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Andiamo!: An Exploration of the Relationship
Between Abstract Expressionist Painting and
Women Artists From the Mid-20th Century to the
21st Century.

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Fine Art

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For every woman artist and the mark[s] they have made.

Positionality Statement

This dissertation is founded on over four years of experience working as a woman abstract artist, including the challenges, lessons, and artistic growth that has guided me to this point.

Abstract

Andiamo!: An exploration of the relationship between abstract expressionism painting and women artists from the mid-20th century to the 21st century is a unique contribution of knowledge to the conversation of gender bias within the abstract expressionist movement. This propositional exhibition will critically analyse the impact of gender bias on women abstract expressionist painters through the inclusion of eight women artists work from the mid-20th century to the 21st century. The exhibition will be held at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy and aims to highlight historically underappreciated women artists as well as their contribution to the abstract expressionist movement and lasting influence on contemporary artists working today.

Introduction

This curatorial dissertation forms an original contribution to knowledge through the creation of a propositional exhibition that explores abstract expressionism through the lens of gender stereotypes and women artists. This has been inspired by four years in art school, working as an abstract woman painter and a thorough body of research and critical writing to date. The exhibition, named *Andiamo!: An exploration of the relationship between abstract expressionism painting and women artists from the mid-20th century to the 21st century*, will take place at the Palazzo Grassi art gallery in Venice, Italy and includes artworks from the 20th and 21st century.

In chapter one, the dissertation outlines the curatorial thesis, including the inspiration and historical context of the exhibition together with the research to this work. Chapter two provides textual analysis of the selected artworks that are included in the exhibition, including a brief biography of the artists and the relevance of the works inclusion in the exhibit. This is modelled on Phaidon industry standards for artwork analysis (Phaidon Editors, 2022). In chapter three, this paper discusses and critically analyses the curatorial influences which have underpinned the decisions made in the exhibition, including the *American Artists Paint the City* exhibition at the 28th Venice Biennale (1956) and the Denver Art Museum's groundbreaking *Women of Abstract Expressionism* exhibition (2016). Finally in chapter four, I discuss a proposed public programme, inspired by the Cooper Gallery's exhibition programme *The Ignorant Art School, Sit-in Curriculum 5: A Season of Peace Building* (2025) that aims to improve the public's engagement with this upcoming propositional show. A conclusion will summarise the dissertation, together with highlighting any further existing gaps in knowledge.

The background to this research has been underpinned through wide reading of gender studies literature including academic books by Gørrill (2020), De Beauvoir (1949) and Nochlin (1971) and peer reviewed journal articles (Gohari, 2014 and Wagner, 1989).

For purposes of reading this proposal, the following definitions apply.

Colour Field Painting:

The term colour field painting is applied to the work of abstract painters working in the 1950s and 1960s characterised by large areas of a more or less flat single colour. (Tate, 2017).

Soak Stain Painting Technique:

Helen Frankenthaler was an American artist who invented a technique called 'soak-stain' in the 1950s. This technique involved using thinned-down paint to create abstract paintings. Instead of using thick, opaque oil paint, Frankenthaler would add paint thinner until the paint was the consistency of watercolour. Then, she would apply it to raw canvas... and when she applied the paint it would soak the canvas and leave behind a stain... By 1962, she began using the same technique with acrylic paints instead of oil paints. (Oklahoma City Museum of Art, 2020).

