



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Interview with Helen Frankenthaler

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Transcript

Preface

This interview is part of the *Dorothy Gees Seckler collection of sound recordings relating to art and artists, 1962-1976*. The following verbatim transcription was produced in 2015, with funding from Jamie S. Gorelick.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were just saying, I mean, you know, I think what you said was very, a good place to start our discussion of any effect that the avant-garde audience or the culture boom might have on your work. You have very small, a sense of a very small audience that are important to the way you think about your work and, oh, I liked the way you said it. Could you say it again?

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: Well, I said that over the years there have never been more than four or five people whose eyes I respect and in some way they do affect my work and sometimes even they don't, but I don't have a feeling that there are, even though there might be many people that liked or disliked my work from time to time, I don't feel that they're on the periphery watching me and affecting what I'm going to do or not do.

But I imagine, I don't know. There are people who sell two green paintings and go and paint 50 green paintings. But I don't think there's any, in a way, I feel there isn't an issue because what is good and beautiful is real and comes out or will come out and what is mediocre shows itself and might have a fling but goes where it belongs eventually, so that if 5,000 mediocre collectors and museum officials and dealers are buying 500,000 mediocre pictures that doesn't affect me.

I mean, I know they're mediocre and I know what I think is good or great or of value so that I think it's irrelevant in a way that there is a wave. There are always waves or no waves or waves coming up or waves dying down and you just sort of go about and follow your line [ph].

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a very complete and very authoritative statement, Helen.

[They laugh.]

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: Well, that's sort of the way I've seen it or lived it in a sense. I mean, I think I know two painters that have turned from being well-known, young abstract expressionists to what looks like more or less pop art, but I never thought they were good abstract expressionists and I don't think they're good pop artists.

I mean, I think there's something in your soul that comes out that betrays and in the end there's the picture, whether the guy is around with an audience or not, and that doesn't lie and you can have all kinds of syndicates and publications to push something over the top and if you're patient you see it won't work. I mean, it's like forcing any political issue.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So the expression that is really valid and felt makes its way without, well, I mean, is affected by marketplace but not ultimately. In time, it wins.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: I think so. Well, I think where it affects it is that something that might be worth very little in time can be boosted to be worth a great deal and I think more people are ready to gamble because it makes them feel they're living, but I really don't think it matters. It matters

because at times I feel this is ridiculous or it sort of bugs me or I feel, you know, I can't believe this is going on but, well, all you can do is do what you do. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How about a younger person, well, I mean, you're very young but versus starting out. Do you feel a young person can have the same spiritual independence?

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: No, I think the atmosphere is generally with wider, with more breadth is more corrupt. I think there was a time 10 or 15 years ago where the situation in many areas might have been lousy but there was always a little corner where you could corral your cronies and the guys that were serious and have sympathizers and a truer feeling. And I think now it, where there was no thought of a market, we didn't think how big should it be, how small, is this dealer better than that, is it going to be reviewed, reproduced, whatever, because it was generally not possible. I mean, when John Myers opened his gallery, it was in a railroad flat on 53rd Street. Do you remember that?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, yes.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: And it was the only small avant-garde gallery in New York. I mean, there was nothing else unless you then made a leap to 57th Street and big time, you know, something reputable and known. There was Kootz, Janis, I mean, and that was all big.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Egan.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: Egan, yes. But he was not involved in younger people and so it was, you know, most of the people in the gallery were working to make 20 bucks a week for extra canvas or something, not \$20 but \$50.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that wouldn't be possible today, isn't likely that it would be possible.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: I don't think so. I think you do, I think the difference today has to do something with the truth but it's distorted. Today the idea is what gimmick should I conjure up that will make me noticeable?

Now, I think it is true that every person that becomes noticeable and deserves it does something original but in this present situation it's sort of the cart before the horse, but the talent and the timing and the passion have very little to do with it but the show biz, what's my line, that's the thing and I think that is corrupting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you said you were ready [ph]. Do you want to go on or shall we—

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: No, I've said enough.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Okay.

[Audio break.]

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: Can you hear me?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, sure.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: I was saying that I felt I was rather old-fashioned in my attitude because I still believe that what I select as an object or want to be faced with as, well, I'm saying this

in a clumsy way, but that what art is is beautiful and moves me, that I can admire or laugh at or become a sociologist about many other forms and take it seriously.

But I do want, for example, if somebody says to me in a gallery or a museum what do you think is the most beautiful here that you would like to have for the rest of your life or have someplace where you know it will remain to look at, the idea is pleasure and beauty and if it's a Pop expression then it's something else.

In other words, I don't think pop artists pretend to be doing beautiful things or want anything to do with what I'm talking about as art but it's another concept but that concept is pushed by the same dealers, collectors, et cetera.

In other words, they're applying the same vocabulary and methods to this new thing that the makers themselves don't call beautiful art or art. The treatment is all the same but it should, there should be a new syndrome altogether to handle it.

And I think a lot of it is staggering, the way a billboard is staggering or the way the grain in marble is staggering or the way Arp's or Duchamp's—Who did the toilet, the urinal? Arp—

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible].

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: Yes. But it is something else and I refuse to be either carried along or confused by it. I think it does mean something if you put a goat through a tire and I don't think Rauschenberg's a Pop artist but something else again. But I really don't want to put it in the middle of my living room or refer to it in my heart or memory or eye as part of that leap I feel when I see a beautiful Rothko, a beautiful Titian, a beautiful Matisse or whatever.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]