

Lee Krasner
Portrait in Green



Pollock-Krasner House
and Study Center

3 August – 29 October 2023

Photographing Lee Krasner at work

Mark Patiky

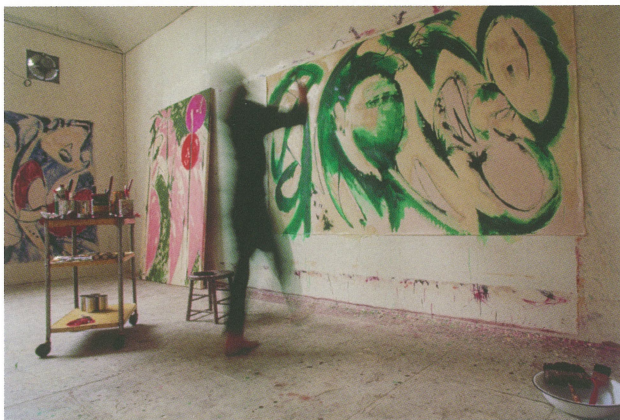
I met Lee in 1969. At the time I was a fashion photographer, and I had been asked to do a portrait of Lee. She invited me out to her home and her studio, and we began at dinner. We talked about all sorts of things, with the exception of art. She became very comfortable with the conversation and invited me into the studio the next day to do the portrait. I photographed her for the portrait, the formal portrait, and she got very comfortable with me in the studio taking pictures. I asked her whether I could photograph her while she worked. She looked at me and said, "No one has ever photographed me in the studio while I work, but I'll let you do that."

I realized that I needed to find a unique way to take these pictures, and I felt that the best way to do that was to have some blurred motion, because she was so extraordinarily energetic. She imbued her painting with energy, and she exhibited that energy as she confronted the canvas. So then I began taking photos, and I realized that if I could do a series of her I would be able to capture this motion with a series of stills. And that's exactly what transpired.

We spent about an hour or so as she worked, and each time she would race to the canvas with her brush and make large strokes and then stand back and contemplate what she had done. I watched her all this time, and then she stood back and said, "It's finished." I blurted out, "How can you tell?" and she said, "I know." Indeed, she was very comfortable with the fact that she knew exactly what she wanted to do, and she knew exactly when she was finished doing it.



From an interview conducted at the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland, 4 April 2020
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKBxONQX01Q>



Acknowledgments

Thinking about how to honor Lee Krasner, whose foresight led to the creation of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, I was struck by the fact that *Portrait in Green*, an outstanding example of her dynamic gestural technique, is singular in two respects. It is the only canvas she painted in 1969—all the other works she created that year are on paper—and it is the only one of her paintings to have been documented as she created it. There are many photographs of her with finished paintings or posing with works in progress, and a film of her making a collage, but Mark Patiky's photographs are the only ones that show her actually applying paint to canvas, a process eloquently described in his recollections. His generous gift of those images and others from his photography session with her were the stimulus for this exhibition.

The show's centerpiece is the painting itself, graciously lent by the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, courtesy of Kasmin Gallery, which represents Krasner's estate on the foundation's behalf. Their loan also includes a selection of the beautiful gouaches that comprise the rest of Krasner's 1969 output. I am sincerely grateful to the gallery's director, Eric Gleason, and his staff, and the foundation's president Samuel Sachs II, chairman Ronald D. Spencer, and executive director Caroline Black for their enthusiastic cooperation, as well as Cindy Lou Wakefield and Rick Friedman, Saara Pritchard and Tom Melton, and a private collection for lending additional gouaches. The Whitney Museum of American Art kindly gave permission to reproduce portions of Marcia Tucker's essay for her major 1973 exhibition of Krasner's large paintings. Phyllis Braff provided me with a copy of her 1980 interview with Krasner, which contains valuable insights into the artist's working process.

Helen A. Harrison
Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Director

Checklist of the exhibition

Mark Patiky, Lee Krasner at work on *Portrait in Green*, 1969. © Mark Patiky
Five digital prints from Kodachrome transparencies, each 9 ¾ x 14 ¼ inches
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, gift of Mark Patiky

Unless otherwise noted, all works by Lee Krasner are lent by the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, courtesy of Kasmin Gallery, New York. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Portrait in Green, 1969

Oil on canvas, 55 ¼ x 94 ¼ inches

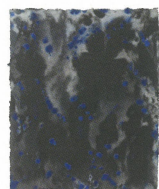
Illustrated on the front cover



Earth No. 1, 1969

Gouache and collage on Howell paper,
18 x 21 ½ inches

Courtesy of a private collection, Texas



Earth No. 5, 1969

Gouache on Howell paper
21 ¾ x 17 ½ inches



Earth No. 7, 1969

Gouache on Howell paper,
19 x 15 inches
Cindy Lou Wakefield and Rick Friedman
Collection, Southampton, NY



Water No. 16, 1969

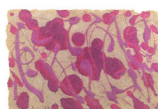
Gouache on Howell paper,
15 x 19 inches



Water No. 14, 1969

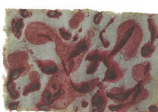
Gouache on Howell
paper, 21 ¾ x 33
inches

Collection of Saara
Pritchard and Tom
Melton, New York



Water No. 20, 1969

Gouache on Howell paper,
6 ¾ x 10 inches



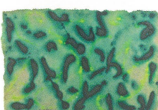
Seed No. 3, 1969

Gouache on Howell paper,
6 ¾ x 10 ¼ inches
Cindy Lou Wakefield and Rick
Friedman Collection,
Southampton, NY



Hieroglyphs No. 4, 1969

Gouache on Howell paper,
30 x 22 inches



Untitled, 1969

Gouache on Howell paper,
6 ¾ x 10 inches



Untitled, 1969

Gouache on Howell paper,
18 x 12 ½ inches

The [gouaches] involve vigorous, dynamic, freely brushed forms, color washes of the most exquisite subtlety and refinement, and very complex play with effects of texture and relief. The rhythms and contrapuntal interplay of Miss Krasner's forms are among the most striking features of her work. The total effect is one of magnificent lyricism and vitality.

