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Berggruen's gallery goes back into color fields

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Anyone who wants a taste of how it felt to walk into a blue-chip gallery in midtown Manhattan circa 1968 can visit the Helen Frankenthaler show at John Berggruen's.

Color-field painting still ruled the day then, despite the upsurge of Pop Art, minimalism and their offshoots.

Frankenthaler justly got credit for first exploring the pooling and brushing of color onto unprimed canvas. With this technique, she integrated color and boundary, and merged figure and ground, as no one quite had before. The lyrical abstraction that resulted epitomized without depiction both real and pictorial experiences of light, space and reverie.

Jackson Pollock (1913-56) had set the example of how to command large expanses of canvas with little or no spatial illusion, but he never mastered color.

Frankenthaler found a way forward that respected the fluidity of her medium without mimicking Pollock's signature "drip" technique. In works of the early 1950s, such as "Granada" (1953), she poured oil (and later, acrylic) pigment directly onto absorbent canvas, maintaining a marriage of marking and surface that many painters at the time saw as imperative.

Pictures such as "Mountain Pool" (1963), "Bias Blue" (1963) and "Orange Underline" (1965) have the precisely judged compositional force of Frankenthaler's best early work. They also intimate the potential for lateral expansiveness whose limits she tested, with debatable success, in a painting such as the 20-foot-long "Moveable Blue" (1973).

Two factors spelled the doom of the narrowing mid-'60s formalism into which Frankenthaler's art then fit comfortably. Philip Guston (1913-80) personified the first, when he defiantly abandoned lyrical abstraction for a rambunctious figurative style. Corporate art collectors personified the second, as they demonstrated color field painting's defenselessness against use as cultural window dressing by business interests of every stripe.

But painters decades younger than Frankenthaler have since begun revisiting the color field aesthetic in the radically different 21st century art world context. For them, and anyone learning about late 20th century American art, the Berggruen show offers a valuable history lesson.



"Mountain Pool," acrylic on canvas by Helen Frankenthaler.

Photo: Courtesy / John Berggruen Gallery, S.F.