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**'Fuchsia Lipstick':
The Domestication of Lee Krasner in Post-War Criticism**

Aleisha Barton

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After the Second World War, the art world shifted from Europe to New York and a new form of painting that defined itself as distinctly American demanded attention from the public. Art critic Harold Rosenberg put this new style, called abstract expressionism, in words as: “not a picture but an event.”¹ There was a focus on the action of painting rather than the formal qualities that changed the discourse in which critics analyzed art. This inability to survey clear subject matter allowed critics to imply gendered metaphorical resonances within works, as meanings were fluid and inconclusive to the viewer. Coupled with instability in the social sphere, artistic abstraction served as motivation for critics to seek out gendered aspects within an artwork, identifying and constructing difference to preserve order and control in a society that had dramatically changed from the Second World War.”²

This new critical approach to art led to the conservative social constructs and gender stereotypes prevalent in post-war America, impacting the reception of Lee Krasner (1908-1984) and her abstract expressionist paintings. An analysis of primary sources, such as exhibition reviews, interviews, and art historical scholarship, provide insight into this reception, specifically in attitudes towards the use of color in Krasner’s work. Krasner is often considered when discussing the archetype of the female abstract painter, and she has been enshrined in the canon due to her relationship with her husband, Jackson Pollock. Her work is widely known and exhibited, yet she maintains a lesser role in art history; even today, scholarship of her male counterparts

¹ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 190.

² Lisa Saltzman, “Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender, Identity, and New York School Painting,” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 572.

outweighs her own.³ I want to return to the initial reception of Krasner through art journals and the popular press to better examine how this narrative of Krasner as a woman artist and the wife of Pollock originated. Instead of utilizing biographical or feminist methodologies, I will point out the contributors to Krasner's narrative through formal visual analysis and historical context to explain the reasoning behind her current historical narrative. I maintain that this is a constructed narrative that often ignores the formal qualities of Krasner's paintings, and if noticed, attributes them to a biographical or identity related cause. I hope to dismantle this notion and present Krasner as many of her male peers have been in the past, through objective formal analysis and contextualize the gendered notions as a product of her historical position and the cultural zeitgeist surrounding her career.

Even though Krasner is now seen as one of the most important abstract expressionist female artists, she was largely ignored by critics in the 1950s and 1960s and overshadowed by Pollock. This transformation can be analyzed through the frequency and content within primary and secondary sources dedicated to her. Primary sources attributed to Krasner can be separated into three categories: during her husband's life, after Pollock's death, and after Krasner's death. Both the frequency and length of articles devoted to Krasner show that her role as wife was viewed more significant than her role as an artist.⁴ It was not until the rise of second wave feminism in the 1970s that Krasner was the focus of serious scholarship, which only increased after her death

³ Her first solo show was at Betty Parsons Gallery on October 15, 1951 titled, "Paintings 1951, Lee Krasner" now known as "Little Image." She also served as an artist in residence and exhibited in several museums. She also had a retrospective in 1965 at the Whitechapel Gallery, led by Barbara Rose, in London. Gail Levin, *Lee Krasner: A Biography* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2011), 273 and 389.

⁴ During Pollock's life, only four reviews were written regarding Krasner beginning in 1951 to 1955, spanning roughly one fourth to a half page. After his death, there were ninety-four reviews and articles written about Krasner beginning in 1957 to 1984, averaging two pages in length. (ArtSource)

in 1984.⁵ Scholars of Krasner focus on her biography and gender, but rarely examine Krasner's paintings formally themselves to objectively view the art without connotations of Pollock, womanhood, or her past. This narrative, in part influenced by the reviews that came before the scholarship, control the way Krasner is understood and presented and ensures her position of "woman artist" and Pollock's wife.⁶

The assignment of femininity to certain colors, such as pink, prevailed in domestic advertising and consumer culture. This expanded to art criticism in the 1950s and 1960s and led critics to use gendered language in their reviews of Krasner's work that utilized similar color palettes. By associating her work with "feminine" colors and "decorative" or "cosmetic" qualities, critics effectively trivialized her work. This tendency differed from the praise given to her male Abstract Expressionist counterparts who also employed similar color palettes. This division between men and women "triggered a revision of art criticism's language and tone" in the late nineteenth century and replicated itself in post-war American society.⁷ This was rooted in late nineteenth century ideology in which "critics called for greater individuality and virility in American art. They praised art that seemed to display 'masculine strength,' which they defined in terms of a striking, individual vision and a 'virile,' virtuoso style."⁸ However, this implied that only men could create art in these terms. Women would constantly be relegated to their "essentially femi-

⁵ Since Krasner's death, 211 articles have been written about her from her death in 1984 to 2015. (ArtSource)

⁶ Many secondary sources encompass at least one of the following themes: Krasner as wife then painter, societal pressures in the 1950s and the creation of a masculine and feminine dichotomy, and the impact of the rise of the second wave of feminism on the reception of Krasner's work.

