

P A I N T I N G

Provincetown

Helen Frankenthaler and Her Muse at Land's End

SUSAN RAND BROWN

Finger-like expanses of purples and blues float into springtime greens anchored by a horizontal ribbon of taupe in *The Bay*, Helen Frankenthaler's (1928–2011) homage to summer. *Blue Atmosphere II* is a dense veil of multi-colored plums. These monumental canvases from 1963 were painted early in Frankenthaler's seasonal stays in Provincetown, when the town's colors and landscape—the ocean, sky and dunes—were her muse. Except for a brief visit in the 1950s, her Provincetown years span a decade that began shortly after her 1958 marriage to painter, printmaker and collagist Robert Motherwell. The precocious Frankenthaler was widely known by the time she and Motherwell met; the self-described “saddle-shoed girl” who graduated from Bennington College (class of 1949) was on the scene and exhibiting almost immediately. She had the first of six solo exhibitions at Manhattan's avant-garde Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1951 and was included in numerous high-profile shows including *Young America 1957* at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown, at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM), is neither a retrospective nor a complete accounting of what this prominent second-generation Abstract Expressionist was doing during the 1950s and 1960s when Provincetown's Mediterranean light, its azure and salmon skies, captivated her senses. Instead we're treated to something more intimate and fulfilling: a focused, thematic exhibition of more than two dozen artworks, one



Left: Frankenthaler in her studio “in the woods,” Provincetown, 1969. Photograph by Bill Ridenhour. Courtesy Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Archives, New York.

Opposite: *Beach Scene*, 1961, oil and crayon on canvas, 122 1/8 x 93 3/4" (310.2 x 237.8 cm). Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York. Artwork © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Tim Pyle, Light Blue Studio. Courtesy Helen Frankenthaler Foundation.

12-feet long and others up to ten feet, covering three galleries, from the fascinatingly quotidian to the sublime. In linking Frankenthaler's studio practice to specific works done during this time in Provincetown, *Abstract Climates* takes Frankenthaler's emotional temperature; the “climate” of the show's title is the connective tissue between natural and personal landscapes and the artwork these stimulated.

A treasure-trove of archival materials sets the stage, including letters to Grace Hartigan and from Hans Hofmann, dinner party menus and wide-ranging guest lists; she and Motherwell combined business with pleasure, entertaining a glittering crowd of writers, artists, art critics, curators and more, from neighbor Norman Mailer, to poet Frank O'Hara and sculptor David Smith. The reclusive Mark Rothko also summered nearby. There are enlarged photographs of Frankenthaler in her studios (she had three in Provincetown). Drawings, watercolors, works on paper, and paintings in oils and acrylics fill two more galleries.

That landscape inspired Frankenthaler is no longer a controversial assertion. But in the

'50s and '60s, the artist herself, responding to Abstract Expressionist purists, danced around whether she was a painter for whom actual landscape mattered. PAAM's curators convincingly assert that the experience of the natural world did impel the work itself—that these are paintings of place. “I could say that nature has very little to do with my pictures. And yet I'm puzzled: Obviously it creeps in! I don't have a fixed idea about this. I think that, instead of nature or image, it has to do with spirit or sensation that can be related by a kind of abstract projection,” she said in *Nature in Abstraction*, the Whitney Museum's catalogue. To filmmaker Perry Miller Adato, (whose documentary about Frankenthaler, *Toward a New Climate*, will be screened as part of a series of PAAM events) she refers to her sensory awareness of nature's presence as an “abstract climate.”

The exhibition took almost five years to plan and is “a nice way to capitalize on who we are as an art colony,” says Christine McCarthy, PAAM's executive director, “but really it is about these beautiful, very significant works created while she was here. I can clearly see the



influence of Provincetown in these pictures." The exhibition introduces Frankenthaler's work done while she was personally and professionally connected to influential art critic Clement Greenberg. It was he who suggested that she study in Provincetown with master teacher and abstract painter Hans Hofmann, which she did briefly. His students were taught "the idea of movement on a flat surface," according to Elizabeth Smith, exhibition co-curator and founding executive director of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. Hofmann later found north-facing loft studios for Frankenthaler and Motherwell in what was a lumberyard barn and is now part of the Fine Arts Work Center.

