

# Lee Krasner and Negotiating a Gendered Public Identity

[AVANEL FORD]

As is often the case with female artists, Lee Krasner's work comes attached to a publicized mythology centered around her male contemporaries. Her marriage to Jackson Pollock, and the abstract expressionist movement they both created in, lead to a diminishing critical response to her work. The way artists have come to understand art as an expression of internal emotions and ideas enables viewers to read femininity into works of pure abstraction. Misogyny in the art world only compounds this issue, narrowing interpretations of her work and shackling conversations about her work to Pollock. In a sense, she was shackled to Pollock herself, keeping up with her husband's titles and buyers while she took years away from painting.<sup>1</sup> Krasner attempts to mitigate sexist interpretations of her work and uphold the ideals of the genre by signing her work as L.K. and obscuring her gender through abstraction.<sup>2</sup> Her struggles come to a head in *Black and White Collage*, where Krasner asserts her artistic identity materially while confronting her unique position as a modern woman artist.

Abstract expressionism is a completely nonobjective genre, rejecting subject matter in favor of using process and materials to express personal meanings. The style emerged in New York City, which had become the new center of the international art scene while World War II ravaged Europe. European artists and thinkers fled to America, bringing with them radical notions about the purpose of art. The destruction of the war drove artists away from narrative and perspectival space and incentivized the use of industrial and mass-produced materials to grapple with the unprecedented devastation. Abstract expressionism builds on cubism in space and surrealism in emotional expression, ruminating on the

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1 Anne M. Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K," *Representations*, no. 25 (1989): 44.

2 Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K," 48.

constraints of its medium by embracing the flatness of canvas and unique marks of paint rather than attempting to create a convincing illusion. Mark making is considered evidence of an artist's presence, revealing their subconscious inner emotions when they apply paint to canvas. Abstract expressionism is a reaction to massive political and social change, resulting in works of total abstraction that invite viewers to invent meaning based on visual qualities alone.

Jackson Pollock is one of the biggest names in abstract expressionism, famous for using drip and pour techniques to apply paint to massive canvases. Pollock works in gestural abstraction, emphasizing the energetic and spontaneous nature of physical artistic process. Committed to the ideals of abstract expressionism, Pollock named his canvases by chronological number. However, followers of his work read subjects and scenes into Pollock's paintings regardless. *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)* barely deserves its title, made up of industrial black, white, and lavender-gray flicks on a tan background. A neutral palette may seem masculine to some viewers, but potential assumptions of masculinity are more so derived from the idea that creation itself is a masculine act. Pollock's splattered paint is meant to implicate the unique touch of the creator rather than create an illusion of form. It is up to the viewer to determine what they are looking at. Some see landscapes or weather, while others embrace the inscrutable nature of paint on canvas. While reaction to his works was mixed, supporters of abstract expressionism uphold him as an innovator, his work an example of raw intellect and simple masculine genius.

As his wife and female contemporary, Lee Krasner faced constant accusations that her work was derivative of Pollock's. When their work was exhibited together, she was criticized for cleaning up his style, sanding down something raw and unrestrained. Her work was evidence for a larger trend of abstractionist wives dulling great work, creating and existing secondary to the unfettered genius of their husbands.<sup>3</sup> Willem de Kooning's wife, Elaine de Kooning, fell victim to the same rhetoric, particularly because her work was more figural. Krasner's and Pollock's paintings are made in the same nonobjective style, suggesting these accusations come from viewer interpretation rather than artistic intention or quality. Considering *The Springs*, her strokes are fuller and shorter, without dripping. The features it shares with Pollock's *Number 1*, namely a gestural quality and color palette, are both influenced by themes of subconscious and industry central to abstract expressionism, not each other. Part of the reason her work was undermined in comparison to his was that it was considered an expression of her femininity, justified through minute details and a similar tendency of interpretation that created the title *Lavender Mist*. Viewers crave meaning, and the meaning they extrapolate from abstraction is influenced by social bias. Krasner more often includes color in her work, which reads more feminine and therefore less intellectual and contemplative. Without splattering, her strokes are rounder,

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3 Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K." 45.

energetic but lacking Pollock's active violence. Krasner titles her works, guiding interpretation though she is unable to control where viewers take that interpretation, potentially undermining the genre. Spring is associated with fertility, provoking viewers to combine her feminine identity with her artistic one. Pairing feminine associations with accusations of unoriginality, especially in copying her husband's work, created a critical attitude that devalued her work based on gendered social bias.

