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# Helen Frankenthaler's Gravity

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## Helen Frankenthaler    American, b. 1928

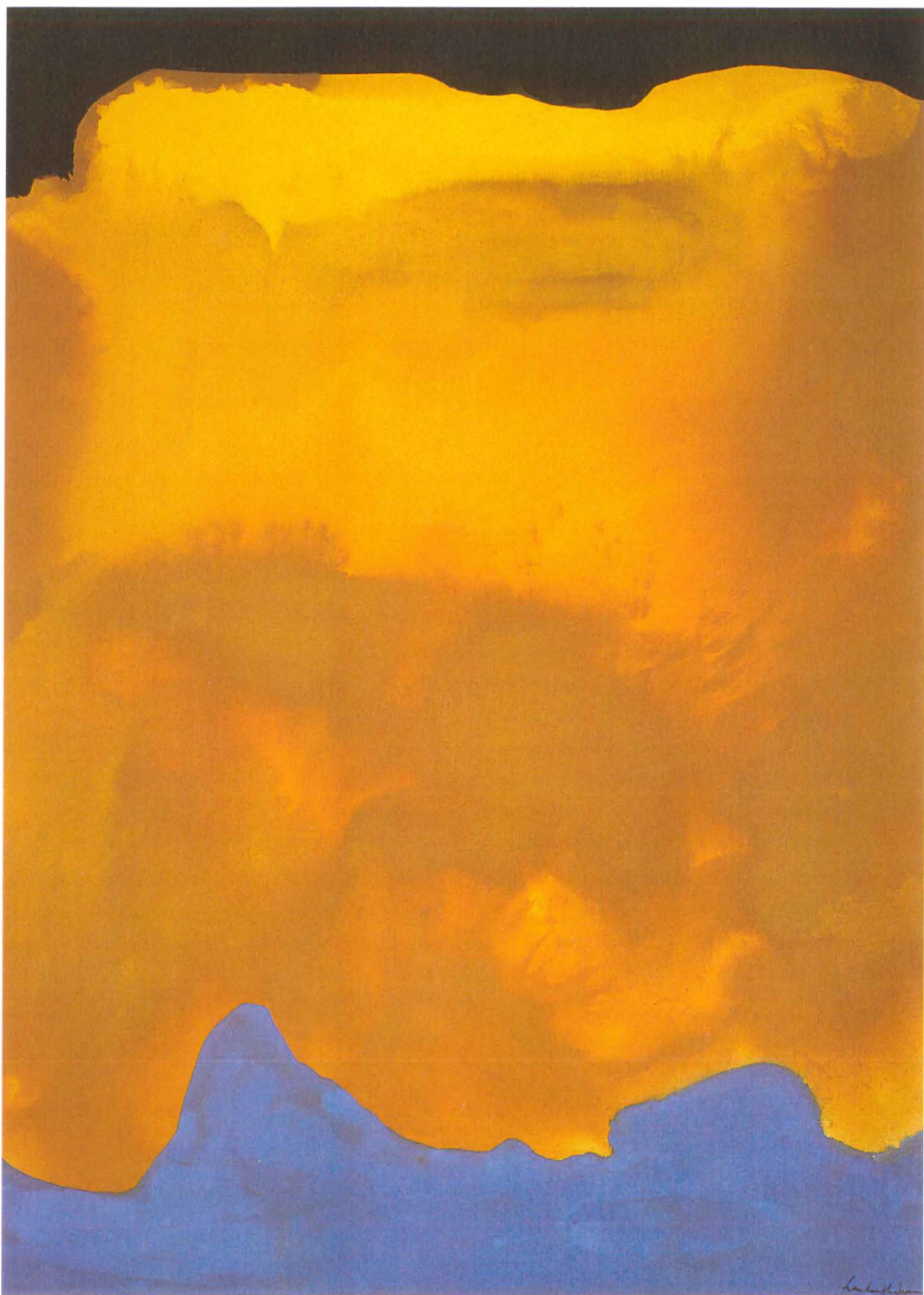
Helen Frankenthaler, like other painters of her generation, was compelled to come to terms with the technical and philosophical modes of Abstract Expressionism's gestural practice.<sup>1</sup> Responding to Pollock's black-and-white paintings of 1951, she evolved a technique of staining raw, unsized canvas with thinned acrylic pigments that became her hallmark and a formative influence on many other painters, including Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. The method yielded paintings whose images appeared indivisible from their canvas grounds because colors were soaked directly into the surface.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, since the technique de-emphasized the touch of the artist, it potentially renounced Abstract Expressionism's painterly gesture.