"In nature, light makes color. In painting, color makes light," Hofmann famously said. In a Frankenthaler, color as well as its absence makes light—in her watercolors, a medium she also explored, areas of unpainted canvas imply light peeking through. *Sea Picture with Black* (1959), painted when Frankenthaler and Motherwell summered in Falmouth, is a study in vibrating orange and blue with a core of black; its areas of raw canvas read as clouds of light.

In Provincetown, Frankenthaler lived on the bay, swimming daily, surrounded by color-saturated skies and the swell of the tides lapping onto her deck. From her second-floor studio, she viewed the action as a seagull would. *Provincetown Series* (1960), *Beach Scene* (1961) and *Low Tide* (1963) capture this aerial perspective.

"Helen loved to entertain," said Ann Freedman of Knoedler & Company, Frankenthaler's gallery. "She enjoyed feeding



Left: *Blue Atmosphere II*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 69 1/2" (182.9 x 176.5 cm). Smith College of Art, Northampton, MA. Gift of Sarah (Griswold, Class of 1954) and Richard Leahy. Artwork © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Smith College of Art.

Below: *The Bay*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 80 3/4 x 82 1/8" (205.1 x 208.6 cm). Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan Founders Society Purchase, Dr. and Mrs. Hilbert H. DeLawter Fund. © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Mike@mikestudio.org, courtesy Turner Contemporary, Margate, Kent, U.K.

In Provincetown, Frankenthaler lived on the bay, swimming daily, surrounded by color-saturated skies and the swell of the tides lapping onto her deck.

people and engaging in lively conversation. And she liked to dance. In fact, you could see it in her movements as she worked on her paintings," according to the *New York Times*. Photos in the exhibition show Frankenthaler kneeling into an unprimed "raw" canvas, its expanse often dominating a studio floor. Using brushes, rags and sponges, Frankenthaler pushed thin paints into the absorbent fabric, creating colors that appear to float. Like most abstract painters, Frankenthaler aimed for control yet left room for serendipity. "I think accidents are only lucky if you know how to use them," she said to critic Eleanor Munro in *Originals: American Women Artists*.

Frankenthaler first used her soak-stain process in 1952, working on the once critically reviled, now lauded 7 x 10' *Mountains and Sea* (on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Art) when she was 23, after a trip to Nova Scotia. The previous year, she had paid a visit to her friends Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock in East Hampton, Long Island. In what is described as Frankenthaler's technical breakthrough—"Pollock was her jumping-off point," Smith said—she was captivated by Pollock's technique of pouring thin oil paints onto a floor-mounted canvas. As the visit to Pollock's studio was pivotal

for Frankenthaler, a 1953 visit to her studio in Provincetown was pivotal to Color Field painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. They followed Frankenthaler's lead in staining raw canvas with color, acknowledging their debt to her and, in turn, influencing other artists.

Through this exhibition, we can picture the young Frankenthaler striding into the Abstract Expressionist club, whose participants included Motherwell, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline; she was admitted in 1951, when working on an epic scale was considered a masculine prerogative. "A stretch of outsized canvas is like a dare to her," an *ARTnews* critic wrote in 1956.

"There are no rules," said Frankenthaler. "That is how art is born, how breakthroughs happen. Go against the rules or ignore the rules. That is what invention is about." A half-century later, artists on the Outer Cape are still ignoring the rules, still inventing. ■

Susan Rand Brown is a poet, art critic and frequent contributor to *Art New England* and is based in Connecticut and Provincetown. She also writes for *Provincetown Arts* and *The Provincetown Banner*.

Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown
Provincetown Art Association
and Museum
Provincetown, MA
paam.org
July 6–September 2, 2018