Expanded Painting:

Expanded painting is... painting[s] intended as sculptural work, engaged in an exercise that blurrily combines two spaces, two dimensional and three dimensional. Expanded Painting is an observation point over contemporary painting as interpreted by artists who, while maintaining different identities, do not only paint but also sculpt with colour. (Galleria Massimo Minini, 2019)

Chapter One: Curatorial Thesis

1.1: Gender Stereotypes in the mid-20th Century

This chapter will explore the social and cultural climate that surrounded the abstract expressionist art movement at its peak between 1943 and the mid-1950s (Paul, 2004) and dissect the gender bias that women artists working at this time were forced to navigate. The birth of abstract expressionism changed the landscape of the art world forever, shifting the focus from Europe to New York in the 1940s. In 1948 American art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) declared ‘the conclusion forces itself... that the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States.’ (Greenberg, O’Brian, 1986, p.215) The cultural impact of this art movement and the artists that defined it has lasted for decades, influencing the pricing of paintings in the modern-day art market, critical response to abstraction and artists materiality and painting methods. However, in her book *Ninth Street Women* Mary Gabriel (2018) argues that the traditional art historical depiction of the abstract expressionist movement led exclusively by male artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning, is an incomplete one that reinforces gender bias. Gabriel argues that women abstract expressionist painters, like those included in this propositional exhibition, played an equally important role in shaping the movement despite not receiving the same critical or institutional recognition as their male peers. Thus proves the abstract expressionist movement failed to break the mould for the way women artists were received and appreciated for their works.

In her 1971 essay ‘Why have there been no great women artists’ art historian Linda Nochlin (1971) details the societal processes and structures in Western culture that have prevented women artists from breaking out of supporting, secondary roles, to be seen as master’s on par with their male contemporaries. Nochlin argues that restricted access to arts training is a fundamental reason why there has historically been no great women artists (Nochlin, 1971). Prior to the 20th Century, mastering the nude figure was a crucial element to becoming an artist in any right and life drawing was a large portion of academic artistic training. However, as late as 1893, women were

forbidden to attend life drawing classes with nude models of any sex (Wickham, 2024), so were denied access to this fundamental training.

The art world being 'a boys club' that enforces barriers that exclude women artists is not a new concept. Larger egos will not be found than those in the pool of male artists and politicians, two groups that dominated the Western media and culture in the mid-20th Century. In post-World War Two America, The G.I. Bill of 1944 provided veterans with financial support from the government which enabled them to buy property and land as well as attend college (Library of Congress, 2019). Millions of Americans benefitted from this public policy and as economic prosperity grew so did the middle class, with increased upward social mobility and a huge baby boom. By the 1950s, the image of a white, middle-class family consisting of the breadwinning father, the housewife mother and 2.5 children, was sold in a can as The American Dream and helped to enforce traditional gender stereotypes for decades to come. The escalation of capitalism in America during the mid-20th Century saw work and economic gain as an increased priority in people's lives. In his paper *Capitalism and Its Culture: Rethinking Twentieth-Century American Social Thought*, Hendrickson (2004, pp. 157-160) supports this statement by arguing that in the US by the mid-20th century, capitalist social thought came to shape not only economic institutions but everyday values and norms. This included a newfound prioritisation of work and economic growth as ideals in American society. This in conjunction with the lack of women's rights (women in the US could not open a bank account in their own name until the Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1974 (Civil Rights Division, 2017)) strengthened the traditional belief that men were more hardworking, aggressive, and powerful than women. On the other hand, women were expected to be gentle, maternal, and content with a life of marriage, children and domestic work. A woman's personal ambition was frowned upon and '[a woman's] intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision' (Ruskin, 1865).

1.2: Gender Bias and the Critical Reception of Women Abstract Expressionist Painters

