



## At the Galleries

By Karen Wilkin  
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The past season was like a selective survey of modern masters, a constellation of serious, ambitious painting shows, spanning the glory years of Abstract Expressionism and its aftermath. Willem de Kooning was celebrated Uptown, Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell in Chelsea. Helen Frankenthaler received tribute just off 57th Street, while Frank Stella, in Chelsea, demonstrated once again his ability to assimilate and transform the issues of both the recent past and the present.

In “De Kooning: Five Decades,” at Mnuchin Gallery, an impressive selection of canvases, works on paper, and sculptures, from private and public collections, offered a textbook lesson on the artist’s expressive, gestural, wet-into-wet paint handling—an approach that an entire generation of aspiring abstract painters once strove to emulate. We began with de Kooning’s transgressive—for the time—images of women, starting with a group of superlative drawings of standing figures, made between the late 1940s and the early 1950s. An ambiguous late 1940s torso on paper, reminiscent of the celebrated *Pink Angels*, c. 1945, was upstairs. In the drawings, we could follow de Kooning’s simultaneous fragmentation and reassembly of the female body, and in the related canvases, such as the buxom, cheerful *Woman III*, 1952–53, we could savor his translation of seductiveness and fictive mass into layered sweeps and scrapes of urgently worked, sensual oil paint. The most ferocious of the series was the smudged, passionate *Woman as Landscape* (1954–55), which seemed coherent on first acquaintance, but threatened to dissolve into a welter of virtuoso, anxiety-driven touches and swipes. De Kooning’s restless swings toward and away from echoes of figuration were announced by such iconic “landscape” abstractions as *Police Gazette* (1955), with its looping drawing and scrubbed-on reds and yellows, sparked with odd greens, and *Pastorale* (1963), with its glowing peaches and yellows. Together with some loose-jointed, loosely stroked canvases from about 1975 to 1977, they bore witness to de Kooning’s ability to suggest specifics—urban grit or blinding seaside light—in completely non-literal ways.

Among the latest works on view, the bold *Untitled VI* (1981) continued the explorations of the 1970s pictures. Clear primaries—red, blue, and yellow—bursting out of an inflected sea of dragged off-whites, tinged by adjacent or underlying hues, suggested an otherworldly, unenterable, active space. Sadly, the very latest works, a pair of drawing-like paintings, mainly in red and blue on white, made only two years after *Untitled VI*, in 1983, ended the show with a whimper. De Kooning’s sublime hand was still visible, tracing sinuous paths across the canvas, but the result was empty—a diagram, rather than a felt response to the three-dimensional richness of the world. Nonetheless, “De Kooning: Five Decades” and its catalogue by Pepe Karmel were high points of the past season. It was a show any museum would have been proud of.

In Chelsea, in what is described as Kasmin’s flagship space, “Sheer Presence: Monumental Paintings by Robert Motherwell,” showcased eight very large, very audacious canvases that announced the painter’s mastery of near-mural scale. Made between the early 1960s and 1990, they ranged from the graphic seventeen-foot *Dublin 1916 with Black and Tan* (1963–64)—a crisp arrangement of red, black, and ochre, framing a clear cerulean pinched flag-like plane with a mysterious glyph—to the slightly more modest (twelve-and-a-half-foot) *The Grand Inquisitor* (1989–90)—similar in palette, absent the blue, with a roughly brushed biomorphic form humping across the center, its curves contrasting with the clean geometry of the earlier

painting. Despite the political allusions of the titles, both works were most notable for their visual opulence, their rich orchestration of fresh, saturated but subtle hues, and their tellingly deployed shapes.

None of the other exhibited works were as large, but they were no less demanding of our attention. Several were iterations of Motherwell's Open motif: a rectangle inscribed within the rectangle of the canvas that provokes infinitely varied spatial allusions and internal relationships. Each of the Opens had a distinct personality. In one particularly fine example, a fabric of brushy brown strokes with hints of green seemed to drift into the Open configuration, with the interior rectangle barely corralled by an escape of white and apparently capable of dispersing without notice. In another ample canvas, an expanse of palest gray was crossed by charcoal lines, delicately accentuated with a stroke of white, and in yet another, a glowing ochre field supported fragile drawing suggesting dislocated architectural elements.

