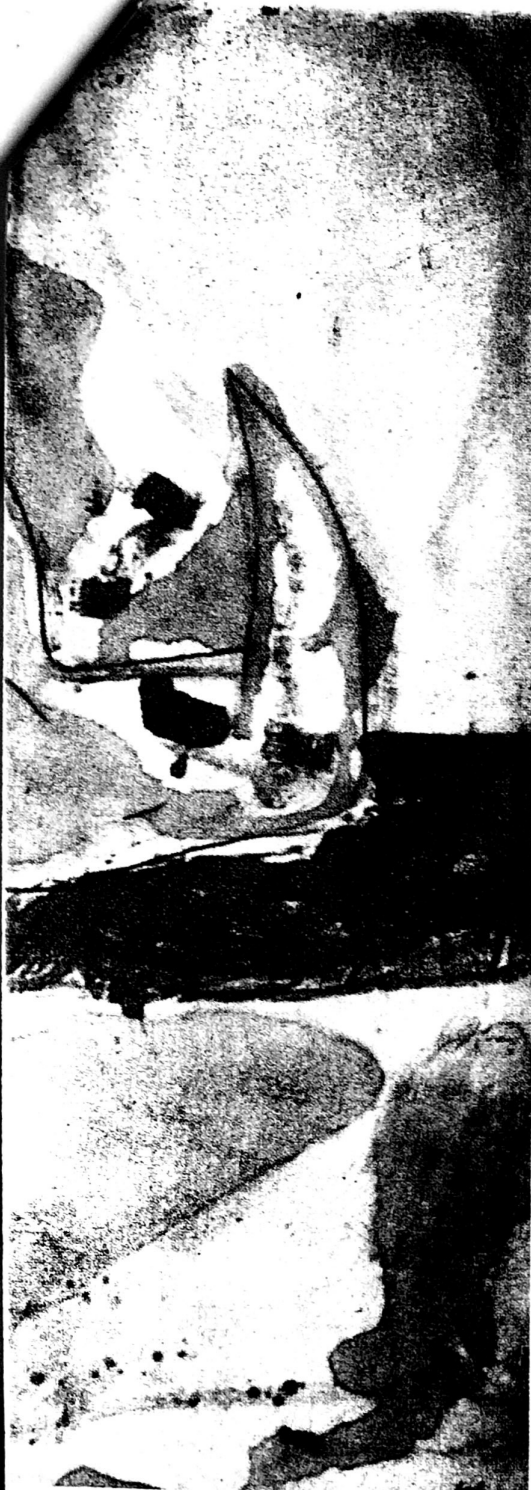


Whether decorating his Parisian apartment or
entertaining his coterie of friends, designer Claude
Montana likes to do everything with his personal touch.

CHEZ CLAUDE



by Hunter Drohojowska

Only a few months before her retrospective was scheduled to open at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (June 5-August 20), Helen Frankenthaler took refuge at her country home in Stamford, CT. The brown-shingled house on Shippan Point, a spit of land jutting into Long Island Sound, is as tailored and trim as its owner. This is a neighborhood where nature is controlled by culture, which happens to be a recurrent theme in her paintings, and it is a soothing atmosphere for the troubled soul of a second generation Abstract Expressionist.

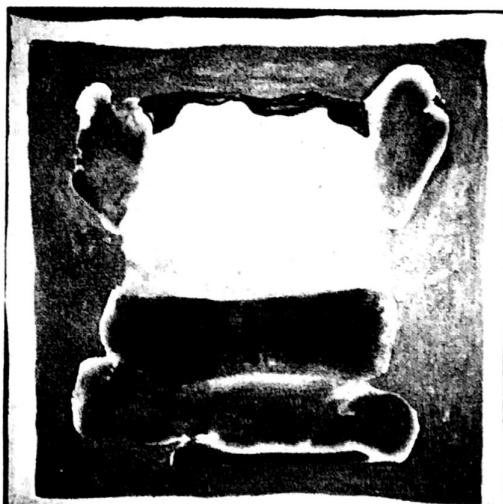
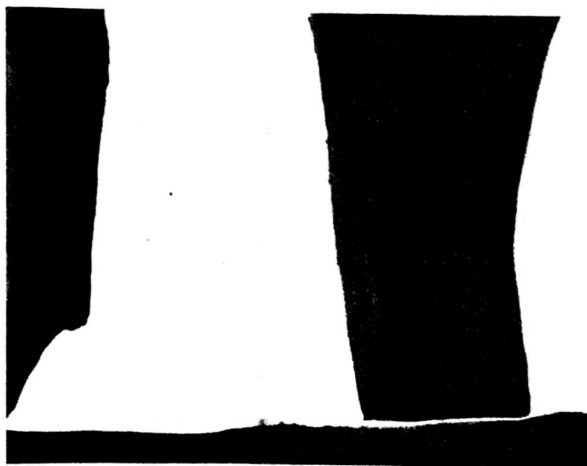
From the living room, one can see the silver surge of the sea and the overcast sky, in broad sheets of various blues. The scene is reflected in the aqueous hues of a painted screen standing in the corner, the only major Frankenthaler on view. It is a reminder that the artist's most abstract canvases have been inspired by the land and sea, and that she regularly returns to nature for solace