Traditional gender norms played a key role in the critical reception of women abstract expressionist artists throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Due to their gender, these artists' works were never viewed from a neutral standpoint or critiqued purely on their artistic merit. Instead, judgements were dismissive as critics and art historians often used weaponised gendered language to reduce their works to a 'female quality'. In 1960, key abstract expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) had her first retrospective exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York (1960), a landmark event in her career. In response to the nineteen paintings in the exhibit, poet and critic James Schuyler had expressed a 'sensibility altogether feminine' and Anne Seelye wrote in *Art News* 'one is in the presence of a hysterical temperament... The paintings are romantic, hypersensitive, sulky and filled with surface tension' (Schumacher, 2010, p. 12). To contrast, in 1959, following a tour around Europe, the MoMA in New York exhibited *The New American Painting* (1959), a collection of eighty-one abstract works by seventeen (all male) artists (Shaw, 1959, p.1). In his review of the exhibition, published in *ArtReview*, art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway describes Willem de Kooning's form as 'heavy, blunt and rounded' while Mark Rothko's works display 'rigour and control' (Alloway, 1959). This language reinforces both male and female gender stereotypes of this era. Frankenthaler's work was viewed through the lens of her gender and how it impacted her choices in colour, gesture and mark making, instead of considering those choices as made by her, an artist. On the other hand, when discussing male artists' work, the language evokes strength, power and manliness, strengthening the belief that men need to be seen as overly masculine. In her article *Gender Roles in Abstract Expressionism*, Comstock further argues that 'men needed to be seen as especially masculine and macho so they would not be falsely accused of homosexuality' (Comstock, 2017). The reception of women artists in comparison to their male peers demonstrates the systemic barriers at work to keep women in the constraints of traditional gender roles. Women artists could not escape the label of 'women artist' while their male counterparts were simply 'artists'. This must be considered a key factor as to why women artists' contribution to the abstract expressionist movement and their lasting impact on contemporary art has been undervalued throughout art history.

Moreover, the works of women artists were often contextualised within abstract expressionism, only to discuss their influence from or on other male artists working in abstraction. For example, Sybil E. Gohari states,

An overview of critical writings reveal that reviews, articles, and comments about Frankenthaler's position in the history of art cast her as either a follower of Jackson Pollock, expanding upon his ideas; a disciple of Clement Greenberg, the influential modernist theorist with whom Frankenthaler had a five-year relationship during the early 1950s and through whom she gained access to artists in the inner circles of Abstract Expressionism; or an artistic link between the (male) artists of the New York School and Colour-Field art, where Morris Lewis and Kenneth Noland reigned.

Seldom considered artists in their own right, these women's works were used as sounding boards for male artists. In her article *Lee Krasner as L.K.*, American art historian Anne M. Wagner (1989) highlights a review of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock's work in the *Artists: Man and Wife* (1949) exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1949. The review from ArtNews states 'There is also a tendency among some of these wives to 'tidy up' their husbands' styles. Lee Krasner (Mrs. Jackson Pollock) takes her husband's paints and enamels and changes his unrestrained, sweeping lines into little squares and triangles' (Munson, 1949). This proves the critical reception of Krasner as a women artist was plagued with gender bias that saw her work primarily in relation to her husbands. Critics gendered her artistic practice and identity, as they often did to women artists of this era, whilst their male peers were praised for originality and genius (Roberts, 2023). Furthermore, Gohari explains how Frankenthaler and other women artists from this era were never judged solely for their artworks - as their gender was always considered, consciously or not, when critically received. Frankenthaler is rarely credited as the artistic innovator she was, rather a follower inspired by working methods and concepts coined by male artists who came before her. However, it must be recognised that Pollock did have a lasting influence on Frankenthaler and whilst male artists were received more favourably than women artists, they were often friends or lovers. In the early 1950s, Frankenthaler and Clement Greenberg, a couple at the time, spent time with Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, at their home in Springs, Long Island (Elderfield, 2013) and often moved

within the same circles of abstract expressionist painters living and working in New York.

Furthermore, Fryd (2003) highlights that women abstract expressionists were often married to male abstract expressionists and were pigeonholed into the role of 'muse', 'wife' or 'assistant' – and in some cases all three. For most women, being married to successful male artists overshadowed their own artistic practice and they were unable to escape the association with their partner to be seen and credited as individual professionals in their own right. However, for their husbands, having a wife who was also an artist has little to no effect on their own career and if it did, it was often positive as their wife could act as a skilled assistant already familiar with the materials or as a full-time mother who took care of the children so they could continue with their work uninterrupted by family life.

