

ART HISTORY THESIS

NATURE IN ABSTRACTION:
AN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION DEVELOPED IN THE 1950S AND 1960S BY
GRACE HARTIGAN
JOAN MITCHELL
AND
HELEN FRANKENTHALER

Submitted by

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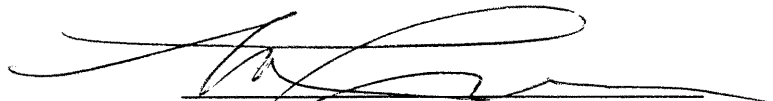
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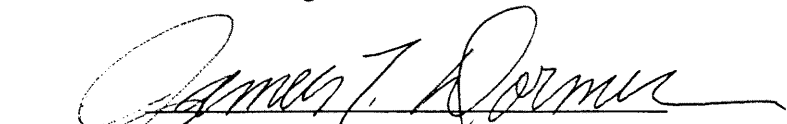
I have completed and filed the original term paper in art history in the Art Department office and I have given a copy to the course instructor.

AR 592 Spring 1995
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In this paper I will investigate an aspect of abstract art that draws on natural observed reality and expresses the essences of the natural world to create imagery. I will look at the relationship between abstract art and observed nature during the twenty year time period from 1950 to 1970. I will point out the character of this abstracted vision of nature by examining selected paintings by Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler. This particular imagery was termed "nature in abstraction" in 1958 by John I. H. Baur (5), a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art and I will use the term throughout, to name this type of imagery. To define the term, "nature in abstraction," I will discuss two definitions of abstract art. The first will be a so-called "pure" definition, the second, I will term as a "more inclusive" one in comparison. I will then define nature as seen by the selected artists. I will discuss each of the three artists' approach to "nature in abstraction," their response to their work when completed, and how art critics reviewed their work. I will then compare the differences and similarities in work. In closing I will discuss some aspects of how gender bias affected these artists.

The first definition of twentieth-century abstract art was rooted in the break from representational work before the 1930s and some art critics called it "pure abstraction" (Baur 5). It is one of many definitions applicable to abstract art. Michel Seuphor, an art critic in the 1950s defined pure abstract art as being,

...impossible to recognize in it the slightest trace of that objective reality which makes up the normal background of our everyday existence; in other words, a painting is abstract when the absence of any other form of sensible reality compels us to regard it as purely paint and nothing else, and to judge it according to values that have nothing to do with representation or

with the imitation or reproduction of some other thing. It follows that a transposition of nature, even when it is very far fetched, remains figurative and is fugitation; but it also follows that a transposition taken to the point where nothing in the work suggests or evokes some basic naturalistic subject -- a transposition, therefore, which to the naked eye does not even imply the act of transposition itself -- will rightly be called abstract, abstraction (Seuphor 3).

This "pure" definition is one of the definitions of abstract art that provided a basis of understanding for the Abstract Expressionist artists such as Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock in the 1950s and 1960s. The Abstract Expressionist artists were an important part of the New York art world that greatly influenced Hartigan, Mitchell, and Frankenthaler. The Abstract Expressionist artists adhered to the purer definition of abstract art in varying degrees. These artists were identified as "macho," a term which was used by some critics to define the aggressive controlling heroic attitude that reflected the spirit of that time when World War II was over and America had declared itself the peace keeper of the world. Fittingly, to further define "pure" abstract art, it was said that, "Art is the only moment when mind, without ceasing to be mind, is converted to physical expansion, and when matter submits (my underline) to mind's transcendence and is converted to speculation, ..." (Seuphor 84). This definition is typical of the established art world's presumption that some human beings have power and control over nature, objects and other human beings.

In the 1950s and 1960s, critics such as John Baur and others provided a more inclusive definition of the abstract form of art, in their effort to understand the character of the abstract

vision and personal attitudes of various abstract artists, which was a definition that included women artists. This more inclusive point of view included the artist's expression of personal issues and feelings as part of the abstract work. It related abstract art to all experiences and generated a broader definition that allowed a more direct emotional and personal relationship to the world around us. This approach to the observed world is only slightly different than the representational approach prior to the twentieth century. Both approaches were concerned with interpretation, search for essence, meaning, mood, spirit and character. Both dealt with expressions of the artist's response to intensify and distill the observed world. The difference between artists who abstract and artists who represent is only in form. The tolerant definition of abstract art will be further defined throughout this paper and demonstrated as I discuss the works of Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler.

In the 1950s nature was defined as the, "all embracing universe about us ... the intangible world of land and water ... world of light, sky and air ... the eternal forces on germination and growth and death which make up the cycles of life and season" (Baur 3). Nature also included for some, urban life, and this was referred to as "man made" nature (Bernstock 31). Nature was seen as a universal experience and often avoided the moral and social problems inherent in human beings. Nature was a tool sometimes utilized by artists to express the artist's own nature.

Artists who abstracted and used nature as their source of inspiration in the context of the more inclusive definition of abstraction find compelling symbols in the natural world to be symbols of the artist's own nature. "Nature in abstraction," is a "synthesis of experience rather than a reflection of the individual experience. It is a total experience rather than a momentary one" (Baur 6). Gabor Peterdi, a printmaker and a painter in the 1950s said, "I want to paint

nature from the inside, not as a spectator" (Baur 7). The abstract painter's expressions of nature in this context were fluid, multidimensional, personal, and reflected an acute sensitivity to nature and the world. The experience of nature abstracted was described as formation, emergence, and light. "Nature in abstraction" was different from the aims of the Abstract Expressionists and their definition of abstraction because it allowed these and other elements of the natural world to be expressed and felt. The more inclusive approach to abstract art more accurately defined the group of artists that worked at the same time as the Abstract Expressionists artists but were younger and were called the "Second Generation" Abstract Expressionists.

Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler can be appropriately called Second Generation Abstract Expressionists artists because their work fits the more inclusive definition of "nature in abstraction." All three women artists expressed in their work a true sense of observed nature along with many personal elements. They faced intense gender bias during the 1950s and 1960s and only began to understand the degree of isolation involved in being a female artist. Hartigan, Mitchell, and Frankenthaler, like other artists of their time, chose this more inclusive type of abstract expression because they preferred the connection between their art and their own lives.

