

Gender Biases of Abstract Expressionism & *Before, Again II*

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The glory of Abstract Expressionism is and was a transformative, evocative, and intimate movement that reflected artists true inner identities and the response to the world around them. Horrified by the terrors of war, emotional responses were thrown onto monumental scale canvases, colors were manipulated, and energy visualized. The romanticism of this great individualized recognition cannot and has not been quieted. However along with this recognition, it must be noted that the realm of Abstract Expressionism, heralded as one of the most transformative movements in the 20th-century art world, was not exempt from the pervasive and unjust influence of gender bias. Despite the movement's ethos of individualism and freedom of expression, female artists within this milieu faced significant hurdles in gaining recognition and validation for their contributions. While male counterparts such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning garnered acclaim and institutional support, women like Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler often encountered barriers ranging from limited exhibition opportunities, to dismissive critiques of their work. This gender bias not only hindered the visibility of female artists but also perpetuated stereotypes about creativity and artistic merit, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards women in the arts and society as a whole. An exploration of gender dynamics within Abstract Expressionism unveils a complex narrative of talent overshadowed, voices marginalized, and the ongoing struggle for equitable representation in the annals of art history.

During the movement of Abstract Expressionism, being male conferred several distinct advantages that contributed to greater recognition and success within the movement. Male artists benefited from societal norms that formed from the repercussions of World War II, and the ongoing nature of the Cold War and

anti-communism ideals in the United States. Masculinity, anti-communism and the suppression of women became natural standards of the everyday. Institutional biases privileged their voices and perspectives over those of their female counterparts, silencing them due to a false bravado of masculine traits. Critic Clement Greenberg described the best characteristics of art and society as “masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness”¹. This bias manifested in numerous ways, including preferential treatment in terms of gallery representation, critical reception, and opportunities for professional advancement. Well known artist and influence to Abstract Expressionism, Hans Hoffman, was quoted saying “this was so good you would not believe it was done by a woman”, in regards to work created by the profound Lee Krasner who at one point, studied under him². Additionally, the prevailing cultural perceptions of masculinity during the mid-20th century often aligned more closely with the bold, assertive gestures and experimental approaches that were characteristic of Abstract Expressionist painting, further bolstering the visibility and prestige of male artists within the movement. As a result, men enjoyed a disproportionate share of the limelight and institutional support, allowing them to establish themselves as dominant figures within the Abstract Expressionist canon and shaping the narrative of the movement for generations to come.

However it must be noted that the influence of female painters in Abstract Expressionism was profound and far-reaching- though not nearly as respected as their male counterparts- enriching the movement with their unique perspectives, innovative

¹ 1. Mark Humes Gallery, “The Evolution of Gender Roles in the Abstract Art World ,” Mark Humes Gallery, September 1, 2020,

² 1. Mark Humes Gallery, “The Evolution of Gender Roles in the Abstract Art World ,” Mark Humes Gallery, September 1, 2020,

techniques, and unwavering commitment to artistic expression. Despite facing systemic barriers and gender biases, female artists such as Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler and more, made indelible contributions that continue to shape the trajectory of Abstract Expressionism. Not only were the standards of women forced to be perceived a specific way, but the artists were also required to be mothers, wives, and caretakers. From the University of Idaho's Women's Center: "Simultaneously, they were supposed to be mothers and wives because they were women, but at the same time were not supposed to be mothers or wives because they were artists"³. The weight of all responsibility often caused a disconnect to the desire and need to express themselves via painting; it was unheard of that an individual could be both a lover and an artist. Frustrated with the pressure, some women even went as far as changing their name in order to be viewed in a more widely accepted masculine light- "some even changed their names, like Michael West, in an effort to combat the era's sexism,"⁴. Their bold experimentation with color, form, and gesture pushed the boundaries of the movement, challenging traditional notions of masculinity and paving the way for greater inclusivity and diversity within the art world, and yet- the comparison of opportunities still falls flat. Artists (and wives) such as Elaine de Kooning and Lee Krasner, were forced into minimization due to their husbands' outreach. In the case of de Kooning, in order to combat the immense gender biases through painting, a body of work emerged entitled *Faceless Men*, that obscured the intimacy of historically prominent male faces, allowing for a deep questioning of their personalities and traits in societal roles; it is also notable

