



# PAINTE





Helen Frankenthaler, one of five artists profiled in *Ninth Street Women*, lounges with her artwork circa 1956.

The story of five women who helped create an exploding New York art scene in the 1950s is only now being told. Author **MARY GABRIEL** talks to Brunswick's **FRANK TAGARIELLO** and **CARLTON WILKINSON**.

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**I**N 1951, A GROUP OF 72 ARTISTS, DRAWN TO the newly minted Abstract Expressionist style and mostly living and working in downtown Manhattan, participated in an exhibition on two floors of a Ninth Street building scheduled to be demolished. Among them were names now considered the pinnacle of the era: Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg, David Smith.

Among them too were women – some who had helped define the style but whose names have since been largely written out of art history books.

“All of a sudden, all these taxi cabs started pulling up and cars started pulling up,” says Mary Gabriel, the author of *Ninth Street Women*, a critically acclaimed Amazon Best Seller on the important role the women artists played in the New York art scene from 1929 to 1959. “People came out in evening clothes. These artists, used to talking to each other, were suddenly showing their work to people who were dressed up as if they were going out to an opening at The Museum of Modern Art.”

Many of those artists became part of The Museum of Modern Art collection, including Grace Hartigan, one of five women whose careers Ms. Gabriel examines in detail in *Ninth Street Women*.

“It was really the introduction and the birth of this first major American art movement,” Ms. Gabriel says. Having already written an acclaimed book on Karl Marx and his circle, the Pulitzer-nominated author turned to abstract expressionists, finding it a revelation that the important role women had played had been seriously devalued in our own time.

“That period has been written to death and yet here’s a major part of it,” she says. “I like to write about something that you think you know everything about, but when you look at it from a slightly different perspective, you get an entirely different story. That’s the fun for me, to shine the light from a different point of view and the contours that emerge are really fascinating.”

Along with Ms. Hartigan, the author looks at Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler, artists who represent a much larger group of women involved in the scene. The research and writing took over six years and included direct conversations with many of those who knew and worked with these women.

“I was lucky enough to meet and interview a lot of their friends who were still alive, women and men,” Ms. Gabriel says. “And that was really crucial. A lot of these people were considered sort of secondary or even without value by earlier historians of the move-

ment. And yet these people had incredibly rich anecdotes and memories. And only by combining these supposedly peripheral figures and their stories could I come up with the actual story.”

#### **What inspired you to write *Ninth Street Women*?**

Back in 1990, I was assigned the task of interviewing Grace Hartigan for a magazine article. When I met Grace, she began telling me, not about herself necessarily, but about this incredible group of people she worked with in New York in the '40s and '50s.

A lot of them were names I knew: Jackson Pollock, Bill de Kooning, Franz Kline and Larry Rivers. But then she talked about a lot of women, too. It wasn't that she was making a point of talking about women – they were just an integral part of the scene. I had never heard that part of the abstract expressionist story, the very important role that women played in it. But I had a lot of other things to do, so I didn't begin writing the book until 2011. [Ms. Hartigan died in 2008.]

#### **The impact of World War II and the Cold War fueled the abstract school. Was that an attraction for these women in particular?**

No, it was for the whole movement. You can't live through all of that as an artist, no matter what kind of artist you are, and not be affected by it. The language used on canvas before the war – you can't use those same techniques after the war. They basically said, we're starting from scratch. The only thing that you can do is approach this blank canvas and paint what's inside you because nothing else is real anymore. Everything had been destroyed. One of the people quoted in the book describes it as a rupture in humanity. There's a before 1945-46, and an after. What comes after, whatever art form it is, cannot be the same as what came before.

#### **Was documentation about these women harder to find than for someone like Jackson Pollock?**

Definitely, yes. The documentation is there, and there's a ton of it. It just takes a little bit more digging. That was kind of fun. When you tell the story of Willem de Kooning or Jackson Pollock, you have a tendency to use previously published material, interviews in magazines or books about them, or abstract expressionist history. But when you tell the story of Elaine de Kooning or even Lee Krasner, or definitely Grace Hartigan, you have to go to the primary sources. That's the part of the project that I actually enjoy the most, the digging through the libraries to find those gems.



