WALTHAM — “The pains of beautifully showing your identity,” said Helen Frankenthaler in a 1962 letter to Grace Hartigan, “are really too much for me sometimes.”

Both Frankenthaler and Hartigan appear, alongside other (mostly abstract) painters of the past half-century, in a new show at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University called “Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler.”
Organized by the Rose’s curator-at-large Katy Siegel, the show uses Frankenthaler, who died at 83, in Provincetown in 2011, as a pivot on which turns an alternative history of post-war painting.

As I understood it, the premise is simple enough. Instead of treating the vigorously poured and dripped paintings of Jackson Pollock as the font of all subsequent breakthroughs in post-war art (more or less how the story usually goes), Siegel posits Frankenthaler’s “stained” paintings, in mostly pastel colors, as the key to a different sensibility — more feminine, perhaps, but also more socially and emotionally supple — and thus a very different story.

If that sensibility was different from the muscular existentialism of Pollock and the abstract expressionists, it was different again from the subsequent ironies of Pop and the hygienic intellectualism of Minimalism and Conceptualism. It combined a little bit of camp, a dollop of decoration, some unabashed romance, and a predilection for pretty colors. But — adding weight to unbearable lightness — it concerned itself deeply with “the pains of beautifully showing your identity.”

Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham

Closing date: June 7

The exhibition kicks off with paintings by Frankenthaler, Hartigan, Jane Freilicher, and Larry Rivers, all painters in the stable of Tibor de Nagy, an economist from Budapest who established a gallery-cum-salon in New York in 1950.
De Nagy had arrived in America in 1948 after surviving imprisonment by both the Nazis and the Russians. His artists were initially picked out on the advice of Clement Greenberg, the era’s leading critic, and the one who had done more than anyone to make Pollock’s reputation.

But as time went by, the gallery came to be associated with figurative art and collage rather than abstraction, with New York School poets such as John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, and James Schuyler, and with various forms of urbane gorgeousness and good humor. Its artists were, in the words of New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl, “doomed to specialness in the coarsely triumphant art world of the sixties.”

Frankenthaler made her breakthrough stain paintings in 1952, in the middle of a four-year romantic relationship with Greenberg. Her large-scale “Mountains and Sea” spawned the Color Field movement after Greenberg took Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland to Frankenthaler’s New York studio to see it in 1953. Greenberg went on to champion Color Field painting — stained or sprayed abstract works by Louis, Noland, and Jules Olitski, among others — primarily as an admirable manifestation of his own theories.

These artists made some beautiful work. But Color Field painting collapsed from a kind of aesthetic altitude sickness. Its relationship to the sea-level social upheavals of the era was basically nil. And so, faster than you could say “Whoosh!,” its paper-thin preciosity was overwhelmed by the likes of Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein.

And yet the Color Field section of the show detains us thanks to the inclusion of “Along,” a massive, stained painting in lambent colors by Sam Gilliam, an African-American painter associated with Color Field, and an untitled 1970 floor sculpture by Lynda Benglis.

The Benglis, made from polyurethane, looks like a spill. More precisely, it looks like overflow from the nearby Morris Louis, a vertical rainbow looking for a raison d’etre somewhere outside Greenberg’s egg-shaped head.

And suddenly, with this brilliant juxtaposition, the show begins to open up, to spill out of the specialness of the de Nagy artists and the strictures of Color Field.
The third section, dedicated to feminist art of the 1970s, demonstrates how the seemingly anodyne processes of staining and spraying and spilling could be made to connect with a whole lexicon of actions both feminist and feminine, with the pleasures of a sensuous physicality, and with the pressures of beautifully showing (or showing on your own terms) your identity.

Much of this work, by the likes of Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, and Faith Wilding, tries to break down the patriarchal division between the domestic (feminine) realm and the public (masculine) realm. Ornamentation, scorned as a “crime” by the fathers of modernism, gets to join the party. So does “kitsch” — Greenberg’s great bugaboo.

The section includes an homage by Wilding to Georgia O’Keeffe, whose organic abstractions, especially in watercolor, are obvious precursors to Frankenthaler’s stained paintings.

It also includes photographs, by Robin Mitchell, of “Painted Room,” which was part of what the wall label winningly describes as the “seminal feminist art space,” “Womanhouse” — a collective project in a dilapidated mansion in Los Angeles, organized in the early ’70s by Chicago and Schapiro. Mitchell’s room, within this grander complex, conflated abstract painting with domesticity and femininity.

If much of the show up to this point feels dated, or taken up with issues long ago made redundant, the two remaining sections overturn this suspicion. They make us joyfully cognizant of the ways in which old, marginalized ideas can spill back into the mainstream, reviving present possibilities. They are filled with works — stained, spilled, figurative, abstract, colorful, visceral, fey, ferocious, all linked in some way with terrain opened up by Frankenthaler — that dispel the suspicion that we have been poring idly over cultural dead ends, like a paleontologist sifting through fossils.

“The Men’s Room,” the fourth section, includes several so-called “Oxidation Paintings” (urine pissed onto metallic paints) by Andy Warhol; a 2001 silkscreen by Christopher Wool called “Minor Mishap II”; an early Mark Bradford; and a juicy Carroll Dunham from 1989-90.
Dunham has written that, while experimenting with stained paints in the early ’90s, he was “totally conscious of Frankenthaler’s influence. Her gaseous veils and embedded rivulets bespoke trust in materials and a sense of flow, both pictorial and behavioral. What from one point of view had appeared random and gratuitously pretty could from a different angle become athletic and ravishing.”

Ravishing is the word, and it applies to some of the highlights of the final section, among which are a recent painting by Carrie Moyer (“Four Dreams in an Open Room”); an untitled painting in flavors of fluorescent pink by Laura Owens; a suite of ceramics by the always marvelous Kathy Butterly; and a wonderful Frankenthaler called “Flirt.”

Flirting is, of course, about keeping your options open. It’s about maintaining a repertoire of possibilities, rather than being bound to a contract. Siegel, the show’s curator, performs this service for Frankenthaler, blowing open her previously restricted reputation.

Holding the exhibition itself to an imaginary contract, one might say that, if it has an overall problem, it is that Frankenthaler never really comes into focus as a great artist, or as the authentic beginning of something. She, too, at least to some extent, clearly emerges from Pollock; and besides, to ask the distinction between paint that is poured and paint that stains to bear too much weight is to risk categorical collapse.

Nor, for all of their preposterous bar-brawling and braggadocio, has it ever felt fair to me to characterize the work of Pollock and de Kooning as relentlessly masculine. If pinks and pastels are to be the markers, for instance, of a more feminine sensibility, as this show seems to want us to accept, it’s as well to remember that Pollock
Grace Hartigan’s “Frederiksted.”

Still, to hell with critical scorekeeping. It’s folly to take issue with something that’s obviously worked. The show is a joy.

Almost any woman might sympathize with Frankenthaler’s lament about “the pains of beautifully showing your identity.” But of course, such pains have their compensations. And nor are they just the lot of women.

One of the many achievements of this show is to remind us that the urge, the need, not only to express yourself, but to make that expression beautiful, crosses lines of gender and sexuality.

For some reason, it never fails to involve pain. But we persist with the process, and it pours out of us, staining our every endeavor.

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