⁷ Kirsten Swinth, *Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 132.

⁸ Ibid.

nine” qualities and thus create artwork that was “something fundamentally different and almost always lesser.”⁹ In a *Vogue* article from 1972, titled “American Great: Lee Krasner,” Krasner pushes back on this essential difference ideology. She is quoted as saying, “I’m an artist—not a ‘woman artist.’”¹⁰ Although she did not view herself as creating art for women, about women, or as a woman, critics used phrases and associations that contextualized her as a “woman artist.”

Critics often saw Krasner’s use of color as disjointed from her identity as a woman. During the post-war era, society had been conditioned to expect cheery color palettes from women as advertising had introduced many pastel options for the home. However, this expectation did not remain in the consumer world, but also translated into the domain of art criticism. For instance, in *Night Watch* (1960) (fig. 1), an unknown writer states that Krasner is “den[ying] us a sensual experience from her work; let’s face it, brown and cream don’t make a giddy color combination.”¹¹ In this case, her color is critiqued for its lack of “giddiness.” This expectation of pleasure from Krasner’s work highlights an interesting difference in how her work was perceived compared to male abstract expressionists. Rather than examining her technical skill or praising her composition, the critic focuses on color. Her color is more serious than expected, especially for a woman painter. Although later on, the critic also finds *Celebration* (1960) (fig. 2), too brash as the critic writes, “monochrome seems preferable.”¹² The red, orange, and green in *Celebration* (1960) seem to be too vibrant and powerful to be accepted by them; it seems that critics are ex-

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Levin, *Lee Krasner*, 391.

¹¹ *Arts Magazine* 35 (1961): 54.

¹² Ibid.

pecting a specific type of color from Krasner—one not too bland but also not too jarring. In either case, Krasner’s color choices do not please.

Beginning in the late 1940s, American family structures shifted following the Second World War.¹³ This resurgence of men in the workplace left women to rediscover their place back in the home, and solidified the “housewife” stereotype with advertisements and products promising happiness to women through consumption and decorative adornment. Women were viewed as emotionally unstable, irresponsible, weak, submissive, less intelligent and less talented than men.¹⁴ The ideas found in *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, published in 1947, by Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg promoted these assumptions about women and their inferior status. This text focused on a popular Freudian concept that ‘anatomy is destiny’ and therefore natural differences exist between men and women that dictate their nature and function in life.¹⁵ Paraphrased and quoted in many popular magazines read by women such as *Good Housekeeping*, *McCalls*, and *Ladies Home Journal*, Farnham and Lundberg’s ideology was accepted with minimal rebuttal by the American public.¹⁶ Men were described as naturally strong, aggressive, independent, rational, and competitive and therefore the obvious choice for breadwinners, protectors,

¹³ Women were desired to be seen as soothing and calm the anxieties caused by the aftermath of the war and Cold War anxiety. Women were no longer working in factories for the war effort, but instead expected to dedicate themselves to pleasing their husbands and family. During this time, women’s femininity was also emphasized and companies catered to this ideology with small waisted clothing and pastel appliances. Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 210.

¹⁴ Ronald J. Oakley, *God’s Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner Books, 1986), 292.

¹⁵ Oakley, *God’s Country*, 293.

¹⁶ Oakley, *God’s Country*, 294.

and leaders in society.¹⁷ Women were described as naturally soft, passive, emotional, obedient, and gentle and therefore fit to be wives, mothers, and homemakers.¹⁸

In the 1950s, women's roles as mother and wife were emphasized by a new consumer culture. Transitioning from a society in which many women were part of the work force, to a post-war world in which many women were back within the home had adverse effects on some women. In an issue of *Life* from June 16, 1947, the author writes about the "American Woman's Dilemma" asking "should she go on working? Full time? Part time? Will housework bore her? What will she do when her children are grown?"¹⁹ At a time when the majority of society favored Farnham and Lundberg's ideology, advertisers sought to make domestic activities more fun, beautiful, and appealing to women to ensure their desire to stay within the home and serve as caretaker while the man was out providing for the family. The article in *Life* continues, noting that writers agree that "women as displaced persons are unadjusted to their lot," and proceeds to quote Dr. Helene Deutsch in *The Psychology of Women* stating that "the intellectual woman is masculinized."²⁰ To combat this, manufacturers feminized domestic appliances even further by coloring them with pastel colors such as pink, green, and yellow to make them more alluring to housewives and reinforce their feminine nature as opposition to the "masculinized" working woman.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Frances Levison, "American Women's Dilemma," *Life*, June 16, 1947, 101.