**Elaine de Kooning paints on a cylindrical sculpture in her New York studio in 1961. Top, her 1948 painting "Untitled, Number 15." A significant painter herself, she married Willem de Kooning in 1943.**

#### **How did you settle on this group of five?**

About 10 percent of the artists were well-respected women. This is over a course of about 30 years – 1929 to '59. These five stood out because they were really critical to the movement or because their art was so important. And they gave me the best window into the movement, partly because of their ages. Starting with Lee, who was the oldest of the group, and ending with Helen, who was 20 years Lee's junior, I could tell the history of the movement.

Lee's experience – she struggled as a young adult through the Depression to fend for herself – was completely different from the experience of Grace, Helen and Joan's generations. Joan and Helen had gone to an art college. French art was accessible to them in museums. When Lee and Elaine started, The Museum of Modern Art was just opening.

Each decade had its own personality. The '30s in the Village was all about the intellectuals – not necessarily exclusively about art. It was also about the economic crisis and rising fascism. The artists, men and women, were completely involved in the Spanish Civil War, completely involved in this really, vehement dialogue about greater issues outside the studio.

By the '40s, when the war was on, many of the men were gone. The Village was kind of desolate. That's when Pollock and de Kooning first rose to the surface. They had medical problems and couldn't go off to fight. So the men and the women who were still there formed this really tight community.

By '48 and '49, the American scene was really blossoming. The French artists, including Surrealists, who had been war refugees in New York and had been an inspiration, had all left. The men who had



been fighting were back, and the men and women who had been on the scene since the '30s were in their studios, literally creating a revolution. That's when the huge breakthroughs started happening.

In '49, the artists found actual homes. One was The Club, a loft on Eighth Street that the artists had just for themselves and their closest friends – including writers, composers and poets they loved, intellectuals they could learn from. That was really one vibrant scene. And then, in 1950, the Cedar Bar was discovered. That's where they went to have fun, to blow off steam, act crazy until 4 in the morning. Problems that composers were facing were similar to those that the visual artists were facing and that poets were facing. It was this constant dialogue. People would go off to their studios, come back at night, meet up. The talk didn't stop.

By the '50s, the galleries were proliferating and that began to change the whole scene. By 1955, it was really becoming something else entirely.

**In the book, you quote Grace Hartigan saying, "Men have no objection to women as creators. It's only when they're all scrambling for recognition that the trouble begins."**

Yes, that was absolutely the case. It wasn't just the women. There were a lot of men who were excluded too. Relatively few collectors were willing to take a chance on this art, and they focused on just a few painters. And so, the scene went from being a population of about 50 artists, let's say, to a focus on a handful. And that changed everything. Then everybody else was competing for scraps.

It's funny, at the same time that there were a few men who the market was focusing on, around post-1955, there were also a few women. Grace, Joan and



Grace Hartigan's 1952 "The Persian Jacket" was bought by MoMA in 1953. Below, Helen Frankenthaler is flanked by Ms. Hartigan, right, and Joan Mitchell at a Frankenthaler opening.

Helen were selling, showing all over the country. In Grace's case, all over the world. They were written up in Life Magazine, Newsweek, Glamour, Mademoiselle, Time, Saturday Review. They were well known to a mass audience. Part of the fascination was that they were women. But that ended before the fascination with the men did.

The reviews of them in the '50s are very respectful, very serious. But then when you read the reviews of them in the early '60s – in Helen's case, she's described as the daughter of a New York State Supreme Court judge and the wife of Robert Motherwell and then parenthetically she's a painter. They describe her "boudoir" colors – it's crazy how she is diminished. And Grace is kind of written out of history because she had the temerity to leave New York.

Traditionally, women aren't considered the primary artists. Women can't be geniuses. In the '40s and the early '50s, supporting each other, this group didn't really ever even consider gender. But after collectors and galleries got involved, that old "gender versus genius" became a formula again and the men were the ones who were embraced and heralded.



PHOTOGRAPHS: BURT GLINN / MAGNUM PHOTOS / MUSEUM OF MODERN ART / SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY

For women to remain part of history, the scholarship has to be there. Art history courses have to teach them and books have to be written about them and galleries have to show them. When galleries stopped showing these women, critics stopped writing about them, museums stopped collecting them. They just drifted away. That was it. It's a tragedy. The result is that we have a history half told of that period.

