

20th Century Female Abstract Expressionists' Overcoming of Societal Constraints and Their Impacts on the Future Art World

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how female Abstract Expressionists used their talent and bravery to break through societal injustice and how their action has positively impacted future women artists. Following up on the Suffrage Movement in the mid-19th century, women gradually gained more rights and more representation. Influenced by the previous generation, women artists (Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, and Helen Frankenthaler) in the 20th century continued women's legacy, promoting and fighting for their place in the art world. Through secondary research, this paper investigates how several significant women artists pushed beyond societal norms after marrying a male artist. By analyzing future women artists' artworks and comparing them with 20th-century artworks, connections between past and present women artists were made, leading to the conclusion of how the past has influenced the future. Finally, it is uncovered how marginalized artists pave the way for the next generation.

Keywords: Abstract Expressionism; Art History; Feminism; Gender Equality

1. Women in the Art World

The world is thriving with complex, easily accessible art and no human is unaffected by these aesthetic, powerful works. However, can you imagine that among all the permanent collections of 18 prominent US art museums, only 13% of the represented artists are females (Topaz, 2019)? How could this be when women earn 70% of bachelor of fine arts (Townsend, 2017) and 65–75% of master of fine arts degrees (National Endowment For The Arts, 2019) in the US?

Women, a powerful but largely marginalized group in history, were previously drawn largely as objects in art. Under the male gaze, women were passive subject matter, objects to be observed in the way that men desire. For instance, one of the very popular subjects in European Orientalist art of the 19th century was odalisque. The term odalisque refers specifically to a concubine in a harem, who usually dresses scantily, exotically, and poses as if she is an object on display for the (assumed) male viewer (Terry, n.d.). But even with these barriers, women still managed to showcase their talents through art, changing their stereotypes in the world.

This paper focuses specifically on female Abstract Expressionists and will discuss how they broke the constraints of society—allowing the world to recognize their talents and overcome obstacles for future generations of female artists. By exploring the role of these female painters (such as Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler) in their families and analyzing the unreasonable expectations of women at that time, this paper explores the courageous decisions and contributions made by these women to the art world.

By breaking societal conventions, some female abstract expressionists made their own names in the male-dominated art world. After gaining fame, these powerful female artists used their reputation to help break the glass ceiling for future female artists. Research on the foundations they initiated demonstrates how these trail-blazing women inspired others through their experimental and forward-looking mindset.

2. Why Have There Been No Great Female Artists

Like the world at large, the art world has been male-dominated because men have traditionally held the majority of power. Stereotypically, males were meant to be more hardworking, powerful, and skillful than women. Women, on the other hand, were assumed that their “intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” (Sillock, 2018, p. 20). Due to these perceptions, women were deemed physiologically incapable of artistic genius. As a consequence, when we think of famous artists, it is much easier to pull out a list of males than females. For example, Ray Eames (1912-1988) was the wife of Charles Eames (1907-1978), but more importantly, she was a leading industrial designer with whom Charles was one of the designers of the famous chair. Ray had a husband who understood that she was an equal partner in their creations. Unfortunately, society was not as enlightened. With Charles mentioning their relationship as “an equal and total alliance,” Charles' profile in *The New York Times* in 1973 described their relationship as Charles and his “wife and assistant” (Schuessler, 2020). Even if society recognizes male artists, it naturally neglects their words describing the importance of female artists.

When we look at old and famous paintings, we are looking through the eyes of men. In Linda Nochlin's (1931-2017) ground-breaking 1971 essay "*Why Have There Been No Great Female Artists*", she stated that "The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education — education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals" (Nochlin, 1971). This essay informed many female artists of their potential artistic capability that was originally invisible due to societal pressure. This essay also built up their confidence to pursue their dreams that were once out of reach. In art historian Whitney Chadwick's review of the essay, he wrote that it "signaled the beginning of a critical feminist art history" (Chadwick, 1990). The long-existing social barriers are the catalyst of the "problematic nature" of women artists. In the 19th century, when art schools started to accept female students (although they had to pay a much higher tuition), females did not have the right to take life classes, which was an essential part of creating major artworks (Silock, 2018). Encompassing the most complex creations represented by unclothed human bodies, life drawing is widely recognized as the foundation for fine art education. Not having the ability to do life drawing would prevent access to higher levels in the art world. Many aspiring female artists lost their way when forced by society to make a decision between being "a good woman" or "a great artist" (Silock 2018). This restriction not only hindered female artists' techniques of depicting figures but also took away their confidence to express themselves and reach their fullest potential.

