard for Frankenthaler to disengage from, are

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201. Ann Eden Gibson determined that "it would be more productive to consider [Frankenthaler] within the context of a later era when the lionization of the essential eight of Abstract Expressionism was reaching another stage in its escalation." Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xxxiv. It is notable too that Bridget Quinn omitted Frankenthaler from her anthology of important woman artists. Bridget Quinn, *Broad Strokes: 15 Women Who Made Art and Made Art History (In That Order)* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2017).

prominent in the overall composition, especially in the use of charcoal lines which Frankenthaler later commented were "original guideposts that eventually became unnecessary." [202] In addition to its presence through line, Cubism is incorporated in the composition. Elderfield observed this effect in the "generally symmetrical" composition without a single point of focus yet pulling the weight of the image to the bottom of the canvas. He compares this to Analytical Cubist composition but for "profoundly anti-Cubist effect."[203] Frankenthaler's extensive studies of Cubism under Feeley and Wallace Harrison, with a refresher course one summer with Hofmann, are in evidence, then, in this early painting. For an artist of her age and artistic educational background, Cubism was the instinctual lens through which she approached the fresh canvas.

The Cubist reference points in this work remind us of the extent to which, Cubism was embedded in artistic education and production in the years leading up to the 1950s. Greenberg acknowledged this impact in the comment offered in his 1961 critical monograph that Hans Hofmann, with whom Frankenthaler studied briefly, suffered from a "Cubist trauma." Greenberg acknowledged the importance of Cubism in the formation of Hofmann's art, observing that "[n]o one has digested Cubism more thoroughly than Hofmann, and perhaps no one has better conveyed its gist to others." Yet he believed Hofmann had "suffered" from it more than any other artist of the postwar era, and he diagnosed it as the cause of "the distractedness of his art in its abstract phase." He observed that this was particularly problematic when he painted without a specific subject of nature, as he would "too often impose Cubist drawing upon pictorial conceptions that are already complete in themselves," and that, consequently, the "moments of his best pictures are precisely those in which his painterly gift . . .has freest rein and in which

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202 Elderfield quoting Frankenthaler, in Elderfield, *Frankenthaler,* 66.

203. Elderfield, 67.

Cubism acts, not to control, but only to inform and imply, as an awareness of style but not as style itself."[204] Given the esteem Greenberg had for Hofmann, Frankenthaler was in good company.

But unlike Hofmann who, in Greenberg's view, suffered an instinctual reversion to Cubism when he did *not* have the grounding of a natural object, Frankenthaler, in *Mountains and Sea*, incorporated Cubism even *with* the reference point of mountains and sea. This was a short-lived problem for the younger Frankenthaler, however, as she was much more agile in freeing herself from Cubism's shackles of linear definition gravitational pull as is evidenced in *Shatter* (fig. 5) which she painted in 1953.

Shatter is a significantly smaller work than *Mountains and Sea*.[205] It is less likely therefore to envelop the viewer by virtue of its size, and more likely to do so through the refinement of technique it exudes. *Shatter* offers a visual symphony of form, color and energy. A slightly concave blue streak on the left side of the canvas compels the viewer to the right, creating a force of motion. The motion appears to suspend, however, as the eye is drawn to the darker ochre images in the middle of the canvas – the central focal point that *Mountains and Sea* lacked. These images appear suspended within clouds of yellow that is at once muted and joyous; the clouds in turn themselves are grounded on three aqueous forms of blue at the bottom. Hovering above in the top center is a cherubic blot of deeper blue, suggesting the lyrical qualities that critics have often attributed to Frankenthaler's work. Thus, while the work's title suggests

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204. All quotations in this paragraph are from Clement Greenberg, *Hofmann* (Paris: Éditions Georges Fall, 1961), 17-18.

205. With measurements of 48 ½" x 54", it is nearly half the size of *Mountains and Sea*, which measures 86 5/8" x 117 ¼".

violence, its effect is one of a Zen-like calm, suggesting the ambiguities that Frankenthaler frequently juxtaposed in her paintings without reversion to either line or gravity.[206]

In *Shatter,* Frankenthaler has refined her method and achieved a stunning result based purely on form and color. She not only eliminated the linear definitions that appear so frequently in her paintings until this time to establish the multiple surface planes that the pictures sought to depict, but she also succeeded, where Pollock in his drip paintings had failed, in eliminating any reference to the dual dimensionality of the picture versus the canvas, instead absorbing the picture into the canvas to form a single plane. She achieved this first by eliminating the linear charcoal underdrawings, removing the line as a strict point of reference and thus enabling paint to act visually on its own on the canvas surface. By liquifying the paint through her addition of turpentine and kerosene, she was positioned to allow it more freedom of movement than she did with *Mountains and Sea.* Through this freedom and the natural act of absorption, the resultant shapes took on an almost organic quality directly embedded within the canvas, marrying paint with surface and denoting success in the artistic creation. Rose sees in this latter achievement a resolution of the "dual crisis" that Pollock and other painters were unable to solve. Her words are particularly helpful in understanding the crisis she had identified:

> The dual crisis I referred to involved (1) the rejection of the tactile, sculptural space of painting from the Renaissance to Cubism in favor of the creation of a purely optical space that did not so much as hint at the illusion of a third dimension, and (2) the avoidance, if not ideally the banishment, of figure-ground or positive shape against negative background silhouetted arrangements. The drip technique allowed Pollock to reconcile flatness with a purely optical illusionism by freeing line from its traditional role as a shape-creating contour. In later works, Pollock further questioned the nature of figure-ground relationships by actually cutting holes out of his webs; while in the glass paintings, he attempted to

206. Cross identified the coming together of perceived opposites in *Mountains and Sea* and noted that it remained a leitmotif that gave her paintings a captivating originality. Cross, "The Emergence of a Painter," 24.

