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REVIEW: 'PRETTY RAW' RECOUNTS HELEN FRANKENTHALER'S INFLUENCE ON THE ART WORLD
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University

By Roberta Smith



"Pretty Raw" at the Rose Art Museum. Charles Mayer/Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University

WALTHAM, Mass. — A groundbreaking show at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University here clears a more prominent place for Helen Frankenthaler in the history of postwar New York painting. "Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler" re-examines her 1952 invention of stain-painting and traces some of its repercussions up to the present.

The technique was inspired by Jackson Pollock, who dripped thick enamel on raw canvas, where it sat, discrete and textured, almost in relief. In contrast, Frankenthaler used water-thin paint, often brilliantly hued, that she poured and brushed onto canvas, where it sank and spread, becoming one with the fabric. Her technique was immediately adapted by Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland — who used it more systematically. It became the linchpin of the off-denigrated movement called Color Field painting. Frankenthaler, who died in 2011 at 83, was the only woman among its leading adherents, and her work was often slighted as soft or light.

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Organized by the art historian Katy Siegel, the show places Frankenthaler's unleashing of color in context and then presents the related efforts of 45 artists — about half of them women — from several generations working in mediums from painting to performance to ceramics. It approaches postwar art from a new, implicitly revisionist perspective that expands it beyond the usual male suspects.

Was Frankenthaler's invention as important as Pollock's? (The critic and Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd found the idea ridiculous.) She was certainly the more innovative colorist. By the show's end, it is apparent that in addition to sustaining her own long career, her technique left other artists plenty of options to pursue — maybe more than Pollock's did — and its potential feels far from exhausted.

Ms. Siegel organized "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975" at the National Academy Museum in New York in 2007, a much-needed attempt to write painting back into the history of 1970s Post-Minimalism. But "Pretty Raw" operates on a higher level, both curatorially and historically.

In a way that eludes most exhibitions that include contemporary art, "Pretty Raw" is gorgeous, full of fresh insights and diverse yet coherent, connected throughout by a formal rather than a literary theme: color used freely and inventively often at full strength — in liquid, process-oriented ways. Another through line is feminist thought and its aesthetic ramifications, especially in painting, with "the feminine" as both a stereotype to be shattered and an artistic potential to be explored. Above all there is the implication that it remains in many ways implicitly political for a woman to paint.

Ms. Siegel's astute installation is replete with carefully made connections and contrasts that build as you go along. For example, one series of links is formed by Andy Warhol's, Christopher Wool's and Kara Walker's very different uses of the unpredictable flows of Rorschach blots. Excellent use is made of ephemera from the 1950s, reflecting Frankenthaler's rise and the networks of friendships among the artists who exhibited with her at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Several of them are represented here, most notably her close friend Grace Hartigan and Jane Freilicher, the landscape painter whose uncharacteristic "The Sky," from around 1960, flirts with Color Field.

A few established Color Fielders are on hand, but Ms. Siegel also expands the roster with works by Sam Gilliam, Ralph Humphrey and Frank Bowling. Ms. Siegel regularly comes up with resonating surprises. In "Curtains," a 1972 painting by Miriam Schapiro, girly washes of light pink and blue are collaged with bits of lacy curtain trim that evoke homemaking and women's work. The piece is an early example of Pattern and Decoration, built on a feminist-feminine read of Frankenthaler's innovations.

The show follows the expansion of independent, mostly liquid color into three dimensions in the early 1970s starting with a pigmented foam pour piece by Lynda Benglis and a skirt-like wall-hanging titled "Girdle" by Harmony Hammond.

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There is also a video documenting Judy Chicago's pyrotechnic "Atmosphere" performances, ephemeral Land-art works created with the clouds of color emitted by rescue flares, among which nude women moved — liberated color was equated with the liberated female body. Photographs taken at Womanhouse, a feminist art exhibition space that Ms. Chicago and Ms. Schapiro helped establish in 1973, show a room painted as if it were a canvas by Robin Mitchell.

Painting, performance and domesticity are conflated in Janine Antoni's "Loving Care," a 1993 video in which she paints, or mops, a floor with her own hair, dipped in dye. And Polly Apfelbaum does something similar in 1997, arranging little ovals of dyed velvet on the floor, temporarily evokes a luxurious rug and an abstraction that seems made of separate drops of color.

In a section slyly titled "The Boy's Room," the show acknowledges some men who have emphasized stained color, among them Mike Kelley, Carroll Dunham and Sterling Ruby. But Ms. Siegel culminates her effort with paintings by Dona Nelson, Jackie Saccoccio, Carrie Moyer, Mary Weatherford and Laura Owens, women for whom Frankenthaler's stained, often radiant color has clearly been a touchstone.

"Pretty Raw" has occasioned an excellent book, "The Heroine Paint, After Frankenthaler," overseen by Ms. Siegel and just published by Gagosian Gallery. The title — taken from a 1960 poem by her close friend Barbara Guest — sharpens the idea that Frankenthaler altered painting's gender balance irrevocably, and to an extent that we are only beginning to appreciate.