The first artist we will look at is Grace Hartigan, who was born in 1922 in New Jersey. She was not interested in art until she was a young married adult with a child. In 1958, a friend with whom she worked as a draftsman, pointed out her drawing talent and showed her a book of Henri Matisse's work. Right then Hartigan decided to become a painter. She began to study other artists' work and to paint. Hartigan received artistic support from her Abstract Expressionist peers such as Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner.

Hartigan met Pollock in New York and was greatly influenced by his work. She admired his work because of the scale he used, over all composition, projected painting surface, and his willingness to show the painting process. She was also influenced by Willem de Kooning's work; Hartigan's painting paralleled de Kooning's in that they both refused to accept any theoretical division between abstraction and representation. Hartigan's paintings were centered on self expression, self identification, and self creation. She also looked at the work of painters such as Matisse, Braque, Picasso and Monet for inspiration, and then moved in her own path. Hartigan was interested in expressing such varied things as costume, modern city life, nature, the expression of her feelings and her response to the world around her. Some of these interests will be shown by the paintings I will discuss.

A painting that illustrates Hartigan's sense for "nature in abstraction" is Montauk Highway , 1957 (Illustration 1). It was inspired by a drive from Manhattan to Long Island and reflects America's new passion for travel by automobile. Here, Hartigan incorporated all the elements of her view while traveling into the painting: the ocean, open fields, billboards, pavement, as well as the interior and exterior of the car. These elements are stacked and piled on top of one another. "I wanted every section to vibrate with life ... with emphasis on how the planes fell, and are separated, in the billboards for example, and in the further reaches of the land," commented Hartigan (Mattison 43). This painting suggests an instantaneous recording of Hartigan's memories even though she created eight collage studies before painting it. Hartigan preferred to call these paintings "place paintings" (Mattison 46). She said in an interview that she did not do landscape painting, but that she was involved in the time of the event, the environment, the feeling of the place, and her own interpretation of the moment.

In the next painting I will discuss, Hartigan expressed a communion with nature. With the painting New England October , 1957 (Illustration 2) Hartigan suggested organic growth, autumn colors, space, and fluid landscape forms. Here, as in her other "place paintings" the specific view is not detectable, and the viewer estimates the approximate location from the title. The generality of place, the hinting of time, and the suggestion of the land is a key in this abstract work. The connection between art and nature demonstrated in Hartigan's works can be clearly observed in this painting. It reflects themes of light, space, air, season, sky, land, growth, death, as well as capturing the magic that happens in the fall. The painting's scale sets a mood of well being and adds to its pastoral character.

In 1958, Hartigan went to Europe. She was especially taken by Ireland because of her great admiration for James Joyce's writings. Upon her return to New York, she painted a work titled Dublin , 1958-9 (Illustration 3). In this painting, she suggested Ireland's contrast of sooty buildings, yet open feeling. The painting imbues the viewer with a feeling of release, as though Hartigan were letting an emotion go. White linear marks at the bottom of this painting were intended as a love letter to Franz Kline, with whom she was having an affair at the time, but the marks also suggests the word "Dublin." This "place painting" reflects Hartigan's response to the area, and to the emotions that flew through her head during her trip. Hartigan felt the freedom to add elements other than those she observed and felt about the area, like the white lines in Dublin, which were a reflection of her feelings about a relationship. This multidimensional approach to her canvas typified Hartigan's style of "nature in abstraction." In her diaries she wrote that she wanted to " ... paint like nature, uncensored" (Mattison 50).

During the 1950s, Hartigan's work became well received by critics and the general public. The 1960s was a time when she experimented with her work. She moved to Baltimore with her third husband and became removed from the art community of New York City. This was one of several events that caused her to become lesser known. Leaving the city enabled her to explore her own painting more freely. She felt less pressure to paint like other well known artists of the 1950s and 1960s, especially the Abstract Expressionists.

In 1962 Hartigan painted Lily Pond (Illustration 4). This painting is quite different from her previous works as Hartigan began to work towards painting in her own manner instead of a style molded by other artists and by critics. Lily Pond was inspired both by a lake in Maine and Claude Monet's sensibility. For Hartigan, this sensibility meant to imagine herself in the area she was thinking of as she created each work. This particular painting communicates a sense of being right in the water; a total sense of immersion is suggested in the work's symbolism. The theme of this painting is the generation that takes place in the form of a birth from water, such as when a human being is born, the human being emerges from an environment of water into the environment of the outside world.

Hartigan's paintings at this time express the deep inner spiritual freedom she was feeling. She said, "... I have refrained from emphasizing 'the sexual revolution' as the center of the new sensibility. Of all the simplistic explanations of what happened in the sixties, that perhaps does the most violence to what actually occurred The deeper insurgency of the sixties was spiritual and religious" (Mattison 57).

The short period of time from 1950 to 1969 in Grace Hartigan's career shows how she approached nature and the world around her. She combined many diverse elements in her

paintings, such as time, place, weather and light, as well as her thoughts, life situation, memories and others. Her early works in the 1940s and early 1950s reflect all of these themes and show how she simplified her work using fewer elements because of the influences of other artists and critics. She commented on her earliest work that, "Pressure from Kline, Guston, and others made me drop the subject. They made me feel it wasn't serious. Subject matter must come from the act of painting, they felt" (Munro 203). After Hartigan's experimental work came to a close in Baltimore she said, "It was a personal battle to come back to that aesthetic. I didn't break through back into my imagery until the end of the '60s. Since then, these ten years have been a constant investigation of images observed from life. My studio, lyrical nature, my art roots, medieval manuscripts, myth, the Lascaux caves" (Munro 203). Upon returning to her personal aesthetic, Hartigan said, "I just had to throw in something of the life around me, even if it was just fragments, little memories, little snatches, little wisps of a corner, a piece of fruit, a vendor going by, something" (Diggory 41). She wanted to convey the directness in her perception, all the elements that occurred while painting, and her action in her paintings. Even though Hartigan was not satisfied with this series of paintings, I believe this work is important because it was her interpretation of "nature in abstraction."

A contemporary of Hartigan's was Joan Mitchell. Mitchell's work was highly intellectual and gestured. Mitchell was born in 1926 in Chicago, and as a child she was exposed to poetry and painting. Mitchell began to draw at a very young age, and decided to become a painter when she was twelve. She attended The Art Institute of Chicago where she painted and created lithographic prints. In 1947, Mitchell went to New York for a year, and discovered the leading

Abstract Expressionist artists and their works. They were a starting base for her own abstract painting sensibility.

