

Jeannie Motherwell

Chance Favors the Ready Mind

By Christopher Busa

Last fall, I spoke with the artist Jeannie Motherwell in Boston at the Rafius Fane Gallery, amid a solo installation of her new, larger paintings, aptly titled *Pour. Push. Layer*. Cate McQuaid, reviewing the show in the *Boston Globe*, wrote, “The title gives away her kinship with Frankenthaler, who stained her Color Field canvases with poured paint. Motherwell’s affinity for black echoes her father’s. . . . This and all [of] Motherwell’s paints pit generation against collapse, and are as capricious as light flashing on water. They pin us with similar intensity—a moment of coming to be that will just as soon vanish.”

This review mentions Motherwell’s connection with the artists Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler, her father and stepmother, who were two iconic figures in midcentury abstraction. And, while their story is a natural segue into a discussion of Motherwell’s work and shows some early influences, this influence merely reflects the beginning of Jeannie Motherwell’s artistic journey. Over thirty years of painting, she has created her own legacy in her innovative techniques and bold vision of abstract painting.

JEANNIE MOTHERWELL WAS BORN into a culture where the idea of being an artist involved a communication with unconscious processes. During the dozen years Robert Motherwell was married to Helen Frankenthaler (1958–71), Jeannie and Lise, children of Robert’s second marriage to Betty Little, were growing up under the tutelage of icons of American art, each projecting power and natural confidence. When Robert Motherwell first came to New York in the fall of 1940, he assessed the young artists he encountered and concluded that talent was abundant, but many artists failed to find a “point of attack,” meaning that their work was not guided by a personal “creative principle.” For Motherwell, it was important to attend to the hints, clues, and spontaneous associations that bubble up into being during the process of working. The “creative principle,” he discovered, was the daily activity of what the Surrealists described as “automatism.” This was the method that revealed one’s originality to oneself; the spontaneous gesture that showed the honest signature of one’s intuitive impulses. Motherwell liked to say, “The only thing I have over any other painter is that I’m the only one who can make Motherwells.”

Helen Frankenthaler, stepmother to Jeannie in her formative years, between ages five and seventeen, had a strong influence on her stepdaughter’s life and work. Fundamental to Frankenthaler’s ability to find her own independent “point of attack” in her work is the inspiration she received from seeing Pollock’s shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery, an impact made even more emphatic by a 1951 visit to Pollock’s studio in Springs, East Hampton, where she actually saw how his paintings were made. A decade later, Frankenthaler, in her early thirties, became an art-world star with her youthful “retrospective” at the Jewish Museum in New York.

As a female artist succeeding in the male-dominated art world of the 1950s, Frankenthaler was a role model for Jeannie and many other young artists; perhaps she was an even greater influence in the way she focused on the work itself rather than engage in debates about her art in terms of her sex. In a 1965 interview in *Artforum*, Frankenthaler was asked by Henry Geldzahler how being a woman affected her painting. The artist answered with the aplomb of one possessing natural self-confidence: “Looking at my paintings as if they were painted by a woman

is superficial, a side issue, like looking at [Franz] Klines and saying they are bohemian. The making of serious painting is difficult and complicated for all serious painters. One must be oneself.” In a 2011 interview with Grace Glueck in the *New York Times*, Helen also said, “I don’t resent being a female painter. I don’t exploit it. I paint.”

She had her detractors, especially among the male art critics of this period. In his essay “Art and Words,” Harold Rosenberg tartly criticized the artist, saying that the “vital actor” in a Frankenthaler painting is not Frankenthaler but the paint, which was more in control than she was. He stated: “The artist is the medium of her medium.” In a review in *Art International*, E. C. Goossen viewed the artist as the female heir to Pollock: “Frankenthaler’s painting is manifestly that of a woman. . . . Without Pollock’s painting, hers is unthinkable. What she took from him was masculine.” John Elderfield put it another way: “Femininity has long been an available metaphor to describe such qualities of painting as lyricism, delicacy, colorfulness, and restraint.” Regarding colors that are “feminine,” Amy Sillman raises the issue of the “politics of color,” pointing out that Pollock’s colors in *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)* (1950) are not “diaphanous” like Frankenthaler’s stained colors.