²⁰ Levison, "American Woman's Dilemma," 114.

Color was an important part of this beautification of women and their homes. While not all women were confined to the home, advertisers catered to the housewife and created an image that the ideal woman was caring for the home and family.²¹ Contemporary films and television focused on romantic love and emphasized beauty and youth. This translated to consumers through advertisements that promoted beauty as a means to satisfy women.²² Entire industries and advertising agencies blossomed as women were willing to spend billions to make themselves more beautiful and attractive.²³ Beginning with the publication of *Functional Color* by Faber Birren in 1937, color began to be analyzed in terms of how it could affect the emotional qualities of humans and increase productivity and morale.²⁴ Tired of the “color moratorium” from wartime, consumers were excited to see new color possibilities that post-war synthetic materials could provide.²⁵ This emphasis on color in advertising coupled with articles paraphrasing and quoting Farnham and Lundberg’s theory of natural difference in popular magazines led to an association of these colors, like pink, with women and therefore qualities such as emotional, passive, and gentle.

Accompanied by Birren’s theory of emotional value of color, advertising language promoted this cheery domestic setting. Daystrom furniture promised a dining set that is “cheerful as

²¹ In the 1950s, women made up one third of the working class at 22 million. Also, half of all women worked outside of the home. Oakley, *God’s Country*, 291.

²² Oakley, *God’s Country*, 301.

²³ In 1956, women spent \$1.3 billion on toiletries and cosmetics, \$660 million on beauty parlors, and \$400 million on soaps and electronic beauty aids. *Ibid.*

²⁴ Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *The Color Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012), 222.

²⁵ Blaszczyk, *The Color Revolution*, 239.

a chuckle” in an advertisement and Frigidaire raved “what these buoyant colors can do for your kitchen, for your spirits is just short of believable!”²⁶ Through consumerism, women could lift their spirits and beautify the home with a colorful solution. Advertisers’ promises were significant at this time. Advertisements in magazines like *Ladies Home Journal* for Rubbermaid Houseware offering “lovely pastel colors to brighten your bathroom” (fig. 3)²⁷ or Chromcraft Dinettes “upholstered in long-wearing, all-plastic Masland Duran in lovely pastel colors” (fig. 4)²⁸ gave women options to make their kitchen the cheeriest place in the home. Advertisers emphasized the advantages of having color within the home, pushing the notion that chores were more satisfying in an aesthetically pleasing surrounding.²⁹ Coupled with convenience, companies like Hotpoint (fig. 5) promised that “never were home appliances so beautiful to look at—so automatically convenient to use—so thrifty to own—as are the Hotpoint 1959 models in your choice of four lovely Colortones or classic white.”³⁰

The work by Krasner that received the most favorable reviews utilized colors found in these cheery advertisements for appliances and kitchen decor. The bright pink “Fashion Front” (fig. 6) on the refrigerator in Admiral’s advertisement from 1956 mirrors the use of pinkish tones in Krasner’s *Listen* (fig. 7) from 1957. This is not to say that Krasner was using these advertisements to create her color combinations, but rather that critics gendered her artwork by

²⁶ “Daystrom Furniture,” *Ladies Home Journal* October 1948, 103., Jim Heiman, *Mid-century ads* (Köln: Taschen, 2012), 580.

²⁷ “Rubbermaid Houseware,” *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1948, 133.

²⁸ “Chromcraft Dinettes,” *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1948, 233.

²⁹ Kathryn Ferry, *The 1950s Kitchen* (Botley, Oxford: Shire Publications, 2011), 25.

³⁰ Jim Heiman, *Mid-century ads*, 173.

placing it in a domestic context by praising her “feminine” colors. The domesticity and femininity inherent in pastel colors during the 1950s and 1960s was pervasive in the criticism of Krasner’s work and hindered her success as an abstract expressionist in a male dominated art world.

Krasner provides the desired pastel feminine palette in *Primeval Resurgence* (1961) (fig. 8). This work is lauded by critics who claim that “Miss Krasner’s work seems better-looking than it did last year, chiefly because other colors—ocher and purple—are invading the basic brown and yellowish scheme.”³¹ This desire is also fulfilled by *Listen* (1957), in which critics praise Krasner for her “energetic forms toward a rose-beige-brown, emerald-green and fuchsia delicate beauty.”³² This examination is interesting because *Listen* employs red more than any of the colors highlighted by the critic. In fact, it is a similar red to that in *Celebration* (1960) that is later dismissed for its extreme vibrancy. This critical bias prevalent in reviews of Krasner’s work shows how the language used by critics rarely truthfully describes a work; she only receives positive reviews for works that employ pastel colors and delicate forms. Critics condemn her for extreme color usage from monochrome to vibrant primary colors. This correlation between favorable criticisms and Krasner’s use of pastel colors can be linked to the contemporaneous fascination with pastel appliances and kitchen decor. With pastel colors’ ideological connection to domesticity, critics effectively reduced her work by placing her nearer in context to a housewife than an abstract expressionist painter.

