The women of Abstract Expressionism

by Leann Davis Alspaugh

Jackson Pollock was dead. Drunk, as usual, he’d overturned his Oldsmobile in the summer of 1956, injuring his mistress and killing another young woman along for the ride. Lee Krasner, the artist’s wife, was in Europe when she received the bad news. Even though Pollock had earned a record amount of money that year, Krasner discovered when she returned home that they had only $300 in the bank. Krasner found herself as the guardian of her husband’s art and reputation—and, now, of his estate—in his death as she had done during his life.

The complicated and turbulent relationships of the women—and the men—in involved in Abstract Expressionism drive the narrative of Mary Gabriel’s impressive study of a uniquely fertile time and place. Abstract Expressionism is considered the first major American art movement, but, as Gabriel shows, it was also a movement that could only have happened in America. Although the avant-garde was not new to New York in the early twentieth century—after all, this was the city that had hosted the 1913 Armory Show—the Great Depression changed the lives of American artists in unexpected ways. As the art historian Barbara Rose notes, the Depression turned American art in on itself, pushing artists into a crucial period of introspection. Crucially, the federal art programs of the time, designed to alleviate artists’ poverty, made “no formal distinction between abstract and representational art,” Rose wrote. At a stroke, then, these programs helped make abstract art respectable and created a sense of esprit de corps among artists that lasted through the 1940s and beyond.
Ninth Street Women focuses on this spirit: the bull sessions, the fights, the couplings, the tantrums, the jealousies, the struggles to stay warm, the penny pinching, the drinking—and the art. Had Gabriel pursued a strictly feminist mission in depicting the lives and careers of Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler, her book might have been tiresomely reductive. Instead, what she has achieved is a comprehensive, landmark study of what
it was like, in the time of the Abstract Expressionist movement, to be a woman and an artist in a man’s world.
Lee Krasner (1908–84) was already a formidable artist in her own right when she met Jackson Pollock in 1942. Theirs was a mutually influential relationship: “Jackson helped her to be free and spontaneous, and she helped him to be organized and refined,” Rose writes. Krasner willingly set aside her own career in order “to do for” Jackson, and while this might not be a popular stance these days, it speaks to her character as a spouse and as an artist. With endless fortitude, Krasner put up with Pollock’s explosive nature, his drunken exploits, and his failed attempts at sobriety. Yet, as she asserted, she had his respect, and he never failed her as a fellow artist. After Pollock’s death, the pugnacious Krasner cut out no less a competitor than the Museum of Modern Art, selling his *Autumn Rhythm* to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for $30,000 after moma’s Alfred H. Barr, Jr., delayed in raising funds for the earlier price of $8,000. Krasner’s move forever changed market expectations for American art, opening the way for today’s stratospheric prices.

Elaine de Kooning in her studio. Photo: Alfred Eisenstaedt.