Unfortunately, female artists were still restricted even if they decided to self-study. According to a 2014 video describing societal constraints on women in the 19th Century, women were not allowed to spend their free time socializing or doing anything unrelated to the maintenance of their families (Feminism in the 19th Century: Women's Rights, Roles, and Limits). They were bound by their husbands, fathers, or brothers, and lacked independence. Until 1848, when the Married Women's Property Act was passed in New York state, married women in the US could not own property. Moreover, women were also forced to shop with a male escort, meaning that artistic resources and materials for females were also difficult to reach (Gane 2023). As a result of these limitations, women artists were rarely respected in places of art exhibitions, galleries, or competitions as spectators and even more so as artists themselves. Some even had to adopt a male name in order to be taken seriously in such a male-dominated industry. The underrepresentation of women artists has created a great cavity in the art world. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the position of women in society changed dramatically. "They had gained entry into the public sphere through political participation and expanded presence in the workplace" (Maloni 2009, 880). Following women's suffrage, females gradually gained more rights, voice, and representation in society. Female artists were inspired and started to advocate for their rights, seeking more opportunities to practice and present their work. Though they started to become important reformers of the community, they still seldomly behaved freely as themselves and were unequally perceived by the public.

3. Female Artists In The 20th Century

It was not until the late nineteenth century that female students had ready access to life-drawing classes in both London (Levin, 2007) and Paris (Myers, 2008). Being exposed to life drawing for much longer than women, male artists were assumed to have matured skills and were generally more valued than women artists.

Developed in New York City in the 1940s, Abstract Expressionism is a post-World War II art movement following Surrealism. Using gestural brushstrokes, Abstract Expressionists valued spontaneity and improvisation, reflecting their individual psyches (Paul, 2001). Although Abstract Expressionism has been largely male driven, women artists in New York were attracted to the same style and participated in the same movement. The difference is that they faced more challenges than male Abstract Expressionists. To find a way out of this predicament, many female artists chose to adopt a male name to sign their works.

3.1 Grace Hartigan

For example, Grace Hartigan (1922-2008), a leading Abstract Expressionist, used the name George when exhibiting until 1954 (MoMA, n.d.). Hartigan gained recognition in 1950 when her painting was selected by Clement Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro for the "New Talent" show at the Kootz Gallery. In 1951, the following year, she had her first solo show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Later on, she decided to use her actual first name Grace to exhibit. The act of using a masculine name could also be an indication of her belief that identity is multiple: "...if being a woman meant behaving in a certain way, then she was also a man" (MoMA, n.d.). Although Hartigan refused to be categorized as a feminist, she was considered a feminist precursor, as her artworks (such as *Pallas Athena-Earth* (1961), *Joan of Arc* (1973), and *Marilyn* (1962)) reference powerful female icons (Cassell, 2020). Grace Hartigan opened the way for other female artists to gain acceptance through her powerful abstract expressionist works.

3.2 Lee Krasner

Similar to Hartigan, Lee Krasner (1908-1984) also adopted a masculine name. Although Krasner belonged to the center of the New York art world and was in the friend group of many leading artists, it would take her decades to

receive the same kind of attention as the males. She chose the name “Lee Krasner” over her birth name Lena Kreisner, or sometimes just her initials L.K., to blur her identity from the judgments of her contemporaries (Folland, n.d.).

Krasner has always insisted on her love for art, even though she did not have sufficient wealth and support. She and her husband, Jackson Pollock, were both artists. After their marriage, Pollock worked in the big studio, while Krasner worked in the tiny bedroom of their house. The limited space would also limit the artist's ability and creativity. *Untitled*, completed in 1955, was made on a tabletop in her bedroom. Although the dimensions of the work were not large, 48 x 37" (121.9 x 93.9 cm), Krasner was still able to show her unique style of using repetitive strokes. As Pollock fell into the abyss of alcohol, the devastating situation was added to the limitations of space, but it did not stop Krasner from working. She took comfort in the collages she was then making: images, made from shreds of her own discarded work, that many people believe to be among her greatest achievements (Cooke, 2019). *Milkweed* (84 x 59"), a work of collage of oil, paper, and canvas on canvas, showcases how Krasner combined the canvas fragments with a circular rhythmic pattern, expressing her joys and sorrows (Nikkal, 2019).

After Pollock's death in late 1956, Krasner finally had the opportunity to work in the studio and created one of her most famous works — *Polar Stampede* (Cooke, 2019). These circumstances did not limit Krasner's progress as a great artist.