Mitchell went to Europe, traveled and painted in the south of France for a year. This is where she began to paint in her abstract style and within the "nature in abstraction" definition of abstract work. Upon her return to New York in 1949, she saw more Abstract Expressionists' work, and she developed friendships with Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning and others. She also became friends with Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning and Grace Hartigan. Mitchell did not like the pressure in New York to fit into the art community and in 1955, moved to France to live permanently.

Even when Mitchell first turned to abstract painting, she featured nature in her work: remembered places, elements and essences of nature. Her work also included and involved her feelings. The viewer can feel nature-oriented essences such as the warmth of the light, the clearness of the weather, the brightness of the day, the season and more. Mitchell spoke of this saying, "... I paint from remembered landscapes that I carry with me -- and remembered feelings of them, which of course become transformed. I would certainly never mirror nature. I would like more to paint what it leaves me with" (Bernstock 31). Irving Sandler wrote of her that, "...memory is her creative domain" (Bernstock, 31). Mitchell's goals were to accurately recapture the original feelings that she experienced in the presence of nature, and then express that natural state in her painting. Her work also reflects the time between Mitchell's experience of nature and the time that she actually began to paint. This time transformation appears in the emotional quality of each painting. Mitchell's paintings began with these elements and then the painting itself took over and directed her as she worked. Additionally, Mitchell aimed for a "...lack of conscious

self you are what I call 'no hands' riding a bicycle (Bernstock 33). Mitchell's experiences of nature remain in her work, her feelings do not completely take over. Mitchell's paintings express a stoppage of time and were intended to be as beautiful as nature is beautiful.

The first painting of Mitchell's I will discuss is Skyles ,1960-61 (Illustration 5). Painted after Mitchell had moved to France, it reflects a diffused mass of raw energy. The title of this painting refers to the sky she observed often on her sailing trips in the Mediterranean, as well as to her three Skye Terriers. This title expresses the two associations the work had for Mitchell. The painting has a misty atmospheric effect and "...a spirit of heightened passion and spontaneity ... " (Bernstock 57). The mass at the center of the painting plays on a white area and creates an interactive effect between the foreground and background. The activity in the painting presents an equilibrium between containment and explosion. In Skyles Mitchell painted an aspect of nature and expressed the high activity of the Skye Terriers. Later a critic wrote of Mitchell "...as one of the strongest, most independent painters in the world" (Bernstock 57). She had her own way of working and resisted any trends or influences of her time.

In the mid 1960s, Mitchell had developed a complete devotion to landscape. She spoke of her work as "...the sum of the character of a subject -- whether water or tree -- as she has come to know it through numerous past and recent experiences that are interwoven in paint" (Bernstock 66-67). Judith Bernstock, the author of the book Joan Mitchell , comments on Mitchell that, "... her painting presents an 'outer vision,' which leaves nature to itself without transforming it. In her view, her art differs from Abstract Expressionism in that it is not autobiographical or self-expressive" (Bernstock 67). Mitchell said, "It comes from and is about landscape, not about me" (Bernstock 67).

Some critics disagree with this and have said that Mitchell's paintings are about self assertion and the projection of her feelings into nature. They believe this type of art begins from a personal perception of a world larger than the artist herself. In other words, the critics said Mitchell was in awe of nature rather than in union with nature. She carried her memories into her studio and rarely painted out of doors. Her paintings express essences of nature. Mitchell insisted that her paintings were the result of objective discipline and a celebration of nature. Mitchell had a great gift for empathy with nature. She often contradicted herself when she spoke of adding her feelings to, and removing herself from her work.

In 1968 Mitchell moved to an estate in Veteuil, France, surrounding herself in a beautiful natural area. She lived there for the remainder of her life. When she first moved into the estate, Mitchell changed her technical approach to her canvas. Her brushstrokes became more painterly and her shapes more round and soft. A radiance came out of her combinations of complementary colors and from the white spaces between the colors. Specific paintings that show this change are My Landscape II ,1967 (Illustration 6), River I , 1967-68 (Illustration 7) and La Seine ,1967 (Illustration 8). In these paintings Mitchell found inspiration in water. She spoke of the water in these works saying, "I really empathize with the lake or water" and insisted "I don't exist at all" as she painted (Bernstock 77).

Water was regarded as a traditional source of creative power and as a way of gaining insight, according to poets that Mitchell admired. A natural unity seems exist between Mitchell and water. Her paintings suggest the changing movements of water, even though there are no representational elements. Mitchell painted a sense of change in the underlying transparent

texture in these paintings and by the capturing of energy and compression of time. These elements are expressed in her brushstrokes, color and composition.

The next painting I will discuss is Sunflower III , 1969 (Illustration 9). In this and other sunflower paintings Mitchell focused on and created a single natural element. She commented, "I do not exist at all. If I see a sunflower drooping, I can droop with it , and draw it, and feel it until its death" (Bernstock, 85). Mitchell's sunflowers are similar in ways to Vincent van Gogh's sunflowers as in Two Cut Sunflowers, One Upside Down 1887 (Illustration 10). She admired van Gogh and viewed his sunflower paintings to inspire her work. Mitchell expressed nature in some of the same ways that van Gogh did. The similarities exist especially in their use of chrome yellows, contrasting complementary colors, and the light of midday. Mitchell's brushstrokes became even more diversified in this work to create a surface on the canvas much like van Gogh's. Both van Gogh and Mitchell expressed intense physical energy in their work. Mitchell utilized flexible space here, and gave her flowers the quality of "sunfloweriness" (Bernstock 87). Mitchell showed great joy in using light in her sunflower paintings, and gives the viewer an intoxicating breeze in her colors of yellow, purple, blue, green, and red.

Joan Mitchell painted from a place inside herself that contained joy and love, and was able to get out of herself to focus on the part of nature that she wished to paint. Her landscapes "...feel more like landscapes than most representational landscape paintings do" (Scott 73). Her paintings express the worldly conditions in which her objects exist. Thomas Hess said, "In fact, no bits of external nature serve to verify the figurative properties of Mitchell's paint, which are nature" (Berkson 98). Her work all came from "a mind's eye view" (Berkson 98).

Without ever depicting the human body, Mitchell's paintings remind us of how the body orientates itself in a matrix of sensations, how consciousness favors and transforms its immediate world view. Sensation supposes a physiology capable of reflecting experience. The world may be recognizable but confronting it directly with one's senses is a scramble of approximation, The sensational world is a mess of additional layers. The task of the artist ... is to find a form that accommodates the mess. Mitchell's pictures don't contemplate; they stir, rounding out visible instants in a range of disorder hooked to intermediate orders (Berkson 99).