> render the background neutral by literally suspending the image against a transparent ground.[207]

Thus, for Rose, Pollock embarked on the first step in resolving this crisis with his drip paintings in their abandonment of the line, but he was unable to resolve the issue of plane thereafter. Resolution of the planar challenge was taken up by Frankenthaler who learned, possibly by accident, that the plane could become one with the painting through the liquid qualities of paint that would integrate into the form and texture of the unprimed canvas. Absorption therefore offered a solution to the problem Rose articulated, unifying the plane of the canvas with the paint to create the effect of three dimensions without changing the limited two-dimensionality of the canvas as picture plane. It was only in Frankenthaler's abandonment of the linear for the purely formal, in combination with her enhancement of the liquid qualities of paint on the unprimed surface – which combination occurred after *Mountains and Sea* – that she definitively resolved the dilemma.

Shatter stands as evidence of the extent of Frankenthaler's achievement and the merit it demonstrates of her importance in the canon in several respects. Frankenthaler's elimination of the easel in favor of painting directly on the floor, thus eschewing the horizontal application of paint on the surface for the vertical, allowed her a space in which to create through physical interaction on the canvas surface. It opened up possibilities in its elimination of the constraint of the heretofore vertical relationship of artist to canvas, allowing for incorporation of multiple planar perspectives as the artist moved above and across the canvas. Moreover, there is no evidence that she attempted small-scale paintings in order to practice and perfect her technique, opting instead to immediately begin painting on very large canvases in which she could immerse

207. Rose, "Painting Within the Tradition," 29.

her body directly in the painting process.[208] She adopted this technique with the full knowledge that a failure on the canvas meant a failure of the work as the technique, like watercolor, did not allow for correction by paint-over. Finally, successfully painting in the scale on which she executed this painting is itself innovative. These facts depict an artist who, although young in age, was confident in her own skills, curious about history as she developed her own aesthetic and methodology, and forward-thinking about the direction in which art must move.

Although her art developed swiftly during the early 1950s, her inspiration from nature broadly and water specifically as her art matured remained constant. The importance of nature generally to her art is evidenced in her preference for landscape painting, as well as in her frequent practice of painting outdoors and directly from nature. Moreover, photographs of her in Provincetown show the calming effect of water on her, often gathered with friends or enjoying a swim on her own. The personal effect is incorporated in her work through titles that invoke images of bodies of water, including *Provincetown Bay*, *Mountains and Sea*, and *Basque Beach*, to name a few. And, importantly, water is present on her canvas in the fluid forms she creates with color, as well as in the imprint the fluidity leaves by way of the stain. These influences and practices, which coalesced around 1953, remained a part of Frankenthaler oeuvre throughout the remainder of her career. While she continued experimenting with paint and form, she frequently returned to these ideas as grounding. Her most successful works are those in which they remain

208. Frankenthaler did in fact paint in watercolors during the trip to Nova Scotia that inspired her to paint *Mountains and Sea*. Rose posits that "the first formulation of the atmospheric image in *Mountains and Sea* derived at least somewhat from a watercolor experience." Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 60. Given the likelihood that she painted on comparatively small paper during that trip, it is difficult to extrapolate from that experience a direct connection to the ultimate painting given its size and medium, among other differences.

prominent, including those painted during her years in Provincetown during the 1960s where she remained physically close to the very source of her inspiration.

Yet even after she had perfected the technique first deployed in Mountains and Sea, she continued to experiments in ways that sometimes worked and other times did not. *Shore Figure* from 1959 (fig. 6) reveals itself in Frankenthaler's oeuvre as one instance of this experimentation.[209] The title of the piece, rendered in gouache on paper, puts us immediately in the context of the sea, but with a focal point being a figure on shore. This configuration creates immediately an ambiguity of place from the viewer's perspective, however, as it is unclear whether the perspective is from ocean to shore, or shore to ocean. The colors generally are much deeper than in both *Mountains and Sea* and *Shatter*, and the blue in particular is perplexing: it is deep enough to suggest agitation, as we might have just before a storm is to hit, but it is at the same time soothing. Whatever soothing qualities it conveys are overcome by the bold brushstrokes of the red and brown forms. These forms re-incorporate a bold linearity in her work reminiscent in palette and form of *Provincetown Bay*. In *Shore Figure*, however, the linearity undermines the fluidity of the paint, rendering what is light in other paintings heavy in the present. The forceful presence of the brown forms projects forward from the canvas, reintroducing the three-dimensionality that she successfully eliminated in *Mountains and Sea*. Notably, the stain is nowhere evident, and there is only a half-hearted suggestion of the fluidity of paint in the mid-canvas ochre form. This could perhaps be a manifestation of Frankenthaler's

209. John Elderfield observes that, in the period between 1959 when *Shore Figure* was painted, and 1962, Frankenthaler's work could be characterized as "think-tough and paint-tough" from 1959 to 1960, and the quieter, more open from 1961-62. John Elderfield, "Think Tough, Paint Tough, Move On: Helen Frankenthaler after Abstract Expressionism, 1959 – 1962," in *Helen Frankenthaler: After Abstract Expressionism, 1959-1962* (Paris: Gagosian, 2017), 6. Shore Figure clearly fits in the "think-tough and paint-tough" category.

intentional ambiguity,[210] but it could also be another attempt to paint in the stylistic conventions of the day as abstract expressionism was fading.[211] In either case, it does not carry the same impact as many other works, and this appears clearly related to the different medium and overall approach to its liquidity that does not create a clear sense of space within the four corners of the work.