³ 1. Olivia Comstock, "Gender Roles in Abstract Expressionism," The University of Idaho Women's Center's Blog, February 9, 2017,

⁴ 1. Alexxa Gotthardt, "11 Female Abstract Expressionists You Should Know, from Joan Mitchell ...," Artsy, June 28, 2016,

to mention that these works emerged whilst husband William de Kooning was creating works such as *Woman I*, in which the simple goal was female objectification⁵. In cases such as Lee Krasner with husband Jackson Pollock, it is important to bring to light their artistic environments, in which Pollock was allowed the entirety of a large barn, and Krasner was allowed only a small back bedroom in their house to work, which ultimately led to her smaller scaled pieces⁶. It is so unfortunately prevalent, the disadvantages and visible biases placed upon the women of Abstract Expressionism, and the revelation of circumstances. However, no matter the individual, through their resilience and creative vision, these pioneering women not only shattered glass ceilings but also expanded the possibilities of abstract painting, leaving an enduring legacy that inspires generations of artists to come.

Regardless of the innate gender biases of this time, women were still creating expressionistic masterpieces that hold immense merit for art and art history to this day. Works such as *Before, Again II (1985)* crafted by artist Joan Mitchell, is a mesmerizing canvas that invites viewers into a world of vibrant emotion and dynamic movement. Created by the renowned American painter, this triumph serves as a testament to Mitchell's mastery of color, texture, and composition. With bold, sweeping brushstrokes and a richly layered palette, Mitchell captures the essence of a moment suspended in time, evoking a sense of both anticipation and reflection- the before and the again. As one immerses oneself in the intricate details and rhythmic patterns of this painting, they are transported to a realm where the boundaries between past, present, and future blur, inviting contemplation on the cyclical nature of existence. *Before, Again II*, stands as a

⁵ 1. Mark Humes Gallery, "The Evolution of Gender Roles in the Abstract Art World ," Mark Humes Gallery, September 1, 2020,

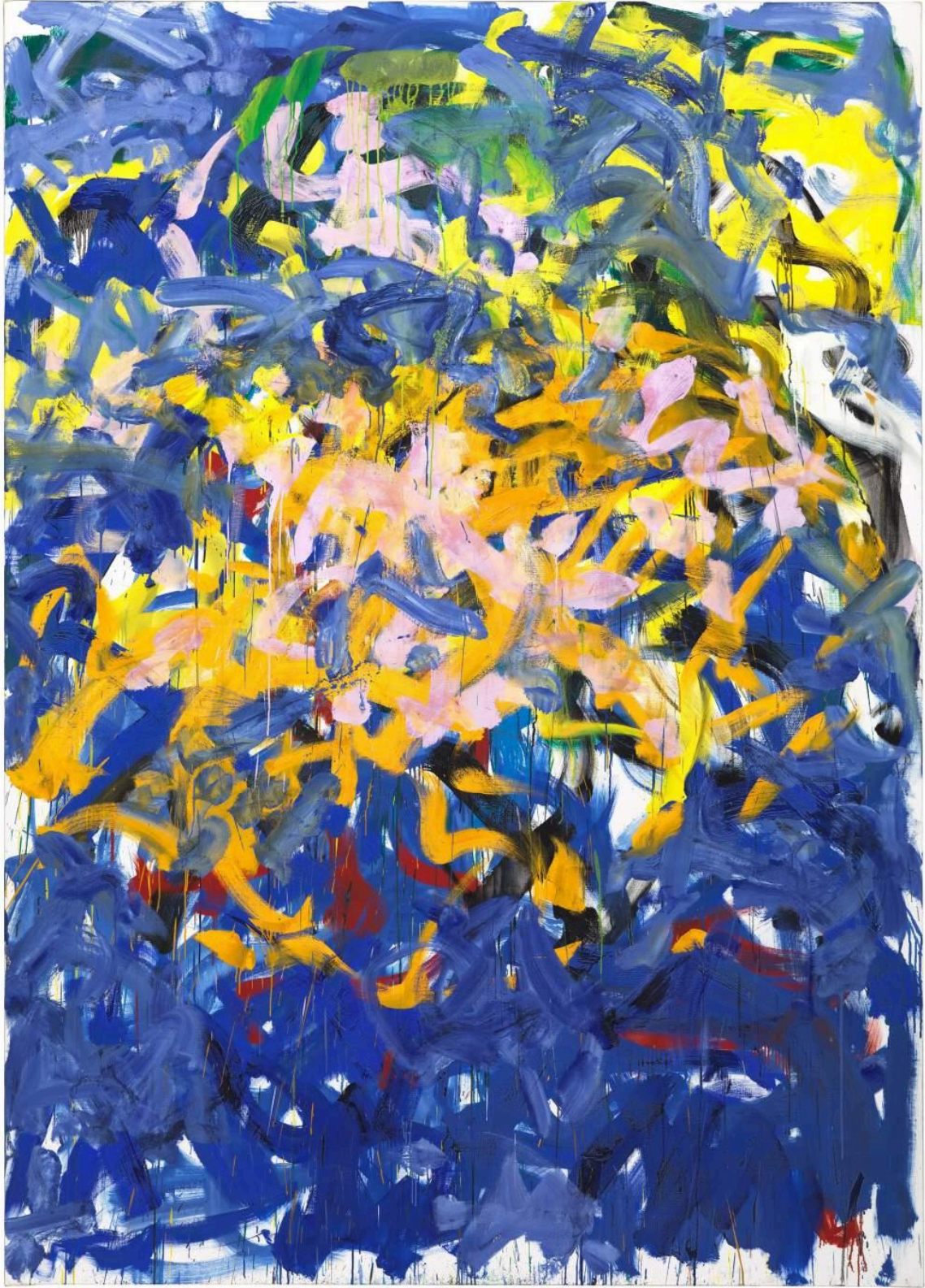
⁶ 1. Biography, "Lee Krasner - Painter | Mini Bio | Bio," YouTube, December 15, 2011,