Mitchell commented in 1989 that the art scene of the 1960s had lost some of its spirituality. She looked into other artists' work and her own work for elements in which the "painting ... keeps you here, not a painting that takes you elsewhere" (Gaugh 159). When she studied her own canvases from twenty feet away, Mitchell stated, "I paint from a distance. I decide what I am going to do from a distance. The freedom in my work is quite controlled. I don't close my eyes and hope for the best. I have to know what my brush is doing" (Sawin, 29).

The final artist to be examined is Helen Frankenthaler. Frankenthaler was born in 1928, in New York City. She was raised in a wealthy home. In 1948 she received her B.A. degree in art from Bennington College and later studied briefly with Meyer Scharpiro. Through Scharpiro she met Clement Greenberg, a powerful art critic who introduced her to Abstract Expressionist artists. These artists helped Frankenthaler with her move towards a successful career.

Frankenthaler's career started out strong from the beginning. She kept the momentum of her success going and she continues to be a strong force in the art world today. In the 1950s and

1960s, Frankenthaler was often assumed to be a colorist. Her work included a strong colorist element but expressed far more than one formal element and she insisted that her primary interest was in drawing. She described herself as "grounded in Cubism " (Wilkin 30) and was fully committed to abstraction. She also declared herself a maker of pictures, not a finder of pictures. Her work at this time was spontaneous and discoveries happened during her involvement with the media and responses to unexpected stimuli.

Later in the 1950s, Frankenthaler began to look beyond Cubism for inspiration and stimuli, searching for non-geometric ways to work. She studied works by Arshile Gorky, Kandinsky, and Joan Miro, and viewed the works of the Abstract Expressionists. She spent a lot of time learning from Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock.

Frankenthaler spoke of her involvement with the Abstract Expressionist artists as crucial to her development. These radical, New York artists helped her establish the critical criteria of her work and her professional sense. During this crucial time, Frankenthaler found her "distinctive voice" (Wilkin 32). Her work took a unique direction and began to establish its own clarity and a sense of inevitability. Frankenthaler developed and used a new painting process called staining, based on Jackson Pollock's poured painting process. She developed her painting process and then other artists adapted her style.

In 1952 Frankenthaler painted her famous work Mountains and Sea (Illustration 11). In this painting, she used light and color to establish the subject and its location. The spirit of this abstract landscape came from a summer spent in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Frankenthaler specified that this not a memory painting; instead she described the source of the painting as an experience that stirred what she called her "Inner psychic surroundings as well as outside orbits"

(Fine 218). She stated that the source of her imagery was not any specific site in Nova Scotia. Frankenthaler viewed landscape in general as a "... handle ... held onto by people who want a clue as to how to read the surface of an abstract painting" (Fine 218). Frankenthaler did not work from nature and rarely sketched it. She denied that she was a landscape painter and only saw nature in her works after each painting was finished. She explained that her paintings are not painted from nature sketches and while she was working on them she was more aware of abstract form, color and construction than she was of the presence of nature. Frankenthaler said,

So, in one sense, I could say that nature has little to do with my pictures. And yet I am puzzled; obviously it creeps in! In the past couple of years I have made paintings in which an animal shape or a nose and mouth, numbers, apples, etc., appear as part of an otherwise totally abstract picture. These images are not put down to be recognized for what they are, nor are they surrealist. They seem to be spontaneous and necessary points of departure, often disappearing completely, on and off, before the picture is finished. As I say, I'm puzzled because I don't have a fixed idea about this, and I seem to find myself in something new in terms of nature. I think that, instead of nature or image, it has to do with spirit or sensation that can be related by a kind of abstract projection (Baur 12).

Mountains and Sea was well received by critics and other artists but it never sold. It did not receive its fame until ten years after Frankenthaler painted it. About this particular painting she said, "...I know the landscape was in my arms as I did it. One of the things that struck me was the

unique contrast between the great wooded peaks and the horizontal ocean -- the mountains and the sea of its title" (Carmean Jr. 12).

Frankenthaler's painting Arden , 1961 (Illustration 12) was constructed with more raw canvas showing through in the background than she had previously let show. She executed this huge painting in more of a controlled manner, showing more restraint than with her earlier paintings. This work expresses a greater serenity. The critical review of this painting suggested that the painting and its title was of a relaxed place, as the word Arden suggests a garden, innocence, and love in literature. Frankenthaler agreed with the garden reference, though she insisted that it was basically an abstract painting. She spoke of this painting in terms of where and why she placed colors and shapes.

Mountains and Sea and Arden are both examples of Frankenthaler's paintings that indicate how her work and verbal descriptions often contradict one another. She would say that her work has no landscape references, but at other times she would draw on landscape references often when she spoke of her paintings after they were finished and referred to landscape in some of her titles.

Another Frankenthaler painting that suggests landscape is The Bay , 1963 (Illustration 13). This is one of her very few paintings that was given a title before it was finished. Frankenthaler came to the name as she completed the blue area. She stated, "In seeing the silhouettes of blue and raw canvas, I thought of the bay -- of weather, but in terms of abstract shapes" (Carmean Jr. 36). Similar to most of her themes, it was not intended to represent a particular body of water, but rather coming from the experience of water. She said, "Anything that happens affecting your sensibility has an effect on what you make. My work is not a matter of direct translations, but

something is bound to creep into your head or heart" (Carmean Jr. 36). She painted this work while in a bayside studio in Provincetown, R.I..

The Bay is more complicated than it looks: Frankenthaler layered 9 shades of blue in this painting to give it its sense of weather. This painting marked a change in direction for Frankenthaler in that she displays a very dense composition and the whole canvas is covered. This change in her style lasted until the end of the 1960s.

Frankenthaler's pictures have a timeless element. Her style was very individual and did not fit into any critically deemed-category. In the 1960s she became famous. She had annual one-person shows and achieved many awards and honors. It was not easy for critics to figure out what to say about Frankenthaler because she was a female artist and her work was so different from other artists. Critics categorized her as being the, "... link between Abstract Expressionism and the 1960s Color-field abstraction " (Wilkin 69). Frankenthaler's work was strong and independent.