Helen Frankenthaler (center) with Jeannie Motherwell (right) and Lise Motherwell (left) in front of their New York City residence, early '60s. COURTESY OF JEANNIE MOTHERWELL

I find it strange that Pollock is so often referred to as a seminal artist in terms of his originality. The roots of his work, in the connotations of fluidity and fecundity, are abundant in other artists’ repertoires and boldly represented in the art of Helen Frankenthaler. Here, perhaps, is the locus of Frankenthaler’s historical significance in altering the waning cultural meme of what is called the “male universal,” where *he* includes *her*, implying in our very language a hierarchal ordering of gender.

Even though Frankenthaler rejected an identity of being a “woman painter,” she was mindful of the feminist artists who were inspired by her example over the last six decades. This illuminating history is detailed in “The heroine Paint” *After Frankenthaler: Stains, Flows, Decoration, Play, Ambition: A Different Account of Painting from the 1950s to the Present Day*, a collection of extraordinary contributions by contemporary artists and art historians including Liz Hirsch, Daniel Belasco, Carroll Dunham, John Elderfield, Barbara Guest, Harmony Hammond, Suzanne Hudson, Carrie Moyer, Laura Owens, Lane Relyea, Dwight Ripley, Sterling Ruby, Amy Sillman, Howard Singerman, Tracy K. Smith, and Mary Weatherford. The range of discussions raises questions never asked before and offers a previously unrecognized parallel history to the macho orientation of the Abstract Expressionists. The book was edited by Katy Siegel, who writes about the “bind” confronting these artists:

They didn’t want to be acknowledged as women, but it was equally unacceptable to openly claim a “masculine” role. They were left to triangulate between publicly rebuffing categorization, playing with or debating the role of the feminine among friends, and assuming masculine traits. . . . In retrospect, this very incoherence of identity may have allowed them a certain freedom.

MY YOUNGER SISTER, Marianne, was a childhood friend of Jeannie Motherwell. During summers in Provincetown, they collected shells along the beach across from Commercial Street and played hopscotch on the chalked lines they drew on little-used Allerton Street. (“Great for children,” Robert Motherwell once wrote about the location of “Sea Barn,” the family home with two studios that he shared with Helen.) My father, Peter Busa, a colleague of Motherwell in New York in the early forties, owned a house and studio half a block east from Sea Barn on Commercial Street. The neighborhood was dense with artists working in studios adjacent to the commotion of domestic life—the artists Arthur Cohen, Anne Packard, Suzanne Sinaiko, Lily Harmon, Mervin Jules, Leo Manso, Howie Schneider, Umberto Romano, Jack Kearney, Richard Florsheim, Lila Katzen, Henry Rothman, and Phil Malicoat first come to mind. Children wandered in and out of their parents’ studios; they were often asked to offer opinions about works in progress.

Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler discouraged their children from using coloring books; instead, they provided them with paper and paint and pastels from their own studios, then displayed on the refrigerator door the most eye-catching drawings and spontaneously written poems, which they would all discuss at lunch. On visits to galleries and museums, the children were asked to select a favorite painting. “This was a huge responsibility,” Motherwell recalled. “If you liked something, you were obliged to say why. Helen and Dad prompted us consistently to say what we thought about a particular painting, especially at one of their openings.”

Motherwell told me about the genesis of her name, Jeannie, which her father chose in honor of the Stephen Foster song, “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair,” and the poems of Robert Burns. She said, “It’s my given name, with Burns being the middle name of my Scottish father. Dad didn’t want people to know he had a middle name after somebody famous.”



Fracture, 2017, acrylic on Claybord, 48 by 60 by 2 inches

Just before Motherwell began classes at Bard College, her father told her that he and Helen were getting a divorce; that next year he would marry the German photographer Renate Ponsold. “I think it was 1971 when he took me to St. Gallen, Switzerland, where he was commissioned to make some prints,” she recalled. “From there, we went to Germany to pick up his new Mercedes convertible, which at that time was not available in the States. We drove all through the winding roads of the South of France with the top open to the summer air. We bonded on that trip. It was the first time I was having adult conversations with my father, at a time when I was developing my own interest in art and had found the school where I was going to major in painting. Bard had a great art department. All of the professors there were artists actively showing in SoHo and abroad.”

