GRACE HARTIGAN AND HELENE HERZBRUN: REFRAMING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM
“No rules, I must be free to paint anything I feel.”
—GRACE HARTIGAN
“AS ARTISTS, HARTIGAN AND HERZBRUN REMAINED CENTERED WITHIN THEMSELVES AND SHARED AN UNWAVERING RESISTANCE TO THE PRESSURE TO CONFORM.”

—NORMA BROUDE
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The 70s was a wonderful time to be a graduate student in the American University art department. Faculty members Mary Garrard and Norma Broude brought an urgent relevance to classes in art history through their leadership in developing Feminist scholarship. I took all of Garrard’s classes, and as a graduate painting student of abstractionist Helene Herzbrun from 1973 to 1975, I worked as the Gallery Assistant in the Watkins Memorial Gallery (the tiny precursor of today’s American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center).

Given this history, I was thrilled when last year Broude proposed curating a two-person show featuring Grace Hartigan and Helene Herzbrun. The idea brought back great memories of the opportunities I’ve had at American University and provided the museum with an opportunity to achieve another part of its mission: showcasing and re-evaluating the careers of important and compelling artists.

One experience that set me on a new career path binds these two painters in my mind. In 1974 Herzbrun suggested I make an appointment to visit Grace Hartigan’s studio in Baltimore and put together a show of her new figurative work for our gallery. This was to be my first crash course in curatorial practice.

Grace Hartigan and her studio assistant, Rex Stevens (who still represents Hartigan’s estate) received me at the side door of a down-at-the-heel, antebellum commercial building in Baltimore’s Fells Point—a centuries’ old shipbuilding area known to sailors, privateers, and an array of shady characters for its three Bs: brothels, bars, and boardinghouses. As I recall, Hartigan’s second floor studio was above a bar and a porn shop (at least it seemed like it to my impressionable eyes).

We went up a very long, steep, and narrow stairway to get to the studio which was filled with the kitschy detritus of Fells Point: a life-sized Styrofoam cactus, plastic toys and sea creatures, etc. I couldn’t help but notice these objects from the street appeared as motifs in the paintings in progress around the studio.

Hartigan knew pretty much exactly what she would show at the Watkins Memorial Gallery, so my first foray into curating involved saying “whatever you want, Grace.” I have used this curatorial method many times over the years whenever there was an asymmetrical relationship between artist and curator. Over time, I have learned collaboration with artists seems to produce the best results. But back then, when Herzbrun pushed me into the ring, I was 24 years old and this was my first rodeo. I keep telling my students “you don’t have to learn everything the hard way,” but getting thrown from a horse, as happened to me with Hartigan, does clear the mind.

Herzbrun and Hartigan were very different people, but both were strong, independent artists. Both had made their careers as abstract expressionists in a male-dominated world, and they possessed the self-confidence to realize and express their unique visions.

On behalf of the students, faculty, and friends of the American University Museum, I want to thank Norma Broude for a catalog essay that is a real contribution to our understanding of how women of their generation made a lasting difference in the way the art world operates. Her exhibition also reminds us that more work needs to be done before economic and critical discrimination against women in any field is no longer a viable option.

Our deepest gratitude also goes to the private collectors, among them Hart Perry and Elisabeth French, and to the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and to the Grace Hartigan Estate in Baltimore, who generously loaned their works to this exhibition.

Jack Rasmussen
Director & Curator
American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC

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FOREWORD

GRACE HARTIGAN AND HELENE HERZBRUN — 5
Inspiration for this show comes in part from my personal acquaintance with both of the “second-generation” Abstract-Expressionist painters whose work is freshly showcased here. I got to know Grace Hartigan, though only briefly, when I curated an exhibition of her work for the Watkins Art Gallery at American University in 1987; and I was Helene Herzbrun’s colleague at this university for almost a decade, between my arrival as a member of the art history faculty in 1975 and her death in 1984.

Both of these women made the Baltimore/Washington area their home, and their work, newly seen here in juxtaposition, is contextualized from the dual perspectives of gender and geography. In this show, I have set out to challenge the bias of the New York art world, which routinely ignores the careers and/or undervalues the legacy of artists such as Hartigan and Herzbrun, artists who lived and worked productively outside of New York for many decades. As an early member of the Abstract Expressionist circle, Hartigan had enjoyed real success in New York in the 1950s; and even after her move to Baltimore in 1960, her work never entirely disappeared from the consciousness of the mainstream. Today, nevertheless, the bulk of attention to her art and life continues to focus on her New York-based work of that single decade, the 1950s, and the nearly five decades when she lived and worked in Baltimore are rarely acknowledged or considered in any depth. This exhibition takes a radically opposed position, assigning newly relevant and positive value to Hartigan’s nearly fifty years of creative work in Baltimore and to Herzbrun’s long and fruitful career in Washington, DC.

In choosing a geographic focus, I have been inspired by the American University Museum’s commitment to documenting and making freshly relevant the artistic heritage of the Washington community, a program that has been carried out with great success for more than a decade by the museum’s director, Jack Rasmussen. I extend to him here my personal thanks for the genuine enthusiasm with which he greeted the Hartigan/Herzbrun project and for the support that he has given it.

My thanks and appreciation go as well to members of the AU Museum’s professional staff, whose work in countless ways has made this exhibition possible: to Keith-Anne Shae, Associate Director, and Carla Galliano, Registrar, for their invaluable work in organizing loans and facilitating various forms of interface for me within the museum and across the university; to Jessica Pochesi, Assistant Registrar, for help with research in the Registrar’s office files; to Kevin Runyon, Preparator, for the show’s superb installation; and to Elizabeth Cowgill, Marketing and Publications Specialist, for ably coordinating various aspects of this catalogue and bringing its publication to successful fruition.

Special gratitude is owed to the artist Ron Haynie, who was a student and colleague of Herzbrun’s, and to Glennie Haynie, who was Art Department Administrative Coordinator during the years of Herzbrun’s tenure at AU. They prepared her papers, now an indispensable research tool, for deposit with the American University Archive, and organized the contents of her studio for two major posthumous exhibitions of her work that were held at AU in 1984 and 1988. Both, now deceased, were Herzbrun’s faithful friends. They were instrumental in helping to preserve her oeuvre and her legacy for future generations, who will remain, as do I, in their debt.
Grace Hartigan and Helene Herzbrun:

Reframing Abstract Expressionism
In the second half of the twentieth century, the Washington, DC area became home to the Baltimore/Washington painters of the second Abstract Expressionist generation, Grace Hartigan (1922–2008) and Helene Herzbrun (1922–1984). Both had taken inspiration from and strongly identified with the painterly abstraction and zeitgeist of the Abstract Expressionist movement that had emerged in New York City during the late 1940s. And both were artists whose styles and career paths gradually diverged from their Ab-Ex roots, evolving in completely personal and utopian ways during the many decades when they worked as artists outside of that city, a choice that allowed each to be framed by issues not only of geography but also of gender.