1.3: Changing Gender Stereotypes in the 21st Century

In a modern-day context, the Western world is beginning to lean back into traditional gender roles that mirror those from the 1950s. Social media and the rise of right-wing politics over the past decade has amplified these beliefs. The pinnacle of this change in culture is the 'Trad Wife' trend, that sees women online post pictures and videos of their 'homemaker' lifestyle. These 'influencers' push the belief that women belong in the home, caring for children and providing unpaid labour whilst their husbands are the sole financial earner (Sherman, 2024). In an unstable economy and ultra-polarised political climate, these women believe that feminism is the reason why the American dream is not what it once was and sell this belief to viewers as an alternative lifestyle. This trend creates a multitude of contradictions on gender and the modern woman – the debate over the 'trad wife' has gone viral and for every like, share and comment on these videos, the creator makes money. These women promote a life of financial dependence on men whilst simultaneously making money independently of their husbands, an opportunity that women in the 1950s were not afforded and continued to fight decades for (Zignego, 2024).

To understand the contribution of these pioneering women abstract expressionist painters despite the societal and institutional barriers they faced, the exhibition also includes works from contemporary abstract women artists working today. Exploring the relationships between paintings from these two eras in art history will highlight the influence these women had on contemporary art and their lasting impact seen in artists working today.

Chapter Two: Curatorial Choices

2.1: Exhibition Overview

The exhibition will be held at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy where it will display the following paintings from eight women artists. The exhibition will span across two of the museums main gallery spaces, making use of the vast scale of the building and unique architecture. This traditional, ornamental interior will create a strong contrast with the bold, colourful abstract works included in the exhibition. The exhibition focuses on works that harness the key elements of the abstract expressionist movement – colour, composition, scale, gesture, mark making and materiality. To analyse the development of these elements from the height of abstract expressionism's popularity in the mid 20th century to the present day, the show includes 2D and 3D paintings spanning from 1958 to 2025. By including such a diverse range of works, this exhibition highlights historically undervalued women artists and their seminal contribution to the abstract expressionist movement, one that lives on in women abstract painters working today.

2.2: Artworks included in exhibition

Helen Frankenthaler

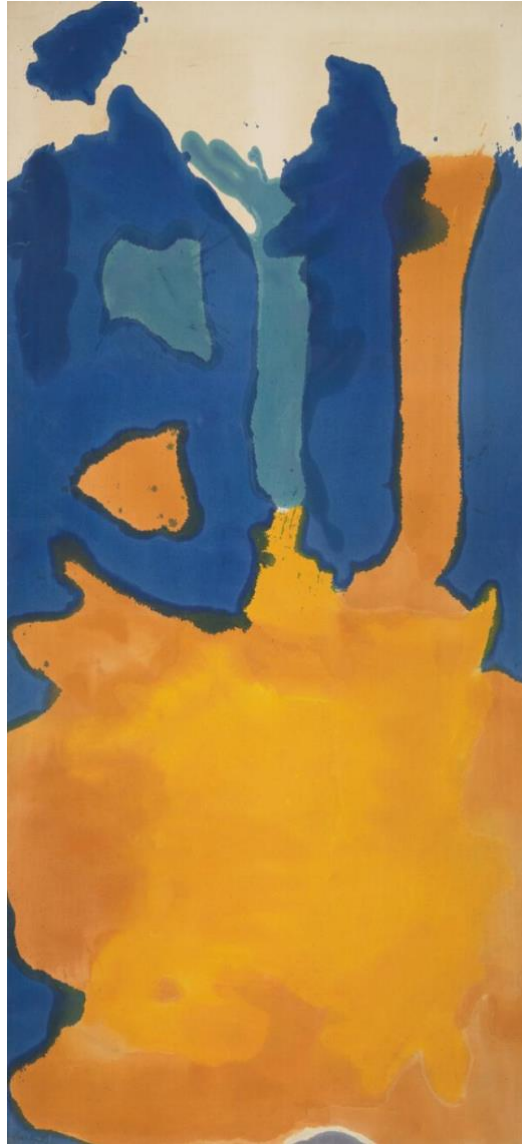


Figure 2.1: *Saturn* (1963) Acrylic on canvas, 264.2 x 121.3 cm.

