

**Lee Krasner: Little Image Paintings, 1946-1950**

1 August – 31 October 2008

Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center  
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East Hampton, New York 11937  
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Organized by Helen A. Harrison, Director  
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Catalogue essay by Gail Levin

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On the front cover: Untitled, 1949. Oil on linen, 38 x 30 inches. Catalogue number 9.

On the back cover: Lee Krasner with an early version of *Stop and Go*, displayed on an easel in the  
living-dining room, ca. 1949.

Opposite page: *Shattered Color*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 22 x 26 1/8 inches. Catalogue number 4.

# LEE KRASNER'S LITTLE IMAGES

Gail Levin

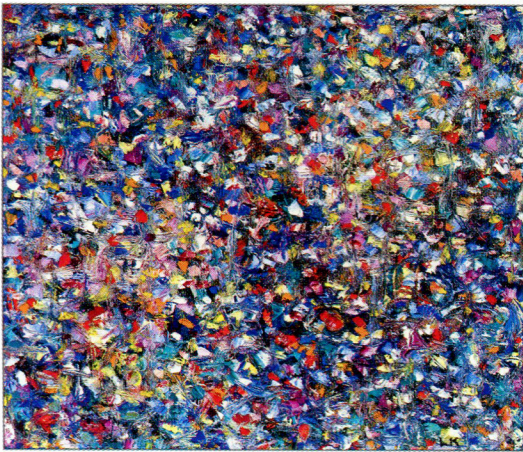
Describing the first years of her life with Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner explained that in the early to mid 1940s she had been trying “to undo my Cubist orientation and produced very little work in a rather anxious situation.”<sup>1</sup> She was trying too, she said, to express her own inner self.<sup>2</sup> Getting her own studio in Springs, East Hampton, may have helped her to stop feeling blocked and consequently reducing everything to what she characterized as grey slabs. She was able to break through to her Little Image paintings, which are considered her first abstract expressionist canvases. The Little Images are known for their abstract, all-over patterns and thick textures forged by layers of paint.

Krasner said that the series occupied her for nearly four years, beginning in late 1946, when she started painting in a small upstairs bedroom. Pollock had moved his studio into the barn, which they had just had relocated to the property’s north edge to free their view of Accabonac Creek. “The grayness of the streets finally began to open up in the Little Image paintings,” she recounted. “It was a great change.”<sup>3</sup> Some of Krasner’s earliest Little Image pieces (Figs. 1 – 3, now lost and presumed destroyed) were photographed on the back porch of the Springs house by Herbert Matter in 1947, when he and his wife, Mercedes Matter, were visiting.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Krasner called this group of canvases Little Images because she painted them in the little upstairs bedroom after Pollock had vacated it for the larger barn studio. The lost works were actually larger in dimension (well over three feet) than the smaller canvases that followed in 1947, but in 1949–50, she again turned out somewhat larger and bolder works.

Later Krasner would recall that she spent this period waiting for something to happen, confident that out of dealing over and over again with the familiar pigment and canvas she would eventually make something. She did not paint her Little Images on an easel and, she insisted, they did not reflect that tradition. “The canvas is down on a floor or on a table and I am working out of a tiny can. In other words, I have to hold the paint so I can move it. But [contrasting her method with Pollock’s] I wouldn’t have been using Duco [liquid enamel]. My paint would always have been oil and I could get the consistency of a thick pouring quality in it by squeezing it into a can and cutting it with turp. . .”<sup>5</sup> She considered that her procedure in making these pictures was unique in her *oeuvre*: it was the only time that she ever worked looking down on her canvases, dripping paint, as she told the critic Emily Wasserman:



Fig.8: *Noon*, 1947. Oil on linen, 24 x 30 inches.  
Roy Zuckerberg. CR 209



2. *Shellflower*, 1947  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 28 inches  
Private collection, New York  
CR 210

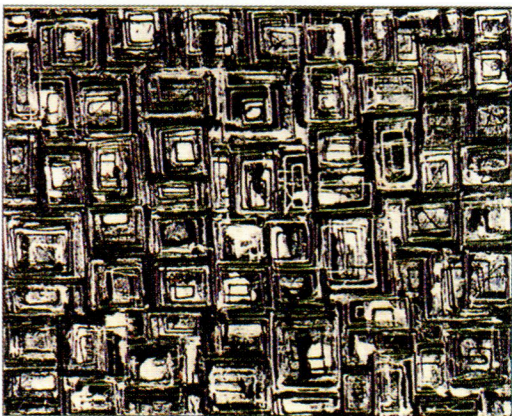


Fig. 9: *Black and White Squares No. 1*, 1948.  
Oil and enamel on linen,  
24 1/8 x 30 inches.  
Private collection. CR 223

