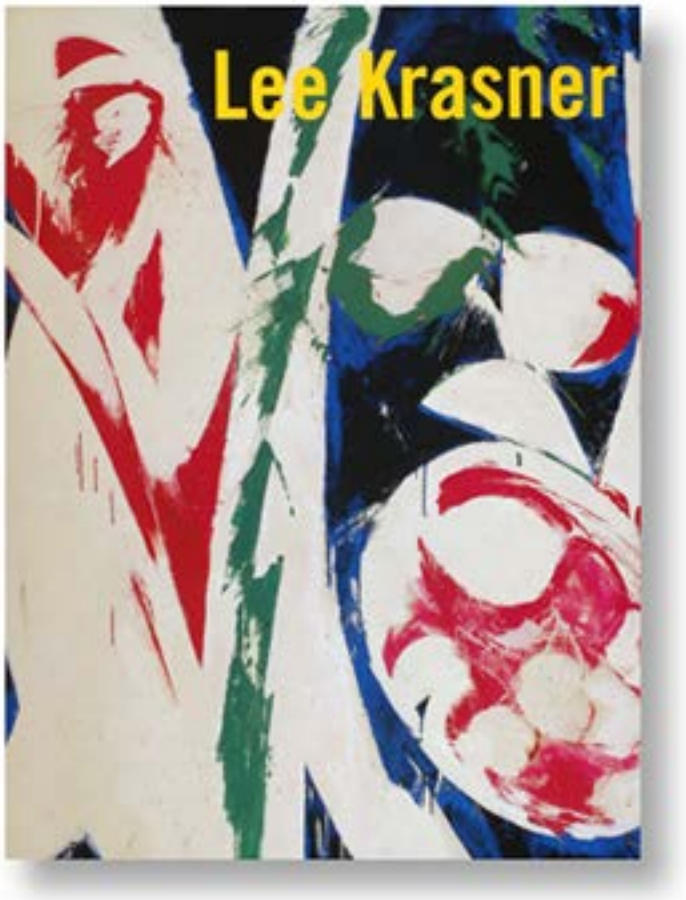

Lee Krasner. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1999; pp. 27-29.

Lee Krasner

BY ROBERT HOBBS

In the mid-twentieth century, the Abstract Expressionists replaced a School of Paris aesthetic with New York School process-oriented art.[1] But, with the notable exception of Lee Krasner,[2] a nineteenth-century romanticism still tinged even their most advanced works with a distinct bias in favor of artists as individual geniuses. As a means for dispensing with the eighteenth century's overemphasis on rationality, romantics in Europe and the United States had lauded individual sentiments and courted intuition. In the early 1940s most Abstract Expressionists cobbled together aspects of ego psychology, primitivism, empiricism, and romanticism in their attempts to find artistic styles capable of directly manifesting such individualism. Lee Krasner's art, however, diverges from this mainstream Abstract Expressionist path and assumes almost by default, a critical role as an unrelenting search for a dynamic identity that continually outdistances her work. Eluding her grasp, this artistically constructed self remains provisional.

Her approach is diametrically opposed to the objectified individuality characteristic of most other Abstract Expressionists who began achieving hallmark styles in the late 1940s. Before securing these distinguishing modes, these artists, including Krasner, had embraced existentialism, as well as the Surrealist method of psychic automatism. The latter was a means of free association that served as a procedure for discovering what were considered formal equivalents of themselves, but these painters soon permitted these experiments in improvisation to congeal into static styles. Krasner, however, remained committed to the existential imperative to confront the monstrous freedom of the modern world by facing her own contigency.[3]

Krasner's marriage to Jackson Pollock, who became the group's first proclaimed leader, and her position as the only female member of Abstract Expressionism's first generation have put both herself and her work in a position of otherness. Unfortunately, critics and art historians have tended to undermine this distinctive role by casting her accomplishments in the perennial shade of Pollock's widely proclaimed genius. Although several prominent scholars since the early 1970s have asserted that she is at last free from the secondary status of being Mrs. Jackson Pollock, others have regularly incorporated references to her phantomlike existence vis-à-vis

Lee Krasner, 1982.
Photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe

Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock in Pollock's studio, ca. 1949

Pollock, as the following headline descriptions of her readily demonstrate: "Out of the Shade," "Overshadowed by Late Husband," "Out of the Shadows to Gain Recognition," "Out of Jackson Pollock's Shadow," "Bursting Out of the Shadows," "Shining in the Shadow," and "In the Shadow of an Innovator." Using such catch phrases, these writers have unfortunately legitimized the problem by rallying around it.[4] As Krasner herself commented, "The cliché is that Lee is overshadowed by her husband and that's easy and we don't have to think about it. It is outrageous."[5] And so it is.

Lee Krasner was assured a significant position in the history of twentieth-century art the moment critic Clement Greenberg (fig. 1) stated in his factually oriented *Evergreen Review* eulogy of Jackson Pollock in 1956 that "even before their marriage [Krasner's] eye and judgment became important in [Pollock's] art, and continued to remain so."[6] But even though her historical position was secured at this time, the significance of her work and the intellectual currents that it both apprehends and extends still need to be discerned and assessed if we are to appreciate how she responded to her times and in turn molded them through her work. In her art, Krasner dramatizes a change of enormous import as she moves from the monolithic definition of individual identity evident in the single-image compositions prevalent in the mature works of many Abstract Expressionists toward a more open-ended perception of the self as a dynamic constellation of forces. This new mode of conceiving oneself can be most fully appreciated in Krasner's decision in the mid-1950s to start working with Dr. Leonard Siegel, an analyst conversant with the ideas of Harry Stack Sullivan

(1892–1949), rather than put herself in the care of a Freudian or Jungian specialist.

Although this essay deals with Krasner's art in a basically chronological manner, I investigate three enduring and at times interlocking themes affecting her work that are in turn transformed by it. These three subjects need to be established at the outset so that readers can be on the lookout for the ways that they at times subtly and at other times broadly frame her work and constitute the terms of the artistic conversation that she maintains with herself throughout her life. These themes represent the new contribution to Krasner studies that this book offers. Stated briefly, they are: (1) viewing oneself as other, which Krasner learned from French poet Arthur Rimbaud and enriched through her work with a Sullivanian analyst; (2) finding artistic equivalents to existentialism and its assumption of an unremitting freedom that makes the self an unresolvable lifelong project, and (3) being a responsive member of the New York Jewish intelligentsia in a pre- and post-Holocaust world. Apropos the dynamisms of her life, it is not surprising that in the 1970s Krasner took comfort in the following lines from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.[7]

Fig. 1. Clement Greenberg, ca. 1940s

Krasner's Beginnings

Paralleling her open-ended attitude toward her identity, Krasner underwent a long apprenticeship in the 1930s in which she initially moved from academic realism to Surrealism. Later she began to explore the international modernism that German expatriate Hans Hofmann (fig. 2) codified, transformed into a pedagogy, and disseminated in his school in New York City.

Fig. 2. Hans Hofmann

The theme of the self as other is established early in Krasner's career with *Self-Portrait*, 1930 (plate 1), which she undertook in the backyard of her parents' home in Huntington, Long Island, in order to be promoted to the level of "Life Drawing from Plaster Casts" at the National Academy of Design. Although the jury did not believe that her work was painted outdoors, Krasner explained that she had nailed a mirror to a tree and worked throughout the summer of 1930 on the picture. In this portrait, Krasner paints not herself but her mirrored reflection: the distinction is important since this artist remained throughout her life philosophically attuned to representation as an approximation of ongoing reality and a process of attempting to give form to that which exceeds itself. Instead of realizing