3.3 Elaine de Kooning

Another example is Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989). The wife of Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), she did not allow marriage to hinder her pursuit of art. Elaine de Kooning appreciated and respected Willem, saying that she did not work under his shadow, but rather painted in his light (Strickland, 1993). After their marriage, Elaine de Kooning also devoted her efforts to promoting Willem, using her social popularity (Moonan, 2015). However, this admiration did not let her lose her way. She stuck to her own style: Elaine de Kooning “gave her subjects both individuality and a kind of asceticism, while he exulted in their anonymous sexuality,” (Midgett, 2015). While they were both in poverty, Willem de Kooning suggested that if she admired his work so much, she would get a job and support him. But Elaine de Kooning refused, saying that she was an artist too, willing to starve along with him (Curtis, 2018). Difficulties did not weaken Elaine de Kooning's determination to paint.

3.4 Joan Mitchell

The persistence of these female artists enabled several to establish their reputations in the male-dominated field. Joan Mitchell (1925-1992), considered an important member of the postwar Abstract Expressionism movement, was one of the few female painters to gain critical and public acclaim in her era. Through her compositional rhythms, vibrant coloration, and textual brushstrokes, she is a central figure among the second generation of Abstract Expressionists (MoMA, n.d.). In 1955, she completed the work *City Landscape*, using bright pigments concentrated in the center of the figure to communicate the bustling urban space. In 1972, critic Peter Schjeldahl called Mitchell “a master of many oil-painting techniques who seems always to be pushing her mastery to the limit, willfully throwing it against ‘impossible’ problems,” (Greenberger, 2021b). Being such an influential artist, Mitchell's works are shown in major museums and collections worldwide and have sold for record-breaking prices, overcoming the stereotype of females' intellect in art.

3.5 Helen Frankenthaler

Helen Frankenthaler was another artist who stood out from her peers. Frankenthaler's artworks greatly differed from the male artists at that time. In comparison to the blustering and epic artworks by other male artists (such as Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko), Frankenthaler's paintings are more serene, full of cool colors, and exposed, unprimed canvases (Greenberger, 2021a). Frankenthaler pioneered post-painterly abstraction (abstract painting in the 1950s -1960s) with her experimentation and abandonment of masculine gesturalism in Abstract Expressionism (Dodge, 2020). Though, like Hartigan, Frankenthaler did not consider herself a feminist. Regardless, her positive influence on upcoming female artists was enormous.

4. Impacts of the Past on the Present

Through their own efforts, these female artists have successfully defined their reputations and gained more resources and wealth. Because of their experiences, these female writers decided to use their influence to support other artists.

4.1 Lee Krasner and Kathe Burkhart

The US economy experienced the Great Depression as Krasner and Pollock finished their artistic training. They took advantage of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project, which gave thousands of nationwide artists a living wage to do the work for which they were trained. Through this program, the prospects for young unknown artists were increased. Being grateful for the help that she received and mindful that there was

a lack of such opportunities in the contemporary art world, Krasner envisioned the Pollock-Krasner Foundation to relieve the financial burden on artists enabling them to freely practice and advance their work (Pollock-Krasner Foundation, n.d.).

Kathe Burkhart (1958-) is an interdisciplinary artist and writer in New York. She is also one of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation 2020-21 Artist Grantees and Lee Krasner Award Recipients. Receiving help from the foundation, Burkhart, like Krasner, has also become a forward-looking artist who made her place in the art world. As a feminist artist, Burkhart has actively engaged in the discussion of gender roles. In her signature Liz Taylor Series, she: “combines appropriated portraits of actress Elizabeth Taylor with profane language, shattering both female stereotypes and conventions of representation” (Fredericks&Freiser, n.d.).



Sit On It: from the Liz Taylor Series (The Girl Who Had Everything)

Acrylic and composition leaf on oval canvas

72" x 132"

1999

Her *Sit on It*, created in 1999, is one of the works in this series. In this painting, Taylor sits comfortably on the man, one hand resting on her neck while the other pressing on the man's head. The man is well-dressed, wearing a gold watch on his left wrist. Thus, the focus of this painting is not aimed at the discussion of economic classes. Taylor's expression was portrayed as enjoying and relaxing, and the man did not struggle with his situation. The words “Sit on it!” in bright red contradict the cyan and rather less-saturated background. The choice of using “Sit on it” instead of “Sit on him” symbolizes the reclamation of female sexuality and power by making the male an object. Through exaggerated and vibrant colors and satirical words, Burkhart criticizes and challenges the stereotypical way women are represented in society.

The iconoclastic impulse and feminist perspective of the Liz Taylor series was recognized by MoMA and was presented in the *Defamation of Character* exhibition (2006-2007). Burkhart's success is a manifestation of increased women's representation in the art world.