“There’s what I would describe as a controlled dripping situation, very controlled and sustained, as it took many sessions to do one... I have an awareness of that, of that kind of control.”<sup>6</sup> “I stayed with them until they built up surface. Until I got what I wanted.”<sup>7</sup>

Krasner developed her all-over patterns of strokes with her palette knife, small squirts or blobs of paint direct from the tube, or controlled drips of paint right out of a can or off the tip of a stiff brush. Since her Little Images were smaller than Pollock’s large dripped canvases (such as *Cathedral*, 1947), Krasner did not need the kind of stepping motion of being “in the painting” that Pollock would employ. She simply stood over her canvases that lay, as she said, on a table or the floor. Krasner maintained careful control, raising and lowering the source of the paint to change the size of the stream that she allowed to flow onto the canvas. Other artists besides Pollock had been experimenting with dripping paint: the immigrant “housewife,” Janet Sobel, who showed at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery, Art of This Century, in 1946, even attracting Pollock’s attention; Mark Tobey, who showed canvases with his calligraphy-inspired “white writing” at the Willard Gallery in New York in 1944; also Hans Hofmann and Max Ernst.<sup>8</sup>

Taking her cue from Pollock, Krasner worked more from instinct than she had previously. She, too, tried to be more at one with nature, rather than standing back and depicting it as she once had. An abstract painting like *Night Life* (1947) might well be inspired by the night sky and the fireflies that illuminate a late summer night on Long Island. Though the series is mostly untitled, a few titles such as *Noon* (Fig. 8), with its bright color and rich texture, or *Shellflower* (catalogue number 2) suggest sensitivity to the seaside environment and to the shifting effect of sunlight on the surroundings.

The all-over impasto surface of *Noon* is vibrant with its bright color and rich thick surface. Though her work appears related to Pollock’s Sounds in the Grass series of 1946, including his *Shimmering Image*, Krasner continued to develop her own idiom. The Little Images range from a delicate lyrical sensibility with pastel colors to a bolder hieroglyphic form emphasizing black and white (Fig. 9).



5. Mosaic table, 1947, Glass and found objects on wood, 48 1/2 inches diameter. Jason McCoy. CR 218

She adored calligraphic complexity, perhaps a result of her childhood study of Hebrew. Sensitized to the forms of letters in exotic cultures, she also loved Irish and Persian illuminated manuscripts, especially the repetition of forms that went into her own painting.

Several other works from Krasner's Little Image series can be dated before she exhibited them with Bertha Schaefer from September 20 through October 16, 1948, in a show billed as a collaboration between "architect, interior-designer, and artist to make the modern house come alive."<sup>9</sup> Schaefer showed two model living room schemes meant to be in houses designed by architects—including Edward Durell Stone and Carl F. Brauer. Each room was built around Krasner's unique coffee tables: one with a mosaic top (catalogue number 5) and the other containing a Little Image canvas (Fig. 10). A "black wood coffee table in the Brauer house has an oil painting by Lee Krasner as its top, and not the least of the table's charms is that the painting succeeds in looking at home," noted a newspaper critic, reporting that Schaefer was "especially proud" of it.<sup>10</sup> If Krasner minded having her Little Image painting shown as part of a decorative ensemble, she never protested what was Schaefer's idea. She did not, however, actively pursue this direction as a means to market her work.

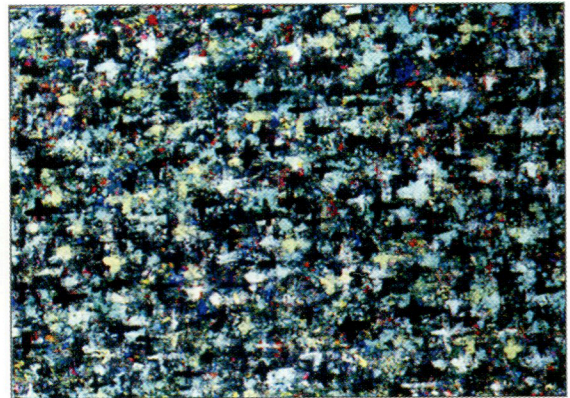


Fig. 10: *Composition*, ca. 1948. Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches. Private collection. CR 225