All of the canvases in "Sheer Presence" were distinguished by their clarity and forthrightness, as well as by their elegance, economy, and expressive contrasts of paint handling and drawing. If the de Koonings at Mnuchin exemplified gestural Abstract Expressionism, Kasmin's Motherwells were emblematic of the "cool" side of the movement, which avoided contingency and layering, preferring thinner paint application and clear color. Asked, in 1965, what was particularly American about American painting during and immediately after World War II, Motherwell suggested that it was its violence. That hardly seems an apt description of the restrained, authoritative works in "Sheer Presence," with their carefully considered edges, suave surfaces, masterly drawing, and harmonious palettes. Of course, even the earliest of these paintings were not made in the wake of international catastrophe, but during the unbuttoned 1960s. Perhaps the disciplined, emphatic, thoughtful canvases in "Sheer Presence" can be read as Motherwell's rejection of violence and a return to order and reason. Yet his titles often allude to historic horrors. The two largest works at Kasmin, for example, refer to the Irish struggle for independence and the Spanish Inquisition, while his best known series mourns the defeat of the Spanish Republic by Franco's Fascists. The intensity and confrontational quality of the paintings in "Sheer Presence" may have been generated by their author's most strongly held opinions about the state of the world, but whatever else they are about, Motherwell's paintings always seem grounded in pure aesthetics. That's part of their strength.

At Pace, in Chelsea, "Adolph Gottlieb: Classic Paintings" assembled a stellar group of works made between 1955 and 1973, from public collections and the Gottlieb Foundation. Most rang changes on Gottlieb's signature Burst image—a floating disc above an exuberant tangle—but the show began with a work that signaled the definitive disintegration of the grid and the mysterious "glyphs" of his Pictographs of the 1940s. It ended with a tall eloquent Burst made a year before the artist's death, distinguished by delicate, stuttering drawing. Gottlieb's inventiveness was asserted by paintings as pared down as *Descending Arrow* (1956) with its over-scaled black "signs" against a radiant rose ground, and as magisterial as *Dialogue 1* (1960) a vast—eleven-foot wide—canvas with two ample red and black discs hovering above fraying black calligraphy against subtle pale gray washes. In other works, the expansive drawing of *Dialogue 1* subsided into a plane of a single hue, disappeared completely, or became a scrawled, layered band below multiple discs, pointing to a series known as Imaginary Landscapes. Each of these Burst variations seemed fresh, spontaneous, and unique because of its surprising color and the inflections of its composition.

"Classic Paintings" might finally lay to rest the myth that Gottlieb's best Bursts were red, black, and white and give him his due as a brilliant, provocative colorist. Witness, among many other examples, the eye-testing *Green Expanding* (1962), a golden brown splash below a soft-edged luminous blue disc almost fused with an equally luminous green ground to create an invigorating pulse. The show's handsomely produced accompanying catalogue unfortunately did not reproduce all of the exhibited works, although it included others not on view. The essay by Dr. Kent Minturn of New York University, which makes some pertinent observations about Gottlieb's aspirations, begins by characterizing his achievement as "a sustained play, rather than synthesis, of opposites." It's an interesting idea, except that those "opposites" are described as "the two putative branches of Abstract Expressionism, namely Color-field painting and Action painting." By "Action painting," Minturn means gestural abstraction. By the oddly spelled "Color-field painting," he means the restrained "cool" approach of Motherwell, Mark Rothko, or Gottlieb himself. This isn't the place to discuss the stunning wrong-headedness of Harold Rosenberg's idea of Action painting (see Clement Greenberg *How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name*, 1962, in Volume 4 of his collected writings), but the notion that "Color-field" is part

of Abstract Expressionism is bizarre. The term, usually written “Color Field,” always applies to the next generation—Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, and their peers—who shared Ab Ex assumptions about the nature of painting and the necessity of abstraction but rejected layering and drama in favor of thin paint, anonymous surfaces, and radiant hues. The Color Field painters saw the “cool” anti-gestural Abstract Expressionists as ancestors, but that doesn’t make those predecessors part of the group. Of course, the typography may be intended to signal a difference, but it seems perverse.

