Helen Frankenthaler

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

In the days following Helen Frankenthaler's death, on December 27, 2011, my Facebook feed teemed with JPEG memorials, makeshift tributes to a painter many had forgotten. The image I remember best was a photograph of the artist in her studio, taken by Douglas Banks for *Life* magazine in 1956; it shows Frankenthaler sitting on top of, and surrounded by, her canvases of the previous half decade, including the breakthrough *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, as if ensconced in a sort of aqueous dream-cubicle.

Banks's portrait of Frankenthaler is seductive, but also troubling: While ostensibly emphasizing the physical contact between artist and artwork, it has the effect of distancing one from the other, encouraging us to doubt whether the young woman in the picture (only twenty-eight in 1956) could possibly have birthed such wild pictorial ferment. The photo casts her in the role of seated oracle, as the spokesmodel for her art—a far cry from "action painting," indeed. Already by the 1950s, the charge of passivity had disqualified Frankenthaler from the circle of critic Harold Rosenberg; alternatively, a younger generation of abstract painters, including Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, would point to her decision, in 1952, to pour thinned paint directly on to unprimed cotton duck, thereby permeating the picture surface with color, as an early win for procedure over gesture. The *Life* photograph arguably summarizes these misprisions of Frankenthaler's work, subsuming the term "passive" to the modifier "woman."

Enter John Elderfield, whose recent survey of Frankenthaler's work of 1950–59 at Gagosian sought to reconnect the artist and her art, foregrounding her path from Cubist compactness to the luminous, open fields of her stained canvases. The show, Elderfield's second at the gallery since his retirement as the Museum of Modern Art's chief curator of painting and sculpture in 2008, was as gripping an elegy as the recently departed painter could have hoped for, collecting all the major canvases of her breakthrough decade, including *Mountains and Sea*; *Eden*, 1956; *Jacob's*

Helen Frankenthaler, *Eden*, 1956, oil on canvas, 103 x 117".

Ladder, 1957; and *Mother Goose Melody*, 1959. Recalling the main arguments of Frankenthaler's 1989 MOMA retrospective, also curated by Elderfield, this exhibition emphasized the breathtaking pace of her progress in the '50s, beginning with *Painted on 21st Street*, 1950, a canvas that exploded the figure/ground binary that had structured her previous paintings, dispersing heterogeneous gestures across the picture plane in a breathable meshwork.

As a scholar and curator, Elderfield is keen to stress the continuity of Frankenthaler's "both/and" ethos, in which abstraction and figuration, the spontaneous and the measured, are coaxed together; even her signature tactic, the poured stain, is alternately thick and thin, wet and dry, sometimes playing the role of line, sometimes coalescing as a bounded shape. Yet this did not prevent the show from splitting more or less evenly into two halves. Whereas her work of 1952 to 1954 simultaneously courted environmental immersion and metonymic literalism—see, for instance, *Open Wall*, 1953, a precarious tympanum of aquamarines and caramels, which flickers restively between raw materiality and spatial extension—Frankenthaler's canvases of 1956 to 1959, such as *Western Dream*, 1957, and *Before the Caves*, 1958, developed her signature stain technique in large-scale compositions, allowing brush marks and pooled paint to congeal into recognizable symbols. (Though rarely into figures: Fish and insects can be spotted in the former picture, and the latter recalls the painted cave walls of Altamira and Lascaux.)

In seeking terms for Frankenthaler's canvases of 1956 to 1959, I keep coming back to a list of binaries: controlled and chaotic, titanic and intimate, brooding and whimsical—to which the dualisms self/other and male/female beg to be added. In this regard, *Eden* is a touchstone: Rather than divide its pictorial universe into sundered parts and opposite genders, Frankenthaler posits ambiguity as fundamental; hence her ecstatic doubling of the number 100 at the picture's center. According to Elderfield's reading, *Eden* marked modernism's triumphant return to its roots in pastoral lyricism, rendering "interior landscapes" in a grammar of spatters and pours. Yet his argument demands a caveat: Frankenthaler may have turned inward with *Eden*, but the subject of her lyric was multiple and contradictory, not at all the singular, authorial "I." In the painter's paradise, nothing is yet named or damned; all things sing cacophonously, no one able to discern who is who, or he from she.

—*Daniel Marcus*

Richard Serra

DAVID ZWIRNER

Richard Serra has a story he likes to tell—as he did recently to a group gathered for a preview of this magisterial, museum-quality survey of his works made between 1966 to 1971 mounted at David Zwirner's imposingly soigné new digs on West Twentieth Street—about a formative moment in his life as an artist when, traveling around Europe while on a Fulbright, he encountered *Las Meninas* for the first time. His experience at the Prado was a revelation, he said, because he felt Velázquez had somehow managed to make him feel "implicated in the space of the painting," something the fledgling painter simply could not imagine accomplishing with his own wall-based work. Serra was