While at Bard, Motherwell made weekend visits to see her father in Greenwich, Connecticut, two hours away. She would drop off her car and then take the train to New York to see art shows, but first she would often go into her father’s studio to see what he was working on. She was drawn like a magnet to his signature black paintings, and one day her father asked her why. She said, “Black is my favorite color,” blurring out that she did not see black as the absence of color, but as a color as primary as red, blue, or yellow. In her own paintings, she limits her palette to the powerful interplay of a few restricted combinations. She mentioned to her father, “If I’m about to begin a painting, unsure of what to do, I’ll begin with black.” His response: “You really do get black, don’t you?”

In her junior year of college, Motherwell moved into a New York loft purchased for her by her father, which gave her a large living and working space on Mercer Street in the vibrant early days of SoHo. Nearby, at the buzzing corner bar Fanelli’s, she met with friends to discuss shows they had seen and what openings to attend on the weekend. Summers, she spent in Provincetown in the Mermaid Apartments, next door to her father’s Sea Barn, which had three separate quarters for Lise, Jeannie, and frequent guests—art dealers, critics, historians, and reporters.

For thirty summers, Motherwell worked in her water-view studio, with mesmerizing drama ever present in the ripples of water, blasts of wind, and cascades of waves soaring skyward from concussions against the bulkhead—an image that inspired her father’s *Beside the Sea* series. Motherwell told me that she hears “a humming drama when the sea is flat and calm.” She began to see how a breeze creates small “capillary waves,” fine as fingerprints, as it flows across and grips the surface of the water. For a period, her paintings referenced the loss of Provincetown fishermen she had known on the vessel *Patricia Marie*, which was



Chrysalis, 2017, acrylic on Claybord, 48 by 60 by 2 inches

destroyed in a storm in 1976. Triangles of painted paper began to flutter in her collages, obliquely evoking the silence of abstracted draggers skimming over water.

Motherwell initially evolved a working process derived from the “collage aesthetic,” so consistently cited by her father as the essence of Modernism, since collage was the only medium capable of expressing the cacophony of contemporary life. Gradually, however, Motherwell departed from the torn-paper edges of her early collages and began producing sinuously fluid new paintings. These pieces reflected a vital unfettered freedom in her technique, in which liquid harmonies of poured paint flowed naturally from a combination of the force of gravity and the intuitive guidance she provided with squeegees, brushes, sticks, and cheesecloth. She would also physically lift the canvas from its level position on the floor, further controlling the direction and speed of the flowing paint.

Motherwell described her process to me: “I start by working with the piece laid out on the floor, then after it is dry enough I work with it hanging on the wall, then go back to the floor, depending on how many layers I need to add. On the floor, if I move the canvas or board, I can lift and move the flow. I do other things to manipulate the desired effect, but I tend not to put my handprint on it too much. I want the results to feel natural and fresh, as if it were revealed in an instant.”

The sense that an exploding image is arrested while in motion is the result of years of experimentation. “It’s a visceral feeling where I know I can’t push it any further,” she explained. She yields to these intuitive limits, mindful that even nature’s expressions of great force—crested waves or flames grasping at the sky—always seem to hold energy in reserve. She experimented with splatter effects, but, unlike Pollock, transitioned into a new technique in which absorbent ground mixed with gesso generated a different effect on the canvas. “It would often break things up in a way that gave me something new to like and work with,” she said.