I will consider here some of the commonalities and differences in the careers and working lives of these two artists, framed by issues not only of geography but also of gender. For even though both were women who notoriously rejected or self-conscious side-stepped the emerging feminist politics of their era, their art nevertheless diverged in significant ways from the now-infamously macho esthetic of their Ab-Ex progenitors.1 In an era when New York had become the geographical center of a rapidly evolving art world, both Hartigan and Herzbrun chose to spend most of their working lives as creative artists outside of that city, a choice that allowed each to be interested in ‘pure’ painting… No rules, I must be free to paint anything I like.”4 And on June 6: “Oh the mystery of the image. Nature, you monster you. I was on the edge of succumbing to the need of looking ‘modern’—abstract—contemporary. All of which is fashion, not painting, and is most dangerous.”8 And "the vulgar and vital in American modern life and the possibilities for an art that might celebrate what she referred to in 1956 as its transcendence into the beautiful.”5

FOR ARTISTS WHOSE WORKS AND TIES TO NEW YORK WERE SO DIVERGENT, THE CHOICE OF A Lifetime’s Work at the Kootz Gallery, generating interest that led to her first solo exhibition the next year at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, for which Greenberg had recommended her. But Herzbrun’s original support for Hartigan’s purely abstract work, which was characterized by its emerging taste for referential imagery and figuration elicited her disapproval and her angry resistance, leading to a lasting break between them.6

Her defiance of Greenberg and his insistence on the orthodoxy of pure abstraction was a major turning point for Hartigan. As a younger artist, just making her way in the New York art world, her residual commitment to finding her own direction and remaining true to herself as an artist, in the face of Greenberg’s power and influence, was an act of high courage. As she writes in her journal on March 31, 1952, shortly after her first solo show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, generating interest that led to her first solo exhibition the next year at the Kootz Gallery, for which Greenberg had recommended her. But Herzbrun’s original support for Hartigan’s purely abstract work, which was characterized by its emerging taste for referential imagery and figuration elicited her disapproval and her angry resistance, leading to a lasting break between them.6


In the following years the museum actively promoted Hartigan’s work and reputation. She was the only woman and one of the youngest artists to be included by Barr and curator Dorothy C. Miller in two defining MoMA shows of that decade: 12 Americans of 1956, and The New American Painting, a traveling exhibition that introduced Abstract Expressionism to audiences in eight European cities in 1958 and 1959. A flurry of media attention accompanied these shows, with articles and photo shoots that featured Hartigan and her work appearing in popular magazines such as Life, Newsweek, and Look. In 1958, Life Magazine called Hartigan “the most celebrated of the young American women painters.” And in 1959, so great was her popular currency that Newsweek ran a feature story on her adjacent to one on the famous Judy Garland.12

By the late 1950s, however, the growing pressures of fame and celebrity, always a double-edged sword for Hartigan, had begun to take their toll. In a note to herself after her Newsweek photo session in 1969, she wrote: “I must close my doors so abstract and all-over style that quickly attracted critical attention. In 1950, when she was 28, the influential critic Clement Greenberg and the art historian Meyer Schapiro chose one of her paintings for their New Talent 1950 show at the Kootz Gallery, generating interest that led to her first solo exhibition the next year at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, for which Greenberg had recommended her. But Herzbrun’s original support for Hartigan’s purely abstract work, which was characterized by its emerging taste for referential imagery and figuration elicited her disapproval and her angry resistance, leading to a lasting break between them.6

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that I can be alone again. I must have time to think and paint without constant interruption.14 And in a 1974 interview, she recalled how in that earlier period of her life and career she had felt herself “being devoured… I felt that everyone wanted to eat me up and it had nothing to do with my work. My life as a person was very involved with love and friendship and not involved with thousands of devouring strangers. It was a very consuming need.”

In journal entries from the early 1960s, Hartigan had already begun to talk about the demands that the New York art scene made on her time and energy, expressing concern that those pressures would affect her concentration and ability to work, always her primary focus. “One thing that I must have is more time,” she wrote in 1963, “days and nights both, to get into myself and sustain my painting.”15 She frequently expressed her deep need to get away from New York and to experience nature, both during her time there.18 But she worried that life outside the city might lack the necessary tension with which New York’s urban scenes and subjects had imbued her work. “What irony it would be,” she had written, “if I am an artist and my husband is a scientist. We have had a long track record of sacrificing such personal considerations and attachments for the sake of her art.”19 Later writers have connected the impetus for the Baltimore move with the waning of the Ab-Ex movement on the New York art scene, now turning its attention in the late 1950s to Minimalism and Pop, as well as to the shrinking of Hartigan’s old support group in the city. But her discomfort with the pressures of New York, as she has seen, was not new. And in the throes of her new passion, she was able to convince herself that Baltimore could provide what New York had not: the privacy to work in addition to the intellectual stimulus of an engaged and interactive community of artists, musicians, poets, and scientists. Only the former, however, proved to be true. As she told the critic Cindy Nayar in a 1975 interview:

“I had a dream about moving down here. It was a Renais- sance idea. I am an artist and my husband is a scientist. We would find artists, scientists, poets, writers, and put together a salon. Was I ever a dope! My husband is the only scientist that I have met, not only in Baltimore but in Washington, he who has the slightest interest in painting. But he isn’t interested in literature and poetry. All the other scientists are just interested in science. They are not even interested in politics. Whereas during my life in New York I knew Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and all the New York poets. It was a full creative life. I haven’t met a poet here. It is a fragmented life.21”

Further recalling her shock and disappointment on arriving in and setting into Baltimore, Hartigan later said: “I went from the lower east side filled with push carts and loads of material for popular culture that I worked from, and I came into a provincial backwater. I felt tremendously isolated, I didn’t have any friends here.22 But despite her disenchantment and artistic isolation, settle in she did, soon discovering the neighborhoods that she loved. Her old Lower East Side was “200 years more major turning points to her both personally and professionally.

It seems safe to say that Hartigan’s departure from New York was not motivated solely by her new love interest and marriage: she had had a long track record of sacrificing such personal considerations and attachments for the sake of her art. Later writers have connected the impetus for the Baltimore move with the waning of the Ab-Ex movement on the New York art scene, now turning its attention in the late 1950s to Minimalism and Pop, as well as to the shrinking of Hartigan’s old support group in the city. But her discomfort with the pressures of New York, as she has seen, was not new. And in the throes of her new passion, she was able to convince herself that Baltimore could provide what New York had not: the privacy to work in addition to the intellectual stimulus of an engaged and interactive community of artists, musicians, poets, and scientists. Only the former, however, proved to be true. As she told the critic Cindy Nayar in a 1975 interview:

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success in the art world was only possible for artists who exhibited in New York City. It may have been nostalgia for that kind of success that impelled her in 1993 to allow her work to be included in the Whitney Museum's large group exhibition Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–62, which advanced the thesis that Pop Art had evolved out of Abstract Expressionism. But ever since the 1960s, Hartigan had been asserting her dislike for the cool and unemotional cynicism of Pop Art (so categorically different from her own deeply felt and passionately expressed connection to popular culture), saying of the movement, with pointed disdain, that "Pop Art is not painting, because painting must have content and emotion." Her continued aversion to it was encapsulated by the critic Vicki Goldberg, whose feature article on Hartigan in the New York Times, published on the occasion of the Whitney show, was entitled: "Grace Hartigan Still Hates Pop."33

Hartigan's life outside of the New York mainstream may have helped to support her ongoing resistance to being thus reclassified and diminished as a forerunner of Pop Art and of the later Neo-Expressionist movement—as a mere "link" to something other than what she had truly pioneered in the art world: her own poetic and passionate mode of figurative Abstract Expressionism. As the critic and art historian Irving Sandler said of Hartigan and her integrity as a painter: "She simply dismissed the vicissitudes of the art market, the succession of new trends in the art world. This didn't in any real or important way affect her. Grace is the real thing."35

