

Lee Krasner: Living Color  
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao  
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Lee Krasner's Experiential Oeuvre: 'A Dense Jungle of Exotic Shapes and Colour'

Few influential artists' oeuvres have been more misunderstood than that of Lee Krasner (1908-1984), who was a bit younger than her painter peer Willem De Kooning, yet slightly older than her husband Jackson Pollock. Most critics tend to frame her figurative drawings and mid-career paintings as Cubist and link her allover abstract paintings to those of Pollock. Such simplistic narratives not only neglect her pioneering moves, but they ignore her keen influence on both literature and later visual artists. William S. Burroughs' novel *The Soft Machine* (1961), for which he sliced phrases and words to create new sentences, is attributed to his having discovered Brion Gysin's "cut-up technique" in the Beat Hotel in Paris in 1959. Apparently, Gysin told Burroughs that they needed to turn painters' techniques directly into writing. Eventually becoming Burroughs' signature technique, he used it to create novels, anthologies and the film *The Cut-Ups* (1967). By 'painters' techniques', it's impossible to know whether Gysin meant the Dada photomontages of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield, Kurt Schwitters' gritty *merzbilder*, Henri Matisse's ingenious 'cut-outs' or Robert Motherwell's elegant *papier collés*.

What's clear, however, is that Krasner's technique, which she finessed in the mid-fifties, is much closer to that of Burroughs than those earlier artists, since she actually destroyed extant artworks to construct new ones, just as he made new sentences by cutting up written ones. To create her collages, she cut up several large-scale black and white drawings that she suddenly found despicable. She then mounted burlap scraps, torn newsprint, drawing remnants and paint atop 12 of the geometric abstract paintings that she had exhibited at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951. This body of work, which she created prior to Pollock's death in 1956, led Clement Greenberg to extoll her as 'a major addition to the American art scene of that era'.

In 1955, Krasner presented several allover paintings alongside multimedia collages at the Stable Gallery, nine years before Andy Warhol gained fame for cramming it full of wooden *Brillo*, *Campbell's*, *Delmonte*, *Heinz* and *Kellogg* boxes (1964). Reviewing her show in the *New York Times*, Stuart Preston characterised Krasner as a 'good noisy colorist' whose cut-ups offer 'a dense jungle of exotic shapes and color'. Such comments evoke improvisational jazz musicians far more than lyrical AbEx painters. Not only was she an avid jazz music collector, but she spent at least one evening dancing to jazz at The Café Society with Piet Mondrian, whose dance style she called 'staccato', since she found his sense of rhythm so complex!

By contrast, painter Fairfield Porter described Krasner's new paintings as 'nature photographs magnified'. He added, 'When nature is photographed in detail, its orderliness appears: Krasner's art, which seems to be about nature, instead of making the spectator aware of a grand design, makes him aware of a subtler disorder than he might otherwise have thought possible'. The micro-details he mentions resemble fractured shards, piercing splinters and coloured filaments. Although these angular, sharp shapes pop up in various manifestations over the years, they arose in 1947 while creating a round table top comprised of diverse materials, such as ceramic chips, coins, keys, pebbles, jewelry bits and mirror shards. One imagines her working out how best to arrange these odd bits, all the while analysing how this process might transform painting. On this level, her oeuvre owes more to Divisionism or Pointillism than Fauvism or Cubism, as is oft claimed. The same year she created this tondo, she painted *Shattered Color*, an incredibly vibrant horizontal rectangle featuring reddish-brown, aquamarine and yellow threads of paint, seemingly twisting together to form an undulating web. This and others like the tondo *Stop and Go (Yes and No)* (1949-1950) green-lighted Op Art's illusionistic, pulsing beat.

Although Burroughs left New York City in 1947, and returned only briefly in September 1953, Pollock was acquainted with members of the Beat Generation, so Burroughs probably already knew about Krasner's 'cut ups' when Gysin suggested they adopt painters' cut-up techniques. Several of her cut-ups, such as *Forest No. 2* (1954), *Bald Eagle* (1955) and *Burning Candles* (1955) are said to include bits of

Pollock's discarded drawings, which ties them to Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning* (1953); exemplary of artists upcycling another's art. In retrospect, her cutting-up artworks to create such super-dynamic imagery also anticipated the Process Art movement, which includes Eva Hesse's rope works, Barry Le Va's floor works or Richard Serra's scatter art. Strangely, art historians tend to credit Pollock with having inspired process art, but there is comparatively very little process involved, other than randomly slinging paint. Krasner's process recently resurfaced as millennial sculptors increasingly sliced, diced and spliced objects to invent surprisingly quirky, dynamic innovative forms.