Happily, “Helen Frankenthaler: Selected Paintings,” a spectacular group of twenty-three works made between 1957 and 1990, at Yares Art, allowed us to see the differences for ourselves. The earliest, rather slapdash paintings in the show, *First Blizzard* and *Revolution* (both 1957), with their weightless pools of soaked-in color, overscaled strokes, and uninhibited drawing, reminded us that Morris Louis, after his first visit to Frankenthaler’s studio in 1952, famously described her as “the bridge between Pollock and what was possible.” The young painter’s approach pointed the way to new ideas about what a painting could be, physically and, as it turned out, conceptually, assuring her place in the modernist Pantheon. Frankenthaler’s innovative originality was even more evident in a pair of even looser, more open, vertical canvases painted the following year and apparently haunted by the memory of the figure without resembling the body overtly. In these, with their wristy lines, spatters, and stammers, it was impossible to separate painting and drawing. Thinned out paint seemed to have magically floated across the unprimed surface of the picture, forming fluid, fluent linear configurations and then sinking into the raw canvas to fuse with the material.

As we moved through the show, we could note Frankenthaler testing the capabilities and limits of staining, intensifying her color, keeping her drawing sparse, and allowing the white of the canvas to make everything more distinct. In paintings such as *Wine Dark* (1965) or *Signal* (1969), it was hard to decide if the translucent pools of pigment assumed their seemingly inevitable positions or their unpredictable shapes because of the way paint flows or because of the force of Frankenthaler’s personality—her apparent ability to make things happen on the canvas by sheer will. These shapes dominate the paintings of the 1960s, with their edges being made to replace the linear drawing that swept through earlier works. In the early 1970s, drawn line returned as an important component, floating free or entering into a conversation with the edges of pools of color, after Frankenthaler traveled to North Africa and was fascinated by the patterns of tile and stucco work, especially by the stylized, oversize calligraphy of inscriptions and prayers written on the exteriors of buildings. Somehow, these enthusiasms merged with her knowledge of Henri Matisse’s enormous *gouache coupé*, *Souvenir d’Océanie* (1958), with its blocks of color pushed to the perimeter of the image and its delicate lines. The result was paintings such as the exhibition’s *Pavillion* (1971), with its emptied out center, a white void surrounded by intense blue, inhabited by a few floating shapes in clear green and yellow, and fragile linear elements.

That the selection affirmed that Frankenthaler was one of the most inventive and expressive colorists in recent history is hardly surprising. Works such as the uncanny, chalky *December Start* (1980)—a richly inflected veil of delicate pink over deep red brown, with an emphatic, thick swipe of rose—or the ravishing *Truro* (1984)—a shifting expanse of greens of various densities and degrees of saturation, seasoned with almost brutal hits of raw sienna, lavender, and yellow—made us feel as if we’d never properly experienced the full gamut of pinkness or greenness before. Frankenthaler herself was well aware of the power of chromatic color and her ability to deploy it expressively, but as a passionate admirer of Rembrandt and Édouard Manet, she was also immensely proud of what she called her “dark paintings”—works in which she explored the possibilities of Old Master chiaroscuro, improvising with deep earth colors, murky greens, blacks and grays that she always mixed herself, and what she described as “mud from the bottom of the pail.” One of the most potent canvases at Yares was *Closing the Gap* (1979), a bottomless sheet of deep reddish brown, applied with generous swipes, devolving, on the left side of the canvas, into an enormous patch of black/blue/brown as rich and stygian as the night sky on a moonless night. It was magical and mysterious. (Full disclosure: some years ago, I organized, with the artist’s collaboration, a touring exhibition titled “Frankenthaler: The Darker Palette”.)

The selection also made plain that Frankenthaler never settled for the familiar or the comfortable. During each of the decades represented in the show, the late 1950s to 1990, she continually investigated new ways of constructing a picture, new ways of putting on paint, new chromatic possibilities, and more, not in pursuit of novelty, but rather, excellence. Frankenthaler always sought to surprise herself, to keep herself off balance. Fearless in the studio, she allowed herself to be led by things that happened on the canvas as she worked,

