

THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT DEDICATES A MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE TO THE PIONEER OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM LEE KRASNER

LEE KRASNER

OCTOBER 11, 2019 – JANUARY 12, 2020

PRESS PREVIEW: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2019, 11.00 a.m.

The artist Lee Krasner (1908–1984) is a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism in the United States. For the first time in more than 50 years, her work will be on view in a major European retrospective. The Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is presenting paintings, collages, and drawings as well as films and photographs, and will tell the story of one of the most remarkable artists of the twentieth century. The exhibition presents works from across Krasner's entire oeuvre, which spans more than half a century: self-portraits from the late 1920s, charcoal life drawings, groups of works such as her renowned *Little Images* from the 1940s and her *Prophecy* series from the 1950s, along with works from her *Umber* and *Primary* series from the 1960s and late collages from the 1970s.

Driven by a great sense of purpose, Krasner took art lessons even during her time in high school, went on to study at the Cooper Union, the National Academy of Design and the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts. She was an active member of the association American Abstract Artists and cultivated friendships with Ray Eames, Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning. In New York in the 1940s, she was part of the epicenter of the movement that would become known as Abstract Expressionism or New York School together with artists such as Stuart Davis, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock. After the Second World War, this young generation of artists sought a new pictorial language through different artistic approaches. For a long time, Lee Krasner's work was overshadowed by that of her husband Jackson Pollock, who was one of the main representatives of Action Painting and known for his "dripping" technique. From 1945, the couple lived and worked in a clapboard farmhouse in Springs, Long Island. After Pollock's early death in a car crash in 1956, Krasner decided to use his studio as her own, initiating a new phase of her artistic career. She was able to work on large, unstretched canvases for the first time, producing some of her most important artworks, such as *Polar Stampede* (1960), *Another Storm* (1963), and *Portrait in Green* (1969). Unlike other artists of the time who also painted in a non-representational manner, Krasner never developed a "signature style," but instead aspired to constantly reinvent her pictorial language.

The Schirn has been able to secure loans from a large number of international museums and public and private collections, including the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Jewish Museum in New York. Many of Krasner's works will be on view for the first time in Germany, including the monumental painting *Combat* (1965) from the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, which is over 4 meters wide.

The exhibition "Lee Krasner" has been made possible through the support of the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne. Additional support for the exhibition has been provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Dr. Philipp Demandt, Director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, comments: "Lee Krasner is one of the most important painters of American postwar modernism, and yet for a long time her work was not afforded the attention it deserves. It is surprising that our exhibition is her first retrospective in Europe in over fifty years. Still the art of Abstract Expressionism is often regarded as being primarily a male preserve, and with this tribute to Lee Krasner it is being subjected to a

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reassessment that is long overdue. For our audience, the show at the Schirn will provide a unique opportunity to experience the artist's works in the flesh, because few of her large-format works are preserved in European collections."

Eleanor Nairne, Barbican Art Gallery, London, and Dr. Ilka Voermann, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, the curators of the exhibition, observe: "Lee Krasner worked in cycles, frequently referring back to earlier periods and developing new artistic forms of expression. With remarkable energy and freedom she always remained true to her own spirit. Our exhibition celebrates Krasner's artistic versatility by demonstrating the multifaceted nature of her art as well as her significant contributions to the Abstract Expressionist movement."

TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition in the Schirn is structured according to Lee Krasner's principal periods of work from the 1920s until the 1970s. The starting point lies with her early work, which permits the viewer to trace clearly her path toward abstraction. Among other works, the Schirn is presenting Krasner's self-portrait from 1928, which she confidently submitted when applying to the life-drawing class at the National Academy of Design, as well as life drawings in charcoal from her time as a student, which are influenced by Cubism as a result of the classes she attended at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts. Also on show are photographs of her window-display designs for the War Services Project, in which Krasner combined photography, drawing, and typography in the style of Russian Constructivism.

Lee Krasner's move to a farmhouse in Springs on Long Island with her husband Jackson Pollock in 1945 marked the first of a succession of turning points in her oeuvre. With the abstract *Little Images*, created between 1946 and 1950, she turned away from her early work, which had been influenced by Cubism and the European avant-garde. From the first phase of this series, the exhibition is presenting, for example, *Shattered Color* (1947) and *Abstract No. 2* (1947), which, with their all-over technique, recall Pollock's painting method; Krasner, however, worked in a more controlled manner using oil paint. The Schirn is also presenting later pictures from the series, such as *Composition* (1949) and *Untitled (Little Image)* (1950), which are constructed according to a strict grid and are painted from right to left—a working method that may be derived from the Hebrew script which Krasner learned to write as a child. Krasner, who repeatedly studied the ancient art of calligraphy, described these paintings as "hieroglyphic."

