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Helen Frankenthaler’s Gravity

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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. 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. 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. 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. 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.
Chapter 8: Master Suite

William Baziotes

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.

Helen Frankenthaler


Yves Klein

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.
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 Anthropometries 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.

Jackson Pollock

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.

Ed Ruscha

2. Ibid., 128.
6. Ibid., 128.
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