never preconceiving but always responding to the evolving configuration of liquid color before her. The Yares show was a welcome corrective to recent efforts to “reposition” Frankenthaler as an Abstract Expressionist, a notion that diminishes her achievement and would have deeply upset her. Far from being a follower, a second generation practitioner of a conception of painting that had become entrenched by the time she began to exhibit (as she was initially labeled, along with many of her contemporaries), Frankenthaler was the innovative first of her generation—the young artist whose inventive work pointed a way out of the conventions of Ab Ex for her contemporaries and for painters older than she was. There’s been an effort, too, to label her a feminist painter *avant la lettre*, an idea that has her spinning in her grave. Frankenthaler never believed in segregation by gender, refusing to give a work to the Museum of Women’s Art when it was founded. She always insisted on being called a painter, period, without any qualifying adjectives. The Yares show reinforced how right she was to demand to be described this way. The radiant, tough-minded, beautiful works on view made it abundantly clear that Frankenthaler was not only as good as any of her colleagues of either sex, but also better than most of them. No special pleading necessary.



“Frank Stella: Recent Work” filled both of the conjoined spaces at Marianne Boesky Gallery, in Chelsea, with sculptures—or perhaps more accurately, freestanding paintings—by another restless innovator. The brilliantly colored, extremely complex, often very large pieces, made of combinations of painted metal, fiberglass, PU foam, and flexible TPU and RPT—whatever that may be—were proof of Stella’s continuing fascination with experimentation and the possibilities of new technology. Computer modeling and 3-D printing all played a role in these exuberant works. It’s a long way, materially and conceptually, from the severe, “hand-made” black Pinstripe paintings that first established his reputation, except for the fact that even the recent works most robustly articulated in space or most aggressively layered still read as paintings. They told us from where we were to view them, encouraging us to peer through and into them, to explore their accumulations of events and colors, but not necessarily suggesting that we move around them.

Many of the constructions, such as *Atalanta and Hippomenes Mirrored Relief* (2018) or *Leeuwarden I* (2017), played undulating forms against deep grids, polychromed to emphasize depth and the doubling of elements. The classical titles seemed to suggest a connection with the past and with mythology, despite the essential abstractness of the works, and, in fact, some of the configurations proved to be very specific. We recognized the same central configuration—a “reclining” scoop below a complicated tangle of narrow forms, like entwined limbs, and some odd, mushroom-like projections—in *Atalanta and Hippomenes* (2017) that we found in *Atalanta and Hippomenes Mirrored Relief* made a year later, albeit with significant material differences. The former was a fully three-dimensional, gleaming white, swelling and contracting fiberglass form floating against a richly colored grid, while the latter, similarly positioned against a less vividly painted grid, consisted of layers of flat aluminum ribbons, with hints of three dimensionality created by casual strokes of blue paint. Once we made the connection, we started to see the later *Mirrored Relief* as a kind of allusive “portrait” of the ample fiberglass form, reduced to flat planes. Similar witty improvisations occurred throughout.

*Atalanta and Hippomenes* stood out also because it was wall-hung, which allowed us to concentrate on its opulent, curvaceous qualities and the contrasting character of the grid, rather than being distracted, as we

were in the freestanding pieces, by the expedient ways they were supported. Most of them were on vertical supports stabilized, at floor level, by tapering, silvery metal trusses that had an unfortunate resemblance to oversized snowshoes. An exception was the deceptively straightforward *Canadian Sunset* (2016), which floats a spiraling configuration of interlocking curvilinear forms, further animated by lively color, against a folded, small-scale grid, apparently draped over what looks like a clothing rack. The pure dumbness of the support system, in contrast to the “snowshoes” and their variants, came as a nice surprise.

I’m not sure what I think about the giant three-dimensional star sculptures that Stella has been exploring ever since he debuted them on the terrace of the Whitney Museum during his retrospective. But I was completely won over by a group of small, delicate wall-hung pieces in one of the smaller rooms of the gallery. At once playful and, in their assured combination of improbable forms and riotous colors, extremely inventive and beautiful, they were impossible to resist. I suspect that if the large works at Marianne Boesky Gallery had been installed in more generous spaces, they might have looked even better, but even in fairly tight quarters, they offered an impressive variety of gestures, drawing, color, rhythms, and density. Or at least the elevated parts of the constructions did. Cubism, the High Baroque, and a host of vernacular references tugged at each other in these complex, witty constructions. As always, it was a great pleasure to see what Stella has been up to for the past few years. He never fails to surprise, to engage, and often, to delight.