

Competitive Collaboration: Frankenthaler & Motherwell at Mnuchin

The Art of Marriage: Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell at Mnuchin Gallery



Installation shot of the exhibition under review showing Helen Frankenthaler, *Black with Shadows*, 1961 [left] and Robert Motherwell, *Diary of a Painter*, 1958. Image courtesy of Mnuchin Gallery

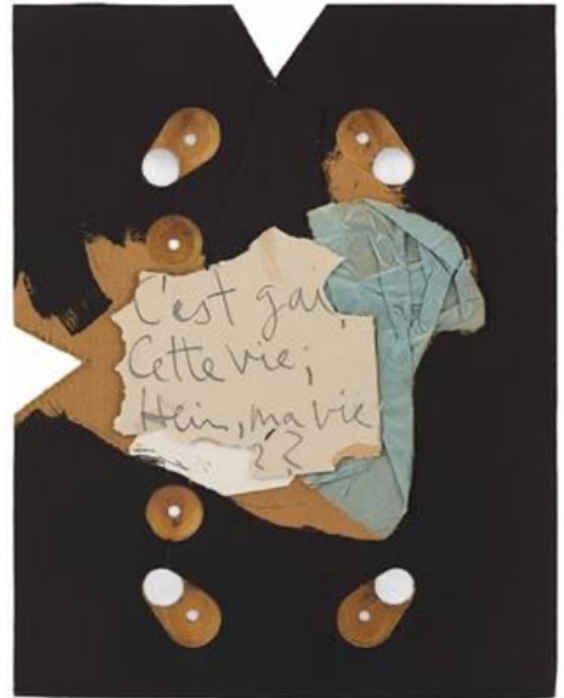
By Kim Uchiyama
December 14, 2019

Renowned critic and art historian of the New York School Karen Wilkin is thanked in the catalogue accompanying this exhibition, for which she has written the main essay, for instigating the project. *The Art of Marriage* is certainly an intimate and instructive portrait of the creative dialogue during the years Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell were together – the actual marriage was from 1958 to 1971 – and beyond. A wonderful commonality of ideas flowed between the artists, and the selection at Mnuchin shows both at the top of their game.

Each had already developed signature ways of seeing and working prior to their meeting shortly before their 1958 civil union after a brief, intense courtship. Subsequent cohabitation, combined with travels to France, Spain and England, for a time created overlapping sensibilities and a shared language. A comparison of these works reveals

color pushed to its limits, a painterly riffing and rhyming off of each other's' form and the presence of a new energy, seemingly kicked up a notch by the visual conversation born of their relationship. Both must have felt the challenge presented by the other's painting, resulting in an explosion of competitive collaboration.

Inspired by Spain, Motherwell produced *Diary of a Painter*, (1958) a work from the same period as his iconic *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* that instigated the series of that title. In turn, Frankenthaler painted *Courtyard of El Greco's House* (1959). Both employ abstract form that remains distinctly referential to local imagery: the black form in Motherwell is reminiscent of the matador's hat, while a gateway, trellis and arbor can be recognized in Frankenthaler's painting. A kind of mirroring also happens in a series of collages on view here in which we can observe the artists telling themselves parallel stories about life together. In places the narrative verges on the autobiographical: *Bingo* (1962) by Frankenthaler is an exuberant, red-footed actual bingo card, emphatically circled and gleefully declaring its winnings. Motherwell's *Hein, Ma Vie?*, (1958) translates as "Huh, My Life?", indicating existential wonder at existence in general. These "Is this really happening to me?" moments give the viewer a sub-rosa sense of joyful communication between the happy couple. Perhaps the most direct message, sent by Frankenthaler to Motherwell, is *Happy New 1966*, (1965) an enormous greeting card, jubilantly painted on paper and presided over by a big yellow sun. In later years Frankenthaler, asked what moments of her life she would most like to relive, is said to have answered "those first few years with Bob." These really were the good old days.



Robert Motherwell, *Hein, Ma Vie?*, 1958. Oil and pasted papers on industrial corrugated cardboard, 21-1/2 x 16-7/8 inches. Private Collection. Courtesy of Mnuchin Gallery

Mnuchin Gallery's publication, adds DAVID COHEN, is a fitting companion and souvenir of this splendid exhibition. Karen Wilkin has worked extensively on both artists individually, especially, of course, Frankenthaler with whom she was particularly close, which perhaps gives the prose here its unique blend of intimacy and accuracy, an example to her profession for how to write biographically and critically with interdependent grace. Take, for instance, her discussion of their respective palettes:

No one would ever mistake a Frankenthaler made between 1958 and 1971 (or at any other time) for a Motherwell, and vice versa. The two painters had very different color sensibilities. Frankenthaler was fascinated by the expressive possibilities of a full spectrum of often intense hues, while Motherwell, especially on canvas, investigated the emotional stimulus of rich tonal variations, with a fairly limited range of hues that apparently spoke eloquently to him. (Frankenthaler confessed to me that when he claimed the chalky blue of Gauloise cigarette packages as his own and asked her not to use it, she was willing to go along with it. "But when he claimed yellow ochre, it was too much.")

Despite important differences, Wilkin makes the claim for the flowing commonalities that Kim Uchiyama observes:

[...] that their art sprang from internal imperatives; that the artist's role was to reveal the unseen, not to report on the visible; that touch and color were potent carriers of emotion; that the art of the present was seamlessly connected to the art of the past; and more.

She describes with particular acuity the common drive towards “simpler, more economical imagery” in their distinct paths through the later 1960s (and years of their formal union) with Frankenthaler’s “large expanses of relatively few colors, strategically placed, with the edges of shapes carrying the burden of drawing” and Motherwell’s “even more (apparently) restrained Open series based on the infinite possibilities of drawn or painted interior rectangles played against the rectangle” of the support.



Helen Frankenthaler, Bingo, 1962. Oil and collage on paper, 18-1/2 x 24-3/4 inches

The late scholar and museum curator E. A. Carmean Jr, who died shortly before the opening of this exhibition, organized shows of both artists, rounds off the catalogue with delightful personal reminiscence of the one moment he saw them together after they had gone their separate ways, when Frankenthaler loaned the first Elogy painting that was part of her divorce settlement to an exhibition Carmean organized at the National Gallery of Art of seven Abstract Expressionists. He describes the look of shared pleasure he witnessed as the two artists looked at their friend David Smith’s sculptures together and its familiarity from photos of the couple in the years of their marriage.