In "Lee Krasner as L.K." Anne M. Wagner asserts that for many reasons, Krasner refused to produce a self in her paintings.<sup>4</sup> In order to deter misogynist devaluing of her work based on her identity, Krasner began signing with her initials so that viewers would not know she was a woman before crafting their evaluation. Even in going by Lee, rather than Lenore, she could not bypass social conditioning to recognize gender. On a few occasions, she refused to sign her works at all.<sup>5</sup> Her artistic education trained her that the logic of art was a genderless pursuit, but to be recognized, she had to obscure her womanhood and "paint like a man."<sup>6</sup> Her critics posit that she fails to disguise her femininity, citing formal elements to justify their reading as innate gender expression. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains that woman is not one subject, not an exhaustive term, and presuming it as such does not help women more than it undermines them.<sup>7</sup> Krasner does not intend to represent femininity, inadvertently revealing gender as a social construction through outsider interpretation.<sup>8</sup> If abstract expressionism is a genre aiming to express inner emotions and identify through total abstraction, the only way to read gender is through social bias. If women are defined by the absence of masculinity, the definition of the term becomes extremely variable with no specific or inherent traits uniting women under one label.<sup>9</sup> Expressions of femininity are alien to male viewers, unable to relate and therefore unable to see depth where they could with male artists' work. Essentializing gender hinders artistic expression and evaluation. After all, subjects cannot paint.

*Black and White Collage* is Krasner's artistic response to reductive perceptions throughout her career, working through her identity as an artist in a scene that consistently qualifies her work in the context of her gender. It is incredibly difficult to justify an essentialist interpretation using criteria from her other works. Her color palette is neutral and limited, littered with harsh contrasts and sharp edges. The materiality and violence of collage fill in for soft brushstrokes, an unrefined and candid exploration of paint and paper. To craft this work, Krasner ripped scraps of paper Pollock had painted, painting over them herself on

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4 Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K," 51.

5 Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K," 48.

6 Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K," 48.

7 Judith Butler, "Subjects of Gender/Sex/Desire," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1-34.

8 Butler, "Subjects of Gender/Sex/Desire," 7.

9 Butler, "Subjects of Gender/Sex/Desire," 13.

a new backing. Not only does she use collage to set herself apart from Pollock and other abstract impressionists, but her technique obscures which pieces were originally painted by his hand. Like many works of abstraction in the genre, Krasner creates a balanced composition, leaving no standout features to extrapolate gendered meaning. In the end, it does not matter which pieces Pollock originally painted, because Krasner has torn up, rearranged, and painted over those pieces herself. Her agency and knowledge of her medium is on display, unavoidable despite the work's connection to Pollock. If the art world wants from her insight into her husband, she will give it to them, if only so they will surrender the notion that that is all she has to offer. *Black and White Collage* was finished only a few years before Pollock died, while *The Springs* was painted almost a decade later. Both works were created after her first independent show in 1951, after which she destroyed or reused most of her canvases.<sup>10</sup> His death may have only complicated her relationship to her craft, but as she experiments her works become a synthesis of professional, and personal identities. Krasner struggled with establishing otherness to Pollock without the otherness of being a woman, navigating gender essentialism and misogyny to achieve recognition and creative freedom.

Wagner asserts that showcasing to the public means losing control of one's identity, even when Krasner tried so hard to control her image (or lack thereof). However she attempts to assert herself, making statements about art and identity in the collage, perception is infinitely difficult to shape. Whether she succeeded in carving out an identity for herself in her art is less relevant than examining the struggle itself, and debating may even feed into the reductive mythologization of her story. Central themes of abstract expressionism and cultural conceptions of gender contributed to a Pollock-centered attitude towards Krasner's work that classifies her art as shallow and feminine. *Black and White Collage* actualizes the conversation around her clashing identities as a woman and artist in the public eye.

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10 Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K," 51.