

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Dynamic Duos are on Display in New York This Spring

Three exhibitions are pairing artists to reveal how their works complement — or contrast with — each other.



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May 8, 2026

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When I interviewed Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) at her Connecticut home in 2003, the famous painter spoke glowingly about her friend Anthony Caro (1924-2013), the accomplished British sculptor.

The peers met in New York in 1959 and formed a lifelong dialogue.

Caro's ethos and career were touchstones for Frankenthaler. "I think Tony gets better and better and more and more daring," Frankenthaler told me. "One is safe if one is still able to risk. I hope I can still do that."

She also talked about trading art with a trusted fellow artist, something she did not do with just anyone.

“It has to be a comrade if it’s an exchange,” Frankenthaler said, recalling that she gave Caro a picture called “Swan Lake I” (1961). (She didn’t tell me what she got in return.)

Now the New York gallery Yares Art, which specializes in midcentury modernism, has an exhibition that explores their friendship, “Frankenthaler + Caro: Similitudes,” on view through July 11.

It is one of several shows of dynamic duos on view this spring in New York.

A two-person exhibition can take many forms and reveal new facets of both artists, as seen in two other concurrent shows besides “Frankenthaler + Caro”: one at an art institution that is among the world’s most visited, the Museum of Modern Art, and the other at a new venue, Brooklyn’s Center for Art and Advocacy.

At Yares, the collegial interplay between two modern masters is a chance to see one iteration of a creative duo, friends who push each other on to new heights.

Frankenthaler was a key figure in the transition from Abstract Expressionism to the Color Field movement — the “soak-stain” painting technique that she started using in the early 1950s is considered a great leap forward; her nonfigurative works often evoked a landscape.

Caro was known for his complex, abstract creations in steel that took a Cubist-like approach. But, as the art historian Rosalind Krauss put it, they also seem to present “the human form not as it looked from the outside, but how it felt from the inside.”

The Yares show is drenched in color and installed purposefully in the light-filled gallery, which is arranged, in most cases, to pair a painting by Frankenthaler with one of Caro's painted steel sculptures; included are 16 works by Frankenthaler and 20 by Caro. Around two-thirds of the works are on loan for the show, and others are for sale.

Sometimes it is hard to believe they were made independently and years apart, given that the explorations of color and form rhyme so closely. Caro's "Del Rio" (1970-71) and Frankenthaler's "Mineral Kingdom" (1976) share the same earthy yellow, for instance.

"Swan Lake I," the work Frankenthaler cited 23 years ago, made it into the show, too.

In the early 1970s, the work was damaged by smoke in its upper-right corner during an incident in Caro's home involving his water boiler and heating system. But the work was restored so well that Frankenthaler called it a "miracle" in a letter to Caro; it is paired with his piece "After Emma" (1977-82).