Krasner's cut-ups point out another interesting aspect about her oeuvre that has largely gone unremarked; that is, its greater focus on landscape than portraiture. No doubt, her earliest artworks from the 1920s and 1930s were figurative, and she briefly returned to the figure following her first exhibition of cut-up paintings; yet nature, as in forests, birds, weeds, seeds, butterflies and water, served as inspirational source material for her otherwise abstract paintings. In fact, her earliest self-portraits depict her outdoors, as if she painted them *en plein air*. Early critics found them too precise to have been painted from life. To my lights, it hardly matters whether she 'added in' the figure or painted herself *in situ*, which she actually did. What matters most is that she remains eternally poised outdoors. Although art historians routinely comment that her scale shifted markedly in the late fifties, since Pollock's death afforded her the opportunity to move her studio from the house to his studio in the barn, they neglect the fact that after 1960, she primarily used the landscape format (wider than height).

It's quite odd that writers mostly associate Krasner's figurative drawings from her days studying with Hans Hofmann in the late 1930s and her paintings that followed the 'cut-ups' with Cubism. Just as *Shattered Color* presents twisting paint threads, her figures appear to twitch and pivot in their frames. Her unsettling characters constantly move, as if they're trying to find a more comfortable position or wriggle right out of the drawing. With *Prophecy* (1956), one of that era's figurative paintings, one imagines a gal balancing on a window sill, trying to get her foothold, so as not to fall out of the window. Unlike De Kooning's earlier 'flattened' women, who appear to have been run over by a steamroller, or Picasso's portraits of women, such as *Les Femmes d'Alger* who stand perfectly still like marble statues; Krasner's full-figure gals feel mangled and contorted, as if they're locked in a cage or shoved in a trunk.

Paradoxically, she finished *Prophecy* (1956) before leaving for vacation in Paris, where weeks later Greenberg phoned her with the horrifying news of Pollock's automobile accident. Upon her return, she painted *Birth*, *Embrace* and *Three in Two* (all 1956), which feature similarly disturbing figures unhappily boxed-in, each tableau a fitting critique of the 'second sex'. Simone de Beauvoir's *La Deuxième Sexe* (1949) had been available in English since 1953. With feminist views floating in the air, she apparently never regretted not providing Pollock the child he claimed to crave. After all, she was first and foremost an artist. I imagine that she titled *Prophecy* after settling into Pollock's studio, where she likely realised that her outsized talent long ago outgrew her in-home studio.

Eerily reminiscent of Leonardo's modest 'deluge' drawings, Krasner's next series is known as her 'umber' paintings (1959-1962). Painted at the scale of actual tempests, they give spectators the sense of being caught in a storm. Launched by *The Gate* (1959), this experiential series incidentally includes *Uncaged* (1960). Leaving most of the canvas blank, their beige grounds echo her earlier burlap collages; while anticipating De Kooning's infamous 'late paintings' with their immense white grounds. She continued this technique for well over a decade, enabling her to put down energetic swirls, whorling vortexes and elongated arabesques. As if to signal this series' demise, she painted *Happy Lady* (1963), an all-over Prussian blue painting evoking a female painter (or farmhand), merrily moving about her field.

For the next twenty years, she produced dynamic paintings ripe with aggressive shapes, interspersed with her sweeping arabesque motifs. In 1965, she wrote 'Painting, for me, when it really happens is as miraculous as any natural phenomenon – as say, a lettuce leaf'. In 1968, she started working in gouache, producing modest, though quite colourful works on artisanal paper that had both the energy and elaborate gestures of her 'umber' paintings. Like those earlier paintings, the blank paper served as her ground. This lettuce-leaf analogy was apparently still on her mind when she painted *Portrait in Green* (1969), *Earth No. 1* (1969), *Palingenesis* (1971) and *Olympic* (1974), her most obviously leafy lattices.

One of her rare hard-edged paintings, the vertical *Olympic* suggests spears or paper airplanes missing their oval target. The same year, she hit a bullseye when she stumbled across a stash of figurative drawings from the 1930s, cut them into angular shapes, arranged them dynamically on canvas and added in spectral imagery found on some of the drawings' backs. Exhibited as "Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See," she titled each drawing after a verb tense, such as *Imperfect Indicative* (1976), *Imperative* (1976) or *Future Indicative* (1977). The technique may have stayed the same, but the resulting imagery is powerful, crystals on steroids.

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