Calling the Little Image paintings "controlled chaos," the feminist art critic Cindy Nemser inspired a sympathetic chord from Krasner: "I love that. . . This work is a key turning point."<sup>11</sup> Nemser once asked why Krasner had not fought to have her achievement of this body of work acknowledged along with Pollock's. The reply was unambiguous and blunt: "I couldn't run out and do a one-woman job on the sexist aspects of the art world, continue my painting and stay in the role I was in as Mrs. Pollock. I just couldn't do that much. What I considered important was that I was able

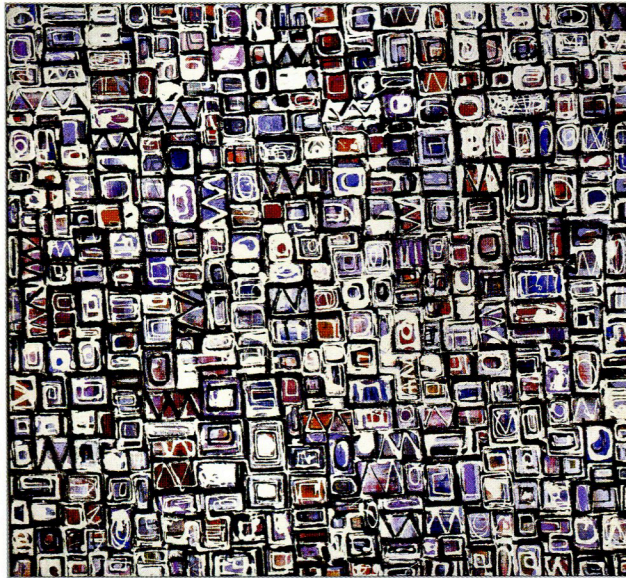


Fig. 11: *Painting No. 19*, 1947-48.  
Oil and enamel on masonite,  
32 1/4 x 34 1/4 inches.  
Dr. and Mrs. Jerome Dersh. CR 220



11. *Stop and Go*, 1949-50, Oil and enamel on panel,  
45 3/4 inches diameter, AXA Financial, New York.  
CR 229

to work and other things would have to take their turn. Now rightly or wrongly, I made my decisions.”<sup>12</sup>

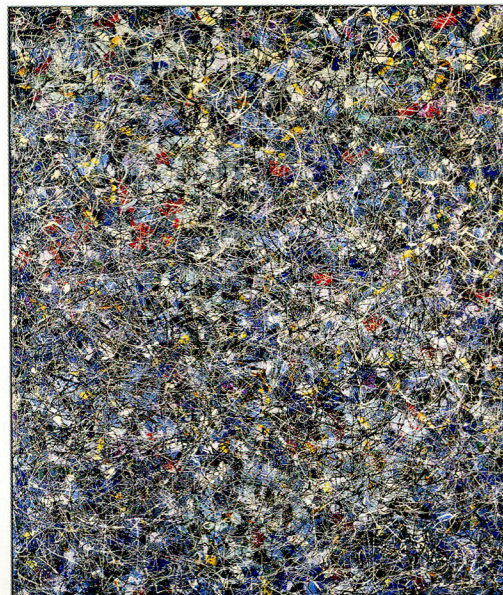
Nemser caught the woman artist’s dilemma: “It is important to remember before Krasner is blamed for not standing up more strongly for herself that it is very unlikely in those macho days of the later 40s, the days of the returning GIs and the heavy reassertion of the feminine mystique, if any amount of protest or any amount of self promotion would have done Krasner much good.”<sup>13</sup>

Krasner was proud whenever someone responded favorably to her work of this early period, especially male colleagues in the art world, for those were the opinions that seemed to matter. “[The painter] Bradley Walker Tomlin admired a great many of my Little Image paintings.” She later recalled. “He saw them hanging in our guest bedroom as he was our house guest a good deal. He used to tell me how beautiful they were and his warm response to these paintings of mine I remember very well.”<sup>14</sup>

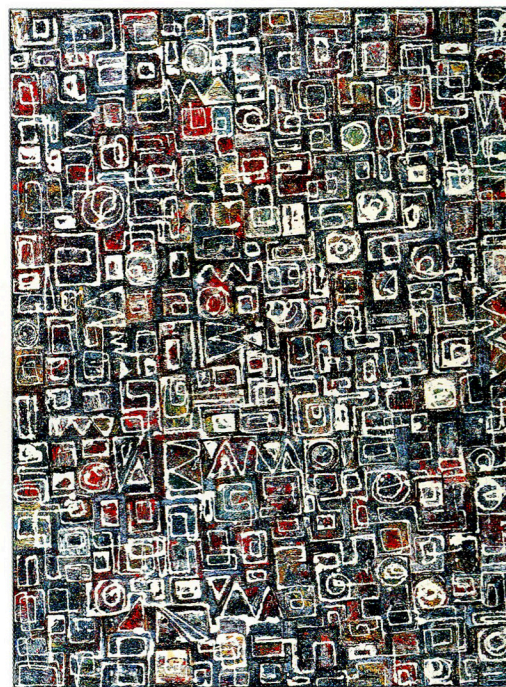
Krasner, who, during the 1940s, did not yet have regular gallery representation, did not show the series of Little Image paintings publicly at the time she produced them. By the 1950s, she did show a few examples in group exhibitions in New York at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1958 (Fig. 11), and in East Hampton at Guild Hall in 1953 and the Signa Gallery in 1959 (catalogue number 11). She also