**Wasn't Grace Hartigan's "The Persian Jacket" the first abstract painting bought by MoMA?**

Of the second generation, yes. They had paintings by Pollock and de Kooning by this time. But she was the first of the second generation, male or female.

That story is great. The poet Frank O'Hara, who was her lifelong love, was working at the front desk of MoMA, watching Alfred Barr, the director, and his assistant, Dorothy Miller, trying to get the painting inside. Frank was on the phone with Grace, saying, "They're bringing it in. They're bringing it!" And it wouldn't fit through the door. For a moment, her future hung on a revolving door. [Laughter] Luckily, there was another door into the museum.

**Elaine was married to Willem de Kooning and Lee Krasner to Jackson Pollock. Were those marriages a factor in them being overshadowed?**

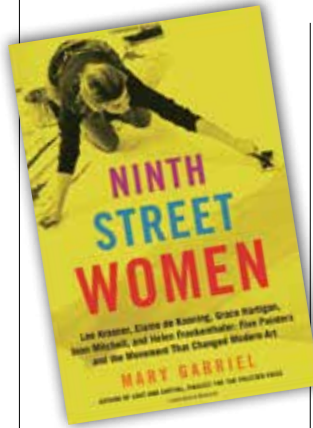
Definitely. At the time, both women were, without exaggerating, as powerful as their husbands. But they've since been overshadowed because of who they were married to.

Also Lee, for a certain period, stepped back because part of her attraction to Pollock was that she thought he was the greatest artist in America. She dedicated herself to helping promote him.

It was the same with Elaine: She really thought Willem was a genius. And she had this natural generosity of spirit and was going to do whatever she could, not just to help him, but to help whomever needed her.

**Grace called herself George for a little bit, right?**

She did. To her dying day, it really annoyed her because it was misinterpreted by feminists as Grace trying to hide her gender in order to sell paintings. She called herself George because she had joined the Tibor de Nagy gallery and John Myers, who was the director of the gallery, and a lot of his friends were gay. The men called each other by women's names. And so, Grace took George. John Myers, absolutely seeing the delight in everything, said, "Oh, isn't that great? You don't have to change the initials on your monogrammed sheets!"



Mary Gabriel's book details the lives and contributions of five women instrumental in New York's abstract expressionist movement. Below, Lee Krasner in the 1950s, standing in front of one of her paintings.



To think that she was trying to hide behind that name is ridiculous because Grace didn't hide behind anything. Anybody coming to George Hartigan's shows would have met Grace and then some. She was absolutely a huge personality.

In about 1953 or '54, The Museum of Modern Art just finally said, "This is crazy. Just call yourself Grace. Everybody knows that you're Grace." So that's what she did.

**Are there still misunderstandings regarding these women's careers?**

Definitely. People say they were too tough. They were terrifying in some ways. They were driven artists and not at all the nurturing kind of woman that the 1950s supposedly produced. No one would ever say a man was too tough or, "Jackson Pollock was an S.O.B., why are you gonna write about him?" It's crazy, but that's the double standard.

The other misconception is that they somehow became tough in order to be like the men. These women were exactly who they were at the age of 13, 14, 15, 16. When Joan Mitchell was in high school, she was so outspoken that she courted expulsion continually. She was so foul-mouthed that her friends wrote letters remarking about it. In New York, she thought, "Finally, here among this group of misfits, I can be who I am without having to worry about censure." She was an absolutely dynamic, fascinating, brilliant artist who happened to be a woman. So there are a lot of misconceptions.

**Are you seeing the perception of women artists changing now?**

With visual art, a couple of things have happened. Women in their 20s and early 30s are having a much easier time getting into galleries. A young painter I spoke with said the question of "am I being excluded because I'm a woman?" isn't even a discussion they would have. So, that is great news although it hasn't actually penetrated the blue-chip galleries yet.

Also, for the generation I wrote about, there's a real resurgence of interest. Some records are being broken at auctions for various artists, including Joan, Helen and Grace.

This all could be a fluke – just this year's flavor. It needs to become part of a greater dialogue. Then maybe this gender divide could be bridged. Maybe women will actually eventually be called genius. ♦

**FRANK TAGARIELLO** is the Brunswick Review's Creative Director and Designer. **CARLTON WILKINSON** is a Director and Managing Editor. Both are based in New York.