While Helene McKinney Herzbrun36 never enjoyed Hartigan's fame in the establishment art world, she too chose to settle in the Washington, DC area well before it had begun to emerge as a recognized center for new art, functioning there productively, and on her own terms, for more than three decades as an artist and teacher. Like Hartigan, Herzbrun forged her identity in the art world as a "second-generation" Abstract Expressionist painter. She maintained ties with New York artists who shared that identity and helped to keep her connected with that world. Principal among them was Jack Tworkov (1900–1982), who taught summer classes in the Art Department at American University (AU) between 1947 and 1951, thereafter making frequent appearances on campus as a visiting artist and forming ongoing and supportive relationships with many of his colleagues and former students in the department. Herzbrun's regular correspondence with Tworkov, preserved among his papers at the Archives of American Art, as well as Herzbrun's own papers and journals housed at the American University Archives, are the principal primary documents which permit us now to reconstruct the trajectory and character of Herzbrun's artistic life and career, in the absence of a significant body of secondary writing about her.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1922, Herzbrun earned a BA degree in English from the University of Chicago in 1943 and subsequently took painting classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. She worked as a copywriter and designer for an advertising agency before moving to Washington in 1950 to continue her studies toward an MFA in painting at The American University, where she worked with both Tworkov and Robert Gates. She was manager of the Watkins Art Gallery at AU from 1953 to 1968, transitioning at that point into teaching in the Art Department, where she was a member of the faculty until her death in 1984.37 Recognition of her work and promise came early in DC. While still a graduate student, in 1951 and 1952, she was included in two of the Corcoran Gallery's annual area exhibitions. Her work was shown again at the Corcoran Biennial.
in 1953, and then, reaching out beyond Washington, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1954. But opportunities for local artists to exhibit in Washington during these years, list alone, was one supportive community, were very limited, and, responding to the need for “a serious, stand-alone commercial venture that promoted the work of local avant-garde artists,” Herzbrun and her American University colleagues William Calfee, Robert Gates, Mary Orwen, and Ben Summerford became founding members of the Jefferson Place Gallery, a cooperative that created a community for the exhibition of new ideas and the cutting-edge art in Washington, building over its eighteen-year history a newly visible and influential contemporary art scene in the nation’s capital. In a letter to Tworkov postmarked October 1, 1957, Herzbrun talked about the excitement of finding space for the Autumn Place Gallery between 1958 and 1974, and two solo shows at the Corcoran, in 1959 and 1976. (Included in the 1959 Corcoran show were Autumn [1957] and Spring Landscape [1959] from the present exhibition, pls. 12 and 13, pages 62–63). But throughout these years, she nevertheless sought representation elsewhere, specifically in New York. With the help of Tworkov, acting as both a friend and mentor, she was selected in 1959 for a group show of new talent at the Stable Gallery, where Tworkov had had a one-person show the previous year. And, in 1960, she garnered a solo exhibition in New York at the Tworkov Gallery. Consisting of sixteen recent landscape-based abstractions (including from the present exhibition, pls. 12 and 13, pages 62–63), the show was sufficiently well-received to have led to the purchase of one of the larger paintings by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1954.

Herzbrun carried home to DC the inspiration of this encounter with a very particular and isolated kind of natural environment. But its esthetic impact on her soon dissipated as she was driven back into the routine demands of academic life. And good or bad, you’ll be amazed (I was) at the change in form in what I did. Far different from what I, in my ivory tower on Wisconsin Ave., had dreamt up as my aim this summer. That little island of unlimited vistas overwhelmed my theories.

Helene Herzbrun, Landscape (Rising from Purple), c. 1958–1960. Oil on canvas, framed 51 1/8 x 59 1/2 x 1 1/2 in., image 52 1/4 x 58 1/4 in. American University Museum, Gift of Lynne V. Walker, in Memory of Lois Dean Strock, 1997.2

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Herzbrun carried home to DC the inspiration of this encounter with a very particular and isolated kind of natural environment. But its esthetic impact on her soon dissipated as she was driven back into the routine demands of academic life. And, in November, she told Tworkov: “That spirit of creativity brought on this summer in a rush of a time to do it,” an overwhelming eye saturation with the place, and a mental overdose has run itself out…. Even if I’m just thinking of work, I can’t decide if I’m a naturalist or abstractionist.”46

The early experiences described in these letters were foundational for Herzbrun, establishing an evolving dialogue between nature and the abstract that remained central to her practice in subsequent decades. Travel to carefully selected sites, in locations ranging from Colorado to Greece, and the dissolution—nothing, land, sea, sky, drunks, existent anymore, arrived and became tending in its place.
poetry of her immersive experiences in nature at these sites gave her evolution as a constantly abstract painter. The cen-
tral landscape of her abstract art—not as floral represent-
tation but as spatial concept—was still being articulated by her as a realization as late as 1982, when she wrote in her journal:

> “This year I think I can learn some of her lessons and translate them into my studio. But I mean, as I said before, nature as imperiled by man—structures, highways, billboards.” As sources of inspiration for her recent painting, Montauk Highway, for example, Hartigan pointed to the billboard imagery she had seen while driving on that highway. “In the Four Roses whimsy billboards,” she told Soby, “a rose is as big as a human head. Our highways are fantastic! I like nature as imposed on by man. Most of all I like to work directly from American sources and phenomena that are typically American, conventional terms, she said that “the openness here helps me to open my paintings.”44

But her emphasis is nevertheless on the manmade, as in the 1982 invitation to the George Gallery in DC, she’d no longer have no representation there.56 To what extent this had been by choice or circumstance is difficult to say. Responding further to Halley’s question about the moodiness or the poetry of the natural environment itself.

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mality of the work she produced in such environments.48

While choosing paintings for Corcoran, I realized I’ve been working with a local critic who trafficked in personal attack and gratuitous attacks. She did it by countering and exposing Richard’s bias in a series of per-

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Despite, or perhaps because of Hartigan’s close associ-
ation with Abstract Expressionism in New York in the 1950s, in later years she did not become a joiner, preferring instead to isolate and distinguish herself from newer groups and movements both in New York and in Washington, DC. Even as Washington: “I want to show with my kids,” she said. “I like that.”

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__Graeme Hartigan and Heloise Herzer-Grun__
The “famous lady painter” reference to Hartigan, whom Life Magazine had recently dubbed the “most celebrated of the young American women painters,” was undoubtedly tongue-in-cheek, for neither of these artists would have appreciated being referred to as a “woman artist” or a “woman painter.” The interview that Herzen passed on to Tworkov is not preserved in his archive. But given the timing, it is likely to have been Har- tigan’s interview with James Thrall Soby, published some three months earlier in the Saturday Review (and discussed above).

Since the 1960s, a number of institutions, both in the United States and abroad, have provided a social link between the two women. But it does not appear that they were close in any way during the decades when both lived in the Washington area. Despite their geographical proximity, their lives did not frequently intersect and their documented points of contact were remarkably few. And on all of these occasions, notably, it was Herzen who reached out.

More than a decade later, Hartigan’s work continued to resonate at AU. In 1969, the Watkins Art Gallery purchased her 1961 painting, Spanish Thanksgiving (pl. 3, page 52), a gift to the Watkins of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (Childe Hassam Fund), 1975.61 On both occasions, Herzen accompanied the invites as an Artist-in-Residence for the spring of 1973; and later, when that did not work out, she proposed a less time-con- suming appointment as Artist-in-Residence for the spring of 1975. On both occasions, Herzen accompanied the invites with an offer to visit Baltimore to discuss the program and any terms that Hartigan might require. But both times, though expressing interest in “high regard” for the department at AU, Hartigan declined, citing the priority of her commitment to the Maryland Institute, increasing problems with her health, and her need to preserve as much of her time and energy as possible for her own painting.