—Alfred Frankenstein, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 November 1969

Lee Krasner and Howell paper

Helen A. Harrison

In October–November 1951 Lee Krasner had the first solo exhibition of her career at the Betty Parsons Gallery, but she did not have the gallery to herself. She shared the space with Anne Ryan, who was exhibiting a series of collages made largely of handmade paper. Both Krasner and Pollock admired them, and asked Parsons about the paper. She introduced them to the papermaker, Douglass Morse Howell (1906–1994), who had a workshop in Westbury, Long Island.¹

The son of a foreign correspondent who took him on her European travels when he was a youngster, Howell was a banker and literary agent before serving in World War II. After the war he learned waterleaf papermaking in France and brought his skill back to his native New York.² The process involves beating fabric or vegetal material to a watery pulp that is then screened. Describing his approach to Pollock's biographer Jeffrey Potter, Howell said, "My paper is [made] of fine damask tablecloths, no glue, sizing or chemicals, and made by my own equipment designed and built from the ground up."³ He also used dish towels, napkins, and other linens with dyed elements, resulting in colored pulp. The air-dried sheets are notable for their irregular edges, toothy texture, and blotting-paper porosity. Pollock visited Howell's workshop on October 18 and bought \$20 worth of papers,⁴ both plain and colored, and made a series of ink drawings on them.⁵

Howell paper first appears in Krasner's work in her 1954 collages, in which she recycled fragments of Pollock's discarded drawings. Fifteen years later, she used it—whether newly acquired or from the remaining stock of Pollock's paper—for her own extensive series, made with opaque watercolor paint called gouache, divided into four groups: Seed (24 sheets); Hieroglyphs (21 sheets); Earth (10 sheets); and Water (21 sheets); as well as four untitled works.⁶ Some of them were floated in the bathtub to enhance the paper's absorbency, creating translucent areas that contrast with and complement denser gestural elements. As Krasner told the art critic Phyllis Braff when several examples were exhibited in Southampton:

It took courage to take the gouache and bathe it. They were experiments in color and a tough paper was needed for what I wanted to try. The monotone is something I tend to do a lot. With the water dipping technique I could get great varieties—and effects that would hold my interest and that of an observer too. You might say I was pushing, with the fixed points just the gouache and the paper. . . . I would try one pigment technique, then the opposite—there was such excitement with the paper, the pigment reaction, and my own.⁷

¹ See Margaret Holben Ellis, "Materials, Tools, and 'Technics': Works on Paper by Jackson Pollock," in *No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock Paintings on Paper* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2005), p. 129.

² Biographical note at <https://www.craftcouncil.org/recognition/douglass-morse-howell>

³ Jeffrey Potter, *To A Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1985), p. 179.

⁴ The cancelled check for the sale is in the artists' financial records, Pollock-Krasner Study Center. A 1954 price list is at <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/jackson-pollock-and-lee-krasner-papers-8943/subseries-1-2/box-1-folder-39>

⁵ See Eugene V. Thaw, notes to catalogue raisonné numbers 829–838, in Francis V. O'Connor, and Eugene V. Thaw, eds., *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), Vol. 4, p. 308.

⁶ Ellen G. Landau, *Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), pp. 240–259.

⁷ Phyllis Braff, "From the Studio," *The East Hampton Star*, 21 August 1980, II-8.

Excerpts from Marcia Tucker, *Lee Krasner: Large Paintings*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1973

From the early 1940s on, certain recurring characteristics in Krasner's work are apparent. One is that she had early settled on the use of a shallow, frontal space which is the heritage of cubism, via [Hans] Hofmann's "push-pull" theory of formal tensions, in which positive and negative space could be equalized so as to retain the integrity of a unified, spatially shallow picture plane. "By avoiding any violation of the surface," as she puts it, or by not "poking holes in the canvas," Krasner rejected the use of deep or traditionally illusionistic space, allowing the painting to communicate through form alone.

A second consistency is Krasner's attitude toward color, which she feels cannot be adequately explained in formal terms. She has a predilection for certain colors, which seem to surface without any conscious decision making on her part:

Let us assume I want to paint a blue picture. But instead the picture comes out alizarin or yellow. This is the aspect of painting which interests me the most. . . . The mystery of painting, which I try to stay with, is the alizarin which comes out.

Krasner's work evinces a marked propensity for reductive color, most often variations of red and green in a single canvas. . . . The enormous range she can achieve through the use of a limited palette indicates the extent to which she earlier assimilated Matisse's color, both directly and through Hofmann's teaching.

...

A third consistency in her painting is her method of working:

I make the first gesture, then other gestures occur, then observation. Something in the abstract movement suggests a form. I'm often astonished at what I'm confronted with when the major part comes through. Then I just go along with it; it's either organic in content, or quite abstract, but there's no forced decision. I want to get myself *something* in the act of painting. . . . I sustain my interest in it through spontaneity.

...

Krasner stresses that the difference between painting large pictures and small ones is, for her, a physical one; large paintings activate the entire body. The vertical dimensions of her work are limited only by the range of her physical self, which, she says, "may include a leap off the floor with a long-handled brush."



Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

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