

# HOW NEW YORK'S POSTWAR FEMALE PAINTERS BATTLED FOR RECOGNITION

*The women of the historic Ninth Street Show had a will of iron and an intense need for their talent to be expressed, no matter the cost.*

By Claudia Roth Pierpont



*Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, and Grace Hartigan in 1957. Photograph by Burt Glinn / Magnum*

**T**he photograph of Jackson Pollock that appeared in *Life* in August, 1949, didn't look like anyone's idea of an artist. Although he stood in front of an enormous painting, a fantastic tracery of loops and swirls that most readers would have found perplexing or ridiculous, the man himself was something else: rugged, intense, with paint-splattered dungarees and a cigarette dangling, with a touch of insolence, from the corner of his mouth. A rival painter, Willem de Kooning, said that he looked like "some guy who works at a service station pumping gas." But the image was sexy, too—notably similar in type to the working-class stud made famous by Marlon Brando on Broadway the previous year. The subtitle of the accompanying article read, "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" The answer was presumably affirmative: why else was a little-known artist being featured in the biggest mass-circulation magazine in the country? The editors, however, were too skittish to render judgment on his mysterious new art. Instead, they offered the phenomenon of Pollock himself: a conspicuously modern artist without a trace of European la-di-da, an artist born in *Wyoming*, no less, who did his painting in a barn, using not a palette but cans of aluminum paint, into which he occasionally mixed (how much more macho could it get?) nails and screws. The big news was that it was safe, at last, in America, for a real man to be an artist.

Allowing *Life* to do the article, despite Pollock's hesitation, was Lee Krasner's idea. Otherwise known as Mrs. Jackson Pollock, Krasner was a fervent booster of her husband's work, outspoken in her conviction that he was, as she liked to say, *numero uno*. She claimed to have believed in his genius from her first visit to his studio, in 1941, and she'd seen him through years of alcoholic turbulence, when he was selling so little that he couldn't afford to heat their ramshackle house, on the outer reaches of Long Island. Krasner had worn long johns and heavy sweaters to work in the freezing room that served as her own studio—for she, too, was a fiercely serious artist. She had trained at Cooper Union, in a section of the school reserved for women, and at the National Academy of Design, where she learned to draw and paint in a rigorously traditional style. After discovering modernism, she had gone on to become a star pupil of the revered teacher Hans Hofmann, who praised her work as good enough to pass for a man's. In the late thirties, working for the W.P.A.'s Federal Art Project, a government program

that promoted strictly nondiscriminatory policies, she had led a crew of ten men working on a giant mural, now lost, on the subject of navigation. As was true for many women artists of the time, the program gave her a professional start, hands-on experience, and enough confidence to think that she might make it as a painter, even after the war effort brought the W.P.A. to an end, along with all vestiges of an art world that viewed women as equal players.

It's impossible to know how she might have developed on her own. By the early forties, she was committed to an upbeat style of geometric abstraction, brightly colored, that gave Cubism a rhythmic swing. But meeting Pollock, moving in with him (in 1942), and marrying him (in 1945) radically reset her course. Beginning in 1943—the year of Pollock's first solo gallery show—she painted almost nothing but “gray slabs,” as she put it, for three despairing years, while she struggled toward his kind of deeply personal abstraction, attempting to paint not what she devised but what she felt and, even more psychologically daunting, who she was. The answer would once have been clear: she was an escapee from an Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn, an Artists Union protest organizer, a gutsy woman who took no guff, an ambitious artist. Now, though, she seemed to have been transformed, as in some cruel fairy tale, into a lowly creature known as an artist's wife. She got past the gray slabs in 1946, and for the next few years kept trying out new approaches, working mostly on a modest scale—she called her best work the “Little Image” paintings—and pushing on with quiet resolve. In 1949, however, just a couple of months after Pollock's appearance in *Life*, she decided to stop exhibiting, following a series of dismissive she's-no-Pollock reviews of a gallery show titled “Artists: Man and Wife.” At the age of forty, she was a scarred veteran who stood for everything that younger women artists feared and rejected. She was even known to cook.