The next work of Frankenthaler's I will discuss is Flood , 1967 (Illustration 14). It was heralded by critics whenever it was displayed and was Frankenthaler's most "atmospheric and dramatic" work up to this time (Carmean Jr. 50). Flood seems to present the forces of nature directly, going beyond Frankenthaler's usual paradoxical references to nature. It gives a sense of a natural released power like a flood or a hurricane. The title actually refers to how Frankenthaler painted it which was in a small studio on the floor, and to Frankenthaler, it seemed as though there was a flood of paint on the canvas.

In 1968 Frankenthaler painted Summer Banner (Illustration 15) and it became a study in restraint. Very few shapes and colors create the force of the composition and give it its solid look. The painting appears to hang from the top like a banner and the orange on the right implies

a connection with the red on the left as it bleeds off the canvas. The title of this painting is a later addition. The canvas implies the clarity of summer, and the blue area at the bottom suggests a seascape of sorts. This work has very few but powerful elements and is important because it was one of Frankenthaler's most reductive works. Critics viewed it as a more planned piece and could no longer call her an "action painter" which was an label given to some Abstract Expressionist artists such as Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline.

Helen Frankenthaler asserted that painters of the 1960s were "exploring the complex equation between a human being and the world" (Fine 215). Her work gives a sense of expansion and exploration. She stated that she would rather risk producing an ugly work rather than continuing to do the familiar.

The light Frankenthaler used in her paintings connected her work to representational landscape. She said that, "However defined, light has to imply an embodiment in the natural world" (Munro 226). Her paintings present the viewer with a wide open view and in a sense, her paintings are environments into which we look. Frankenthaler's works take on a life of their own. In discussions of her works association with nature, Frankenthaler has stated,

I'm not protesting the association, but the painting as a painting has no more to do with nature ... than the greatest of Pollock's or Monet's have to do with nature. Even the apples in a Cezanne primarily have little to do with apples. Yes, of course, the references are there , but they are probably in the best late Mondrians as well. Anything that has beauty and provides order (rather than Chaos or shock alone), anything resolved in a picture (as in nature) gives pleasure -- a sense of rightness, as in being one

with nature. ... Any successful picture -- an abstract work or a landscape -- has a place and rightness and an ability to last and grow. It is not merely a matter of painting a tree, but making a picture that works (Carnean Jr. 8).

Frankenthaler's statement suggests she approached painting with a great deal of freedom and seemed to feel that no subject matter could impose any limits on her work.

Frankenthaler has been criticized and labeled by art critics as being a feminine, lyrical and seductive artist. All of these labels are gender related--rather than a response to the work.

Frankenthaler's response when questioned about being an woman artist was to say that an artist has to deal with contradictions, and that if you have talent or a gift for art you must deal with the loneliness, isolation, and odd special attention that comes with being different. She added that a female artist also has to live up to perfectionist standards.

Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler expressed themselves in their own individual styles. All of them commented on the issue of being a female artist in the male artists' world. "If you're an exceptionally gifted woman, the door is open," Grace Hartigan noted. "What women are fighting for is the right to be as mediocre as men" (Rosen and Brawer 10). What Hartigan was pointing out was that tokenism is not the same as full participation.

Hartigan, Mitchell and Frankenthaler were friends, though they never spoke to each other about their work. They expressed themselves in their work in many similar ways. Each brought many diverse elements into their works such as the paint and the canvas itself. All three expressed the essences of nature, landscape, light, time, space, season, weather, movement, and more. They all added their reactions to the place, events in their lives, memories and other personal elements.

Hartigan brought in many elements, Mitchell brought in somewhat fewer elements, and Frankenthaler brought in the fewest. Hartigan, Mitchell and Frankenthaler had close connections to nature and considered nature to include almost all parts of the world around them, including the environments not traditionally depicted as nature.

During their careers, these women artists approached their art differently than did most members of the established art world. Hartigan and Mitchell were especially comfortable and very successful in adding statements to their work about their relationships with other people or pets. Hartigan, Mitchell and Frankenthaler each tended to utilize "nature in abstraction" in their individual works in the 1950s and 1960s, which was the beginning of all their careers. They were greatly influenced by the Abstract Expressionist artists and then later formulated their own styles.

All three artists found inspiration in the theme of water which offered a sense of birth, renewal and stimulated empathy. Hartigan, Mitchell and Frankenthaler expressed the essences of nature by showing nature's clarity, beauty, movement, transparency, solidity, "rightness" and many others. Hartigan, Mitchell and Frankenthaler were artists who had the strength to move in their own directions despite pressures to conform to current art movements. They worked in a period when women artists were considered oddities, not only by the primarily male established art world, but by many other women's standards as well. This was the cause of these artists' isolation. Hartigan, Mitchell, and Frankenthaler all credit male artists as their main sources of influence. They did not discuss their work with each other or other women. They were not considered competitors in the art world but were looked at as students and oddities. Their work was not often seriously criticized and they were the token women artists along with a few others in the 1950s and 1960s. I can only imagine the numbers of women artists who were left out of

the art world completely and what kind of effort it took for Hartigan, Mitchell and Frankenthaler to maintain the strength in order to keep their individuality and the distinctiveness in their work.

Hartigan, Mitchell and Frankenthaler contradicted themselves in interviews when referring to how nature entered their work and how much of their work was self expression. I believe these contradictions came about in part because of the self expressive element in their work. Women, at the time these artists were painting, were culturally trained to focus on other people rather than themselves and this self focus was at times an uncomfortable source of expression.

Present feminist views of these three artists' work and the conditions that they faced are somewhat sympathetic, but more often the views are angered and unappreciative. Critics have pointed to psychological events either positive or negative, that happened in Hartigan's Mitchell's and Frankenthaler's childhood's to explain these artists' personal drives to successes. These three women were a great addition to the women pioneer artists of the twentieth century. Hartigan, Mitchell, and Frankenthaler have each refused to be associated with the term "woman artist" and none have rallied for the women's movement. I believe they feared the loss of their freedom of expression and the limitations of an association with any group or cause.

Grace Hartigan stated that, "Men don't paint and women don't paint. Artists paint" (Westfall 119). The term "nature in abstraction" was an artistic expression that was neither female or male. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was an expression of universal experience and was a mode of self expression for each individual artist. "Nature in abstraction" was expressed as an experience that occurred over a period of time rather than in a moment. The longer time element allowed a synthesis of experience and permitted the artist to add expressions of personal events. This multidimensional artistic expression offered Hartigan, Mitchell and Frankenthaler and other artists

freedom to be self expressive, empathize with nature and to paint "uncensored." This more inclusive vision generated a broader definition of abstraction that allowed a more direct emotional and personal relationship to nature. "Nature in abstraction" includes the contradiction of self expression through nature and self-denial in favor of nature. This art expression permitted the creation of art that expressed a union with nature and it offered more freedom of expression for each individual artist.