and inspiration, when the distractions of Manhattan become overwhelming. "If I don't get painting accomplished soon I feel I won't be Helen anymore," she says. "My center is threatened when too many things go on that are not connected with where I live which is, in large part, work."

With her high cheekbones and aquiline profile, Frankenthaler is strikingly younger looking than her 61 years. It is momentarily disconcerting to find the power behind 38 years of monumental abstract painting looking more like someone who might be raising funds to support a museum. But that's her heritage.

She projects the good manners inherent to someone of good family. Her father, Alfred Frankenthaler, was a New York State Supreme Court Judge. Along with two older sisters, she enjoyed a privileged and cultivated Upper East Side childhood of private schools (Horace

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Mountains and Sea of 1952, opposite page, which put Frankenthaler on the artworld map, is based on her abstract memory of the Nova Scotia landscape. *Summer Banner* of 1968, far left, incorporates the white canvas into the painting. It marks a departure from the earlier *Buddha's Court* of 1964, near left, which was "framed" by color. *Casanova* of 1988, above, is a more somber composition, perhaps reflecting the artist's pensive mood in looking back upon her career.

Mann, Brearley and Dalton) and early support for her interest in the arts.

Frankenthaler's father died in 1940 when she was 11. The period of despondency that followed found relief in a renewed dedication to art, perhaps responding to what art historian Lawrence Gowing called the "hermetic conditions of private self-preservation." She flowered during her last year of high school at Dalton, where she studied with the renowned Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo, who introduced her to Cubism and encouraged her to visit Manhattan's museums.

Tamayo was the first real artist she had known and the first of a series of male mentors. At Bennington College, she studied with American Cubist Paul Feeley, Australian painter Wallace Harrison and the legendary teacher Hans Hofmann. She also took classes with the critic Kenneth Burke when she was considering a literary future in journalism or criticism. After graduation, her five-year relationship with influential critic Clement Greenberg was an immeasurable boon to her career in terms of both his critical judgments and introductions to New York's art world.

In 1952, after Greenberg and Frankenthaler took a vacation in Nova Scotia, she completed the seven-by-10-foot *Mountains and Sea*, pioneering a technique of "stain painting" whereby the color is diluted and soaks into the canvas, producing a watercolor effect. The landscape was summoned from memory and poured onto a canvas laid on the floor. The influences of Jackson Pollock and Joan Miró had coalesced in a work that was to point toward the cooler quality of the Color Field artists like Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland in the 1960s. Louis called Frankenthaler's contribution a "bridge between Pollock and what was possible."

She was only 23, yet it remains her most famous painting. It shattered the confining Cubist style she had been taught, and with its large-scale, watery, almost unfinished-look-

ing colors, signaled her future direction.

Within a few years, Frankenthaler was an accepted member of The Club on 8th Street along with artists the likes of De Kooning and Pollock. "I was drawn to the best of the New York School," she explains. "I never wanted to copy them, but I learned and looked and was then off on my own." Soon she was represented by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, home to the first generation Abstract Expressionists. (In 1959, she joined the André Emmerich Gallery, where she still shows.) In 1958, at age 29, she married one of its seminal figures, Robert Motherwell, her husband for 13 years. They had no children. By 1960, she had her first retrospective, organized by poet Frank O'Hara, at the Jewish Museum in New York.