Elaine Fried (1918–89), an eccentric and chic woman, was a math major at Hunter College when she met Willem de Kooning, who was fourteen years her senior. After they married (an open marriage to be sure), Elaine de Kooning supported and promoted Willem’s art, encountering much of the same skepticism and derision from the public that Lee Krasner had. Elaine would become known for her landscapes and portraiture, but she was also a respected writer and critic. In the mid-1940s, she began reviewing exhibitions and became, under Thomas Hess’s editorship at *ArtNews*, one of the most significant theorists in American art. Her welcoming and gregarious personality made the de Kooning studio a gathering place for artists, activists, athletes, and anyone else who caught her eye—in the words of the painter Herman Cherry, “the lumpen proletariat of the world, including scoundrels and angels.”
Grace Hartigan (1922–2008) devoted herself to art after seeing a Pollock drip painting at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1948. Hartigan’s commitment became so complete that she sent her seven-year-old son to live with his grandparents in order to be free to paint. But before we cheer her for tossing aside convention, it’s worth noting that for years, she signed her paintings as “George” until she gained confidence as both a woman and an artist. Gabriel betrays a soft spot for Hartigan, from her first appearance in New York in an arty Mexican blouse and neatly brushed hair to her later years as a diva and haughty clotheshorse. Hartigan was the first woman Abstract Expressionist to receive recognition at home and abroad, but Gabriel seems to feel that, among all her subjects, she was the only artist to achieve real personal satisfaction in addition to renown.
Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) had the good fortune to discover the avant-garde art scene with the top critic of the 1940s, Clement Greenberg, as her escort and eventual lover. Although their long relationship became troublesome, Frankenthaler thrived among Greenberg’s circle of artist friends and acquaintances. Over the course of her career, she became a strikingly innovative artist, moving smoothly from abstraction to Color Field to woodcuts with assurance and poise. Her assertion that “every picture tells you what to do, that’s the glory of it” bespeaks intuition and humility. Frankenthaler’s marriage in 1957 to Robert Motherwell added another power couple to the New York scene; one wishes that Gabriel had offered more analysis of how, if at all, these two influenced each other.
Joan Mitchell (1925–92) came to New York from Chicago, where, during visits to the Art Institute, she had developed a taste and talent for art. Her characteristic style—energetic, gestural, and full of color—echoed her tempestuous life, one fueled by cigarettes, alcohol, masochistic relationships, and debilitating bouts of insecurity. Even the French considered her sauvage, and her friend Marc Berlet nicknamed her “the Billie Holiday of Abstract Expressionist painters.” Although it is not unusual to find the natural world in Abstract Expressionism (in the art of Clyfford Still, for example), Mitchell’s abstractions identify with nature’s light and energy in a highly Romantic fashion. Of the works painted at her French estate in Vétheuil (whose grounds included Monet’s cottage), Mitchell remarked, “I become the sunflower, the lake, the tree. I no longer exist.”

“One movement had been born of man’s search for his soul; the other sprang from the terrible corruption of his spirit,” Gabriel writes.
One can’t discuss these five women without also including two men. Pollock’s notable influence is due to numerous innovations: painting on a monumental scale; the use of nontraditional materials such as house paints, utility brushes, unprimed canvases; his “all-over” sensibility; and the drip technique. When she heard about his death while in Paris, Mitchell immediately began the painting *Sunday, August 12th*, an homage to her memory of Jackson’s “enormous generosity and lyricism of feeling.” Krasner’s work also took a new direction after his death, and Frankenthaler attributed her own new thinking about color to a lingering impression left by Pollock’s *Number 14*, a painting that she had seen a few years earlier.

Greenberg may be one of the America’s most influential art theorists, but he could also be cruel and condescending. When Frankenthaler’s mother passed away, Greenberg said he never liked her anyway. In his writings on the Color Field school, he never acknowledged Frankenthaler’s pioneering place in it. He sabotaged the self-confidence of both Krasner and Hartigan at sensitive points in their careers. In 1962, he convinced a Paris gallery to close its Mitchell show early, telling the owner to “get rid of that gestural horror.” Gabriel sums him up as a “malign umbra.”

Abstract Expressionism is said to have “ended” in September 1959 with the *New York Times* art critic John Canaday’s open letter to readers, in which he claimed that they had been the victims of a “modern art hoax” perpetrated by some admittedly talented men, but that the movement’s other artists were mere “freaks and charlatans.” Canaday was clearly in a hurry to usher in the Next Big Thing in the form of Jasper Johns and the Pop artists, another “all-boys’ club.” Although one might have wished for more in the way of art analysis from Gabriel, she has nevertheless restored Romanticism as a salient quality of the Abstract Expressionists and their art. For too long, they have been regarded as distant or impenetrably esoteric. Of the changes for the art world that would soon follow, she writes poignantly, “One movement had been born of man’s search for his soul; the other sprang from the terrible corruption of his spirit.”


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