A central figure within the abstract expressionist movement, Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) was an American artist whose career spanned over six decades. Starting her career in New York in the 1940s at the explosion of abstract expressionism, Frankenthaler finely tuned her understanding of colour and composition whilst discovering new ways to manipulate materials and apply paint in an abstract way.

Saturn is a 1963 acrylic painting on canvas that measures 264 x 119cm. Hung alone on a slim wall, the painting stands taller than its viewer in a gold frame. Softly lit, the golden colour in the centre of the composition can be seen to have many different shades, some layered and blotchy while the strong blue bleeds into frame.

Frankenthaler worked on the floor pouring watered down acrylic onto raw canvas, creating floods of colour that bleed across the frame as if they are growing naturally into place. The composition is so organic and the colours so striking despite the simplicity of the painting as a whole. A master of achieving balance and harmony, Frankenthaler harnesses the simplest of painting techniques to create huge impact. *Saturn* captures a moment of movement – Frankenthaler working quickly, physically moving her body around the large canvas as she paints – juxtaposed with the viewers still, quiet moment with the painting. Her canvases become environments, pulling the viewer into her inner world where she explores emotions and sensations. She once described her way of painting as being ‘involved in making her pictures ‘hold’ an explosive gesture; something that is moving in and out of landscapelike depths but lies flat in local areas – intact but not confined.’ (1957, p.29)



Figure 2.2: *Renaissance* (1971) Acrylic on canvas, 234.9 x 414 cm.

Renaissance has been chosen for this exhibition as it displays Frankenthaler's distinct Colour Field painting in its most refined and impactful form. A master of materials, Frankenthaler pulls endless depth and richness from just a few shades in her ever-restrained colour palettes. By pouring diluted acrylic paint on raw, unstretched canvas, Frankenthaler builds layers of vivid fuchsia pink that live in harmony with the soft washes of blue coming in with the tide at the bottom of the frame.

Compositional harmony is achieved as the artist remains open and reactive to what appears as the paint bleeds, mixes and dries on the canvas. Beautiful, organic shapes reveal themselves as Frankenthaler pours layers of paint over one another, washing her viewer back and forth between the landscape of colour.

Compared to her earlier, more figurative works, *Renaissance* is a triumph of all the visual elements Frankenthaler is a master of. Materiality, colour, composition, application of paint, scale, emotion, depth – each live in harmony with the other, creating a painting with orchestral impact that harnesses the finest qualities of abstract expressionism.

Alma Thomas



Figure 2.3: *They Laid Him in the Tomb* (c. 1958) Oil on canvas, 203.8 x 254.6 cm.

African-American artist Alma Thomas (1891-1978) is most famous for her brightly coloured paintings, made up of small dot-like brushstrokes that create sweeping shapes and landscapes. However, throughout her decades long career as an artist and teacher, Thomas stretched the boundaries of abstraction and created a diverse body of work. During the late 1950s and 1960s, Thomas was identified as a Colour Field painter and was regarded a major painter of the Washington Colour Field School (Markoski, 2024). Following her retirement in 1960 after 35 years of teaching, Alma Thomas' paintings throughout the next two decades saw her emerge as one of the most influential women artists working in abstraction at that time.

They Laid Him in the Tomb was selected for this exhibition as it beautifully displays the visual elements and technique used in colour field abstract painting. With a

restricted and muted colour palette Thomas achieves a deeply impactful painting without it being busy. The richness of tone in such deep colours pulls a warmth from the black mass that floods across the canvas, intertwining with itself. Pops of aqua and red guide your eye around the frame without disturbing the compositional balance of the piece. A muted yellow background is washed in and out of the shapes bringing an organic element to the painting, as curves and angles appear, seamlessly blending horizontal and vertical elements on the same canvas.