showed some (including catalogue number 6) at Donald and Carol Braider's House of Books and Music—for just one day in 1954. Though some argue that Krasner held back from showing because she did not want to compete with Pollock, there is no evidence that she turned down any opportunities to exhibit her work during this period. By the time she had her solo show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in the fall of 1951, however, she preferred to expose new work which she had prepared especially for that exhibition.

Earlier, for the reception of her Little Images, she depended largely on such comments as friends or guests made while visiting in Springs. She recalled that the art dealer "John [Bernard] Myers admired them and I can remember Clement Greenberg saying about an early one, 'That's hot; It's cooking.' I considered it a compliment."<sup>15</sup> Greenberg, then the art critic at *The Nation*, delivered his favorable verdict on a visit to Lee and Jackson in late June 1946.<sup>16</sup> The respect Krasner's Little Images elicited from the Pollocks' guests and her own confidence have been corroborated by the high regard in which the Little Images are held today. It was the strength of some of these paintings (including catalogue number 8), shown in New York in 1978 alongside the work of her male colleagues as part of the exhibition, "Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years," that prompted critics to declare for the first time that Krasner deserved a place among the first generation of abstract expressionists.<sup>17</sup>



6. Untitled, 1948, Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 inches  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
Gift of Mrs. Donald L. Braider, 1986. CR 216



8. *Composition*, 1949, Oil on canvas,  
38 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 27 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches, The Philadelphia  
Museum of Art. Gift of the  
Aaron E. Norman Fund, Inc. CR 227

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gail Levin is Distinguished Professor of Art History, American Studies, and Women's Studies at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is the author of many books, including *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, and *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist*. She is currently writing a biography of Lee Krasner, whom she knew and admired.

## NOTES

- 1 Lee Krasner to Bruce Glaser, undated interview, Archives of American Art [AAA], reel 3774.
- 2 Lee Krasner to Gail Levin, interview of August 1977,
- 3 Lee Krasner to Barbara Rose, interview of 1972, AAA, reel 3774.
- 4 See Ellen Landau, *Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 99. Her research leaves no doubt of the early date of these works despite claims to the contrary made by others.
- 5 Lee Krasner to Cindy Nemser, "A Conversation with Lee Krasner," *Arts Magazine*, April 1973, 44. It should be noted, however, that six of the Little Image paintings are described in the Krasner catalogue raisonné as "oil and enamel." Future materials analysis may resolve this apparent contradiction.
- 6 Lee Krasner to Emily Wasserman, interview of 1968, AAA, reel 3774.
- 7 Lee Krasner to Barbara Cavaliere, "Conversation with Lee Krasner," c. 1978, AAA, reel 3774.
- 8 See Gail Levin, "Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist," *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, May 2005, pp. 8-14.
- 9 "House that 'Lives' Theme of Exhibit," *New York Times*, September 20, 1948, 22.
- 10 Ann Pringle, "Modern Houses Inside and Out," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 20, 1948, 22.
- 11 Krasner to Cindy Nemser, quoted in "A Conversation with Lee Krasner," *Arts Magazine*, April 1973, 44.
- 12 Krasner to Cindy Nemser, quoted in Nemser, "The Indomitable Lee Krasner," *The Feminist Art Journal*, Spring 1975, 6.
- 13 Nemser, "The Indomitable Lee Krasner," *ibid.*
- 14 Krasner to Cindy Nemser, quoted in "A Conversation with Lee Krasner," *Arts Magazine*, April 1973, 44.
- 15 Nemser, "A Conversation with Lee Krasner," *ibid.*
- 16 JPCR, v. 4, 237, D63, JP to Wally & Ed Strautin, letter postmarked June 26, 1946.
- 17 See Gail Levin, "Lee Krasner," in Robert Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), 82-87; the exhibition was also shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art. See also Wendy Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1993), 240.