The correspondence on both sides was professionally cordial, but betraying no prior acquaintance or relationship between the two. Nevertheless, the effort at sincere outreach on Herz- brun’s part was clear. After the first offer was declined, she wrote on May 22, 1972 to express the department’s disappointment:

We realize that this is pure speculation since one hardly contacts a famous lady painter. You may have seen it. At any rate it seemed to me quite candid and straight forward. I was impressed having not expected such clear headedness from Hartigan.”

And writing again on April 19, 1974 to extend a second invitation, she said:

“We are certainly willing to consider any variant schedule, just so you know. Are you free and able to do so? We would be very honored if you could, for as we said two years ago we have long appreciated your work and your well-deserved reputation as an artist. Although neither offer was successful, this did not mark an end to the AU Art Department’s—and Herzen’s—interest in Hartigan’s work. In the following fall of 1974, while still chair of the department, Herzen initiated an application to the Ameri- can Academy of Arts and Letters that resulted in the Academy’s gift to the Watkins Art Gallery of the second painting by Hartigan to enter the AU collection, Beware of the Gifts of 1971 (pl. 8, page 57). That acquisition probably helped to motivate a more radical exhibition of Hartigan’s work in DC, an event that Herzen was again responsible for initiating. Jack Rasmussen, now Director and Curator of the American University Museum, was a gradu- ate student of Hartigan’s at AU from 1973 to 1976. He recalls that when he was working as the Gallery Assistant at the Watkins in 1974, Herzen suggested that he visit Grace Hartigan in Baltimore and put together a show of her new figurative work. That show opened at the Watkins Gallery in November of 1975. Entitled Grace Hartigan, The Move from Abstract Expressionism, selected works from 1961–1973, it consisted of seven large-scale paintings completed by Har- tigan after her move to Baltimore the year that now belonged to the American University Museum collection and another five selected by and on loan from the artist. The focus of this show, then, clearly and refreshingly, was not New York.

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The emergence of women in the late 1940s and 1950s in the New York art world, where previously—with the rare exception of an artist such as Georgia O’Keeffe—their existence had been barely acknowledged, is a phenomenon newly marked and extensively documented in the recent literature.63 In 2016, Mary Gabriel’s popular, biographical survey, Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler, Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art, newly canonized and shone a welcome spotlight on the lives, struggles, and remarkable successes of these five women during their time in New York. Two years earlier, in 2014, the Denver Art Museum mounted an ambitious and revelatory exhibition, Women of Abstract Expressionism, curated by Gwen F. Chanzit, which reached out more broadly to showcase the art of a dozen woman who had worked on both the west and east coasts during the 1940s and ’50s in the context of Abstract Expressionism.64

The increased visibility of women as artists in the late 1940s and 1950s in the United States was surely linked to the lingering societal impact of WWII, an era when women had been needed into the real-world action of factory and manufacturing jobs that had normally been unavailable to them. And for some, that first foray into the workforce persisted, even after the men came back from their jobs and women were again consigned to the home, a regressive move that was supported in the United States by a massive shift in social propaganda. Nevertheless, it must have been the residual sense of that wartime empowerment and liberation from gender role conformity that made Hartigan and Herzbrun, along with their other “north street” women below that confluence, both consider and succeed as professional artists in a world that previously might not have welcomed them.

But by the end of the 1950s, women’s brief postwar moment in the New York art world was over. Throughout the postwar years, American women in general had been re-socialized to abandon their new aspirations and return to their domestic roles and identities. At the same time, there existed a strange disconnect between the societal forces that were urging women to valance and devote themselves to the role of homemaker and the fascination that a non-traditional woman like Hartigan, who was featured in both general interest and women’s magazines throughout the decade, might still hold for this same audience. The trope of the artistic woman and even the “woman artist” could clearly then be accommodated and accepted by the public at large. But the category and realm of the “great artist” was still reserved for men. And that distinction is reflected in the qualified and carefully restricted language with which Hartigan was presented in the popular press. In 1967, as we have seen, Life Magazine described her as the “most celebrated of the young American women painters.” And when her show opened at the Gres Gallery in 1960, the Washington Post continued to refer to her in these terms, as “the woman many critics have called the leading woman painter in the Nation.”65

The larger postwar societal shifts, along with the waning of Ab-Ex among the avant-garde, may help us to understand why it was that women artists whose careers atypically flourished in the 1950s began to struggle and disappear. The “great artist” was still reserved for men. And that distinction is reflected in the qualified and carefully restricted language with which Hartigan was presented in the popular press. In 1967, as we have seen, Life Magazine described her as the “most celebrated of the young American women painters.” And when her show opened at the Gres Gallery in 1960, the Washington Post continued to refer to her in these terms, as “the woman many critics have called the leading woman painter in the Nation.”65

The term “woman artist” survived into this feminist/revisionist era with far more positive connotations than it had ever held back. But it was still a term that neither Hartigan nor Herzbrun could abide. Long conditioned to believe that being labeled a
“woman artist” was to be branded as inferior, each insisted on regarding herself and being regarded by others as an “artist” in what they understood to be universal terms. Hartigan was always particularly outspoken and acerbic on this subject. As the critic Irving Sandler later recalled: “I once asked Grace Hartigan if a male artist ever told her she painted as well as a man. She said, ‘Not twice.’” And in a late life video interview, she stated unequivocally: “I'm an artist. Actually, I don't like even to be called an artist being a female artist and I resent being called a woman artist. I'm an artist. Actually, I don't like even to be called an artist being a female artist and I resent being called a woman artist. I'm an artist. Actually, I don't like even to be called an artist being a female artist and I resent being called a woman artist. I'm an artist. Actually, I don't like even to be called an artist being a female artist and I resent being called a woman artist. I'm an artist. Actually, I don't like even to be called an artist being a female artist and I resent being called a woman artist. I’m an artist. Actually, I don’t like even to be called an artist anymore. I’m a painter.”

Although Herzbrun was a very private person, far less inclined to make public statements or to give interviews than Hartigan, she apparently took a similar position, remaining aloof from and perhaps even unaware of the burgeoning feminist movement in the academy, even though it was having an ever-growing influence in the arts. In a rare interview (for us as well as for Hartigan) was conducted as a taped conversation in the early 1970s by feminist writer and critic Cindy Nemser. It was published in 1975 in Art Talk, a collection of Nemser’s conversations with notable but then neglected women artists of the twentieth century, a collection that has become one of the most important sources of primary documentation available to us from that period. Recalling her conversation with Nemser several years later in 1979, Hartigan described her as a “powerhouse” and an “aggressive” interviewer who “really guided those interviews because she is a militant feminist.” But she proudly remembered that she had resisted any notion of social and political engagement on the part of the artist: “I am very glad that you are involved with this,” she told Nemser, “but I have to devote my energy and time to my work—seriously and thoroughly.”