Flood (fig. 7) from 1967 also suggests experimentation but with a vivid contrast in result to *Shore Figure*. The title here also immediately recalls the destructive capabilities of water, and we sense some of that harshness in both the deep orange, blue and green that form the lower base and frame two-thirds of the right side of the canvas, as well as in the linearity that these colors define. This harshness is, however, balanced above with the more organic images that the liquid paint was permitted to form in the deeper central orange image. In this area of the canvas, Frankenthaler allowed the paint to flow, creating more organic forms above the linear base that exude airiness. The liquidity allowed staining to occur as well, creating a more natural liquid outline to the forms. There still exists the apparent contradiction of opposites in the lower, deeper, more linear base and the upper, more fluid, organic forms. Yet while the contradiction does not appear to be resolved, it creates a unified and clarified visual plane for the viewer to decide, quite unlike that unclear conflict raised in *Shore Figure*. Thus, it can be said that Frankenthaler is most successful when she allows the fluidity of the paint to create the conflict

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210. Rose observed that "[t]he cultivation of every conceivable ambiguity is at the heart of Frankenthaler's style." Rose, *Frankenthaler,* 83.

211. Rose concluded that "she falters only in those instances where she gives in to the prevailing mode, as, for example, when she attempted to accommodate herself to the athletic excesses of "action" painting in the late fifties . . . ," the period during which she painted *Shore Figure*. Rose, *Frankenthaler,* 14.

but to do so with clarity. While she does not resolve it, she offers the viewer entry into a place – a world of choice – on the canvas where chaos does not inhibit resolution. As Frankenthaler herself put it, "[a]ny successful picture – an abstract work or a landscape – has a place and rightness and an ability to last and grow."[212]

As we have seen, one of the myths that has emerged in critical writing on Frankenthaler concerns her role as intermediary between Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting principally through her inspiration of Morris and Noland. Perpetuation of this myth risks diminishing, if not eliminating, the importance of Frankenthaler by relegating her status to that of a bridge without significant contribution of her own. Maurice Tuchman recognized the importance of *Mountains and Sea*, along with several other early Frankenthaler paintings, in 1965 as turning point away from Abstract Expressionism, with Frankenthaler therefore serving as "the foundation upon which Post-Painterly Abstraction was built."[213] Such an attribution pays homage to Frankenthaler as an important artist in the development of American art in the mid-twentieth century. Tuchman acknowledges the interconnectivity of art and artists, especially in the Abstract Expressionist genre that developed in the 1940s: "Virtually every important American artist to have emerged in the last fifteen years looks to the achievement of American abstract expressionism as a point of departure, in the same way that most European artists of the 1920s and 1930s referred in their work to the inventions of cubism."[214] His use of the characterization "point of departure" is identical to Frankenthaler's own characterization of the

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212. Carmean, *Frankenthaler*, 8.

213. Kleeblatt, "Greenberg, Rosenberg and Postwar Art," 167.

214. Maurice Tuchman, *New York School: The First Generation* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1965), 7.

influence Pollock had on her. Tuchman also observes, however, that such points of departure are not starting points for imitation, especially for the younger generation of followers in the New York School, but are instead springboards for individualization of style "for the proliferation and dispersal of the achievements and ideas of the earlier group of artists make it impossible to impose such localized restraints on the younger generation."[215] Tuchman's commentary from 1965 remains valid today as a model for understanding the extent to which Frankenthaler built on previous art and allowed for future art to be built on her innovation while also highlighting the challenge of the 'younger generation' in not having the umbrella of a 'school' in which they could be brought together.

Although linked by a moment of inspiration, Louis and Nolan did not imitate Frankenthaler but moved from inspiration to individualization consistent with the Tuchman observation. Louis's style was reflected in his Veil canvases on which he poured Magna paint on unstretched, unprimed canvas much as Frankenthaler had done, but with much different composition and effect as seen in *Beta Lambda* from 1960 (fig. 8). Nolan's style was demonstrated in his Target series of paintings of a "deliberately impersonal image"[216] as in *No. One* from 1958 (fig. 9). Both suggest the influence of Frankenthaler in their palettes and in their liquid application of paint, yet each represents the artist's distinct style and contribution. In fact, there is little in these paintings to suggest any attempt at imitation compared, for example, with Frankenthaler's *Mother Goose Melody* (fig. 10) from 1959, a work that stands in stark contrast visually to Nolan's *No. One* and Morris's *Beta Lambda* produced respectively the year before

215. Tuchman, 7.

216. Kleeblatt, "Greenberg, Rosenberg and Postwar Art," 169.

and the year following. In *Mother Goose Melody*, Frankenthaler displays a boldly expressionistic symphony of color wash and drip with interspersed reference to form and shape as found, for example, in the upper right corner where a clearly defined square draws the viewer's attention. Reference to identifiable aspects of the world has been replaced with evidence of a more purely expressionistic artistic intent recalling Anne Eden Gibson's "vaunted notions of individuality and freedom" that defined the Abstract Expressionist ethos.[217] The overall composition is individual, but traces of influence from Pollock, de Kooning and Hofmann constitute important elements.

