

## Lee Krasner's Prophetic Paintings

By Janet Goleas

(7/29/2008) Lee Krasner, one of just four women ever awarded a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art, was dismissed through much of her early career as a mere addendum to 20th-century America's most acclaimed painter, her husband, Jackson Pollock. Over her 50-year career, Krasner's art moved deftly between poetic lyricism and muscular drama, culminating in a body of work that helped shape American art.



Metropolitan Museum of Art

"Self-Portrait," 1929, 30 x 32 in, oil on canvas, by Lee Krasner

A selection of some of the artist's most groundbreaking paintings opens tomorrow at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in Springs. Organized by the center's director, Helen Harrison, "Lee Krasner: Little Image Paintings, 1946-1950" examines the first of this artist's all-over abstractions, created in the years just after the couple moved to the South Fork.

Krasner was raised in Brooklyn, the only one of her siblings born in the United States. Her family had fled Russia at the turn of the century to escape the persecution of Nicholas II. They landed in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, an enclave of Eastern European Jews that was resolutely devoid of anything relating to fine art.

Even so, by high school Krasner knew she wanted to become an artist. She slogged through various art programs at New York's Cooper Union, then a women's school, followed by the National Academy. She was roundly rejected at each venue — it seemed her instructors allowed her to matriculate more from a shared sense of exhaustion than from any recognizable accomplishment.

"In other words," the artist recalled in a 1964 interview for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, "I didn't make the grade at all."



Courtesy of Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center  
Lee Krasner with "Stop and Go," 1949

Indefatigable, ambitious, and sharp as a tack, Krasner persevered. In 1937, she enrolled in studies with Hans Hofmann. Fiercely loyal to the European tradition, Hofmann was a proponent of Cubism, the dominant abstract language of the time.

Eventually, nearly all the artists in New York began to struggle against the influence of Cubism — it was clear there could be no original American art until American artists trumped its pervasive reign. And so, there began a crusade of sorts — a campaign to vanquish the power of the Cubist idiom and, along with it, the long arm of European Modernism.

Krasner had a reputation for being cantankerous, even downright prickly. “I didn’t see the irascible side of Lee,” said Gail Levin of Bridgehampton, an art historian and author, who wrote the catalog essay for this exhibit. “She was grandmotherly to me, like a mentor.”

Dr. Levin met Krasner in 1970 and maintained a lifelong friendship with her. She notes in her essay that the artist “adored calligraphic complexity, perhaps a result of her childhood study of Hebrew.” Indeed, certain of the “Little Image” paintings read as if written in hieroglyphs across the picture plane, others like hundreds of diagrams that have been atomized within the rectangle, smashing through darkness to a sparkling luminosity.

When Krasner met Pollock in 1941, she was already firmly entrenched in the New York art world. Through her long association with the Works Progress Administration, the saving grace of many artists in the 1930s and ’40s, she knew everyone. They worked together on mural projects or met after hours at the Jumble Shop, a popular Greenwich Village watering hole, where they would compare notes or bellyache about some W.P.A. ground rule.

When John Graham, an artist and curator, invited her to participate in his exhibit of French and American painters, she was stunned that she didn’t already know Pollock, who was among the handful of American painters included in the show. She made it a priority to meet him before the show opened.

Soon after, the couple moved in together, marrying in 1945. Both were at the cusp of their burgeoning careers, but for Krasner, who would ultimately find herself painting in the shadow of her famous husband, it would be decades before she was acknowledged as one of the country’s first-tier Abstract Expressionists.

Soon after they married, the artists left Manhattan and moved into what is now the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in Springs. Krasner painted in the living room until Pollock, in need of more space, abandoned his bedroom studio in favor of the barn that sat on their sprawling lawn.

For the next decade, Krasner would paint in the 10-by-14-foot upstairs bedroom overlooking Accabonac Harbor. Her art flourished here, and it was early in this period that she embarked on the breakthrough “Little Image” paintings now on exhibit.

The works were painted not on an easel but on the floor or flat on a table so that she looked down at the canvas as she was painting. While it might seem simple enough to remove a canvas from the easel, this maneuver was in itself something of a revolution.

A methodical artist, Krasner built up the thick surfaces of these paintings in increments over the course of a long and controlled process in which she dribbled and dripped paint, dabbled it with a stiff brush, or paddled it on with a knife. The results are radiant, all-over patterns that shimmer like stained-glass windows or pop across the surface like dense cartouche patterns.

Here Krasner locates her subject matter in the paint itself, a colossal innovation for the developing artist and reflective of artistic kinship she shared with Pollock. In the four years the artist focused on this body of work, she is known to have painted only 31 canvases, several of which are missing or have been destroyed. Nine of these paintings are now on view at the Pollock-Krasner House.

As an artist, Lee Krasner was notoriously self-critical, constantly editing, revising, and second-guessing herself. She often cannibalized her own art, overpainting it or slicing, shredding, and tearing it into collages.

“There are so many paintings underneath so many paintings,” Ms. Harrison said, that “in a 50-year career, she left only 599 works.” Krasner worked constantly but, relative to other artists of this period, her output was modest. However, by no means did her work go unnoticed. She continued to paint throughout her tumultuous marriage, mounting her first one-person show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951.

Tough and ambitious, she found heroes, early on, in Picasso, Matisse, and Mondrian, each of whom had a lifelong influence on her. But she also admired the improvisational force in Pollock’s art as well as his ability to access his own internal energy.

Hofmann’s teachings, after all, required artists to paint what they saw in front of them. But Pollock painted from within. His influences ranged from Native American art to the Mexican muralists to Surrealism, an exhilarating departure from the narrow scope of European Modernism.

Although life with Pollock was not easy, they shared a symbiosis that propelled both artists into their mature work. For Pollock, Krasner’s support and appreciation were

invaluable to his artistic development. She nurtured him, focusing much of her ferocious ambition on his career, his well-being, and his sobriety.

When Pollock hit the bottle he was a rageful and self-destructive drunk, but much of the period between 1946 and 1950 he spent in the throes of reinventing American art. It was a focused and feverishly productive time, bringing revolutionary artistic insight for both artists.

Toward the end of Pollock's life, he had grown restless. When he resumed his lethal drinking habits, the couple's life began to devolve into a perpetual state of crisis. It became too much for Krasner. She needed a break.

It was in 1956, during her very first trip abroad, that Pollock lost control of his car and was killed along with one of his companions in a car accident along Springs-Fireplace Road. She received the devastating news in Paris.

She struggled with feelings of guilt through much of her life, based on her desperate need for that fateful "break." When she returned to Springs, there stood the immense canvas "Prophecy," just as she had left it in her studio.

A wrangle of body parts roiling with emotion, the imagery was that of a hybrid male and female form. It would be impossible not to acknowledge the powerful sense of foreboding that the painting possessed. The symbiosis of these two monumental American artists had met its apotheosis.

Krasner's retrospective, curated by Barbara Rose, opened at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, six months after her death.

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