In stressing Frankenthaler's concerns with sheer surface and anonymous technique—in which the hand of the artist is not visible in brush marks—formalist critics have positioned the artist's work within a specific narrative of Modernist painting in which disembodied optical qualities are emphasized over physical, material ones.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is precisely the latter qualities that can be understood as the salient features of her painting practice. *Magic Carpet*, for example, questions the idea of pure "opticality," understood as the condition of seeing, divorced from tactile or physical associations.<sup>4</sup> The work demands to be understood from an embodied, physiological point of view. Frankenthaler's concerns are not only lightness, air, flatness, and horizontality—but also gravity, density, roundness, and verticality.

The painting consists of three bands of color: along the top edge is a horizontal strip of a deep blue-green. Below this strip is a large, roughly square area of bright sun yellow, mixed with shades of metallic gray and a light ocher. Along the bottom edge stretches another horizontal strip of an evenly saturated sky blue. The edge where blue and yellow meet undulates, with the yellow dipping dramatically toward the center bottom edge. It is not surprising to learn that the artist painted this work on the floor of her studio (the impression of the floorboards is just visible in the upper left of the yellow area), for what place is more appropriate for a carpet than a floor? *Magic* carpets, however, are destined to fly, to float above the ground, to transport without encumbrance—and, at almost eight feet by six feet, the "carpet" would actually be large enough to support a rider. While the title might express the desire to float above the earth, the imprint of the floorboards, as well as the spreading stains, testify to the earthly conditions of the painting's manufacture, registering the insistent force of gravity and countering the dream of enchanted levitation. Viewers soon combine playful metaphors of weightlessness and weight with more serious reflections on the ways that Frankenthaler refers to the physical body.

*Magic Carpet* is the culmination of a series of experiments aimed at evoking corporeality by means of color and shape. In paintings such as *Long Range* (1963), *Buddha's Court* (1964), and *Small's Paradise* (1964), she diminished the role played by unpainted canvas by coloring the whole surface with hues of variable saturation and density. Each has a banded compositional structure, and in all of them, vague forms float within nearly rectangular shapes of intense color.

In Frankenthaler's work the referential capacity of the image is not diminished by the soak-stain technique and its application of "pure" color. Her painting expands—one might say *absorbs*—the Modernist interest in sheer surface and in mere opticality: it is involved with depth and physicality; with enclosures, organs, viscera; and with the force that natural bodies feel against the ground.—M.S.



*Magic Carpet*, 1964  
acrylic on canvas  
94½ x 68 in.

from the surrounding space with classical pedestals or other kinds of framing devices as early as the 1970s.

5. John De Andrea/Duane Hanson: *The Real and Ideal in Figurative Sculpture* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1974), unpaginated.

## Chapter 8: Master Suite

### William Baziotés

1. For a more detailed account of these group sessions, see David Rubin, "A Case for Content: Jackson Pollock's Subject Was the Automatic Gesture," *Arts Magazine* 53, no. 7 (March 1979): 103–9.
2. William Baziotés, "I Cannot Evolve Any Concrete Theory," *Possibilities* 1 (winter 1947–48): 2.
3. Mona Hadler, "William Baziotés: Four Sources of Inspiration," in Michael Preble, *William Baziotés: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Newport Beach, Calif.: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1978), 92.
4. Ethel Baziotés, conversation with the author, June 16, 1976.
5. Ethel Baziotés, conversation with the author, May 25, 1977.
6. Ethel Baziotés, conversation with the author, June 16, 1976.
7. See Hadler, "William Baziotés: Four Sources of Inspiration," 79.
8. Reproduced in Michael Preble, *William Baziotés: Paintings and Works on Paper, 1952–1961* (New York: Blum Helman, 1988), 36.
9. Ethel Baziotés, conversation with the author, May 25, 1977.
10. Charles Baudelaire, *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*, ed. T. R. Smith (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 212. Baziotés owned two copies of this book. Ethel Baziotés recited this quotation (from the 1925 edition) to the author in a conversation of May 25, 1977.
11. Reproduced in Preble, *William Baziotés: A Retrospective Exhibition*, 21.
12. Ethel Baziotés, conversation with the author, May 25, 1977.
13. William Baziotés to Alfred H. Barr Jr., April 26, 1949, archives, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