Although there are traces of similar treatment of form and color in the works painted by Morris and Noland around the same time, expressionistic application of paint in their work has been sacrificed for a more controlled and minimalistic one, each to different visual effect. Louis's *Beta Lambda* reflects the calmness of a slow waterfall, drawing on the theme of fluidity that had been such an important part of Frankenthaler's work to date. He simplifies her compositional complexities, however, with a strictly defined flow of paint in colors that do not meet but stand on their own, each in contrast to the other. The result is a calming, Zen-like visual construct of jagged colored line on white canvas with a suggested connection to the natural world. On the other hand, Noland composes his *No. One* around the circle, with limited reference to line in the contours of the canvas and in the painted vertical line on the right side. Thus, he reduces the canvas to a simple reflection of form based on color that, like in Louis's painting, stand on their own in contrast to each other without touching or bleeding together.

The extent of the differences in visual vocabulary and construction employed by Frankenthaler, Louis, and Noland give pause to reexamine the question of influence: where is the evidence of Frankenthaler's influence in these two works? The answer lies in technique, as the

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217. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, 19.

commonality of these works exists in the use of extremely thinned paint. Notwithstanding the common use of a baseline approach to paint, the distinct differences in the work of each from this period evidence the fact the commonality in technique was, in Tuchman's words, a 'point of departure' and in no way the end point. The very different ends which they each achieved from the point of departure evince the distinctions between Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* and Pollock's black and white series.

Irving Sandler explored the idea of influence from a sociological standpoint in the context of the community of New York Abstract Expressionists in *The Triumph of Abstract Painting*. He acknowledges that, at times, a painter who paints in a certain style and is then followed by a later painter who paints in a similar style will be considered the leader with the later painter a follower. He challenges this notion's applicability to the Abstract Expressionist world in New York:

> Mutual awareness, mutual interests and attitudes gave rise tacitly to a common culture. Yet there was never a consensus concerning its attributes – except negatively, for the Abstract Expressionists were generally agreed as to what elements in past styles were no longer viable, that is, what they did not want to paint.[218]

As inheritors of this tradition, Frankenthaler, Louis and Noland can be seen each to have rejected elements of past style, but what they rejected differs. For Frankenthaler, this can be read as a rejection of Cubism, a resolution of the planar conflict of paint with the painting surface, and a full embrace of artistic expression. For Louis and Nolan, rejection of a visual connection to natural experience through use of color contrasts is apparent. The differences of each support Sandler's conclusion, based in part on the sociologist Robert Merton, that innovation can occur notwithstanding the fact that the innovator forms part of a community of values and relations.[219]

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218. Sandler, *The Triumph of Abstract Painting*, 3.

219. Sandler, 3.

Another artist who painted at the same time as Frankenthaler but is not documented to have been part of her circle is Alice Baber. Also considered an Abstract Expressionist at the time, Baber painted with similar stylistic attributes to Frankenthaler, yet her work exudes its own unique sense of refinement and space as seen in *The Turning Door* (fig. 11) from 1960.This work exemplifies the ethereal state Baber frequently captures through use of form and color with limited delineation of line. Here, a series of smaller blotted ovals reminiscent of the stained canvases of Frankenthaler occupy the inner central rectangle of the canvas. Like Frankenthaler's stain, the edges are defined by the contrast with the adjacent color. Unlike Frankenthaler's, however, Baber's ovals convey more clearly defined biomorphic form that interacts with the broader color areas around. These areas operate as an area in which the smaller ovals appear slowly pulsating, suggesting a controlled release of energy and emotion. Thus, where Frankenthaler's staining frequently results in an effect of raw energy, Baber's application suggests a more controlled, almost euphoric experience for the viewer.

That these two painters painted in similar form in New York at the same time provides additional evidence in support of Sandler's theory of the lack of ideological definition in the general of Abstract Expressionist painters who followed the central eight or so from the 1940s. Through Frankenthaler, Barber and others who painted at that time, a clear sense emerged that the artist was free to produce work based on inspiration and free from the academic or stylistic constraints that had constricted painters in the past. It is true that this trend had been gaining steam since the earliest days of Modernism, but its apex appears to have been reached in the mid-twentieth century. The stain is just one iconographic tool symptomatic of its arrival.

Yet the artists of the era advanced at a faster pace than the art historian. Sandler's acknowledgment of influence without precluding innovation in the context of the Abstract Expressionist community of New York established a balanced foundation on which he built his narrative, offering a basis to draw comparisons as well as the flexibility to highlight the many distinctions that could be made among artists from the era. His approach has unfortunately been a minority one in the art historical narrative. Instead, the prevailing view of the art historian maintains an undue emphasis on stylistic *influence* without a corresponding and commensurate consideration of stylistic *difference*. In other words, the art historian maintains the importance of determining the first to innovate for inclusion in the canon although this effort has proven unreliable and unachievable. The prevailing Frankenthaler narrative offers evidence of this view given its heavy reliance on assessment of Pollock's influence on her, and her influence on Louis and Noland.

