

Lee Krasner: abstract expressionist painter in her own right

Married to famed 'drip' painter Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner is being rediscovered by a new generation.

Courtesy of Thames & Hudson

'Lee Krasner: Living Colour,' edited by Eleanor Nairne, Thames & Hudson, 240 pp.

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- By Peter Tonguette Contributor, *Christian Science Monitor*

Married artists occupy a challenging position in art history. A male-dominated art culture nearly always renders the male artist more widely recognized than the female artist. And, when the work of the female artist does come into view, it is judged against that of her spouse.

For too long, such was the case with artist Lee Krasner, who was married to painter Jackson Pollock. Even after his death in 1956, she was continuously asked about his influence on her work. In a 1977 interview with *The Village Voice*, Krasner tried once again to put distance between herself and her late husband, asserting, "I painted before Pollock, during Pollock, after Pollock." A new book, thankfully, presents her as her own creative entity.

Lee Krasner: Living Colour demonstrates with its ample, well-chosen images what a multifaceted and dexterous painter she was from the start. It is being published in conjunction with an exhibition of her work that continues through Sept. 1 at the Barbican Art Gallery in London.

The book suggests that the artist felt both bereft and liberated after Pollock died. For example, he had spent hours creating works in a barn in Springs on Long Island in New York. After his death, Krasner began using the space; she had previously painted elsewhere in their home. "Suddenly, she found she could work on an unprecedented scale, tacking lengths of unstretched canvas directly to the wall," writes editor Eleanor Nairne.

Krasner's early life shows that she blazed her own trail even before her association with Pollock, whom she met in 1942 and married three years later. Born in Brooklyn in 1908, Krasner was independent-minded enough to twice alter her given name, Lena. She called herself Lenore before settling on Lee. And, as a teenager, she pursued an education in the arts, choosing to enroll in Washington Irving High School before studying at the Art Students League, the National Academy of Design, and the Woman's Art School at Cooper Union.

Among the early works included here is the memorable “Self-Portrait,” which Krasner completed around the age of 20. The artist presents herself working on a canvas in a clearing in the woods, but most impressive is the determined expression she gives herself, with lips pursed and eyes narrowed. Other important influences, including a life-drawing class and enrollment at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts, are explored in detail.

This is primarily an art book, ideal for flipping through and pausing on a particular painting, but Nairne has assembled it in such a way that readers can follow the chronology of Krasner’s life. Each of the artist’s significant phases is introduced by the editor, and a trio of essays was contributed by art experts Suzanne Hudson, John Yau, and Katy Siegel.

The text connects with the art. For example, Yau takes the position that, in her life of self-invention, Krasner was “more than one person.” He notes that, although the artist breathed in several different varieties of abstract expressionism, she does not fit comfortably into any of the groups.

Indeed, Krasner’s chunky, cubist life drawings could not be more distinct from her “Little Image” series, whose swatches of color resemble the view into a kaleidoscope (or a shower of confetti).

Most ravishing, perhaps, is her “Primary Series,” made after Pollock’s death: With their busy brushstrokes – some thick, others reed-thin – the works have the beauty, and fieriness, of a flower in bloom.

Nairne suggests that Krasner felt freer with Pollock’s star shining more brightly: “Without a coterie of controlling dealers and collectors, she was never forced to repeat herself, but could flow with each new direction as it came to her.”

The book concludes with an illuminating interview with Krasner conducted by Gail Levin in 1978, around the time when the artist’s contributions were beginning to be valued. (She died in 1984.) Levin, a future Krasner biographer, recalls being a feminist at the time, “eager to find women artists and role models.” Well, she found one in Krasner, and this book is sure to supply a new generation of artists and art lovers with a figure worthy of emulation and appreciation.