John Elderfield, a director and curator at MoMA, has written an insightful and lucid monograph on Frankenthaler (Harry N. Abrams) that is an essential companion to the catalog of the current show. Although he is circumspect about the artist's life and its relationship to her art, he links her father's early death to her ease with male mentors. Frankenthaler has become one of the most successful and powerful woman artists among a movement of men often perceived as machismo in oil. Does she feel that her gender helped or hindered her career?

"It was never an *art* issue," answers Frankenthaler. "I accepted my womanhood and enjoyed it. If I felt envy in those days vis-à-vis male artists, it was because of their *paintings*, not because of their being male." She points out that there were no women artists to serve as role models, but notes that she had several "comrades" like Joan Mitchell and Grace Hartigan. She also doesn't believe the best artists, regardless of sex, can be suppressed. "In the creative world, talent is never smothered, dwarfed or annihilated. It always rears its head. True gifts surface. It's how good are you?"

And how good is Frankenthaler? The question is inherent to any retrospective, and this is billed as 40 of the artist's most important canvases from the last four decades. The essence of her mature style was evident as early as *Mountains and Sea*; by 1959 her position had solidified as a link between the second generation Abstract Expressionists and the Color Field movement. Many critics and observers feel she achieved her most significant work during the late '50s and throughout the '60s.

Still, she has always had detractors. Critics like Harold Rosenberg, who thought her work too decorative, once called her "the medium of her medium." But the continual challenge of art, especially after early success, is not to be taken lightly and she has faced such questions since the late '60s when she once said, "Only dead art comes to a dead end."

Among the paintings in the exhibition demonstrating her best efforts are *Buddha's Court* (1964), with its washes of blue, gray and gold, and *Summer Banner* (1968), which spears the raw white canvas with bands of crimson and cobalt. Her work of the last decade attests to the difficulties of fueling a protracted career. By her own admission, she has found it increasingly difficult to maintain her energy for painting after 38 years.

Like many artists, the solace for Frankenthaler seems to reside in her studio. "At times, it's lonely or painful. But I need concentrated time in my lair to produce. I have some inborn necessity to do what I do."

Frankenthaler pauses thoughtfully, as though considering her past and future, then adds, "Art and life are separate yet intertwined. You can try to be perfect in art but being perfect in life is impossible. I think everybody has to accept one's own journey."

Editor's note: Hunter Drohojowska is writing a biography of Georgia O'Keeffe for Alfred A. Knopf.

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opposite of those typically staid Parisian fêtes set in cement. "It's more interesting to mix people who don't know each other," he says. "I love parties where I see a face I've never seen before."

When it comes to food, guests aren't offered foie gras or oysters in Champagne sauce, as one might expect in the private home of a great French dressmaker. Instead, Montana throws a curve ball, sending out heaping platters of Chinese food supplied by one of his favorite restaurants, Tong Yen. For smaller dinners, "Boots," being American, is known in their intimate circle for serving a more traditional feast of roast turkey with herb stuffing, cranberry sauce, sweet potato pie, green beans, mashed potatoes and chocolate cake. Baked new potatoes, topped with crème fraîche and caviar, are about as nouvelle as things get chez Claude.

After the party dishes have been cleared away the next morning, Montana often remains at home, only now he is working. "It doesn't bother me that I live where I frequently work." Hearing his own words, Montana decides they do not ring quite true. "Let's say that although I may wish my life wasn't so consumed by work, I'm also glad it is. At collection time I tend to stay at the office rather late, until 8:30, have a meal at home, then stay up until perhaps five A.M. sketching. What do I do right after a collection? Think about the next one."

Three days after his fall show last March and less than 48 hours before he was to leave on vacation, Montana, true to form, still had no idea where he might be going. If it had been just a few weeks later he probably would have retreated to his new country house, a romantic 15-room, 17th-century

stone château near Chartres about 55 miles from Paris in the heart of Proust country.

"With the new house I expect the rhythm of my life to change in a positive way," he says. "In the summer, when I'm not absolutely obliged to be at the office, that's where I hope to be. *Remembrance of Things Past* was set there, and the château is typical of the era, with beautiful *boiseries* throughout inside. Obviously I won't be replacing those. I'll decorate myself with a little help from my architects Patrick and Daniel Rubin."

Montana's residences aren't restricted to France. Two years ago he bought an old jewel of a summer house on Capri. Charming as the place is, however, it has no central heating, so his visits are limited to the warm-weather months, usually three weeks in August and a shorter stay in May. "I only go," he says, "when every door (CONTINUED ON PAGE 148)