In her early years in New York, until 1953, Hartigan had signed and exhibited her paintings under the pseudonym “George Hartigan,” and she was continually questioned by later interviewers about her motives for doing so. She repeatedly rejected the idea that it had been a bid to have her work taken more seriously or a ploy to shield herself from discrimination against women—which she always insisted had not existed in the art world at that time—saying instead that it had been an inadvertent homage to two famous women writers who had called themselves “George,” George Eliot and George Sand: “I wanted to identify myself with these two great women.”73

The Nemser interview reads today as an instructive, even inspiring, document, giving voice to the struggles, ambivalent problems and process with which she could identify.74 Explaining why she had been able to find acceptance among the male Abstract Expressionists in New York in the late 1940s, Hartigan said: “Men really love women as commodities and fellow creators. What they don’t want is to share any of the goodie with them. I was friendly in a period when there weren’t any goodies. There wasn’t any fame, there wasn’t any money, there wasn’t any power...” And this is too an explanation that might ring true in part. But Hartigan’s lifelong and larger sense of isolation in this milieu: “I wanted to identify myself with these two great women.”73

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In 1952, when Hartigan, in courageous defiance of Greenberg's scathing rejection, attended a review of a group exhibition in which her work was represented, shereadily admitted that she was aware of the harsh judgment, even if she did not share it. "We are dealing with a calculated opportunity for Greenberg's disparagement of women painters," she had written to Fredric Jameson, "He wants to be the contemporary of the first great woman painter. What shit—he'd be the first to attack."80

As she went her own way, Greenberg's disparagement of women painters—"the copying of male artists, the resistance to any form of directness, revealing at the same time that she had been kept out of the world would somehow not be visible in the work of art."84 She resisted the application of 1970s feminism to herself over the past fifteen years, I was curious to see what the Washington Women's Arts Center would show me... We discussed that day the concept of "feminist art," and I feel that women now are free to incorporate neoclassicism, seeing, fabric assemblage into what was called "high" art. Aside from this difference, I would find it hard to say that this is women's art since many men are adapting similar means. What I can say is that this is an exciting show.86

Despite her later disavowals, then, Hartigan had clearly not been a woman in the world of male painters. Elsewhere, that those differences based on gendered experience were not adequately prepare a young woman to deal with "the real world... the reality of working with men when she gets out of school."87 In her statement for the exhibition catalogue, she addressed these issues and her reservations with characteristic directness, revealing at the same time that she had been kept out of developments in the "feminist" art world.

For artists of my generation the concept of a show of "women painters" belongs to the first to attack.88 Helene Herzbrun seems never to have been as articulate, fully or convincingly, for a younger feminist generation. In Hartigan's case, we discussed that day the concept of "feminist art," and I feel that women now are free to incorporate neoclassicism, seeing, fabric assemblage into what was called "high" art. Aside from this difference, I would find it hard to say that this is women's art since many men are adapting similar means. What I can say is that this is an exciting show.86

In 1985, Harriett joined the National Organization for Women.87 And in 1987, she agreed to allow me to interview her and mount an exhibition of her work at American University, although her wariness and unusual reticence during our conversations suggested that, as in her earlier encounter with Cindy Nemser, my reputation as a feminist art historian had preceded me.88 Helene Herzbrun seems never to have been as forthcoming or as curious about any of these issues. In April of 1976, she once again emphasizing that the works to be exhibited on campus at American University in conjunction with a "Women's Week" celebration sponsored by the Student Program Development Office. But she is not documented as having had any substantive involvement with the event, and for the most part she held herself aloof from the risé tide of feminism in art and politics, both on the campus and in the larger world.

In dealing with the women's movement and questions about it that were repeatedly directed to her by interviewers, Grace Hartigan was undoubtedly trying to be true to herself. She resisted the application of 1970s feminism to herself because, in her view, she had gone through a different kind of experience in a different era. Her position is clearly summed up by her recent biographer, Cathy Curtis, who writes: "Because of her experience in New York, she had little patience for the idea that women traditionally had been put out of the art world, victims of a male cabal. Her view wasn't blinkered, it just wasn't adversarial."89 But it was a view that she never succeeded in developing, fully or convincingly, for a younger feminist generation whose intentions she continued to mistrust. She wrote to  a friend in 1994: "The feminists don't give a shit about me, they just wanted me to join their political agenda."90 But in the long run, and despite her wavy rejection of that agenda, it may well be that feminism and feminists will be instrumental in pres- 26 — GRACE HARTIGAN AND HELENE HERZBRUN — 27

At Helen's (Frankenthaler's) Saturday with the Pollock's, Clem, Barney Newman and Dzubus. Clem got on his kick of the world… the reality of working with men when she gets out of school. Standing as another instance of that compensatory strategy of the 1950s. Her insistence to the contrary is perhaps best under- stood as another of that compensatory strategy of denial, posted here earlier, that was adopted perhaps uncon- sciously by many women of her generation. In Hartigan's case, that denial was a self-protective response that sprang not only from earlier societal conditioning but also, it would appear, from a deep-seated unwillingness to admit that gender had affected any aspect of her career. As its success as an exciting show.86

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Grace Hartigan and Helene Herzbrun both began their careers as gestural abstractionists in the mold of Pollock and de Kooning; and both reinvented the signature styles of the Ab-Ex movement in very personal ways. For most of Hartigan’s career, figuration was an impulse far stronger than abstraction. And as the poetic content of her metamorphic imagery increasingly preoccupied her during her years in Baltimore, drawing gradually assumed a more central role in her practice as a painter. About this growing emphasis on drawing, she said in 1974: “I think I wanted to be more specific. A line is like a lasso. You throw it over your head and you grab something… Drawing is really like writing poetry.”91 Herzbrun, on the other hand, categorically rejected figuration and embraced pure abstraction, gradually transforming the allover gestural mark-making of her early work into a controlled and poetically expressive dialogue between the techniques of brushing and staining. For her, the formal and expressive language of color and spatial relations was always paramount. In the words of the painter Ron Haynie, her former student and then colleague at AU: “All her work relies upon abstract forms and colors reacting to one another, creating reciprocal movements and tensions. This interaction of forms and especially colors creates a specific, individuated content or mood for each work.”92

The present exhibition brings together a selection of large-scale and rarely seen works by Hartigan and Herzbrun drawn from private and public collections, many in the Baltimore/Washington area. It seeks primarily to redirect our attention to the local contexts and communities in which these works were produced, and, secondarily, to promote a deeper understanding of the relationship between mainstream modernist movements such as Ab-Ex and their rich, regional transformations. The show therefore begins with a few examples of each artist’s work from the Ab-Ex decade of the 1950s, but then quickly moves its focus to the period when both artists were active in the Baltimore/Washington area: a period roughly framed by 1960, the year when Hartigan moved from New York to Baltimore, and 1984, the year of Herzbrun’s death.

Today, the bulk of attention to the art and life of Grace Hartigan continues to be focused on her New York based work of the 1950s, a bias discernable in the canvases chosen to represent her in the 2016 Women of Abstract Expressionism show as well as in the disproportionate attention devoted to that phase of her life in recent biographies. In Restless Ambition, for example, the artist’s nearly fifty-year-long life and career after leaving New York are compressed into one third of the text, while the earlier decade of the 1950s comprises two-thirds; and in Ninth Street Women, the art and life of the later decades, following Hartigan’s departure from New York, are presented as part of a short “epilogue,” “brief and typically negative terms.”93 In 1993, the critic Vicki Goldberg, writing for the New York Times, summed up the New York art world’s official position about Grace and her defection from their ranks: “In the 50’s, fame turned a sudden spotlight on her, then in 1960 abruptly turned it off… When she married in 1960 and moved to Baltimore, she sank from view faster than the Titanic.”94 This exhibition begs to differ from these assessments and takes a radically opposed position, assigning newly relevant and positive value to the work of the Baltimore years.