Krasner ventured to exhibit again two years later, in the historic Ninth Street Show. Held in an empty storefront just off Broadway, rented by the artists themselves, the show was a boisterous call for attention by a new generation, artists for whom Pollock and de Kooning (both of whom took part) had the status almost of Old Masters. Since few of them had ever received any significant notice,

the rush to participate was so intense that everyone was limited to a single piece. Even in this renegade atmosphere, there was some initial discussion of whether including women in the exhibition would diminish its chance of being taken seriously. Eventually, the jury selected eleven women, and sixty-one men, to represent the creatively rich (if otherwise impoverished) new downtown art world, with its cheap industrial lofts, high communal spirits, and almost universal devotion to abstraction. Five of the women went on to have international careers, their work collected by major museums and subject to ever-expanding bibliographies: Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Elaine de Kooning (who was married to Willem), and Krasner—the oldest of them but the last to bloom, coming into her own only after Pollock's death, in 1956, a painful loss yet the start of a remarkably productive twenty-eight years of widowhood.

Mary Gabriel's timely and ambitious new book, "Ninth Street Women," provides a multifaceted account of the five odds-defying female artists who travelled from Ninth Street to the Museum of Modern Art and beyond. Gabriel warns at the start that her seven-hundred-page text lacks "traditional biographical detail"; instead, it is a widely roving group portrait, evoking an entire era and aspiring to explain it. She dwells on broad social and political events, which she believes were not merely a context for the artists' work but the *raison d'être* for their allegiance to abstraction. Declaring her opposition to theorists who claim that painters respond primarily to other painters, she begins by proposing that the larger New York group of artists "stripped their work of all life except their own internal meanderings because they existed in a world destroyed by war, dehumanized by the death camps, and denied a future by the atomic bomb."

One can see the appeal of this idea: it makes the art seem bigger, braver. And Gabriel is deft at weaving an artist into a piece of political history. Still, it's difficult to demonstrate the weight of a world that remains invisible on the painters' canvases. Even Krasner, who was politically active, said, "I, for one, didn't feel that my art had to reflect my political point of view." Judging by Gabriel's own account, references to contemporary horrors by any New York artists are rare, and learning of an occasion when Willem de Kooning voiced

concern about the atomic bomb does not necessarily convince one that his world view was expansive. (Furthermore, he departed from abstraction when the spirit moved him, as did Elaine de Kooning and Grace Hartigan; had they given up worrying about the bomb?) In fact, much as one might expect, Gabriel's subjects displayed the all-too-human tendency to respond to world events in ambiguous ways, including keeping their heads down—particularly easy when the rent is overdue—and responding in no apparent way at all.

Fortunately, Gabriel lets the political thesis fade as events take over and the immediacy of these lives becomes all-engrossing. There was so much happening at close range: making art, selling art, not selling art, falling in love with genius, attempting to be a genius, the unforeseen rise of a movement fuelled by creative energy, oil paint, and alcohol. The development of a culture is deeply consequential, and its story—even a very specialized piece of its story—requires no apologies or augmentation. And this piece of the art-world story happens to be very exciting, as brought to life in the balance of Gabriel's rich, serious-minded, and (in a good way) sometimes gossipy book. It was Elaine de Kooning, after all, who characterized the era under consideration, roughly 1949 through 1959, as a “ten-year party.”

**T**he women arrived at Ninth Street from different places, playing very different roles. Elaine de Kooning, despite being half of the other ruling couple of the art world (and, unlike Krasner, using her husband's name), was anything but the standard artist's wife. At thirty-three, some ten years younger than Krasner, she was the doyenne of the downtown art scene, a position that owed more to her charismatic warmth, wit, and bohemian freedom than to her work, which had never been prominently shown. Although she painted her share of de-rigueur abstractions, portraiture was her self-described “addiction”: she joked that it was one area where she didn't have to compete with her husband, who dismissed portraits as “pictures that *girls* made.” But her talent shone in the finely rendered portrait drawings she produced, and her loosely brushed, more allusive paintings showed a true originality in their apprehension of what she called the “instantaneous illumination” that allows us to recognize people at a glance.

Turning art history on its head, she had two main subjects: men, whom she depicted as both soulful and fully sexual (especially in her immensely tender, private drawings of her husband, naked and asleep); and herself, portrayed—most memorably in a detailed painting from 1946, now in the National Portrait Gallery—as unmistakably an artist, sketchbook in hand, boldly staring us down.