³¹ *Arts Magazine* 36 (1962): 100.

³² *Arts Magazine* 32 (1958): 60.

As stated before, Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters," defines the new American style of painting as "not a picture but an event,"³³ and thus contributed to the ideology that women were incongruous to the new painting style's definition. America's preoccupation with men's "natural" role as protectors, found in Farnham and Lundberg's writing, aligned with the post-war ideology that America was "magnificently male again."³⁴ Belief in natural gender roles were supported nearly equally by both the Left and the Right and a strict dichotomy between men and women became an important aspect of American culture.³⁵ Women were seen as passive, caring for the home, while men exhibited the active side of life, working and earning wages. With Rosenberg emphasizing an active form of painting, women were implicitly excluded.

Rosenberg continued by denouncing the aesthetic staid, "nothing would get in the way of the act of painting. In this gesturing with materials the aesthetic, too, has been subordinated."³⁶ Not only were women seen as naturally passive due to the essential difference ideology provided by Farnham and Lundberg, they were also seen as concerned with the aesthetic and unable to remove themselves from this domestic conditioning by society. With society constantly constraining women by using advertising to remind them of their role as caretaker and decorator of the home, it is understandable how with Rosenberg's essay, women were seen as unable to fit the definition of the new American painting style. By making it an active, non-deco-

³³ Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 190.

³⁴ Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism and other politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 10.

³⁵ David Craven, *Abstract expressionism as cultural critique: dissent during the McCarthy period*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 115.

³⁶ Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 191.

rative style, Rosenberg creates a dichotomy between this style of painting and society's expectations of women. This, along with the new critical approach to art that sought out gendered qualities, made Krasner nearly unable to create artwork comparable to her male abstract expressionist peers in critics' eyes.

An analysis of the criticism of Krasner's work in the 1950s and 1960s support the claim that critics used similar language found in advertisements to equate Krasner's use of color to the domestic applications they had been viewing in consumer culture. This connection to cosmetics or decoration was an unappealing critique of male and female abstract expressionists, but for women it could be fatal. Art historian, Ann Gibson, writes, "any hint of ornament in [women's] work tended to relegate them to the personal, feminine ghetto of the home."³⁷ For Krasner, critics used a blend of cosmetic and decorative associations to describe her color use, along with connections to Pollock, to justify her successes that ensured her inferior status as a female abstract expressionist in a male-dominated art world.

In the April 1958 issue of *ARTnews*, a critic compares Krasner's *Listen* (1957) to Pollock's *Easter and the Totem* (1953) (fig. 9). The critic writes, "The Pollock motifs of flesh and fecundity are repeated by his wife in a palette that oddly suggests off-pink cosmetic and fuchsia lipstick."³⁸ Initially, the critic names forms on the canvas "Pollock motifs," eliminating any creativity of Krasner, and placing her in a subordinate context to Pollock by reminding the reader that they "are repeated by his wife." However, formal analysis of each work shows similarity in

³⁷ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism and other politics*, 37.

³⁸ *ARTnews* 57 (1958): 15.

the shade of fuchsia utilized by both Pollock and Krasner in *Easter and the Totem* and *Listen*, respectively. This makes clear that only Krasner's use of color is viewed as "off-pink cosmetic and fuchsia lipstick" because of her gender, not because of her choice of fuchsia. An association to cosmetics trivializes Krasner's work and makes it feminine and therefore less serious than her male counterpart, Pollock. Feminine qualities in art corresponded with the qualities outlined by Farnham and Lundberg for a "good woman": grace, sweetness, motherliness, and gentleness.³⁹

We see this same selective viewing in a review published in the April 1958 issue of *Arts Magazine*. To begin, the critic notes "her paintings stand in a relationship to Jackson Pollock's that is similar to that of Juan Gris's Cubist works to Picasso's or Braque's, or of Dufy's Fauve paintings to Matisse's."⁴⁰ The canonical artists listed here are all male and they are connected by their relationship as established masters in the canon and their less successful admirers and students. By placing Krasner in comparison to Pollock, the hero of American art and abstract expressionism, the critic inherently dismisses her talent to ensure her status as a minor artist in this canon of major artists. The critic continues to state, "This is particularly true of her successes: *Earth Green* and *Listen* (related to Pollock's totem series and *Ocean Grayness*—to my mind his best paintings), in which she moves his energetic forms toward a rose-beige-brown, emerald green and fuchsia delicate beauty."⁴¹ Not only are "her successes" considered successful because they relate to Pollock's work, but the forms employed within works like *Listen* (1957) and *Earth Green* (1957) are not identified as Krasner's own work but instead "his." Like the critic before,

³⁹ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism and other politics*, 9.