I have attempted to show here that Frankenthaler's oeuvre is unique and merits assessment on its own by using Sandler's distinction of influence and innovation as a foundation. *Mountains and Sea* was only the starting point for her work, yet its status as a breakthrough has resulted in inordinate attention from art critics and historians. It is but one of the myths that have emerged preeminently through past consideration of Frankenthaler, myths that have deflected attention away from her more mature works, from the nuances of her technique, and from the complexity of artistic influences from which she draws and which she herself inspires. It is only when her oeuvre is considered as its own body of work that its importance in the history of art is validated.

Analysis of Results

Frankenthaler's significance in the development of and contribution to post-war American art is unassailable. As a child of relative privilege in New York City, she was exposed to important art teachers with frequency and at an early age. Through this education, she was schooled early on in the challenges of color, form and plane raised by Cubism. She demonstrated an independent streak at an early age, however, and she was therefore not a candidate for mimicry in art but one who would develop her own personal artistic idiom. Her appreciation of nature made her vulnerable to the impacts its forces could have, and she embraced them in both the influence nature broadly can have on the artist, as well as in the liquid qualities of the paint used to create the image in conjunction with the absorptive qualities of the canvas when left unprimed. I have argued that the importance of her contribution to the history of art lies not with her adoption of the techniques Pollock revealed, but in her embrace of the liquidity of paint in the formation of her personal artistic idiom. Technique thus becomes the means to realize the flexibility of the liquid, but the liquid quality of paint and its evocative power of expression remains superior. When she embraces the full liquidity of her medium, she paints at her best, and when she exercises more control over the liquid and prevents it from doing its thing, her work is less impactful and more confusing. That each piece is not a success is not a sign of failure but is instead the hallmark of an artist who, from a young age, was willing to learn, understand, challenge and rework – characteristics of a true innovator.

Frankenthaler's absence as a central figure in the conventional history of art is well-documented. Yet her exclusion from this history is, in significant part, attributable to the lack of attention she has received from the scholarly community broadly. I have demonstrated that appreciation for Frankenthaler's status as an innovator has been undermined historically by focus

of critics on assessing the extent of Pollock's influence on her use of the stain, primarily through consideration of a single painting. She immersed herself willfully in the competitive, male-dominated New York art world, but her gender difference provided a convenient tool within that world for comparison and denigration that the most prominent critics of the time apparently embraced. When a prominent female critic had the opportunity to make an historical case with the publication of the first monograph on Frankenthaler, she offered an argument that, with hindsight, falls short of distinguishing Frankenthaler, instead embedding the focus on comparative analysis of Pollock's influence in the historical narrative. Fortunately, feminist art historians have maintained a focus on Frankenthaler, yet, as a consequence of their consideration, gender remains the principal lens of contemporary journalistic scholarship.

The last major retrospective of Frankenthaler's paintings in New York was in 1969 at the Whitney Museum. The Guggenheim hung a show in 1998 focusing on Frankenthaler's work from 1956 to 1959, and it is notable that most exhibits since then listed on the Frankenthaler Foundation's webpage have been at regional museums or galleries or museums outside the United States. When considered with the concurrent focus for the past twenty years on feminist scholarship that concerns itself with gender bias during Frankenthaler's time, the lack of recent attention to Frankenthaler at major museums suggests the possibility, if not likelihood, of a causal connection. A rehabilitation of Frankenthaler's historic significance in the history of art would benefit from a renewed debate about her innovative technique in a manner that frames it rightfully as her own – neither as an appropriator of the past or a bridge to the future, nor as a question of her gender and its influence on her work.

Conclusion

During the last decade, there has been a renewed focus on Frankenthaler's work by regional museums and galleries. These include recent exhibits at Gogosian in New York and Paris, as well as at The Provincetown Art Association Museum in Provincetown, MA. Recent exhibits like these have served to reenergize attention to the significance of Frankenthaler's work as an artist, helping ensure that Belz's 1981 observation of Frankenthaler as "one of America's foremost living painters" remains relevant with her continued recognition as an important American painter in contemporary art. The content of these exhibitions is testimony to the beauty, diversity and significance of her oeuvre to the American art historical canon throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Although these shows take place within a context of critical history that has ambiguously characterized the artist and her output, they remind the viewing public – including critics, academics, and art lovers, alike – that an appreciation for the technical advancement and aesthetic experience of the work can thrive in spite of the ambiguities and challenges brought about by the inherent desire of the critic to categorize and to explain. They evince Dore's "healthy respect for the timelessness of any exceptional work of art," while simultaneously reinforcing Frankenthaler's position as an important artist in the canon.

It is notable that, while recent exhibitions bring critical attention to the importance of Frankenthaler's work in artistic developments in the mid-twentieth century, the weight of recent scholarship on her work has been concentrated on explaining her absence from the canon because of an inherent gender bias among critics who reviewed her work between the 1950s and 1980s. Notwithstanding this scholarly focus, Frankenthaler remains absent from most recent summaries of women artists of importance to the art historical narrative, including those written by Feminists who are ostensibly seeking to correct gender-biased problems from the past.