4.2 Helen Frankenthaler and Kikuo Saito

Unlike Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler has never faced poverty struggles. However, she understood the struggle of different identities and wanted to help artists with similar struggles. Frankenthaler established and endowed the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation during her lifetime (1928-2011). The foundation became active in 2013, on the closing of Frankenthaler's estate. It strengthens her legacy through exhibitions, loans of artworks, publications, grants, and many other initiatives, promoting greater public interest in and understanding of the visual arts (Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, n.d.).

In 2023, the foundation participated in the exhibit *Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction (1940–70)* in France which displayed the Abstract Expressionism artworks created by females overlooked by the world. The Foundation Vincent van Gogh Arles states that: “Reaching beyond the predominantly white, male painters whose names are synonymous with the Abstract Expressionist movement, this exhibition celebrates the

practices of the numerous international women artists working with gestural abstraction in the aftermath of the Second World War.”

Kikuo Saito, once a studio assistant of Frankenthaler, held an exhibition called *Kikuo Saito and Friends: New York City Downtown and Beyond, 1970s and 1980s* at the KinoSaito Arts Center which showcased artworks created by him and his friends, including Frankenthaler. Frankenthaler used her reputation to promote other artists, whether female or male, and her talent to inspire future artists.



Sea Rose, 2013
Oil on canvas
55 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 54 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches
57 x 55 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (framed)
© The Estate of Kikuo Saito

By comparing artworks by Frankenthaler and Saito, the influence of Abstract Expressionism and Frankenthaler on Saito can be inferred. Both paintings used bright, highly saturated, and diverse colors, creating two eye-catching yet harmonic pieces of work. Frankenthaler’s investigation of the smudging of paint and the movement when painting is also reflected in Saito’s work.

4.3 Joan Mitchell and Katrina Andry

Being such an outstanding artist, Joan Mitchell also had the will to aid and assist working artists. Therefore, the Joan Mitchell Foundation was incorporated in New York City in 1993 (Joan Mitchell Foundation, n.d.). Since its establishment, the foundation has always been generous towards its grantees. In 1994, the foundation selected eighteen artists for the first Painters & Sculptors Grants. Each of them received unrestricted awards of \$10,000 to further their artistic practices and careers. Now, the foundation has more than 1,000 artists awarded grants and more than 5,000 young artists supported or educated, as well as almost 300 artists hosted in residencies at the Joan Mitchell Center (Joan Mitchell Foundation, n.d.).

Katrina Andry, born in 1981, is a native of New Orleans and was a part of the Joan Mitchell Center Residency in 2013. Andry continued the experimental spirit of Mitchell, using printmaking to discuss the topic of race. In her woodcut series, “The Promise of the Rainbow Never Came,” Andry presents the viewers with multiple works of people of color being attacked by raging waves. Colorful raindrops fell from the sky, hitting the people who were struggling to breathe. They were in a dangerous environment where they could easily be crushed in the sea full of unknown creatures. Andry’s work confronts how race and gender stereotypes are perceived and the resultant effect on communities.

Works from contemporary artists and accomplishments of these foundations show the continued influence and support from female Abstract Expressionists that strides over time and generations.

5. *Building on Their Legacy*

These female abstract expressionists were pioneers: in such a time when it was easier to give up, they did their utmost to radiate their own light. Grace Hartigan adopted a male name to receive attention and then used her original name as her talent to be recognized and appreciated. Lee Krasner was not defeated by the difficulties of life and showed her innermost being through art. Elaine de Kooning was not trapped by marriage, and so she insisted

on her original heart and faith and produced unique artworks. Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler were seen by the world through innovative styles and prominent techniques.

They not only earned themselves the ability to paint and live more freely, but they chose to invest their earnings in helping others. By establishing foundations that aided other artists, 20th-century female artists shed light on the contemporary art world. While creating more opportunities for future artists, they pass on their spirit to the next generation, creating opportunities for the next generation of artists.

Furthermore, the bravery of past female artists is constantly affecting us in the present. Their contributions not only improved the status of females in the art world but also inspired future generations, no matter men or women, to strive for equality in an unjust world.

Ideally, more artists who have already received some attention could follow the example of the Abstract Expressionist women by encouraging emerging female artists. This could entail creating foundations; Or, organizations such as museums, galleries, and studios. Organizations like the National Museum of Women in the Arts could create incentives (like editorial features and curated collections) for the next generation of artists. There are boundless innovative approaches to continue the impact of these 20th-century female artists apart from establishing foundations. Through social media promotions, artistic collaborations, and exhibit invitations (from established artists to emerging artists), more treasures in the art world could be discovered, further lifting up all underrepresented artistic groups. As society progresses into the 21st century, projects like these will provide more opportunities than ever before for art to play a crucial role in paving the way, opening doors, and breaking glass ceilings for marginalized creators.

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