Her large, recent paintings boldly explode with fascinating chemical reactions. Her trial-and-error experiments with various mediums cause unexpected results, surprises sometimes as plainly beautiful as the breaking of dawn. She also experiments with alternative surfaces—canvas, plywood, silk, and Claybord, which is made from a very fine clay. “It’s the same kind used in women’s makeup,” she explained, “which is manufactured into a very smooth surface. The paint lies on it beautifully, then you apply water and/or a medium and it

goes *wacko!* I mix gesso with certain amounts of absorbent ground on my canvases, which allows for a marvelous natural stain effect. Amazing things happen, and I capitalize on them. The *mistakes*—no, not the mistakes—the *accidents* would remind me of galaxies to further explore.” Slowly, over years, Motherwell has evolved a way of working that does not depend on brushes, removing as much as possible the evidence of an artist’s hand, and allowing independent processes to find their own resolution.

Hans Hofmann urged a fundamental understanding of the commonalities between abstraction and figuration, telling artists not to imitate nature, but to imitate nature’s processes; for example, by portraying the way the force of wind can reveal the back sides of leaves or show the shape of a sail—a dynamic picture of motion and energy. In this sense, Jeannie Motherwell’s forms do not resemble figures from reality so much as express her kinship with serendipitous emotional memories revealed by chance. Like Helen and Bob, she trusts her intuition.

A major change for Motherwell was relocating from a studio in Provincetown to a studio in Somerville, where she discovered the sky above her, not the ocean around her. She commented on this new “stargazing” perspective in her current artist’s statement:

I am amazed by the images and mysteries of the oceans and skies in changing weather, Hubble-type images of the universe, and my own physicality during the painting process. It has inspired my recent body of work for many years. My paintings, which are quite abstract, have an intimacy to the space in them but also an immensity. The process I use and the mere physicality of it help me explore spatial complexities that yield marvelous surprises. They often carry me in directions I cannot anticipate. I like to think of my paintings as an “event” or an “occurrence”; that is, an action that emerges in the here and now—where the subject matter symbolizes the images and mysteries of creation.

Here I am mindful of a surprising analogy with this artist’s contemporary “motion studies” and the groundbreaking experiments in visualization of Harold Edgerton at MIT in 1936, using a high-speed camera and a stroboscopic light, when he famously recorded his silent film *Seeing the Unseen*. The film reveals the acrobatics of milk drops as they somersault into gorgeous shapes after being splattered on a hard, flat surface and tracks the motion of a red-hot poker as it plunges into brine, showing the turbulent beauty of its sizzle.

Titles of Motherwell’s paintings offer clues into her thinking. They are somewhat provocative, encouraging the viewer’s emotional associations



The Eyes of Argus, 2016, acrylic on Claybord, 48 by 70 inches



A Sacred Trade, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 48 by 67 inches

and offering suggestions rather than explanations of the paintings’ import. She, like Frankenthaler, does not work in a serial manner, creating variations of related bodies of work. Rather, each work seeks to express something unique in itself; in this way, Motherwell shows the synthesis and harmonizing of her influences.

The painting *Fracture* implies a kind of explosion, rather than portraying an image of an actual object. The division in the image has the amorphous symmetry of a Rorschach inkblot. This allusion to Rorschach is significant. Psychological suggestivity is a phenomenon that produces pareidolic effects, in which one’s perception of meaning in ambiguous visual images reveals likenesses in the real world. Symmetry appears abundantly in organic forms, but is absent from inorganic forms, such as clouds or rocks. Another psychological effect is the perception of movement without motion, and how motion can be evoked by unstructured forms.

Strange forms are found with lucky blunders, and this is why Abstract Expressionists were keenly alert to the transformative possibilities of chance. Psychologically, Rorschach inkblots, which were so interesting to artists of the ’40s and ’50s, played with the idea of symmetry and showed that even an ugly shape can become appealing when it is flopped into a mirror image, creating an “amorphous symmetry.” The viewer has permission to read the image in ways personally meaningful, with felt associations becoming active in the experience of looking.

Another painting, *Chrysalis*, which reflects a birth image in the sheltering encasement for a budding seed, is one of only a few of the artist’s works that summon figuration. Helen Frankenthaler once said that she didn’t like Arshile Gorky’s work when hints of figuration were too obvious in his painting. When I later asked Motherwell if she was conscious of the birthing metaphor when painting, she answered, “Not at all.”