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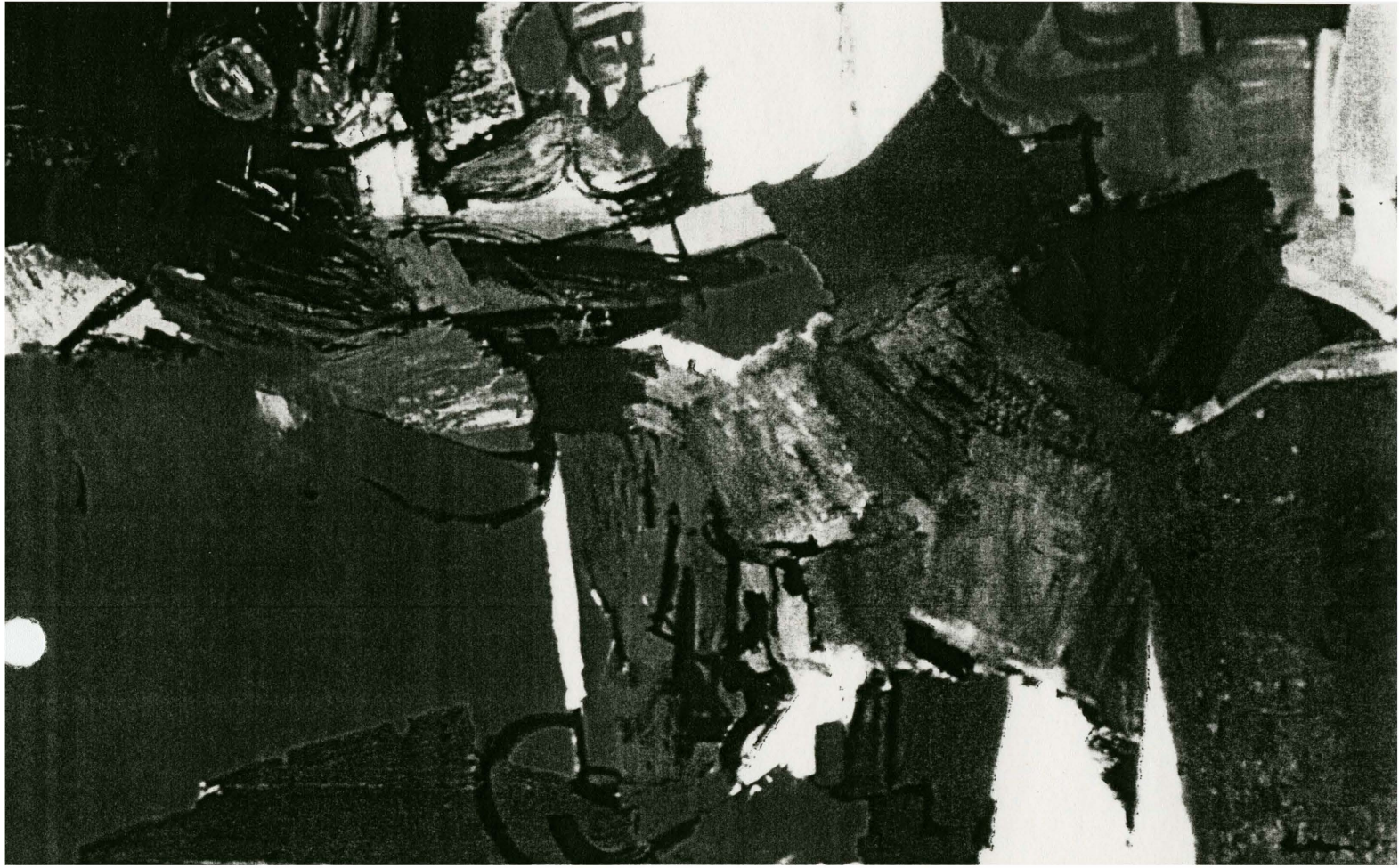


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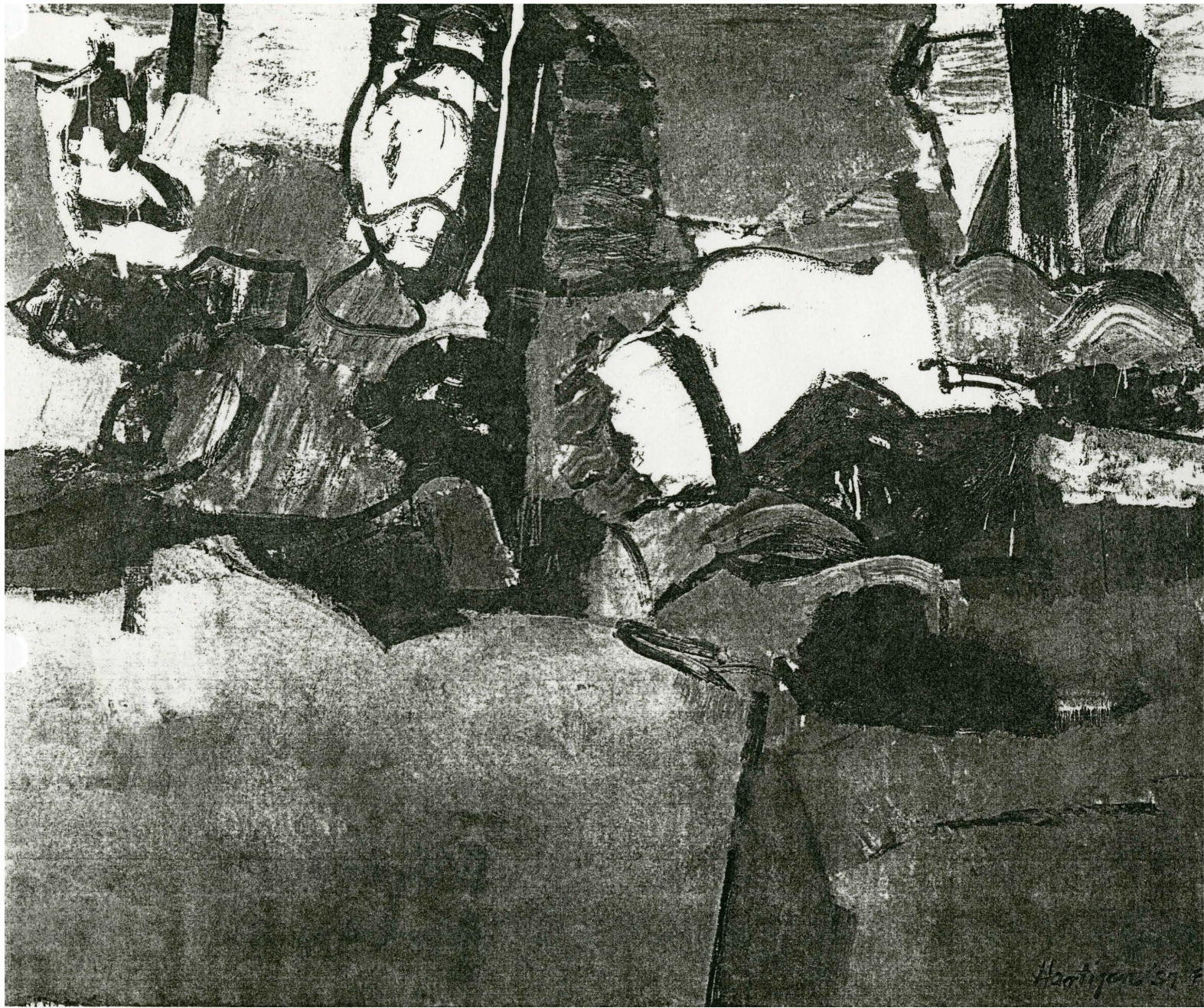