Accordingly, Hartigan’s early figurative abstraction and taste for the “vulgar and vital” in the street life of New York in the 1950s are represented here by a single large canvas, her bold
In 1962, in the year of Marilyn Monroe’s death, Hartigan painted a semi-abstract “portrait” of the famous actress, whom she regarded as a modern version of the goddesses of antiquity (pl. 5, page 54). “For Grace,” Curtis writes, “Marilyn was ‘the last goddess,’ and she wanted to show the personal cost that involved.” Working from photographs and clippings, she first collaged and then painted an image of mundane fragments—a blue eye, a toothy smile, a lank lock of yellow hair, a pair of eyeglasses—low-keyed and far from glamorous fragments that float in an abstract space and coalesce to suggest the ordinary physical reality of the actress as a real woman. Like de Kooning, whose work she admired, and whom she had painted the first Ab-Ex interpretation of Marilyn several years earlier in 1954, Hartigan, too, was unwilling to detach herself entirely from the representational. But the deeply felt honesty and empathy of her own portrayal clearly distinguishes it from de Kooning’s aggressively historic interpretation as well as from the now iconic and impersonal Pop renditions of Marilyn by Andy Warhol. Created, like Hartigan’s work, in the year of Marilyn’s death, Warhol’s brassy and reductionist silkscreen images were based on publicity photographs of the actress. Deliberately and relentlessly repetitive, they embody the media packaging of a pop symbol. As Hartigan herself cogently described the difference, her images of Marilyn have “an emotional element... not just a deadpan repetition, like in Andy Warhol’s work, which showed a very histrionic interpretation as well as from the now iconic and impersonal Pop renditions of Marilyn by Andy Warhol. Created, like Hartigan’s work, in the year of Marilyn’s death, Warhol’s brassy and reductionist silkscreen images were based on publicity photographs of the actress. 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Hartigan was devastated by O'Hara's accidental death in July of 1966, which came at a moment when their friendship had begun to revive.104 In this painting, which she gave as a gift in his memory to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, O'Hara is suggested in the heroic and striding figure at the right, twisting away into a narrow space and bathed in white light. The remainder of the abstract canvas is densely packed with chunky fragments of heavily outlined gray forms. More reminiscent of Cubism than Abstract Expressionism, these abstract forms, Hartigan later said, allude to knightly armor and tombstones.105 As she moved more consistently toward integrating imagery and abstraction in her work during her first decade in Baltimore, Hartigan also became more explicitly focused on the multiple and metaphoric meanings of her paintings, which she saw in direct contrast to the increasingly Minimalist tastes of that decade. "My own work," she wrote in 1968, "moves nearer poetry. It increasingly must be 'read' in terms of meaning and metaphor... not just 'this' standing for 'that' but 'this' existing on many levels."106 These multiple levels of allusion inform the playfully named and constructed Beware of the Gifts of 1971 from the American University Museum collection (pl. 8, page 57). Its title suggests various allusions to Greek myth and drama: for example, “Beware of Greek Bearing Gifts,” the warning associated with Cassandra, Princess of Troy, who foresaw the destruction of her city but was not believed; or another warning sent by Prometheus to his brother to “beware of the gifts” that Zeus might send him, evoking in this case the mischievous myth of Pandora, the first mortal woman sent to earth by Zeus to unleash cares and troubles upon mankind. The setting is nevertheless meant to be a modern one, as suggested by the tank-like train cars that bounce across the painting’s narrow upper register, a reference perhaps to a present-day Trojan Horse. Swirling below is a Miro-esque assemblage of bits of abstracted imagery—a phallic form at the left, an embracing couple at the right, a grimacing head and a pineapple-like form in the center. Their disparities of scale as well as their shifting and suggestive contours keep the reading eye moving around and over the painting’s surface, sustaining its liveliness and its evocative power.

In the early 1970s, Hartigan discovered a rich and unexpected source of inspiration in children’s coloring books, beginning with one entitled Dragons and Other Animals which she came across in the gift shop at the Walters Art Gallery: “I took it to the studio,” she later recalled, “and it was a coloring book based on old prints of creatures, imaginary creatures. And I did a painting. Now certainly there wasn’t any color, I just took off from it.”107 Such imagery appears prominently in Hartigan’s 1973 canvas, Joan of Arc (pl. 9, page 58), where the armored figure of Joan stands at the right, holding her shield and spear and surveying a landscape populated by real and imaginary animals, whose firm but fluent contours suggest a children’s coloring book inspiration. Joan of Arc was a medieval heroine into whom Hartigan was wont to project her own heroic sense of self. In an early Journal entry from 1951, for example, she tried to explain an awkward social encounter that she had had with Clement Greenberg and Jackson Pollock by wryly asking: “What would you say to Joan of Arc at a cocktail party?”108 To underscore Hartigan’s ongoing identification with this female hero, Curtis quotes from another early journal entry and writes: “Again assuming the mantle of a latter-day Joan of Arc, she viewed herself as ‘a crusader, or a missionary’ with ‘the voice that can speak to thousands.’”109 Early on, Hartigan had rejected the masculinizing heroics of Ab-Ex as practiced by de Kooning and Pollock, and she gradually transformed their language into a figurative celebration of the women of history, both ancient and modern. In the 1980s, she
began to focus thematically on famous and infamous women, queens and empresses, and the actresses who played these roles, investing their images with personal meaning. A notable example is Greta Garbo, an iconic movie star of an earlier generation, whose image Hartigan chose to portray, had paid a price for her intransigence. Hartigan’s pointed reference here to paper doll cutouts and pin-up costumes effectively exploits that popular visual form as a cultural signifier to reveal the emptiness and dishonesty of female roleplaying and media packaging. “I’m involved with heroines,” Hartigan told an interviewer in 1985, “and the emptiness of that role.”

The societal impact of gender stereotyping and masking on women throughout history—an issue that had already surfaced in the Grand Street Brides (page 11), Hartigan’s major early painting of 1954—was an important and recurring concern and source of imagery for Hartigan throughout her career. As late as 1998, she told an interviewer: “I can change… the way the world regards women as dolls… and… empty-headed actresses, if I make marvelous paintings that glorify images of woman, can there be art?”

The painting I do on a surface of glass I control. What presents itself when the paper is pulled away is the unexpected tempering by expectation. Discovery emerging from the emptiness and dishonesty of female roleplaying and media packaging, for Hartigan, that same dilemma, in both formal and metaphysical terms, was longer-lived and less easily resolved. “As I look around at all the false starts in the studio… I see my inconsistency, my dilemma—love of the spontaneous unpredictable paint—touch vs. that need for clarity in structure at the same time, my dilemma—love of the spontaneous unpredictable paint—touch vs. that need for clarity in structure at the same time, my dilemma.”

“...the notion of improvisational spontaneity that she had inherited from the first generation of Abstract Expressionists (who had in turn inherited it from their abstract surrealist forebears), embraced instead a personal but nonetheless rigorous standard of order and structure in her work. “In painting,” she said, “I try to make some logic out of the world that has been given to me in chaos.” And in one of her earliest statements about her goals as a painter, she wrote in 1956 that “the rawness must be resolved into form and unity, without the ‘rage for order’ how can there be art?”

For Herzbrun, that same dilemma, in both formal and metaphysical terms, was longer-lived and less easily resolved. Believing in the 1970s that she had found an answer to it in the medium of monotype, “the perfect combination of control and chance” she wrote in a statement that accompanied an exhibition of her monotypes at the Jefferson Place Gallery in 1974: The painting I do on a surface of glass I control. What presents itself when the paper is pulled away is the unexpected tempering by expectation. Discovery emerging from the emptiness and dishonesty of female roleplaying and media packaging, for Hartigan, that same dilemma, in both formal and metaphysical terms, was longer-lived and less easily resolved. “As I look around at all the false starts in the studio…”

Helen Herzbrun, Spring Landscape, 1953. Oil on canvas, framed: 45 1/4 x 48 1/2 in. Private collection.
The work of the late 1950s evolves toward an increasingly confident and forceful application of pigment, with broad strokes of paint overlapping and moving aggressively across larger horizontal canvases that continue, ever more abstractly, to evoke the landscape. Paintings such as Landscape (Rising Sun) from Purply, from Hartigan’s 1960 solo show at the Pondoler Gallery in New York, and Untitled (Blue Landscape), also from about 1960 (pls. 14 and 15, pages 64–65), are comparable, as powerful and accomplished abstractions, to the kind of work that Hartigan was also doing at around this same time (for example, Snow Angel, pl. 2, page 51).