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VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Parkour New York

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The other women were younger and still largely finding themselves, although they seemed to be moving on a faster track. Grace Hartigan, at twenty-nine, had already had a well-received solo show of her vigorous abstractions. Still, she found it difficult to finish her canvas for the Ninth Street Show in time, partly because she habitually doubted her work and partly because her nine-year-old son—whom she'd left to be raised by her ex-husband's parents, in New Jersey—was staying with her for a while. (In a journal, she recorded the painful distraction of his crying at bedtime: “There was nothing to be said that could soothe him—he has his tragedies defined for him at an early age.”) Joan Mitchell, a twenty-six-

**year-old Chicago heiress who had studied at the city's Art Institute, contributed an exuberant abstract canvas nearly six feet square, despite the official request for smaller works, given the crowded nature of the show. Youngest of all, at twenty-two, was Helen Frankenthaler—another wealthy girl, fresh out of Bennington—who contributed a seven-foot-long abstraction that she seemed sure no one would dare reject. Confidence was a property of youth, thriving in inverse proportion to experience.**

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**None of them wanted to paint like a woman, whatever that meant. Alfred Stieglitz's famous words on first seeing drawings by Georgia O'Keeffe, in 1916—"At last, a woman on paper"—would, for these artists, have been a dreadful rebuke, a sign that they had fallen short of their ambitions, or that something closely guarded had slipped through. The descriptive terms for the prestigious art of the day ("monumental scale," "energy," "action," even "genius") were understood to be as masculine as Pollock's swagger. Hartigan, moving away from**

abstraction, in 1952, wrote of having to get up her courage to “look conservative—reactionary—timid—or even (horrors) feminine” in the process. During the previous year, she had begun, revised, despised, destroyed, resurrected, and, it seems, finally abandoned a painting she called “Woman.” Willem de Kooning also struggled to define the human female in paint, but with a result that is as horrifying as it is famous. His “Woman” series, which he began in 1950 and continued for three years, is a group of monstrous, hypersexualized, devouring grotesques: “Never before had a woman been as brutalized by brushstrokes,” Gabriel notes, which is saying a lot, after Picasso. At the time, Elaine, whose sense of freedom included semi-public sexual affairs that were known to torment her husband, felt compelled to explain that the images were not of her. (She suggested that they might represent her mother-in-law.) A couple of her female artist friends, though, looking over the display of gorgons when the series was exhibited, in 1953—at a fancy midtown gallery that did not show women painters—blithely offered their own observations: “That one’s you. That one’s me . . .”

**S**o how did these artists—continually discouraged, derided, and attacked—do it? How did they keep working, in the face of so many obstacles, and keep believing in themselves? The simplest answer, beyond talent (which the six other women in the Ninth Street Show, now forgotten, also had), is a will of iron, an intense need for that talent to be expressed, no matter the cost, even if it meant giving up one’s child. In Hartigan’s journal, the entry about her son is soon followed by one that begins, “My children are scattered”—by which she means that two recently completed paintings have gone off to galleries. None of the other women had children, by self-preserving design, and despite intense emotional ambivalence. Indeed, a child may have been the only thing that Lee Krasner ever refused Jackson Pollock. (She sometimes said that she already effectively had a child, and his name was Jackson.) The women’s formidable will developed in widely varied personal circumstances. Krasner’s immigrant family was hardly aware of art; she taught herself to draw by copying fashion advertisements in newspapers. Mitchell was brought to museums from her earliest youth—her father, a doctor, was an amateur artist—and had her first painting exhibition when she was twelve, at school.

And this will could be expressed in many ways. In the women's battle to establish themselves, inspiration mattered, preparation mattered, but, as Gabriel repeatedly suggests (if never quite admits), access to power and knowing how to use it sometimes mattered more than is politic to say. Precisely because they had no serious power of their own, the cannier among them learned to cultivate powerful men who might serve as door openers, instructors, protectors, promoters, whatever worked. Elaine de Kooning was widely if whisperingly accused of taking lovers who could help her husband's career, but it seems that she was able to serve her own reputation, too. The most significant of her affairs, lasting several years, was with Thomas Hess, the executive editor of *ARTnews*, the influential journal where she developed a second career as a critic. While his position cannot have been the only reason for the affair, Hess published positive accounts of her work and mentioned her in print at every opportunity. He also assured readers that the wholly impersonal subject of the "Woman" series painted by her husband—the man he had long been cuckolding—was "the dehumanization of American women."

Even more powerful than Hess was Clement Greenberg, the critic who almost single-handedly raised Pollock to the heights, and who retained the ability to make or break a reputation. Gabriel details Helen Frankenthaler's almost comically determined pursuit, when she was twenty-one, of the infamously brutish forty-one-year-old kingmaker, and the five-year affair that placed her at the center of the art world. This is not to say that she didn't make good on her own there. Less than a year after the relationship began, in the spring of 1951, Frankenthaler, inspired by a visit to Pollock's studio, achieved a personal and technical breakthrough. Diluting her paints to the fine consistency of watercolors, she applied the liquid to unprimed canvas, laid on the floor, so that it soaked through in broadly spreading stains, creating opalescent veils of color, bright yet soft, not quite like anything seen before. Greenberg considered the technique a revelation.