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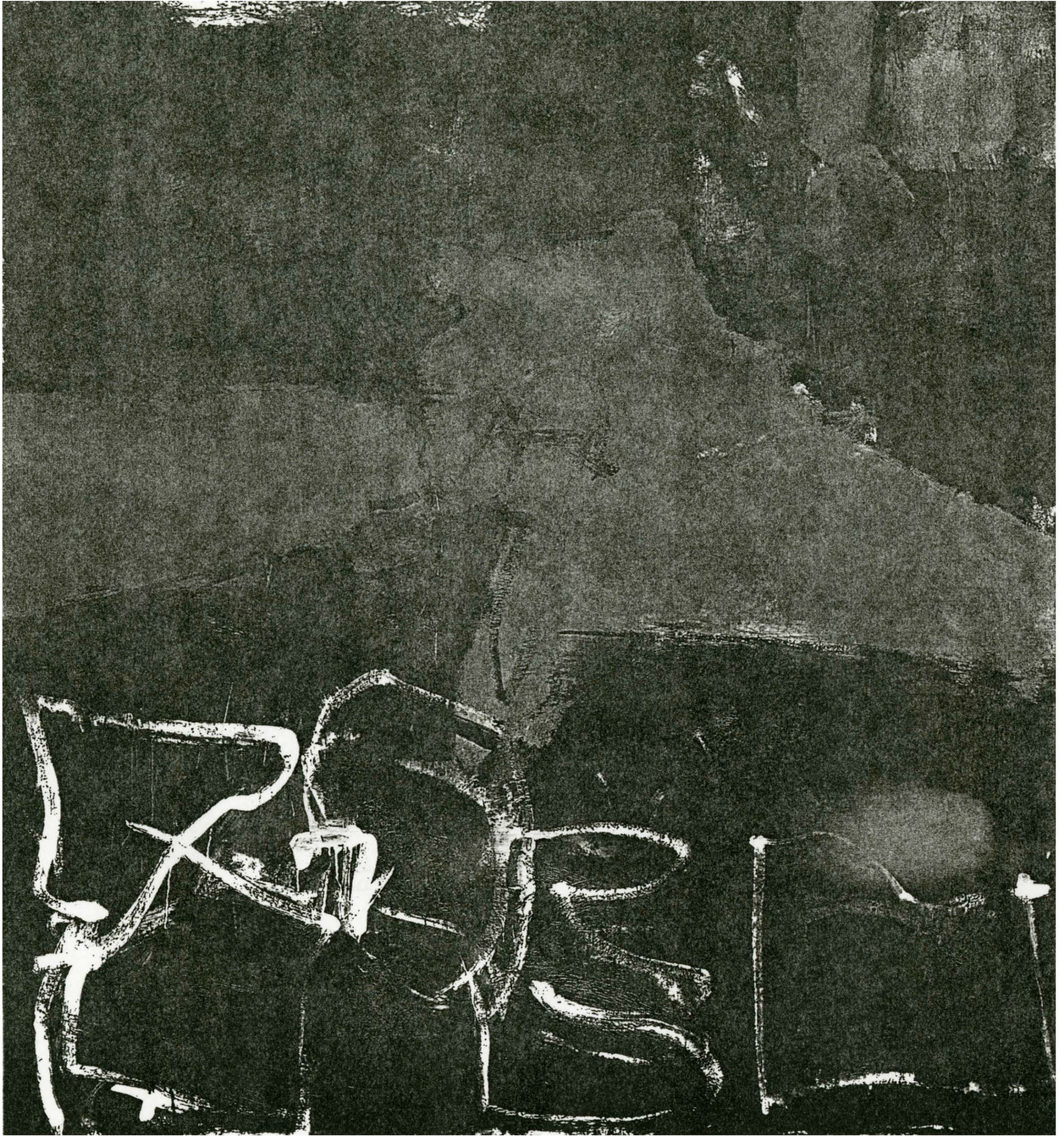