⁴⁰ *Arts Magazine* 32 (1958): 60.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

this one removes Krasner's authority in the composition and instead credits Pollock, but attributes the color decisions to her as they are feminine and have "delicate beauty."

Formally viewing Krasner's *Listen* and Pollock's *Easter and the Totem* (1953) demonstrates the impossibility of discerning the feminine qualities of Krasner's colors as Pollock uses nearly the same shades. In fact, Pollock's work employs several more pastel colors than Krasner's whose canvas is mostly saturated by a bright red. In *Easter and the Totem*, Pollock uses a pastel yellow similar to Sunshine Yellow, a popular kitchen color this critic would have seen in Frigidaire advertisements. Likewise, the pastel green hints at the pops of color utilized on mixers and ovens alike. White breaks up the colored forms of fuchsia, orange, yellow, and green and offers a peaceful composition. The fuchsia utilized in *Easter and the Totem* is very similar, if not nearly identical, to the fuchsia in *Listen* (1957). The difference is that Krasner is a woman, thus her decision to use pinks and fuchsia and their feminine connotations would have been more obvious to a critic who was conditioned by consumer culture to connect women and pastel products. The critic highlights Krasner's use of "rose-beige-brown" and "fuchsia delicate beauty" as if they are not present in Pollock's work. While Krasner uses a lighter pink similar to Admiral's "Fashion-Front" (fig. 6) on their refrigerator-freezers, it is really the only pastel employed in *Listen*.⁴² Instead, *Listen* utilizes bright greens, oranges, and reds with a deep emerald interspersed with white. Pollock's piece embraces more the "delicate beauty" the critic saw in Krasner's work as it employs several pastel colors within the composition. Contrastingly, Krasner's palette is quite harsh with vivid complimentary colors of red and green, with pink as a secondary detail. It is not "delicate" like the critic claims, but rather quite assertive.

⁴² Heiman, *Mid-century ads*, 174.

This observation of Krasner's use of reds, greens, and oranges is especially interesting when analyzing the criticism surrounding *Celebration* (1960) (fig. 2). In the January 1961 issue of *Arts Magazine*, a critic wrote, "when she introduces basic red and green in *Celebration*, monochrome seems preferable."⁴³ Here, Krasner's application of similar colors in *Listen* (1957) are disapproved of and rejected. The difference between *Celebration* and *Listen* is that *Listen* utilizes fuchsia and pink to break up the striking "basic red and green" whereas *Celebration* does not. Instead, *Celebration* utilizes active strokes of black to slash through the vibrancy of reds, oranges, and greens. The black elicits a far more electric energy within the work and commands the attention of a viewer. Although not explicitly mentioned, black separates *Celebration* from *Listen* most, not red and green.

The "monochrome" preferred by the critic references *Night Watch* (1960) (fig.1). However, the critic claims that "one felt physically thumped by Miss Krasner's very severe, monochromatic work" and that "Miss Krasner denies us a sensual experience from her work: let's face it, brown and cream don't make a giddy color combination."⁴⁴ So it is not actually preferable, what is in fact preferable is the "delicate beauty" offered by the fuchsia and pink in *Listen* (1957). This expectation of a "sensual experience" or "giddy color combination" is an expectation derived from the color associations provided by the consumer culture. *Night Watch* (1960) utilizes earth tones of cream, sienna, dark brown, and a light gray, and therefore is by definition *not* monochromatic. These colors are more reminiscent of the "color moratorium" of the war and therefore unfashionable and not acceptable for a woman to use. They were too "severe," and thus snubbed

⁴³ *Arts Magazine* 35 (1961): 54.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

by critics who were expecting fashionable and “pretty” colors from Krasner. The expectation of sensuality also insinuated by the critic aligned perfectly with the cultural zeitgeist infatuated with sultry actresses like Marilyn Monroe, youth, and beauty.⁴⁵ Criticism of Krasner’s work was deeply intertwined with society’s expectations for women and was not viewed objectively by critics who were unable to see past her gender and the desire to keep her a “woman artist.”