In *The Eyes of Argus*, Motherwell reduces and concentrates the one hundred eyes of Argus, the many-eyed giant of Greek mythology, to four ovoid apertures. The focus here on the expanding power of the white of the inner eye recalls her father’s use of black in his thunderous *Elegies*.

In our discussion at the Rafius Fane Gallery, Motherwell reflected on Frankenthaler: “When making some of these paintings, Helen came into my mind. I had been thinking of her very intensely ever since she had become ill, in the last years of her life, and could no longer paint. Not painting must have been breaking her heart and spirit, and so it spurred me into painting larger pieces with new ideas. There were times while I was painting that I felt I was almost channeling her, and I’d exclaim, ‘Oh, that’s how she did it!’ Without consciously trying, I could really feel her spirit.”

Motherwell also discussed how Frankenthaler would critique her paintings: “She used to say things like, ‘That’s very good,’ but she never disparaged anything. Dad would say things like, ‘Don’t touch that. It’s

done!’ When I first started making collages in the seventies using postcards and bits of small imagery, he might say, ‘That’s good—it’s almost tacky, but it’s not.’” She would ponder her father’s remarks for weeks, anguishing over what he meant in his sphinx-like, cryptic comments. “His remarks were not meant to wound me,” she said. “He was trying to teach me in his own way how to tell the difference between what is genuinely good and what is not. He encouraged me to find that out for myself, rather than teach me.”

While Bob and Helen clearly had much harmony in their working relationship, Motherwell recalled that there was also a competitive dynamic between them: “I don’t think I was conscious of competition between them when I was very young. However, I noticed later on that they were very competitive about a lot of things, and the artistic factor had to be a part of it. There was a time early on in their marriage when their work was very similar. They were even using each other’s colors. I have a small painting on paper by Helen, which was made when Dad was sick with the flu. She went down to his studio, painted it, and wrote in pen, *Please Feel Better*. In the painting, she used Dad’s yellow

ochre paint, probably the first color she came across in his studio.”

In Motherwell’s recent works, one can see something in common with the working process of both her father and Frankenthaler: each tested their spontaneity against their own very intelligent scrutiny and revision. Their practice was to isolate and capture an authentic mood, revealing the self to the self in the éclat of surprise. But, having spent many hours talking with Robert Motherwell about what is good in a painting, I know that it was his deeply sourced critical facility that confirmed the success of a painting. Compared to Jeannie Motherwell’s earlier collages with torn edges, the flow in these new and related paintings seems unimpeded, able to extend and fulfill the artist’s impulse.

A discussion about *A Sacred Trade* offers a good concluding comment about Motherwell’s work. “This title refers to what it means to be an artist—the sacrifices the artist makes, like the fisherman,” she told me. “In this particular painting, I saw the ghost image of the *Patricia Marie*. This was after I had stopped painting my boat paintings and collages, so it is of significance to my work.” The “ghost” image is a star-bright concentration of the stellar shape of a ship, almost electric in the intensity of whiteness, a white even whiter than the color that surrounds the surreal apparition. And the surrounding blacks have the deep magnetic attraction that Motherwell always felt as a power in her father’s black paintings. The chemistry of Motherwell’s lineage has yielded a new element in the periodic table of painting.

Motherwell asked me if I saw a family resemblance in her paintings. “I hope mine don’t look like Helen made them!” she said. “I don’t start with a memory. I start with a process. The process reveals things to me, like a feeling of familiarity, and as these revelations happen, I can then begin to edit.”

Robert Motherwell once stated that the medium of painting had the potential to express the complexity of a human being, but only when the painting triggered an authentic experience in the viewer. I am reminded of this when I see the synthesis of complexity and intuitive response in the work of Jeannie Motherwell.

Noting that some of her paintings are streaked with spurts of energetic black gestures, I said, “Those streaks of black are very Motherwellian.” “Which Motherwell?” Jeannie asked. ☒

This summer in Provincetown, Jeannie Motherwell’s work will be shown at AMP Gallery, July 27–August 8, at the same time that the Provincetown Art Association and Museum presents a major display of Helen Frankenthaler’s work in the exhibition Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown, July 6–September 2, 2018.

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