Frankenthaler's exclusion from even these rehabilitative attempts does not undermine the important work of Feminist scholarship, but it does highlight the limitations of its efforts which remain broadly socio-historical in impact. More varied, concurrent approaches to scholarship would seem to be important to rehabilitation as has occurred, for example, in the case of Artemisia Gentileschi; such concurrent attempts would ensure comprehensive consideration of technical, formal, and historical characteristics and variables, among others.

Two fairly recent publications represent meaningful steps forward in this vein. In her 2007 publication entitled *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting History, Writing Painting* Alison Rowley offers novel readings of *Mountains and Sea* and *Eden*. At the intersection of feminist, psychoanalytic and aesthetic scholarship, she approaches painting "as encounter" in pursuit of a reactivation of "the meaning-making potential of *Mountains and Sea* and *Eden* in the present." Although she engages with past scholarship – including directly with Griselda Pollock in a breach of academic decorum – she proposed welcomed readings of these two works that are entirely new and fresh. In her edited volume from 2015 entitled *"The heroine Paint" After Frankenthaler*, published notably by Gagosian, Katy Seigel approaches Frankenthaler with similar newness and freshness as the de facto leader who spawned a generation of important art through inspiration. More scholarship, like these, which serve to consider new ways of experiencing Frankenthaler while reinforcing her importance in the art historical narrative, is needed to foreclose the possibility that, over time, Frankenthaler becomes less than the footnote she is today.

I have attempted to demonstrate that Frankenthaler's development of the stain technique has suffered from either ambiguity or mischaracterization throughout art history is various ways, including that she appropriated it from Pollock, and that it is a metaphor for her gender. The

initial critical connection of gender to the stain can be traced to comments by E.C. Goossen, a critic who esteemed her work. But his commentary remains problematic today to the Feminist critic precisely because of his introduction of gender to critical discourse, thus diverting current attention from discussion of the formal value of her work in the art historical canon. There is significant opportunity for scholarship in other important areas of Frankenthaler's work and influence, including importantly further analysis to distance her work from that of Pollock, Louis, and Noland, as well as exploring similarities and differences between her work and those of other artists like Georgia O'Keefe, Clifford Still, Alice Baber, and Robert Motherwell. Such efforts will doubtless reveal the great depth of beauty in her work as a visual experience drawn from nature, but one that establishes the picture plane for what is it – a unique experience in two dimensions. Her use of the stain represented a significant step forward in addressing the modernist issue of the two-dimensional picture plane that had concerned artists since Cézanne's planar innovations. She went beyond what Pollock was able to achieve, and her achievement should be recognized independently. In this regard, the stain is less powerful as an icon for her gender than it is for its relevance to her artistic inspiration as well as the technique through which she gave voice to her inspiration. Instead of considering the stain as a symbol of her gender, therefore, I propose a reading in which the stain is metaphor for Frankenthaler as a strong-willed artist who embraced the liquidity of paint for its connectivity to nature – and the strength and control she maintained in her earliest days in New York that is itself akin to that of a calming sea that hides the ferocious power that lurks within.

Figures

Figure 1. Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, oil and charcoal on unprimed canvas, 86 3/8 x 117 1/4 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