testament to Mitchell's ability to imbue her work with raw emotion and profound depth, leaving an indelible impression on all who encounter it. Alongside her mastery of painting and printmaking, the legacy that Joan Mitchell left behind will continue on for generations to come, inspiring and granting artists the accessibility to create works intimate to them, through The Joan Mitchell Foundation. The foundation not only ensures that Mitchell's work is highlighted as extraordinarily significant, but also provides grants, residencies, and related initiatives to visual artists⁷. Mitchell's philanthropic spirit and commitment to supporting fellow artists were evident not only in life, but even in her final wishes. Following her passing in 1992, her will reflected this lifelong dedication to generosity, and stipulated the creation of the foundation dedicated to aiding and assisting working artists while serving as the primary steward of her legacy. This testament to Mitchell's enduring impact underscores not only her artistic brilliance but also her profound belief in the importance of nurturing creativity and artistic expression. As a result, Mitchell's influence continues to reverberate throughout the art world, ensuring that her vision and values endure and thrive, enriching the lives of countless artists and art lovers alike.

In the end, Abstract Expressionism, one of the most prominent and intimate relationships of the modern art world, has never been and never fully be, separated from the hardships of gender biases and male-given priorities to the intricacies of the art world. However, the invaluable contributions of female artists to this movement cannot be overlooked. Despite facing formidable challenges inherent to their gender, female artists navigated a landscape rife with systemic misogyny, compounded by barriers related to identification and the balancing act of motherhood and artistic pursuit. Despite

⁷ 1. Joan Mitchell Foundation, accessed February 2024, <https://www.joanmitchellfoundation.org/>.

these adversities, their pioneering efforts left an ineradicable mark on American art history. Artists like Joan Mitchell emerged as trailblazers, defying societal norms and pushing artistic boundaries with their innovative works. Female resilience and creativity not only challenged the status quo but also paved the way for future generations of female artists to claim their rightful place in the art world. As contemporary society becomes increasingly cognizant of the historical marginalization of women, there is a growing recognition of the profound impact female artists like Mitchell have had on shaping the vibrant landscape of contemporary art. Through this acknowledgment, their legacies are not only preserved but celebrated, ensuring that their contributions endure as an integral part of our cultural heritage.



Joan Mitchell, *Before Again II*, 1985

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