Illustration 3

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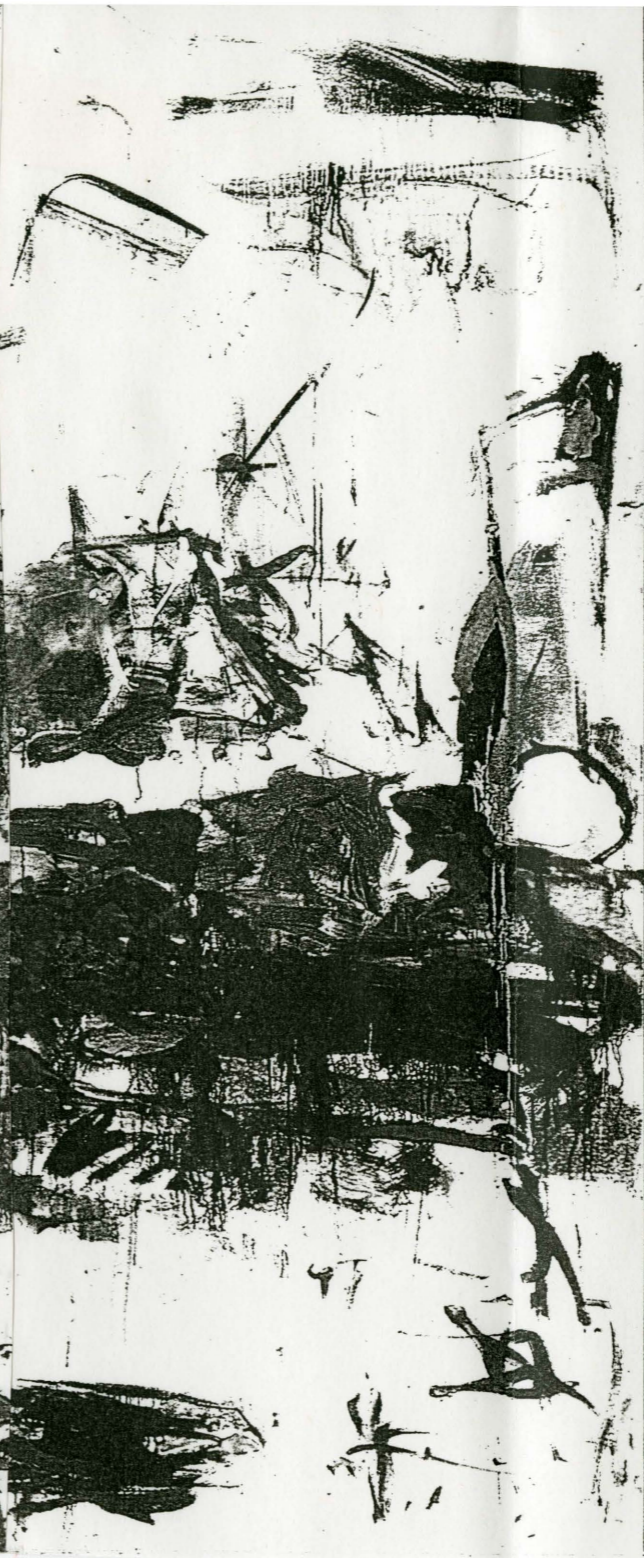




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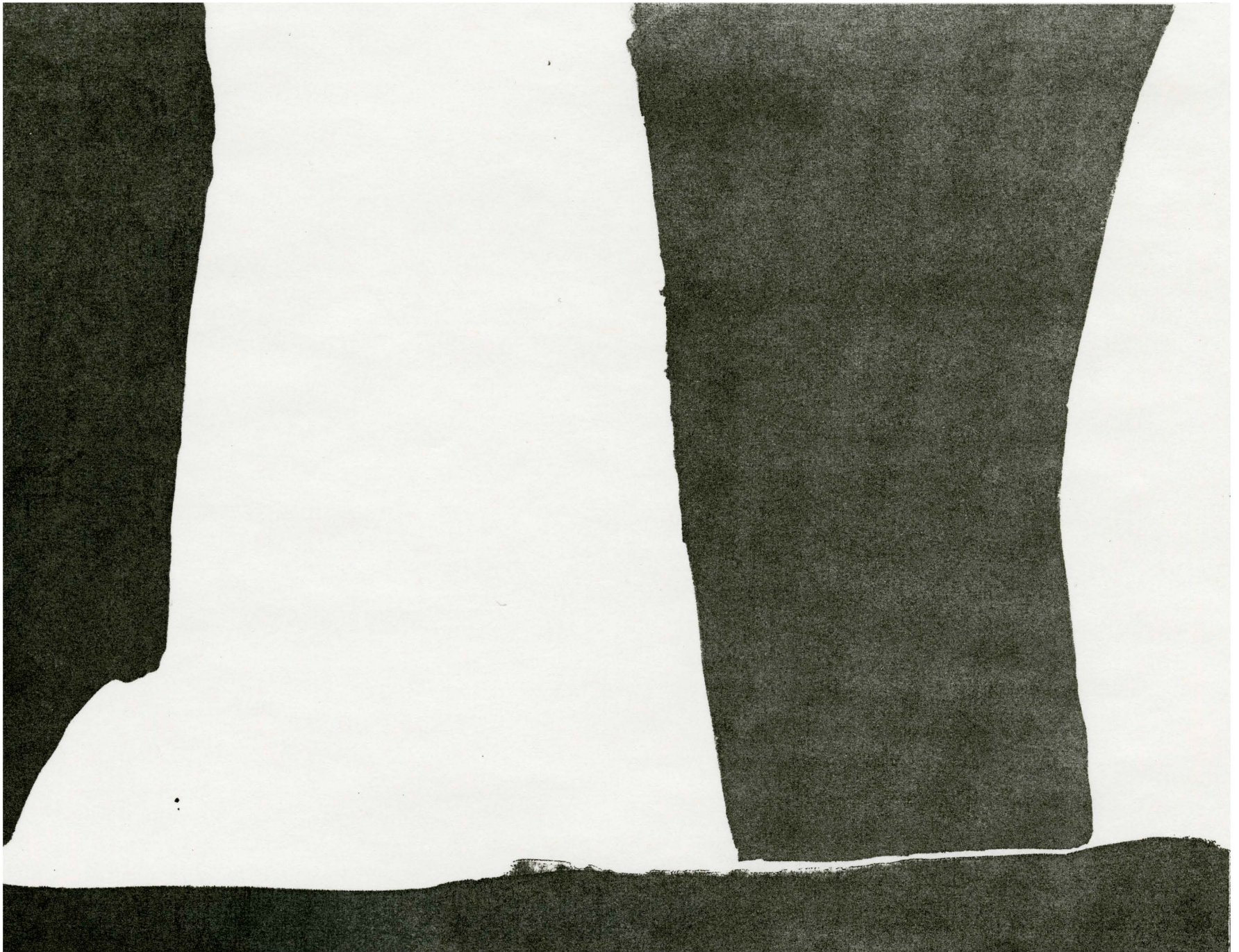


Illustration 15
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Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Faye Sarofim.