A predecessor to her most famous dot colour works, *Untitled* suggests hints of Thomas' interest in nature, the Earth and space before it was a focal point in her paintings.

Bernice Bing



Figure 2.4: *Myacamas No. 6, March 12, 1963* (1963) Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 125.7 cm.

Bernice Bing (1936-1998) was a Chinese American artist from the San Francisco Bay Area. Her paintings were influenced by her time studying with Japanese artist Saburo Hasegawa, a painter and calligrapher. Her paintings express the life of a woman 'fusing Eastern and Western techniques' (Griffin, 2022) and creating soulful, large-scale paintings. Her body of work is chronologically inconsistent as her works were largely ignored by museum and gallery curators due to her being a lesbian, Asian American woman. Her paintings tell the heartfelt story of a woman searching for understanding in an unstable world.

In *Myacamas No.6, March 12, 1963*, Bing has a focused use of perspective to build the composition. Is it flat? Is it deep? Could you climb into the composition and exist on different levels? Continuously inspired by her life in California and her time as a

caretaker for the Mayacamas Vineyards from 1962 until 1966 (Ma, 2021), Bing's paintings exist in a space between abstraction and landscape. The artists deep connection to nature and personal journey with spirituality are intertwined and explored through abstraction. In this painting Bings brings the viewer to recognise something that they don't recognise. Washes of colour confidently brushed across the canvas change shape like clouds, as greens melt into blues melt into reds. Bings use of colour is perfectly balanced, glowing from the canvas with a warm and comforting light as the California hills roll out of the frame in front of you.