When analyzing the language employed by critics in Krasner reviews, it is striking how the language mirrors domestic advertisements. For instance, a critic calls some of her works “gay and glittering as a Christmas tree”⁴⁶ while a kitchen revival in *Ladies Home Journal* recalls a kitchen that is “as gay and glamorous as Guatemala.”⁴⁷ This interchangeable language is unique to Krasner’s criticism and shows how intertwined her identity was with societal perceptions of women and how these connotations of femininity and domesticity influenced the reception of her work. The “giddy color combination[s]”⁴⁸ desired by critics in Krasner’s work were offered by furniture that was “cheerful as a chuckle.”⁴⁹ Nearly indistinguishable from each other, the interchangeability of the phrasing between critics and advertising agencies contributed to the inability of Krasner to break from her label as “wife” or “woman” and kept her from being able to just be “an artist—not a ‘woman artist’.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Oakley, *God’s Country*, 301.

⁴⁶ *Arts Magazine* 30 (1955): 52.

⁴⁷ Gladys Taber, “Kitchen Revival,” *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1948, 124-125.

⁴⁸ *Arts Magazine* 35 (1961): 54.

⁴⁹ “Daystrom Furniture,” *Ladies Home Journal*, October 1948, 103.

⁵⁰ Levin, *Lee Krasner*, 391.

This same criticism revolving around Krasner's color use continued from art journals to the *New York Times* on several occasions. For example, a review in *The New York Times* for the show "By Husband and Wife" is prefaced by Stuart Preston stating: "Here are works by nine well-known painter-husbands and their wives, whose artistic courses either run side by side or else straggle somewhat erratically behind."⁵¹ Preston continues by stating that, "On the whole the husbands are the more adventurous, giving ideas their heads, whereas the wives are apt to hold them back by the short reins of the particular scheme of design or color on which they are based. This is noticeably true of the Jackson Pollock as opposed to Lee Krasner's conglomeration of little forms that are both fastened and divided by a honeycomb of white line."⁵² Here Krasner is noted as literally "held back" by her "particular scheme of design and color." Her gender is restrictive to her artistic intent and Preston's reasoning resonates with language involved in decorating an interior space or domestic setting. It is as if she is too confined by her womanly desire to have a cohesive decorative element in her work that she cannot tap into the "genius" attributed to the male abstract expressionists.

Krasner constantly followed her husband's shadow through the popular press. Preston wrote of Krasner's use of color often, always emphasizing her passivity and Pollock's virility. For instance, one year later, Preston writes again of Pollock and Krasner stating that "Ad Reinhardt speeds up is tempo to a refinement of statement that is disdained in the impetuously handled, rather turgid colored forms of the painting by Lee Krasner. Of course Jackson Pollock's

⁵¹ Stuart Preston, "By Husband and Wife: A Group Show by Teams—Three Modernists," *New York Times*, September 25, 1949, sec. 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*

seething canvas, the furious shaking of a lion's mane of color, is the climax in this direction."⁵³

Here, Krasner is now compared to two male abstract expressionists and once again criticized for her "turgid color." Pollock and Reinhardt are seen as her more successful counterparts, while she is just maintaining her presence rather than excelling. Jackson's virility is obvious as signaled by Preston's "of course" and Krasner's work is shuffled aside as being rushed and poorly colored. Without decorative aspects clear within her work, critics shun her and if present, she is removed from the dialogue through associations to the decorative and therefore the lesser arts.

This biased treatment and awareness of the disastrous effects of having "decorative" work were known all too well by other female abstract expressionists. Elaine de Kooning, for example, recalled at time when she was with Grace Hartigan looking at priests' robes designed by Matisse in which Hartigan noted that, "if a woman used those colors, they would say, those are typically feminine."⁵⁴ Critics utilized gender and an association of color and femininity to ensure that men remained superior artists to their female peers, suggesting that color decision for women is connected to their gender but with men is a product of their genius.

While many of these women were enjoying publicity in popular journals such as *Life* and *Cosmopolitan*, they were still relegated in their subordinate status as, "abstract painting in the hands of these 'lady artists' and 'vocal girls' became a site for painterly inscription of femininity."⁵⁵ For instance, although in a review of Helen Frankenthaler's work in the November

⁵³ Stuart Preston, "Chiefly Modern: Three New Group Shows—Work by Seong Moy," *New York Times*, June 4, 1950, sec. 6.

⁵⁴ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism and other politics*, 9.

⁵⁵ Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain," 563.