In paintings of the mid-1960s such as Storm-Altered (Colorado Series) and Like Thunder (pls. 16 and 17, pages 66–67), the gestural activity of Herzbrun’s brushwork is now balanced by the interplay of more numerous, smaller and more active shapes and areas of color. These create new compositional tensions in her work and spatial dynamism that complements and forcefully conveys the dramatic weather and atmospheric phenomena that she now sought out and responded to as inspirations for her art. In the work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, those smaller shapes coalesce into larger and more focused areas of intense color. These emphasize the overall gestalt of Herzbrun’s compositions as she skillfully, and sometimes playfully, juxtaposes the experiences of flatness and controlled spatial illusionism in her canvases.

Among the paintings on exhibit here from the early 1970s are several exceptionally innovative works that Herzbrun referred to as her “Color Sweeps.” In these, the gestural brushstrokes increase dramatically in breadth and scale; some morph into stairs; and the random drips of the earlier work resolve into an occasional, dynamic, but carefully placed and purposeful “zip.”

Among the most impressive and original of the Color Sweeps is Aeroplat of 1970 (pl. 10, page 68), in which the exhilarating experience of flight is conveyed by broad diagonal swaths of brilliant color, which overlap and interact with one another to define space and suggest movement. Never a hard-edge painter, Herzbrun’s exuberant and manifestly handmade Color Sweeps allowed her to conceptualize and image space through dramatic juxtapositions of intense but tonally modulated hues, in a manner that was both dramatic and skillfully controlled.

Herzbrun’s “Color Sweeps” of the early 1970s have passion, one of the major qualities differentiating her works from those of the post-painterly Washington Color School. Her “color sweeps” are never limited by the formulaic symmetries often
found in the work of such contemporaneous artists as Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, or even Morris Lewis. Each of Herzbrun’s paintings is a purely abstract evocation of a unique sensory experience and never a formal exercise. Even though the physicality of the landscapes that inspired her is no way visually represented in her paintings, the emotions that those experiences in nature had evoked remain, made visible and palpable by the color and the intensity of the artist’s richly variegated brushwork.

The experience of the ski slopes in Colorado inspired two of Herzbrun’s most striking and clearly related “Color Sweeps” of the early 1970s. Glacial Ascent of 1972 (pl. 20, page 73) features broadly brushed vertical strokes of icy blue pigment that “sweep” up along the full height of the canvas to suggest, subliminally, the experience of ascending a mountain slope, while the area of vivid red in the lower right corner both anchors the composition and provides the viewer with a point of physical access. Displaying an evocative juxtaposition of techniques—techniques of brushing, staining, and controlled, simulated dripping—the canvas creates an atmosphere redolent of icy air and suggestive of a soaring ascent along a slippery glacial landscape, and it does so abstractly, through the assured manipulation of the artist’s formal means. In Glacial Sun (pl. 21, page 74), ice-cold connotes as a companion piece, the poetic subtlety of atmosphere and illumination are conveyed through a series of stained purple transparencies, which play against the blinding golden light of the rectangular sun at the upper left and the zip of white pigment that dramatically centers the composition. A slightly later painting, entitled Calliope (pl. 18, page 68), evokes the same geographic region of icy mountain slopes and blinding white snow, but now through an astoundingly minimalist composition of a very few stained sweeps of color and the intensity of the artist’s richly variegated brushwork.

An earlier painting of 1969, Calliope (pl. 18, page 68), named for the Greek muse of eloquence and epic poetry, is in many ways a pivotal work for Herzbrun that foreshadows several of the paths that she would explore over the coming decade. Its large areas of maximally saturated color in a controlled space offer a very different visual experience from the work of the mid sixties. In Calliope, vivid reds and blues of varying opacities and transparencies are carefully calibrated and compositionally locked into place by a single touch of complementary green that floats in the painting’s upper right quadrant. Its expansive areas of color look forward to the broader gestural sweeps and stains of pigment that will characterize the “Color Sweeps” of the early 1970s. The painting also suggests Herzbrun’s newly awakening taste for the possibilities of a poeticized geometry, which would not fully emerge in her work until her trip to Greece in 1975. In fact, Calliope and Vail are both paintings that signal this latent interest: implied in Vail by the way the color sweeps grow out and give visual prominence to the rectilinear shape of the canvas, and in Calliope by the echoing response of the painting’s smaller forms and larger color areas to the canvas’s rectilinear shape. Herzbrun spent part of her sabbatical year in 1975/76 in Greece, where this new structural concern was brought more explicitly to fruition. The significant body of work that resulted from that experience is represented here by Stones at Sounion of 1975 and Entrances of 1977 (pls. 23 and 24, pages 73–74), where remnants of a decaying classical structure are preserved but also revived in modern terms by the artist’s lyrical palette and brushwork Herzbrun’s Greek-inspired works, described in her journal as “geometry and ambiguity paired,”121 appeared in several one-person shows in the later 1970s, at the Corcoran Gallery in 1976, and at the Jack Rasmussen Gallery in Washington, DC and the Crapo Gallery at the Swain School of Art in New Bedford Massachusetts in 1978. In his introduction to the Swan School show, Nicholas Kilmer spoke thoughtfully...
Throughout her career, Herzbrun’s titles for her paintings had referred sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely to the places and experiences for which her paintings became powerful abstract evocations—dried leaves rustling in the breeze of an autumn landscape, diffused sunlight shimmering off glacial ice, moonlight reflecting off ancient stones and facades. Her compositions and brushwork function as responsive musical forms. The pictorial and the sensory combine to create a charged emotionalism in her work that is poetic, but also restrained, increasingly freed over time from the artificial angst of its abstract expressionist roots.

In a journal entry from the last days of 1979, Herzbrun looked back over the work of that decade and recognized her oscillation between putting “my faith in spontaneity,” as in her monotypes of 1974, to “paintings more structured and geometrical more explicitly,” a shorthand reference to her Greek paintings of the following years.120 Inspired by a recent visit to American University by Philip Guston—whose courage to grow and radically change his work she admired—she now looked to the future: “So in 1980 the motto derives from Guston’s talk,” she wrote. “Trust your intuition—that’s all you gain with time.”124