Frankenthaler understandably denied that Greenberg had played a part in her professional advance, and it's true that he did not write about her while they were

together, though her career certainly flourished; she'd had two solo shows by the time she was twenty-four. Gabriel quotes, without comment, an interview with Frankenthaler's nephew, who refutes the suggestion that she was motivated by "careerism," swearing that she had merely wanted to be "near a brilliant mind and be exposed to the best art of the time—to learn." Surely there's some middle ground between this strict high-mindedness and the verdict of, say, the sculptor Louise Nevelson—not quoted by Gabriel—who told the feminist art historian Cindy Nemser, "She's used Greenberg. She's used everything in an abominable way."

No doubt Greenberg's intellect was part of the attraction, and the world he opened to Frankenthaler was thrilling; she described her new social life as "heart pounding." But it's hard to blame an ambitious young artist for using guile—even, yes, sexual guile—when it was one of the very few weapons she possessed, at a time when most commercial galleries had an informal quota of, at most, two women artists. Do we require that male artists be perfectly pure of motive? Who looks down on Max Ernst for marrying Peggy Guggenheim? No one was hurt by the affair, except for Greenberg, when Frankenthaler broke it off. And also, perhaps, Frankenthaler, when Greenberg subsequently heralded two male artists who'd adopted her stain technique—Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland—as leaders of the first important post-Pollock development in American art. It took years for her role to be recognized, and Gabriel forcefully insists that she was robbed.

**G**race Hartigan was justifiably proud of making it on her own. She had the biggest career of any woman in the fifties, despite the disapproval of Greenberg, who found her move toward recognizable imagery—she was soon painting street scenes and still-lives—markedly retrograde. The only man who could outweigh Greenberg in such matters was the utterly unswayable Alfred Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, a soft-spoken rebel who loved to tweak the status quo, including the pious doctrine of abstraction that he had helped establish. Clearly, to his eye, Hartigan's dynamically brushed images, which applied the lessons of abstraction to figurative ends, were not a

retreat but a new way forward. And, to the amazement even of the artist, he began to acquire them for the museum, beginning with “The Persian Jacket,” a totemlike portrait of an enormous blank-faced woman wearing a bright-orange thrift-shop jacket. It was the first work by anyone of her generation, male or female, to enter the collection. (The art world was then so small that the poet Frank O’Hara, who had a job selling postcards at MOMA’s front desk, telephoned Hartigan to say that he had just seen Barr himself trying to wrestle the painting through the museum’s revolving door.) There was some jealous sniping as her fame grew, and resentment at her refusal to acknowledge the difficulties that other women artists faced. But, as she saw it, all they needed was fortitude. Only “inferior talents” had a problem.

Joan Mitchell, whose talents were still evolving yet anything but inferior—she was arguably the most gifted of them all—nevertheless had many problems. Hard-drinking, hard-swearing, argumentative, she comported herself as fully equal to the boys and, like Hartigan, felt no particular allegiance to other women: she referred to Frankenthaler, with her stained canvases, as “that tampon painter.” Her own paintings were abstract explosions of energy and color, indebted to the older New York generation but with distinctive strains of lyricism and violence. Although her work received good reviews, she had no big supporters at museums or in the press to boost her fame (and no famous husband, for better and worse), which may help explain her resentment toward those who did. In her private life, despite her show of toughness, she suffered over the wrong men instead of making use of the right ones, and at times her relationships were as violent as her art. Gabriel mentions, almost as a matter of course, incidents that left her black and blue, and it seems that she could give nearly as good as she got. The book attempts to come to terms with her intractable psyche; most telling, though, is a quote from the French critic Yves Michaud, who described her as “a burning sensibility, one that is skinned alive.”