1951 issue of *ARTnews*, a critic discusses *Painted on 21 Street* and its use of pink but in a relatively unbiased manner stating that, “*Painted on 21 Street* is by contrast [to *Jugglers*] an airy compound of thick, pinkish ground and splotches of white plaster played over sparingly with whispered touches of color.”⁵⁶ E.C. Goossen writes in an issue of *Art International* from October 21, 1961 “Frankenthaler’s painting is manifestly that of a woman... Without Pollock’s painting hers is unthinkable.”⁵⁷ Likewise, in *Arts Magazine*, a critic notes Joan Mitchell’s use of pink in a feminine approach in *Sink*, writing, “*Sink*, reds, pinks, roses, and clear azure blossoms in the midst of sunny white expanses.”⁵⁸ This description of “blossoms” and “sunny” expanses recalls the same rosy and cheery pastels one would find in a domestic setting. Its explanation also suggests happiness, near giddiness, that critics expected women to provide for their audience.

Krasner’s male peers were rarely critiqued for their use of “feminine” pastels, pinks, and fuchsias. Analysis surrounding male abstract expressionists focused on the physicality and genius of their work, with color rarely discussed.⁵⁹ However, this did not mean that they were not aware of the possible implications of choosing a feminine palette. Rothko noted that he “realized that his brilliant colors had often obscured his intentions and he decided he must darken his palette in order to avoid decorative connotations.”⁶⁰ In the sixties, Rothko kept his colors to mostly deep

⁵⁶ *ARTnews* 50 (1951), 48.

⁵⁷ Saltzman, “Reconsidering the Stain,” 563.

⁵⁸ *Arts Magazine* 31 (1957), 54.

⁵⁹ This same phenomena of male artists receiving less attention to their color decisions is also written about by Linda Nochlin in an essay discussing Picasso. Linda Nochlin, “Picasso’s Color: Schemes and Gambits,” *Art in America* 68, no. 10 (1980): 105-123, 177-183.

⁶⁰ Bonnie Clearwater. *Mark Rothko: Works on Paper* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1984), 42.

wine, black, and brown with occasional bursts of red, orange, or flame blue with violet and magenta buried deep beneath.⁶¹ Although, in works by Rothko, such as, *Untitled* (fig. 10), from 1953, the fuchsia utilized in the top section of the canvas could have been interpreted in a similar manner as Krasner with connotations of femininity, cosmetics, and delicacy. As Hartigan noted in her conversation with de Kooning⁶², the gender of the artist plays just as important of a role in the criticism and interpretation of the work as color.

The same omission of color critique can be seen in Pollock's *Lavender Mist* (1950) (fig. 11), first shown at Betty Parsons Gallery on November 28, 1950.⁶³ This show not only exhibited *Lavender Mist* (1950), but also works such as *Number 30, 1950* and *No. 100*. There were two reviews surrounding this show, however neither one discusses *Lavender Mist* (1950) specifically. Rather instead of highlighting the use of soft lavender that simulated the pastel color palette of kitchen appliances being sold simultaneously, critics focus on the physicality, intensity, and strength in the work. In the December issue of *Art News* in 1950 directly following the opening, a critic notes the "disturbing degrees of intensity" and praises the "smaller colorful paintings in which convergences of tensions rule."⁶⁴ Color is nearly ignored and instead the strength and physicality is celebrated supporting post-war masculinity expectations of a strong man.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism and other politics*, 9.

⁶³ Pepe Karmel, ed. *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 72.

⁶⁴ Karmel, *Jackson Pollock*, 74.

The rhetoric surrounding Krasner focused on the decorative, feminine, color, and her role as Pollock's wife and not only shaped the reception of her work, but also the following scholarship. The majority of secondary sources that examine Krasner use biographical and feminist methodologies and rarely incorporate iconographical and formal analysis. In cases where her iconography is examined, it is often attributed to her relationship with Pollock, her pain from his death, or her expression of femininity. This mirrors the attention Krasner received from critics who rarely described her paintings in a formal manner. Barbara Rose writes of Krasner's artistic shift stemming from her academic education and adoration of Mondrian to "post-cubist" as the result of Pollock's death. Rose writes, "Until the critical year of 1956, both her life and her work had been ruled by her own need for discipline and order, a need intensified by her role as the rock of stability to which Pollock anchored his own sense of reality."⁶⁵ In this, Rose associates Krasner's artistic intent with Pollock and his presence. This biographically saturated analysis of Krasner's work creates an inability to look at works like *Prophecy* (1956) (fig. 12) in which Rose is referencing objectively. Instead, we are now encouraged to see this work as a direct impact of a wife's anger and loss rather than one of form, line, and color. Her relationship with Pollock constructs her narrative rather than her artwork. As Pollock's career is described in terms of his artistic styles, Krasner's is defined by life moments, such as his death, to describe her changing aesthetic. She is once again used as a supportive character even in her own story, with Pollock leading the narrative.

