

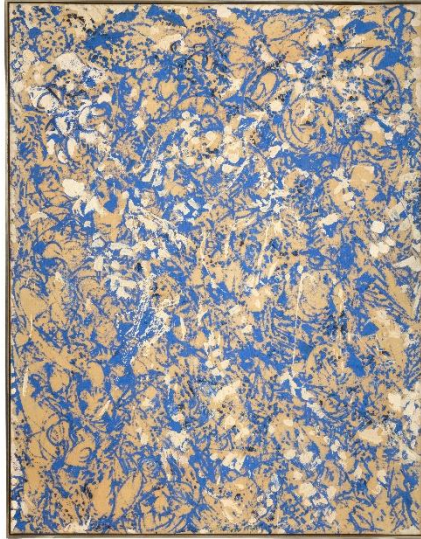
The Possibilities of Painting

Lee Krasner: *Living Color* at the Barbican Centre, London, May 31st to Sept 1st 2019

Frank Bowling at Tate Britain, London, May 31st to Aug 26th 2019

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Through Blue, Lee Krasner 1963



Barticorn, Frank Bowling, 1967

When I was at art school aeons ago, young would-be painters were shunted around the college to different studios throughout their degree years. These studios had names – the ‘life studio’, the ‘figurative’, the ‘constructivist’, the ‘conceptual’, the ‘Pop’ (this was 1970 after all), and the ‘abstract’ studios and so on.... As a result, we were reluctantly and prematurely typecast. It was not easy to move around the building – studio space just off the Kings road was limited – and so one was moulded into a shape that was supposed to last a lifetime. We were told constantly that consistency of style was what it was all about. Stick to what you know and what you are good at. You can paint the model? Be a life painter. Like photographs and advertising? Be a pop painter. Good with pouring paint on raw unprimed canvas? Be an abstract painter. Good at working with straight lines? Become a constructivist. Good with words and philosophical ideas? Be a conceptual artist.

So, if – as was inevitable – stylistic wobbles occurred, this was deemed a regrettable form of transgression and was neither rewarded nor appreciated by one’s tutors. Thus, a generation of artists emerged from this period convinced that the holy grail was consistency. This orthodoxy took me a long time to question and to work through in my own development as a painter. A youthful facility with drawing – from years of copying plaster casts at school in Rome – persuaded my college teachers that I was a figurative painter. I should be working from life. This type casting didn’t last long, and leaving college was a liberation. As it probably should be.

It’s with huge relief and joy that this week I have been looking at two artists who are the subjects of long-overdue retrospectives in major London galleries. I have admired both painters for a long time. But unsung, under-appreciated, and unfairly marginalised, in one case by gender, and in the other by race, they have both been relatively ignored. Neither artist gives a toss about consistency, and both artists work ranges widely in style over long and complex careers. They have both moved in unpredictable and not always successful directions. There are manifest failures but there is never a failure of nerve. These are two brave, unconventional, committed artists who emerged from places where making art has not always been easy. Neither of them are household names today. Both have

been deleteriously affected by the arbitrary circumstance of birth. Despite her androgynous name – deliberately chosen by her in her late teens – Lee Krasner was a woman. Frank Bowling is black.

Lee Krasner will always be known as Jackson Pollock's wife. A curse and a tragically reductive diminishment of her work. You don't need to be a feminist to be aware that successful women in art have often been models (Berthe Morisot and Manet) patrons (Gertrude Stein and Picasso) wives (Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera) mistresses (Georgia O' Keefe and Alfred Steiglitz) and daughters (Artemisia Gentileschi and Orazio). I could go on. So being married to the hard-drinking, womanising macho cowboy from Cody Wyoming was a poisoned chalice, and very difficult for Lee in so many ways. She already had a lot to overcome. The rebellious daughter of Jewish refugees who had escaped persecution in Odessa and who had emigrated to New York, the young and determined Lena Krassner, renounced the insularity of her Orthodox family home for the bright lights of downtown Manhattan, a sophisticated art education and the lure of the avant-garde. She went from being a nice Jewish girl to a beatnik, who lived a rackets life in the male-dominated cauldron of post war American art.

This comprehensive show of her work, the first in England in 50 years, is the best show the Barbican has ever staged. The Chipperfield design studio has transformed the often inert and impersonal exhibition spaces into arenas of pure magic. Large diaphanous paintings downstairs like the ecstatic *Through Blue* and *Another Storm*, both from 1963, benefit from a beautifully judged hanging. Upstairs, in the smaller spaces, her first paintings from the 1930's assert her art historical credentials. They meander from small accomplished copies of Michelangelo to classical brooding self-portraits that summon the spirit of Van Gogh. Her secret language paintings, which evoke hieroglyphics and totemic magic, like *Shattered Color* from 1947, look superb upstairs in small hermetic rooms. It is sometimes a very bumpy ride through her work. There are many Lees. Her ways of seeing are multiple. She is a shape shifter. Her analytical cubist work from the 1940's under the sexist, dogmatic tutelage of Hans Hoffman ("she is so good that you wouldn't know it was by a woman") would lead to a splicing and dicing of colour that would end up being more expressive than Jack the Dripper's.

Frank Bowling, born in what was British Guiana, and living now in London, is still painting well at 85. He is the next generation on from Lee Krasner, but there is a strong connection between them regarding the exploration of the freedoms of abstraction and a willingness to change their means of expressing it. It is a mystery why until now he has been almost ignored by the British establishment (thank you, Tate), but it may be that he, like Lee, is too protean, malleable, daring, unfashionably abstract and always unwilling to be typecast in one genre of painting. His early figurative work owes much to his cohort at the Royal College of Art in the late 50's (David Hockney, Ron Kitaj, Joe Tilson, Derek Boshier among others) but, attracted to New York, he upped sticks in the following decade. Was this considered a defection perhaps? His work does explore identity, but it is an existential one and not specifically racial. His multi-layered Map paintings such as *South America Squared* 1967 are from this period. They are large poured, stained and sprayed canvases, worked on the floor (like Lee and Jackson) and they superimpose stencilled and silk-screened images of the Southern Hemisphere over huge washes of colour. What comes through is a total fascination with control and chance. I see a very strong connection in his work with nature and landscape (I would) and also a very London connection to Turner's water paintings and Constable's studies of clouds. The Great Thames paintings are very moving - both poetic and numinous.

Invigorated by the work of these two magnificent painters I am now going to stop using words for a while and commit myself to paint, as I prepare for a big show of my work next Spring in France.

"Painting is an act of love... as a painter I can't experience it any other way." Lee Krasner

"The possibilities of painting are never ending." Frank Bowling