Truly startling, nevertheless, is a rape that earns just a couple of lines and is not mentioned again. Mitchell had been visiting her lover, the artist Mike Goldberg, in a mental institution—a small-time thief, he had accepted this alternative to jail

—when she was raped by an attendant. Gabriel writes, in full, “She didn’t press charges. She called the attack ‘the dark side of being with Mike.’” This goes well beyond Mitchell’s knockabouts with her various lovers, and the reader longs for something more, some authorial aid in integrating the account into a life that, however destructive, was also functioning and productive. Perhaps Mitchell is an extreme case; perhaps there was no integration. Yet a sense of the author gingerly retreating from the darker reaches of her subjects’ lives occurs, too, with a story about Hartigan, who, after leaving a party one night, slugged a drunk but harmless hanger-on so hard that he landed in the gutter, then explained to a befuddled friend, “I can’t stand a man who doesn’t act like a man!” For Gabriel, this incident shows “Grace at her most imperious.” Is that all it shows? What about out-of-control anger and aggression? What about a disturbing aggrandizement of “masculine” behavior? Gabriel also rushes past a report of Elaine de Kooning’s “psychological pregnancy”—when the adamantly childless artist believed she might be as far along as seven months. Giving due weight to these episodes does not gainsay Gabriel’s essential point about our heroines’ strength but, rather, allows them their fears and complexities, and underscores the harsh and sometimes deforming cultural forces they were up against.

One force too often ignored is the imperative of beauty. I have refrained so far from physical description of these women, in part because I grew impatient with Gabriel’s references to their looks—although, in fairness, she is reflecting an emphasis that her subjects took for granted every day, as women still do. And, no surprise, beauty was not without professional advantages. Krasner is the exception in the group, since she was by no one’s measure beautiful; Gabriel allows the word “ugly” to come from people’s mouths, as it seems to have done quite freely. Elaine de Kooning was much more than a beauty—Krasner told her that she had “the heart of a tiger”—but her appearance was undoubtedly important in making her a role model for younger women. Hartigan, who, like Frankenthaler, was much admired for her looks, recalled her breathless first impression of de Kooning as “the most beautiful and most sexy woman I had ever seen. Red hair, pale green eyes, a perfect body.” By the late fifties, however, when de Kooning was nearing forty, she was largely excluded from the growing public

interest in the peculiar phenomenon of women painters—that is to say, of young, glamorous women painters.

In May, 1957, *Life* ran a feature, “Women Artists in Ascendance,” written by the same editor who had put together the story about Pollock almost eight years earlier. Presenting five outstanding American female painters, “none over 35,” it dedicated four pages of color photographs to the subjects, all shown posing with their work. Included alongside Hartigan, Frankenthaler, and Mitchell were Jane Wilson (who also “works as a New York fashion model”) and Nell Blaine. The paintings, in each case, are striking—Frankenthaler’s blue-washed canvases seem a floating world—but it’s clear that the women are the story. Mitchell protested the use of her photograph, very possibly because, unlike Hartigan and Frankenthaler (whom she was known to call “those two bitches”), she had always been unhappy with her looks. Gabriel assures us that this insecurity was unfounded—quite rightly, though one may question the need to certify that Mitchell was “gorgeous” and had “full, magnificent breasts.” The photograph in question shows a serious (and attractive) young woman, wearing an artist’s serious black turtleneck, with an enormous canvas rolled out before her, on which a hurricane seems to be taking place, and with other equal-force storms on canvases behind. A small figure at the center of the vortex, she appears strangely calm in the midst of all that she has unleashed.

**F**ull-color glory did not last long. In January, 1958, the cover of *ARTnews* displayed a painted target below four framed plaster faces, a work by the twenty-seven-year-old painter Jasper Johns. MOMA bought three of his paintings before the month was out. New movements were on their way—neo-Dada, Pop, Minimalism—and were being taken up at record speed. Pollock’s recent death had sent his prices skyrocketing; no one wanted to miss out on the next possible genius. Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly: the art world was soon filled with newly celebrated names, virtually all of them male. Not only were the women of the earlier era largely dismissed during the next few years (“It was almost as though you were obliterated from the face of the earth,” Hartigan said); *all* women artists seemed to be dismissed. The new movements turned out to be

even less open to them than the old. Modern art was becoming a big business, dealers and gallery owners had become power brokers, and work by male artists commanded much more money. This price differential was hardly new, but it had mattered less when the sums all around were relatively small. Except for a brief epilogue, Gabriel ends her book in 1959, when the bold independence embodied by the Ninth Street Show “sputters and dies,” and the rough commercial beast of the art establishment is being born.

Some could not bear to witness the changes. Hartigan left for Baltimore, making a terrible marriage and a terrible, isolating move for her career; she spent the rest of her life there, painting in whatever abstract or figurative style her feeling prompted. Mitchell settled in France, where her work deepened with the years. De Kooning, by then separated from her husband, kept a base in New York but began teaching all across the country; continuing with her explorations of portraiture, she won a commission to paint President Kennedy, in 1962. Although Frankenthaler remained a part of the New York scene, she found herself demoted in a different way after she married a more famous artist, Robert Motherwell, and reviewers began “discovering” traces of his influence in her work. As for Krasner, she was stuck with the bravura role of Pollock’s widow, and managed his estate until 1972. It was she who tripled and quadrupled prices after his death, forever changing the market for American painting, while at the same time working herself out from under his long shadow, faithfully executing her own abstractions to the end.