### Helen Frankenthaler

1. See especially Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" [1960], *Art and Literature* 4 (spring 1965): 193–201; and Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51, no. 8 (Dec. 1952): 22–23, 48–50.
2. Frankenthaler first realized the soak-stain technique in her watershed painting *Mountains and Sea* of 1952. See John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 65.
3. For a discussion of this point, see Anne Wagner, "Pollock's Nature, Frankenthaler's Culture," in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 187.
4. See Greenberg, "Modernist Painting." For a later critical formulation of opticality, see Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965), esp. 19–20.

### Yves Klein

1. See Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 147–96.
2. For a discussion of Klein's self-conscious myth making, see Thomas McEvilley, "Yves Klein: Conquistador of the Void," in *Yves Klein, 1928–1962: A Retrospective* (Houston: Rice University Institute for the Arts, 1982), 19–87.

3. Klein's Rosicrucianism evolved from his extensive study of Max Heindel's *La Cosmogonie des Rose-Croix*, originally published in English in 1909 as *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-conception* (Oceanside, Calif.: Rosicrucian Fellowship, 1937). From this text Klein drew the idea that life is an ongoing struggle between spirit and matter. He translated this quest for spiritual liberation into artistic terms as a journey from form (i.e., traditional art) to space (i.e., the pure color of the monochrome). See Thomas McEvilley, "Yves Klein and Rosicrucianism," in *Yves Klein, 1928–1962*, 239–54.
4. Yves Klein, "The Monochrome Adventure," in *Yves Klein, 1928–1962*, 224.
5. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 11–21.
6. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro has studied the development of International Klein Blue in "A Technical Note on IKB," in *Yves Klein, 1928–1962*, 258–59.
7. Yves Klein, in Nan Rosenthal, "Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein," in *Yves Klein, 1928–1962*, 111.
8. See Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982), 206.
9. At one time, *Blue Sponge Relief* hung over an aquarium of electric blue fish in the Weisman estate.
10. See Rosenthal, "Assisted Levitation," 126. Frederick Weisman attended one of Klein's Anthropometry performances with his first wife, Marcia Simon Weisman, and met Klein and his wife, Rotraut Uecker, in Los Angeles for the 1961 exhibition *Yves Klein le monochrome* at Dawn Gallery.
11. Klein, quoted in McEvilley, "Yves Klein: Conquistador of the Void," 55.

### Jackson Pollock

1. Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 539.
2. Kirk Varnedoe with Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 31. See also Jeremy Lewison, *Interpreting Pollock* (London: Tate Gallery, 1999), for a discussion of Pollock's interest in Native American art.
3. Pollock, quoted in Jeffrey Potter, "Jackson Pollock: Fragments of Conversations and Statements," cited in David Anfam, Susan Davidson, and Margaret Ellis, *No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock—Paintings on Paper* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2005), 21.
4. Pollock, quoted in Susan Davidson, "The Gesture of Intimate Scale: Jackson Pollock's Drawings," in Anfam, Davidson, and Ellis, *No Limits, Just Edges*, 17.
5. Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, 538.
6. Pollock, quoted in Anfam, Davidson, and Ellis, *No Limits, Just Edges*, 16.
7. *Ibid.*, 22.
8. See Anfam, Davidson, and Ellis, *No Limits, Just Edges*, for a full discussion of Pollock's works on paper.
9. Davidson, "The Gesture of Intimate Scale," 16.

### Ed Ruscha

1. Bernard Blistène, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," in *Ed Ruscha, Paintings* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 136.
2. *Ibid.*, 128.
3. Donald Kuspit, "Signs in Suspense: Ed Ruscha's Liquidation of Meaning," *Arts* 65, no. 8 (April 1991): 54.
4. Artist's studio to Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, June 9 and 12, 1998, Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation archives, Los Angeles.
5. Blistène, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," 140.
6. *Ibid.*, 128.



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