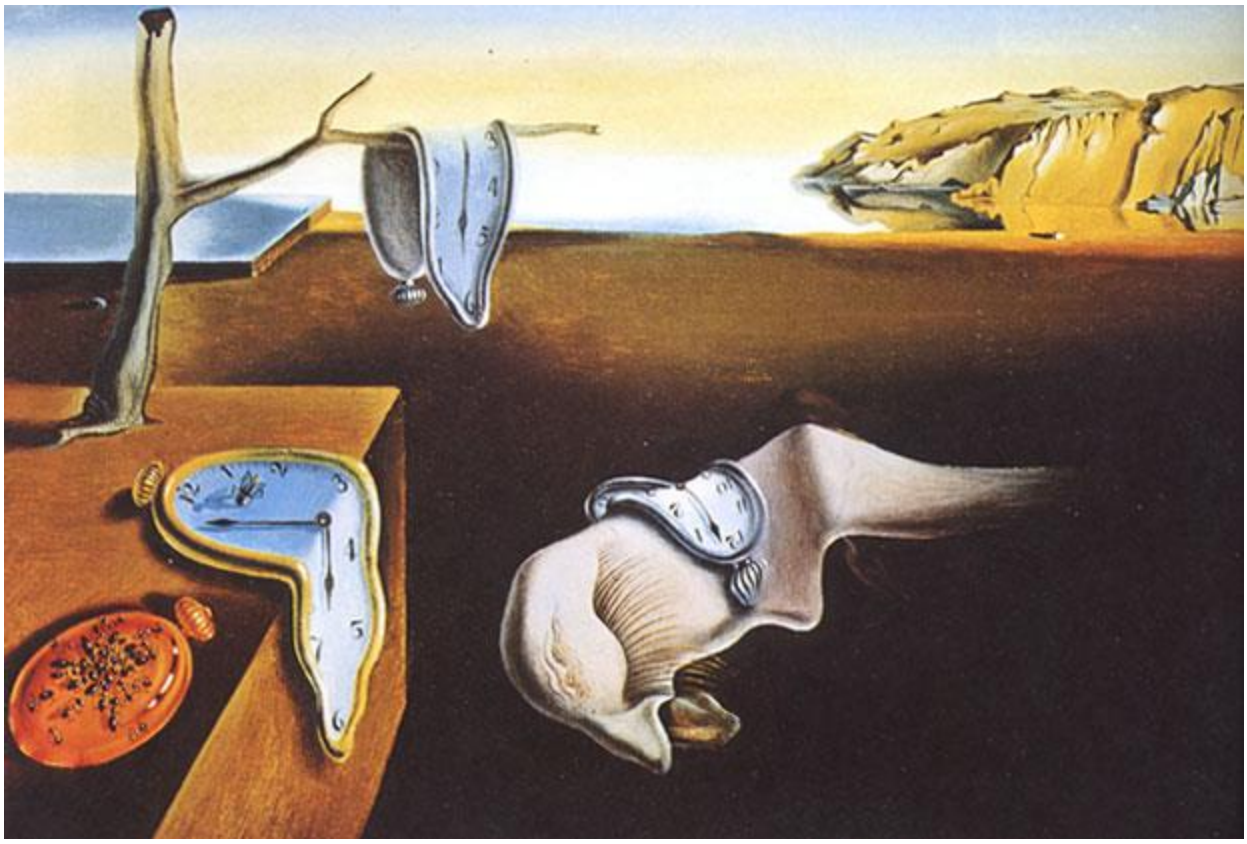

Figure 2. Salvatore Dali, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931, oil on canvas, 9 ½ x 13 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

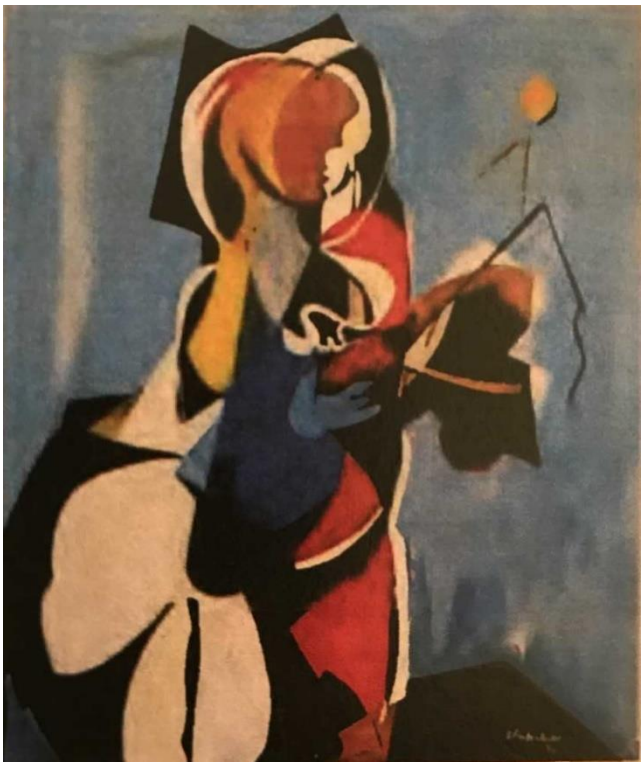

Figure 3. Helen Frankenthaler, *Woman on a Horse*, 1949-50, oil on canvas, 50 ¼ x 40 in. Private collection.

Figure 4. Helen Frankenthaler, *Provincetown Bay*, 1950, oil on canvas, 16 1/4 in x 20 1/4 in. Portland Museum of Art, Portland, OR.