Toko Shinoda

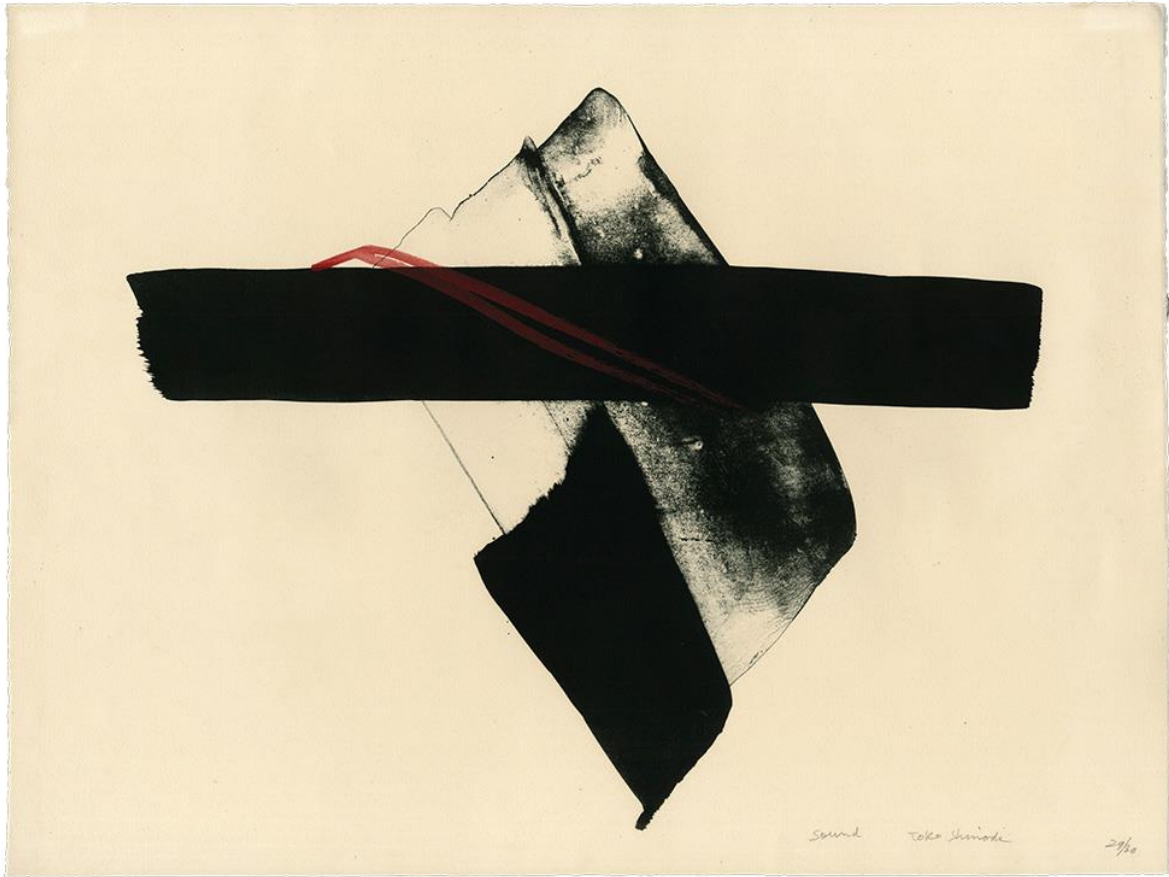


Figure 2.5: *Sound* (circa.1990) Lithograph, 43.2 x 58.4 cm.

Sound by Toko Shinoda beautifully displays the Japanese artists effortless blend of sumi ink painting and abstract expressionism. Trained in traditional calligraphy since she was a child, Shinoda pushed the boundaries of line, form and composition throughout her decades long career. A unique momentum is created in her works as the deliberate, considered nature of calligraphy is slow and serene contrasted with the rapid urgency of abstract expressionism. This balanced quality causes a suspension in time - the viewer experiences a vivid movement frozen within the frame, bursting but still. What is not on the canvas is just as important as what is. Shinoda harnesses the power of negative space, evoking tension with only a few marks. The artists clear grasp on her materials and mark making creates a capturing push and pull between what mark is made and what is left untouched.

Maja Dlugolecki



Figure 2.6: *Your heart knows the truth No. 02* (2023) Acrylic on raw canvas, 165 x 282 cm.

Maja Dlugolecki is a Polish American abstract artist based in Los Angeles who's 'intuitive works feature layered washes and a variety of textures, creating movement and emotion through bold pigments' (Dlugolecki). Often working on a large scale with thinned acrylic, Dlugolecki paints on raw unstretched canvas, a technique directly influenced by Helen Frankenthaler's soak stain painting. The influence of Frankenthaler on Dlugolecki's work is undeniable as washes of colour flow back and forth on the canvas, sometimes touching, mixing to create new shades. In *Your heart knows the truth No. 2* the artist achieves a captivating and vibrant composition with only a few colours. This painting is a prime example of Dlugolecki's commanding and confident, yet always balanced understanding of colour. The restricted colour palette is organic and tonally sound – what could easily be a busy and muddy painting is not. Rather the composition is in perfect harmony and every element of the painting lives in consensus with each other on the canvas.

This painting has been selected for this exhibition as it shows abstract expressionism and colour field painting in a contemporary art context. Dlugolecki's works are an example of how visual elements and working methods that defined the abstract expressionist movement in the 1950s and 60s, are being bent, adapted and modified in the 21st century to create a new genre of abstraction. One that honours the pioneers who came before them whilst conveying the emotions and experiences of a new generation through abstraction.

Lara Merrett



Figure 2.7: *Casus fortuitous* (2016) Painted canvas sewn together, Installation view at Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

Lara Merrett is an Australian artist whose practice ‘interrogates the relationship between painting and its surrounding architecture’ (Sullivan+Strumpf, 2023). Merrett’s paintings become a part of the environment they live in, often suspended from the ceiling or draped cascading onto the floor. Merrett stretches the limits of scale by painting on large sheets of raw canvas sewn together to create walls of soft moving colour.

