

Helen Frankenthaler on How to Be an Artist

by Alexxa Gotthardt

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Portrait of Helen Frankenthaler in her New York studio, 1971. Photo by Jack Mitchell/Getty Images

Portrait of Helen Frankenthaler in her New York studio, 1971. Photo by Jack Mitchell/Getty Images

Helen Frankenthaler wasn't phased when critics panned her 1952 canvas *Mountains and Sea*. After all, her goal wasn't to please—it was to push painting into new, uncharted places. “At first, genuinely new approaches are startling if not shocking....*Mountains and Sea* was first looked at with anger,” she recalled in a 1998 conversation with Guggenheim curator Julia Brown. “It was vandalized in rage. Some people saw it as a blown-up paint rag, something you wipe your brushes on, not something you frame.”

With the painting, the 23-year-old Frankenthaler pioneered a new technique called “soak-stain.” She poured thinned paint directly onto raw canvas, orchestrating rich passages of color that seeped deep into its fibers. Like Jackson Pollock, her mentor and a progenitor of Abstract Expressionism, she worked on the floor, circling around and hovering over her canvases. But despite technical similarities to her contemporaries, Frankenthaler's paintings

were radical—unlike anything the art establishment had seen. The fields of paint that populated her work seemed to float, thrum, and merge ethereally, rather than crash and explode like those of Pollock or Willem de Kooning. And instead of foregrounding expressive gesture, she focused on the relationship between color and space. When painter Morris Louis saw *Mountains and Sea* in Frankenthaler's studio, he lauded it as “a bridge between Pollock and what is possible.” Her work would spur the Color Field movement, led by Louis and Kenneth Noland.

Frankenthaler has long been recognized as a leader of Abstract Expressionism. And her unique, dauntless approach served as a spark plug for what came after it. When she died in 2011, she left behind an array of interviews that offer a glimpse into her innovative process and unflagging drive. From them, we've extracted several words of wisdom to inspire fellow artists.

Lesson #1: Try everything and experiment often



In the Wings | Helen Frankenthaler | *In the Wings*, 1987 | Galerie d'Orsay

In 1998, at the age of nearly 70, Frankenthaler summed up her artistic motivations: “taking risks, being surprised, experimenting, wanting to push painting further,” she told Brown resolutely. Time and again, she pointed to the importance of experimentation in driving her innovative practice.

As early as her college years at Bennington, Frankenthaler gravitated towards mentors who eschewed dogma in favor of a more open, exploratory style of learning. She praised Paul Feely as a professor who “would never teach or give out with any dogmatic perceptions, but just in dwelling on something

would reflect his own praise of it and pull the feeling out of you.” In New York, where Frankenthaler settled after college, critic Clement Greenberg’s advice became elemental to her artistic development: “[He] encouraged me to let myself go, not hold anything back, try everything,” she recalled to Brown. While Frankenthaler surrounded herself with Abstract Expressionist painters like Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, and was quickly recognized as one of the movement’s most innovative practitioners, she explored a wide range of techniques, media, and inspirations on the path to her mature style. She pored over work by Titian, Pablo Picasso, and Arshile Gorky, with the goal of synthesizing and transforming their stylistic choices. “In my love and pursuit of any of the Old Masters, or Cubists, or Manet, Monet, Miró, Gorky, or Pollock,” she explained to Brown, “I would wonder how they made their paintings and want to understand them, and take it from there.” Her impulse was to imitate and abstract: “Sometimes I’d use their works and make my kind of abstract response,” she continued.



What Red Lines Can Do: one plate
Helen Frankenthaler
What Red Lines Can Do: one plate, 1970
Phillips

Pollock’s revolutionary process, in particular, became Frankenthaler’s guiding light: “It captured my eye and my whole psychic metabolism at a crucial moment in my life,” she said. Like Feely’s teaching, his work inspired her, while also allowing room for growth. “He opened the way for me and freed me to make my own mark and my own contribution,” she said. “My concern was, always, where would one go from there?”

Experimentation with materials also became important to Frankenthaler’s practice. In a 1993 conversation with former National Gallery of Art curator Ruth Fine, she highlighted how unorthodox or unfamiliar media incited inspiration: “I realized the romance of a new medium, and that can be any medium—whether it’s working with clay or wool, whatever,” she said. “I feel, essentially, that I am a painter and involved in paint, per se, and the beauty of paint, but there is something equally exquisite about seeing the acid bath make something bleed on copper or using a sanding wheel on a piece of mahogany.”

In her studio on East 83rd Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan, Frankenthaler tried paint of different densities and opacities, moving from oils to

acrylics in the early 1960s. She became particularly interested in printmaking and woodcuts, too, becoming a leader in the “print renaissance” that took hold of many Abstract Expressionists. She worked at the renowned printmaking studio of Tatyana Grosman in 1961. “After the first day there I felt no hesitation. I was very committed,” she explained. “All I had to do was start work on that print. It was a whole new road—and a very connected road.” Frankenthaler also tried her hand at ceramics, sculpture, tapestry, and set design, but her primary focus always remained painting.