Krasner referred back to her own earlier works for the first time with her *Collage Paintings*, which she created between 1953 and 1956. In this series, she combined torn-up drawings and older paintings and developed a painterly approach to the technique of collage. The exhibition presents, for example, *Shattered Light* (1954), in which the painting underneath the collage is clearly visible; the torn pieces of paper are worked almost seamlessly into the picture. Krasner's early *Collage Paintings*, such as *Burning Candles* (1955), are detailed and painted in shades of brown, while the later ones are assembled from more expansive, colored forms, which the artist no longer simply tore but also cut. The other works shown by the Schirn include the work *Bald Eagle* (1955), for which Krasner discarded fragments by Pollock.

The painting *Prophecy* (1956) marks a turning point in both Krasner's style and biography. She had begun it while Pollock was still alive and completed it after his sudden death. With this painting, she returned to an almost figural pictorial language based on Cubism. Further works in this series take up the subjects of death, birth, and reincarnation. The Schirn presents *Birth* (1956), *Embrace* (1956), and *Three in Two* (1956).

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From 1956, Lee Krasner used Pollock's former studio and worked for the first time on monumental canvases, which she attached directly to the wall. She created the large-format, gestural paintings of her *Umber* series, also known as *Night Journeys*. These are among her most expressive works. Since she refused to paint with color under artificial light and was only working at night during this period, the palette is reduced to white and umber. Krasner was 1.60 meters tall, but she worked on canvases up to a height of 2.50 meters, using her whole body and employing long-handled paintbrushes with expansive, rhythmical movements. In spite of the large formats, she never made preparatory sketches or preliminary studies before painting. From this series, the Schirn will be showing works such as *The Eye is the First Circle* (1960). In the early 1960s, Krasner used strong colors again in her *Primary Series*. Her gestural paintings became increasingly free and more calligraphic, for example in *Another Storm* (1963), *Kufic* (1965), or *Portrait in Green* (1969). In *Through Blue* (1963) and *Icarus* (1964), Krasner experimented with painting with her left hand after she had broken her right arm. She often pressed the paint directly onto the canvas and then worked it with her fingertips. Another recurring motif in her work is nature. Starting in 1969, Krasner created parallel smaller-format series using gouache on handmade paper, which she titled *Seed, Earth, Water* and *Hieroglyphs*.

The exhibition concludes with two series from the artist's late work. In the early 1970s, Krasner began a series in which she painted abstract forms with strongly contrasting colors. The Schirn presents *Palingenesis* (1971), one of the main works from this period. Painted works made during this phase evoke the color-field paintings of Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman, although Krasner's later collages of the 1950s had already paved the way for this approach. In 1976, she created collages with sharp-edged forms, for which the artist used as material her own drawings and life studies in charcoal from her time as a student at the Hans Hofmann School, cutting them with scissors, for example for *Imperative* (1976). As was the case with her early collages, these works represent Krasner's critical exploration of her own work and legacy.

The exhibition is curated and organized by the Barbican Centre, London, in cooperation with the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, and the Guggenheim, Bilbao.

CATALOGUE LEE KRASNER, edited by Eleanor Nairne and Ilka Voermann. With a joint foreword by the Barbican Centre, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, the Zentrum Paul Klee, and the Guggenheim, Bilbao, including texts by Eleanor Nairne, Katy Siegel, John Yau, Suzanne Hudson, and a previously unpublished interview with Lee Krasner by Gail Levin. German and English editions, each 240 pages, approx. 250 illustrations, 28 x 22 cm (portrait format), hardcover, Hirmer Verlag, ISBN 978-3-7774-3296-0 (German), ISBN 978-0-500-09408-2 (English), € 35.- (SCHIRN), € 45.- (Trade edition)

BOOKLET LEE KRASNER: *An Introduction to the Exhibition*, edited by the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, approx. 40 pages, presenting the main works in the exhibition and explaining the cultural-historical context. From 12 years, € 7.50 single copy, for classes € 1 per booklet (from 15 copies).

DIGITORIAL® The Schirn presents a Digitalorial® to the exhibition. The free digital educational product is responsive and can be accessed in German and English under www.schirn.de/digitalorial.

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION** October 11, 2019 – January 12, 2020 **INFORMATION** www.schirn.de **E-MAIL** welcome@schirn.de **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49.69.29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION** € 12, reduced € 10, free admission for children under 8 years **ADVANCED BOOKING** Tickets may be purchased online under www.schirn.de/tickets **GUIDED TOURS** Tues. 4 p.m., Wed. 7 p.m.,

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Thurs. 8 p.m., Sat. 5 p.m., and Sun 3 p.m. **BOOK A GUIDED TOUR** Individual or group tours can be booked under tel. +49.69.29 98 82-0 or fuehrungen@schirn.de **MEDIA PARTNERS** Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, VGF **CULTURAL PARTNER** HR2 **CURATORS** Eleanor Nairne, Barbican Art Gallery, London, and Dr. Ilka Voermann, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt **THE EXHIBITION HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE BY** Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne **ADDITIONAL SUPPORT** Terra Foundation for American Art

HASHTAGS #LeeKrasner #MeetLeeKrasner #Schirn **FACEBOOK, TWITTER, YOUTUBE, INSTAGRAM, PINTEREST, SCHIRN MAGAZIN** www.schirn.de/en/magazin

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