This dominant ideology was reinforced through the film *Pollock* (2001) in which Krasner is shown primarily as Pollock's caretaker. This inaccurate representation of Krasner's life sup-

⁶⁵ Barbara Rose, *Lee Krasner* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 97.

ports the many stereotypes surrounding her career.⁶⁶ Her artwork comes secondhand to his needs and wishes, supporting the assumption held by many critics, that she was a wife full time, and a painter part time. This role of wife first, painter second is explicitly shown in the scene in which Krasner is working on a mosaic and Pollock enters, and she stops what she's doing and lets him know she will be getting dinner ready.⁶⁷ This makes Krasner's artwork appear as a hobby, something she does until Pollock needs her or she has housework. The expectation that she will stop what she is doing to service Pollock's needs translates to the housewife stereotype many women were forced into in the mid-century. Rather in several interviews Krasner states that Pollock was supportive of her artwork and they both were very focused on their work. However, this too has translated into rumors of Krasner copying Pollock rather than the two working collaboratively in close quarters where inspiration was unavoidable. In many scenes of the film, Krasner is shown waking him, cooking for him, and even clipping his fingernails like a mother would for a child. She was never depicted in the film as showing artwork, and when she was creating it, her artwork comes secondhand to household needs and she would be either in the kitchen or very close while working on it. In the same way she was not taken seriously by critics in the 1950s and 1960s, this film also downplays her identity as an artist in her own right. Springing from a multitude of gendered language and feminine associations, even today Krasner still finds it difficult to escape from the expectations of wife regardless of her status as a painter.

⁶⁶ This inaccuracy is also criticized by Gail Levin in *Lee Krasner: A Biography*. Levin, *Lee Krasner*, 1.

⁶⁷ *Pollock*. United States: Sony Pictures Classics, 2000. Film.

In order to combat this inaccurate narrative, we must return to Krasner's declaration, "I'm an artist—not a 'woman artist.'"⁶⁸ By looking at Krasner's work through formal analysis it is clear that many of the contributing factors to her narrative are based on selective looking and biased ideologies. Recognition of the construction of Krasner's narrative as surrounding external factors rather than her artwork itself is important to understand the story it's telling. Krasner's historical account revolves around a cultural zeitgeist with an agenda to place her in an inferior position. Rather than perpetuating an academic tradition revolving around Krasner's identity as a woman and Pollock's wife, it is important to treat her work formally to complicate her narrative and place her role in the art world as the central focus of her story. Krasner's narrative should center around her work not her relationships or gender. As she is quoted in an interview in 1960 with Louise Elliott Rago, "It takes years to knock off prejudice. When I am painting, and this is a heroic task, the question of male or female is irrelevant."⁶⁹ If we are aware of Krasner's insistent refusal to be interpreted as a "woman painter," we must ask ourselves why is this implication and recognition of her gender so central to her scholarship. I argue, that we must take Krasner's lead and continue to work toward an approach in which gender is "irrelevant" and Krasner's artwork takes control of the narrative through deconstruction of initial criticisms and subsequent scholarship to unravel this domesticated version of Krasner present in scholarship today.

⁶⁸ Levin, *Lee Krasner*, 391.

⁶⁹ Louise Elliott Rago, "We Interview Lee Krasner," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 237.



Figure 1:
Lee Krasner
Night Watch
1960



Figure 2:
Lee Krasner
Celebration
1960



Figure 3:
Rubbermaid Houseware
September 1948



Figure 4:
Chromcraft Dinettes
September 1948



Figure 5:
Hotpoint Quality Appliances
1959



Figure 6:
Admiral Appliances
1956



Figure 7:
Lee Krasner
Listen
1957



Figure 8:
Lee Krasner
Primeval Resurgence
1961



Figure 9:
Jackson Pollock
Easter and the Totem
1953



Figure 10:
Mark Rothko
Untitled
1953



Figure 11:
Jackson Pollock
Number One (Lavender Mist)
1950

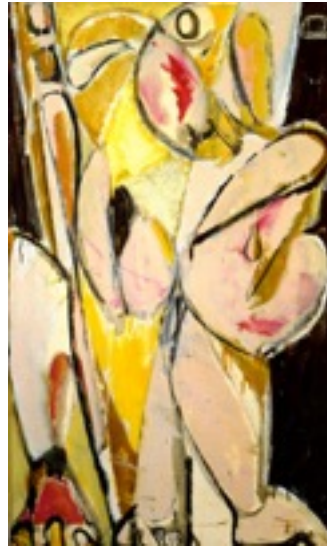


Figure 12:
Lee Krasner
Prophecy
1956

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