Lesson #2: Give yourself prompts, but don't become married to them



Hotel Cro-Magnon
Helen Frankenthaler
Hotel Cro-Magnon, 1958
Making Painting: Helen Frankenthaler and JMW Turner, Turner Contemporary, 2014

To ease the challenge of beginning a new piece, Frankenthaler often gave herself prompts—questions that would spark a composition's direction. “Sometimes, especially at night, I will see a whole painting in my mind and I'll jot down notes on how it looks and often use the notes in the studio later,” she told Brown. “I tend to give myself challenges that I see in my mind's eye: What would happen if? And then I ‘write it down’ on the canvas.” She went on to explain the impetus for *New York Bamboo* (1957), a large-scale painting that is uncharacteristically monochromatic. The raw, bone-colored canvas is activated by spills of gray ranging from ethereal and silvery to dense and ashen. “I thought, supposing I were to paint this picture only in black and leave half the painting empty? Would it work? And I went about doing just that,” Frankenthaler explained. “Experiment and discovery.” Often prompts were straightforward, inspired by a painting that grabbed her: “When I saw the Titian in Boston, *The Rape of Europa* (1562), it knocked

me out. So I made my version in the painting that I called Europa 1 (1957),” she recalled to Brown. Nature, too, offered initial inspiration: “When I am in pursuit of ‘a place to go’ from where I am, I often go back to nature, the figure, or still-life in order to trigger a leap into the unknown.”

While these devices offered a gateway into new work, Frankenthaler also emphasized the importance of letting them go once the painting process began. “I can set up an experiment for myself that deals only with the corners, center, or edges of the canvas—with contours or lines—but once the painting is completed, I might have reworked the entire original experiment,” she explained.

“As I develop a particular painting, I depart from a concept and reach instead into the demands of the canvas before me,” she continued. “What’s coming through is telling me I must go elsewhere. So while I might give the opening direction, the painting, as it progresses through my mind and body, determines its own journey to completion.... The artist has to have a dialogue with what is being created.”

Lesson #3: Approach color expansively



Caffeine
Helen Frankenthaler
Caffeine, 1975
Edelman Arts
Helen Frankenthaler, New York City

Throughout her career, Frankenthaler masterfully harnessed the expressive power of color; her canvases surge with mesmerizing combinations that recall a powerful range of emotions and physical experiences. She often described color as if it were a living, breathing organism with the power to move and metamorphose. “I mixed funny shades of colors and used them but I used them because they made the drawing in my picture move,” she explained to art historian Barbara Rose in 1968. “It wasn’t because I was in love with the idea of putting color down. But these colors were the expedient things to

use for the way I drew.”

For Frankenthaler, the power of color reached an apex when using its full range—not only the most vivid purples and reds, but the swampy browns and dusty grays, too. “When I first started thinking about color it was sort of out of perversity,” she told Rose. “In other words, say around ’50 and ’51, it occurred to me that something ugly or muddy could be a color as well as something clear and bright and a nameable, beautiful, known color.”

She saw black, in particular, as a vibrant, shapeshifting hue. She consistently used it in concert with brighter elements of her palette, such as in *Europa* (1957) and *Pink Lady* (1963). “I think black can be a wonderful color. And often have all kinds of light that we think of as primary color color does not,” she emphasized to Fine, during a trip to the National Gallery (which still houses *Mountains and Sea*). “People like to think of me as a colorist—and therefore where are the reds and the blues and the greens and everything else,” she continued. “But a colorist can also be someone who works in *chiaroscuro*.”

Lesson #4: Let mistakes lead to invention



Tahiti
Helen Frankenthaler
Tahiti, 1989
Christopher-Clark Fine Art

In most cases, Frankenthaler believed that mistakes made on canvas could be, in her words, “redeemed.” She elucidated this thinking in her 1998 interview with Brown. When asked how she approaches a “wrong turn” in a painting, her answer was lengthy, focused on an intense, deep reworking of the composition: “Sometimes you can dig in again and retrieve the painting and make it something else. Then it acquires another kind of spontaneity,” she explained. “It becomes a more worked-into or scrubbed surface, often darker, more dense. You have salvaged its essence.”

She pointed to Henri Matisse as a model for this approach, then brought the discussion back to the context of her own studio: “Sometimes that can take a great deal of walking back and forth in the studio over and over again, judging the painting from a distance and close up,” she explained. “This usually takes place in one or two days, but sometimes I’ll return to a painting much, much later, occasionally, but rarely, years later.”

While Frankenthaler worked resolutely to resolve wayward paintings, she also emphasized the importance of letting some pieces go. “At other times, you need to just leave a painting,” she continued. “Never force yourself to like a painting if something in you says it’s not the best.”

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