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Helen Frankenthaler and Anthony Caro's Creative Communion

The painter and sculptor were friends whose artistic pursuits deeply influenced one another as a brilliant exhibition at Yares Art makes clear.

By **Brian P. Kelly** [Follow](#)

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Installation view of the show with Caro's 'Larry's Land' (1970) at left and Frankenthaler's 'Heading Southwest' (1988) at right. YARES ART

New York

The 35 works by Helen Frankenthaler and Anthony Caro would have made for a standout show at any of New York's major museums: A capsule presentation at MoMA, a side-gallery exhibition at the Guggenheim, a focused overview tucked in

among the Met's Lauder collection. Instead, this triumph of a presentation comes courtesy of Yares Art, the gallery that now occupies an expanded space on Fifth Avenue once held by New York art doyenne Mary Boone. It is nothing short of a revelation, one in which we are invited to eavesdrop on a decadeslong tête-à-tête between the two masters as they discover, reinvent and refine their forms and materials.

If you read only a fact sheet about the two artists you might question the pairing: Caro, the Briton who, as a boy, was brought up on a farm but who would later choose rough-and-ready scrap metal as his material of choice; Frankenthaler, the Upper East Side-raised painter who enlarged the world of Abstract Expressionism with her delicately washed, soaked and stained canvases. But that snapshot ignores connections the two subconsciously formed before ever meeting: Both were the children of successful Jewish families, both educated at elite institutions (he at Charterhouse and Cambridge, she at Dalton and Bennington), both eager to push their art to new heights.

That they undoubtedly would have done on their own, but an introduction in New York in 1959 helped spur their creative journey, as this show makes abundantly clear. From then on, the two would remain friends, correspondents, confidantes, sounding boards, and inspirations to one another.

While the two never collaborated on a single work (though correspondence suggests they had considered making a sculpture together), the mutual influence is undeniable. Caro's earliest work in the show, "Paris Green" (1966), looks shockingly contemporary for a sculpture made six decades ago. A sheet of perforated metal sits at a jaunty angle atop a trio of differently sized pillars, while a T-shaped bar rests above it, defying gravity. Its Parks-department green paint echoes the splash of acrylic that cuts across Frankenthaler's nearby "(Bach's) Sacred Theater" (1973). While most of that canvas is splashed with semi-transparent ocher and fleshy pinks, this invigorating interjection wakes up the entire composition, throwing a bit of precarity into the otherwise stable arrangement and revisiting the formal balancing act that Caro executes in three dimensions.

While those works transcend the limitations of gravity, Caro's "Larry's Land" (1970) and Frankenthaler's "Heading Southwest" (1988) embrace its power. His sculpture, in a shade of teal that's surprisingly regal, spreads across the ground, flaps of steel straining to lift themselves just inches off the surface as a couple plates have effortfully pulled themselves upright. Her painting is a stolid assemblage of horizontal bands, stacked confidently on top of one another, the weight of the structure seeming to make those on top begin to dissolve into those below. Nevertheless, a cheeky portion of blue-green paint contorts itself into a standing position in the corner, fighting against the weight that urges the rest of the work Earthward.

Especially captivating is the chance to watch these artists embrace their materials' inherent qualities to explore the extremes of formal experimentation. Caro deconstructs a pipe in the fragmented "Purling" (1969), which spills across the floor like unraveled knitting; he makes heavy steel float in "After Emma" (1977-82), which looks like the framework for a Futurist horse; he polishes his surfaces to a shine, or coats them in light-absorbing mattes. Frankenthaler, for her part, exercises dictatorial control in tightly framed works like "Orange Breaking Through" (1961), in which washes of the titular hue try to escape a box of black and red. Elsewhere she allows her paint to run wild, as in "Debussy" (1992), whose cool aquatic tones in the all-over composition can't be contained by the canvas, and bring to mind the energy—both calming and chaotic—of the composer's "La Mer."

Most of the works here are joyful, but we also see the artists working in their most serious modes. Caro's "Solitude" (1986-89) bears its unfinished surface proudly, the dark patina unashamedly reminding us of the raw nature of his chosen medium and the rough beginnings of all his work. It rumbles and undulates across the floor, like a lonely camel enduring across a windswept desert. It resonates with Frankenthaler's nearby "Phoebe" (1979), whose rusty brown field is interrupted with gentle washes of white, a brooding swath of black, and a piercing dot of goldenrod.

The brilliance of these pairings recurs throughout the show, which is more than a curatorial coup. It's a chance to bear witness to a silent communion among artists, form and material. For that, it's also a minor miracle.

Frankenthaler + Caro: Similitudes—Color, Form, Friendship

Yares Art, through July 11

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