In April, 1972, Krasner joined a group of some three hundred protesters at MOMA wearing signs that bore statements such as “MOMA PREFERS PAPA” and “SIGMUND, THIS IS WHAT WE WANT, AN END TO DISCRIMINATION.” Marshalled by a recently formed organization called Women in the Arts, the group sought not only to expose the unfair treatment of female artists but to demand an exhibition of their works, to be selected by the membership and held simultaneously in the major museums of New York. That didn’t happen. Nor did much else for a very long time, despite the museum’s occasional efforts with shows like “Extraordinary Women,” in 1977, which displayed recently acquired drawings by international

figures including Sonia Delaunay, Natalia Goncharova, and Krasner. The real advance has come through the dedication of feminist scholars, such as Linda Nochlin, Hayden Herrera, and Kellie Jones, who have revitalized the discipline of art history and expanded the protest against exclusion to consider race along with gender. Gabriel's firsthand sources are extensive, but her work stands on the shoulders of biographies by other women with a mission: Gail Levin on Krasner, Patricia Albers on Mitchell, Cathy Curtis on de Kooning and Hartigan. (There is no biography of Frankenthaler, as yet.) Perhaps the tipping point will come when men write about women artists as easily as women have always written about men.

**“W**hy have there been no great women artists?” Linda Nochlin posed this question in the title of a famously provocative essay in 1971. Why no female Michelangelo? No female Rembrandt? Nochlin was arguing against the quixotic idea of inborn and irrepressible “genius,” pointing instead to the dependence of recognized genius on a number of worldly factors—education, such aspects of training as being allowed to sketch from nude models, encouragement, community, patronage, rewards—none of which were available to women through most of history. (As late as 1929, Krasner was suspended from the National Academy of Design, for sneaking into a classroom reserved for men.) Nochlin was writing about visual artists. When it came to the demonstrable genius of women in literature, Virginia Woolf had a handy explanation: “Books, pens and paper are so cheap.”

In the mid-fifties, Nochlin had been dazzled, as a young teacher at Vassar, by Hartigan, who visited the school to speak at an exhibition of her work. Wearing paint-covered jeans at a time when all the women on campus wore skirts, Hartigan smoked throughout her talk. “She was just marvelous,” Nochlin recalled. “I mean she was a true artist.” Great? A true woman artist was astonishing enough. Historically speaking, in terms of generations of access, women have barely had the time to produce a Giotto. Of course, real changes are upon us, and today one can reel off the names of a number of first-rate women artists. Nevertheless, women are just getting started.

Most important, great or mediocre, it's impossible to judge art that no one sees. MOMA is currently undergoing an expansion that will make room for artists long ignored; at the time of the protests in 1972, works by women (principally paintings) amounted to less than ten per cent of the collection. As of 2018, the number of works by women painters has advanced all the way to eleven per cent. And what is collected is not necessarily exhibited. Right now, in the permanent-collection galleries, even this paltry percentage seems high, to judge by the total of eleven works of painting and sculpture by women on view. As for the Ninth Street women, there is only a single work to see, by Frankenthaler.

But a special exhibition at the museum, about artists' later careers, includes a full room of Mitchell's work, and it is enthralling. (A docent proudly informs visitors that the show, "The Long Run," has been mounted by two young female curators.) Three enormous two-panel canvases, dating from the last sixteen years of her life—one was painted two years before her death, at sixty-six, in 1992—invoke the French countryside where she lived, and late Monet as much as American abstraction, in a lush and incandescent synthesis. Were these paintings avant-garde or even "modern" at a time when movement after movement was flashing by? Mitchell didn't give a damn. Wholly involved in the surrounding earth and the responsive self, color and emotion, she worked with an intensity that makes these elements indistinguishable. Nasturtium gold, warm light. Forest chill, the touch of the wind, vitality. The blue-green verticals of rain and trees. The works seem timeless, yet they clearly spring from the years of Mitchell's formation: the fifties in New York, the last moment of romanticism about paint and all that it could capture—when painting was, in her words, "the opposite of death"—when a woman gave up everything to be a painter, and made a fair exchange. ♦

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