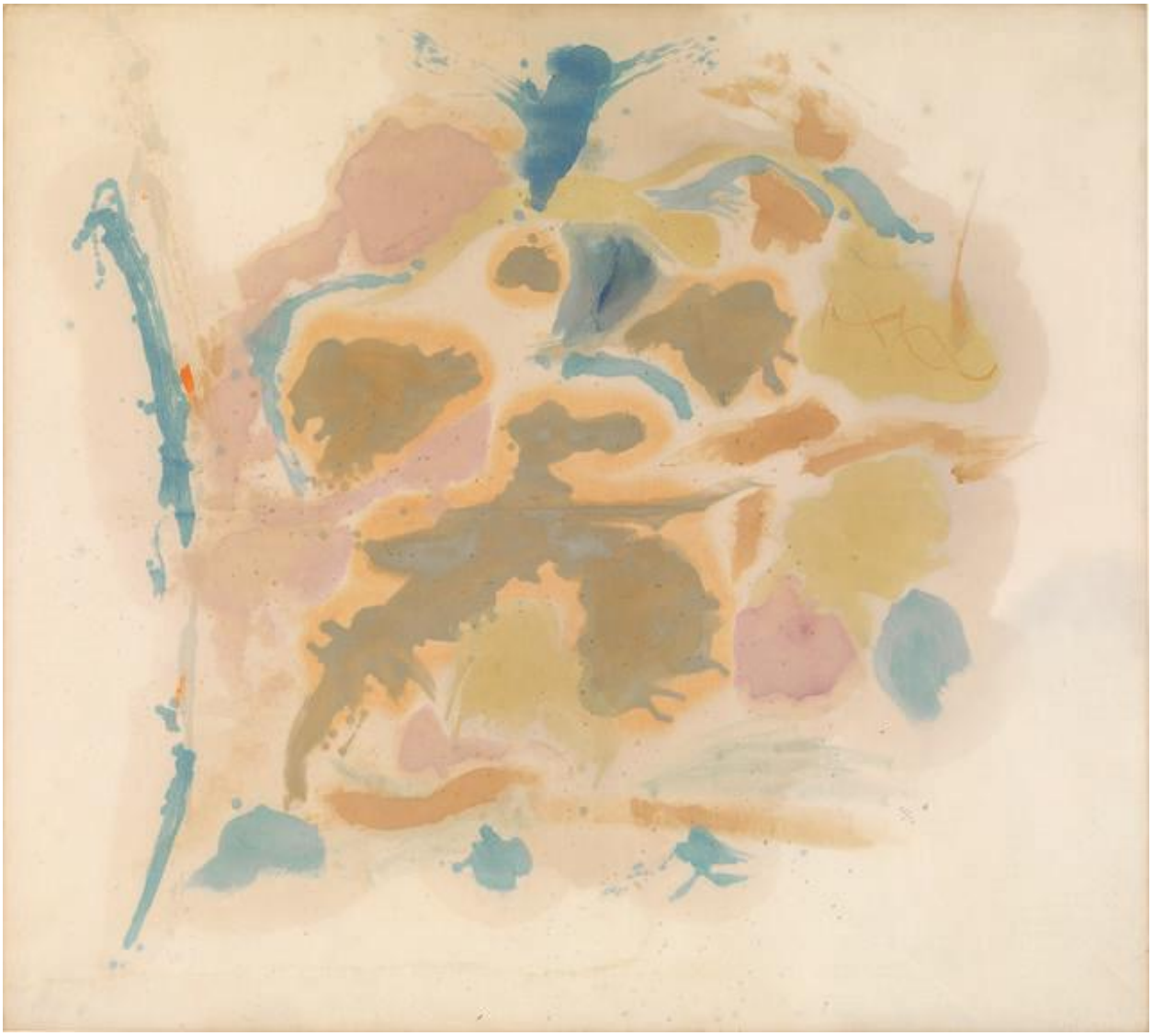

Figure 5. Helen Frankenthaler, *Shatter*, 1953, oil on unprimed canvas, 48 ½ x 54 in. Private collection.

Figure 6. Helen Frankenthaler, *Shore Figure*, 1959, gouache on paper, 22 x 28 ¼ in. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation.

Figure 7. Helen Frankenthaler, *Flood*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 124 1/4 × 140 ½. Whitney Museum of American Art.

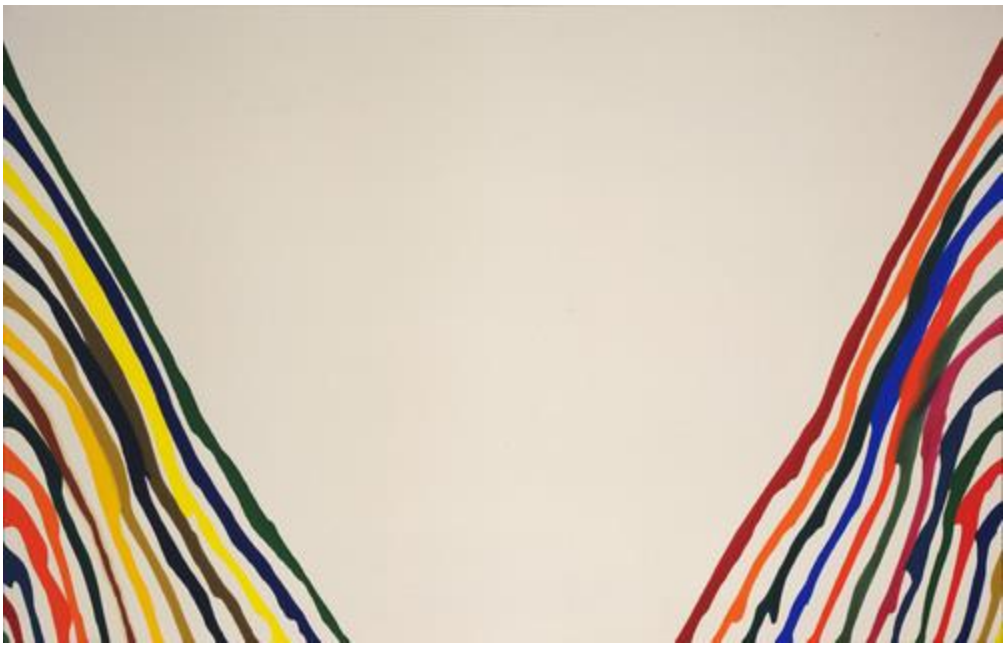

Figure 8. Morris Louis, *Beta Lambda*, 1960, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 103 3/8 x 160 ¼ in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 9. Kenneth Noland, *No. One*, 1958, acrylic on canvas, 33 ¼ x 33 ¼ in. Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR.

Figure 10. Helen Frankenthaler, *Mother Goose Melody*, 1959, oil on canvas, 81 3/4 × 103 1/2 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA.

Figure 11. Alice Baber, *The Turning Door*, 1960, oil on canvas, 40 1/8 × 30 in. Museum of Modern Art, NY.

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