In the early 1980s, the permission Herzbrun now gave herself to follow her instincts did indeed lead her art in new directions, an evolution cut tragically short by the onset of illness in 1984. Mortality, the cycles of life and death in nature, now inevitably took on more personal meaning as she confronted her terminal condition. The poignancy of the Roses Past (pl. 25, page 75) exemplifies this mood in the work of the early 1980s, and it displays, in the unprecedented painterliness and exuberant mark-making of its execution, the newly unrestrained formal language that she now called upon to express these personal preoccupations. Herzbrun’s Roses Past—“dead roses trying to be awakened but so fantastically painted”—was a testament to her faith in spontaneity and to her own art’s generative powers. It allowed her to find inspiration in the medium of painting, printmaking, and collage, even as the primacy of these forms of expression was undergoing serious challenges in the postmodern era. And both found new and important ways of making those traditional media responsive to their own personalities, visions, and experiences, thereby imbuing them with new life. Upon leaving the New York stage and arriving in Baltimore, Hartigan had continued to identify with the mainstream world that had once welcomed and celebrated her. She largely avoided the then, circa 1960, small and insular art world of the DC and Baltimore region. Herzbrun, on the other hand, always more at home and rooted in that milieu, worked cooperatively with other artists to build and develop for the region an alternative network, one that would “make a statement of Washington art.”125 “Down with provincialism!” as she wrote both hopefully and defiantly in a letter to Tworkov in 1957.126 But for both, their “not New York” status eventually brought them creative freedom. It allowed them to find inspiration for their art in what was most personal to their own rich range of experiences—in nature, in art, in travel, in poetry and in history—and led to a gradual transformation of the language of Abstract Expressionism into uniquely personal and revitalized forms in their hands.
9 Artist’s statement for the exhibition catalogue, Grace Hartigan, Grace Hartigan’s life and work have generated 42—GRACE HARTIGAN AND HELENE HERZBRUN — 43

For a relevant analysis of that esthetic, see 42—GRACE HARTIGAN AND HELENE HERZBRUN — 43

ENDNOTES

56 Specifically, Hartigan told the interviewer that the 12 Women Artists show in 1957–58 was a failure and was not collected by local museums. Presently, only one public museum in DC holds a work by her, the 1954 monotype that she donated to SAAM in 1974. The work of her private work has been bequeathed to American University and is now part of the permanent collection of the Museum.


62 Helene Herzbrun Papers, American University Archives, Box 3, Folder 14, McKinsey, Helene (Herzbrun), 1957, 14–16.

63 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.


65 Data collected in the artist’s files for Herzbrun and 10, 1958. The Tworkov Papers, Archives of American Art, Box 3, Folder 17, 1960.

66 The painting was bequeathed to American University and is now designated “in memory of Jackson Pollock.” See Hartigan, “Oral History Interview with Grace Hartigan,” 1970, 8–12; and Clement Greenberg, “Louis and 1950s, she took the name of her first husband, her daughter, and Helene Herzbrun,” in Dore Ashton, “Two One–Man 10, 1958. The Tworkov Papers, Archives of American Art, Box 3, Folder 17, 1960.


68 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.


72 Helene Herzbrun Papers, American University Archives, Box 3, Folder 14, McKinsey, Helene (Herzbrun), 1957, 14–16.

73 The Helene Herzbrun Papers, American University Archives, Box 3, Folder 15, 1960.

74 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.


76 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.

77 Helene Herzbrun Papers, American University Archives, Box 3, Folder 14, McKinsey, Helene (Herzbrun), 1957, 14–16.

78 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.

79 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.

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83 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.

84 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.

85 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.

86 From letter dated July 10 and August 5, 1954, 14–16.


48 Norris, “American Women Artists of the Pre-Feminist 1950s and 1960s.”


52 Curtis, Restless Abstracts, 134–35.


60 Hartigan, “Oral History Interview with Grace Hartigan,” not paginated.

61 Curtis, Restless Abstracts, 231.

62 Curtis, Restless Abstracts, 231 and 363 note 64.

63 A Bay Area, “Painting Group of the West Coast Art Magazine,” 46, n. 3 (June 1974): 50.


67 Curtis, Restless Abstracts, 134–35.


70 Goldman, Restless Ambition, plate 10.

71 Restless Ambition, 240.

72 On the importance of the Pallas Athena painting for Hartigan, see Bucolo, “The Feminist Positions of Helen Frankenthaler and Grace Hartigan,” 115–157, 134 and 337 note 68.

73 See for example, Tom Tierney, “Painting Group of the West Coast Art Magazine,” 46, n. 3 (June 1974): 50.

74 For a discussion of such instances of proto-feminism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, see Terence Diggory, “Introduction,” Artists and Artists’ Wives, 93; also, Haifley, “Oral History Interview with Grace Hartigan,” not paginated.


76 See for example, Tom Tierney, “Painting Group of the West Coast Art Magazine,” 46, n. 3 (June 1974): 50.

77 See for example, Tom Tierney, “Painting Group of the West Coast Art Magazine,” 46, n. 3 (June 1974): 50.


79 See also, for example, Tom Tierney, “Painting Group of the West Coast Art Magazine,” 46, n. 3 (June 1974): 50.

80 See the exhibition mailer and checklist, Office of the Registrar, American University Museum.


82 See entry dated June 5, 1984, ibid., 93.


84 Haifley, “Oral History Interview with Grace Hartigan,” not paginated.


88 On the importance of the Pallas Athena painting for Hartigan, see Bucolo, “The Feminist Positions of Helen Frankenthaler and Grace Hartigan,” 115–157, 134 and 337 note 68.


90 Haynie, “Paintings from the Estate of Helen Herzbrun,” 1988, 2.


93 Ibid., 91.


96 In 1967, the Birmingham Museum of Art acquired Hartigan’s 1956 painting, Barber.

97 See note 43 above.


100 Ibid., “Making Some Marks,” 50.


102 Ibid., “Making Some Marks,” 50.

103 Ibid., “Making Some Marks,” 50.

104 Ibid., “Making Some Marks,” 50.


110 See for example, Tom Tierney, “Painting Group of the West Coast Art Magazine,” 46, n. 3 (June 1974): 50.


114 See for example, Tom Tierney, “Painting Group of the West Coast Art Magazine,” 46, n. 3 (June 1974): 50.

115 Barber, “Making Some Marks,” 50.


118 Ibid., “Making Some Marks,” 50.


Grace Hartigan, Summer Street, 1956. Oil on canvas, framed: 81 5/16 × 59 15/16 in. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection (Gift of Dorothy C. Miller), 2014-136.132.


Helene Herzbrun, Autumn Landscape, 1957. Oil on canvas, framed: 49 1/2 × 56 1/2 in. Private Collection.


GRACE HARTIGAN
(1922–2008)
PLATE 1: Grace Hartigan, Summer Street, 1960. Oil on canvas, framed 21 5/16 x 19 15/16 in. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection (Gift of Dorothy C. Miller), 2014.136.132.

PLATE 2: Grace Hartigan, Snow Angel, 1960. Oil on canvas, 68 x 72 in. Perry Collection.


PLATE 6: Grace Hartigan, Reisterstown Mall, 1965. Oil on canvas, 80 x 102 in. Perry Collection.


PLATE 11: Grace Hartigan, Untitled, n.d.; Mixed media on paper, 10 ½ x 17 in.; Piery Collection.

HELENE HERZBRUN (1922–1984)
PLATE 12: Helene Herzbrun, Autumn Landscape, 1957. Oil on canvas, framed: 49 1/2 x 56 1/2 in. Private Collection.


A pioneering and internationally noted feminist art historian, Broude is co-editor (with Mary D. Garrard) and contributor to four influential anthologies of feminist art-historical studies, including *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (1994). With Garrard, she organized and wrote the catalogue for the exhibition *Claiming Space: Some American Feminist Origins*, which was shown at the American University Museum in 2007.

Professor Broude has received grants in support of her work from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the U.S. Department of Education, the J. Paul Getty Trust, and the Rockefeller Foundation. She has lectured at major museums and universities including the Courtauld Institute of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Art, and the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Her articles have appeared in *The Burlington Magazine, The Gazette des Beaux-Arts,* and other journals.

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“Trust your intuition—
that’s all you gain with time.”
—HELENE HERZBRUN