Again, drawing inspiration from Helen Frankenthaler’s soak stain technique, Merrett pours paint onto the canvas to create marks and stains that bleed and blend into one another creating a double-sided composition that viewers can walk around. The artist embraces the accidental spills and stains that occur throughout the painting process, (Contemporary Editions, 2016) resulting in paintings that exert playfulness and joy. Merrett effortlessly balances a palette of soft, organic shades with luminous, glowing pinks and yellows, creating a confidence and power that compliments her paintings colossal scale.

Merrett’s work has been selected for this exhibition as it pushes the boundaries of what abstract expressionism can be in the contemporary art world and bridges the gap between abstract expressionism and expanded painting. Expanded painting is an art concept that pushed painting further than the traditional canvas frame and explored the 3D world of a painting. Blending sculpture with painting, this approach pushes material boundaries and creates paintings that become environments the viewer can enter. Sam Gilliam was an American abstract artist whose work captures the pure essence of expanded painting. American artist and critic Douglas Davis once described how a person ‘enters’ a Gilliam painting as if they have entered a room (2022). Lara Merrett’s installation *Casus Fortuitus* does the same thing. Engulfed in colourful drapery the viewer cannot help but enter the artists inner world and live there for a moment as the work fills each of their senses.

Nadine Schemmann



Figure 2.8: *Amplituden, Intervention* (2023) Acrylic and chlorine bleach on linen, Installation view at Museum Wiesbaden, Germany.

Nadine Schemmann is a German artist whose practice pushes the boundaries of colour, materials and form to challenge the viewers understanding of classical abstract painting. Her works range from large scale abstract paintings stretched to boards to free-flowing paintings on loose fabric hung from the ceiling cascading down to the floor. In her piece *Amplituden, Intervention*, lines appear naturally from the drape of the fabric, casting shadows and creating folds that seamlessly marry traditional painterly elements with a sense of the living, breathing work. This mixture of flat and 3D creates an environment within Schemmann's work that the viewer can step into and be surrounded by. Schemmann often works with a restrained colour palette of only two or three colours in each piece but pushes the tonal range of these shades through her manipulation of materials. The artist dyes, paints and bleaches cotton, a technique that allows her to create shapes and marks that bleed into one another to reveal new colours and textures that are not always noticeable at first glance.

Schemmann's work has been selected for this exhibition as it demonstrates the natural relationship between abstract expressionist painting and the expanded painting movement. Schemmann's works harness the essence of colour, gesture, scale and form that characterise abstract expressionism, whilst creating a sensory environment that encourages her viewer to consider 'what is an abstract painting when it is not on a canvas?'

Olivia Runciman



Figure 2.9: Vessel I (2025) Acrylic on raw canvas, 95.5 x 202 cm

Vessel I is the final painting to be included in this exhibition. Adopting techniques from Helen Frankenthaler's 'soak-stain' method, the artist poured watered down acrylic onto raw, unprimed canvas laid flat on the floor and worked reactively with the shapes that appeared from the paints natural bleeding. Depth of colour and texture is built up slowly through layers of paint. The canvas is soaked in water each time paint is applied

and then left to dry, revealing new shapes and pigments that look different once dried as they did when wet.

Heavily inspired by colour field painting the artist sticks to a restrained colour palette of only two colours but deeply explores the tonal range that exists within each. Mixing every shade used in the painting from the same two original colours creates a cohesiveness throughout the composition and tonal balance between darker marks and lighter washes.

The scale of *Vessel I* is also important and reflects that of Helen Frankenthaler's *Saturn*. The painting is human sized, hung on the wall facing its viewer almost like a mirror. Soft lines and mellow washes of colour hang in perfect balance, enveloping the viewer in a calming glow that encourages reflection and feelings of peace.

2.3: Exhibition Model and Layout

To realise the exhibition a digital model of the Palazzo Grassi was made using photoshop and existing images of the gallery during previous exhibitions. The model shows each artwork installed within the space, as well as a floor plan to illustrate the route visitors will take throughout the exhibit. The show unfolds across the Palazzo Grassi's ground floor atrium and first floor gallery space.

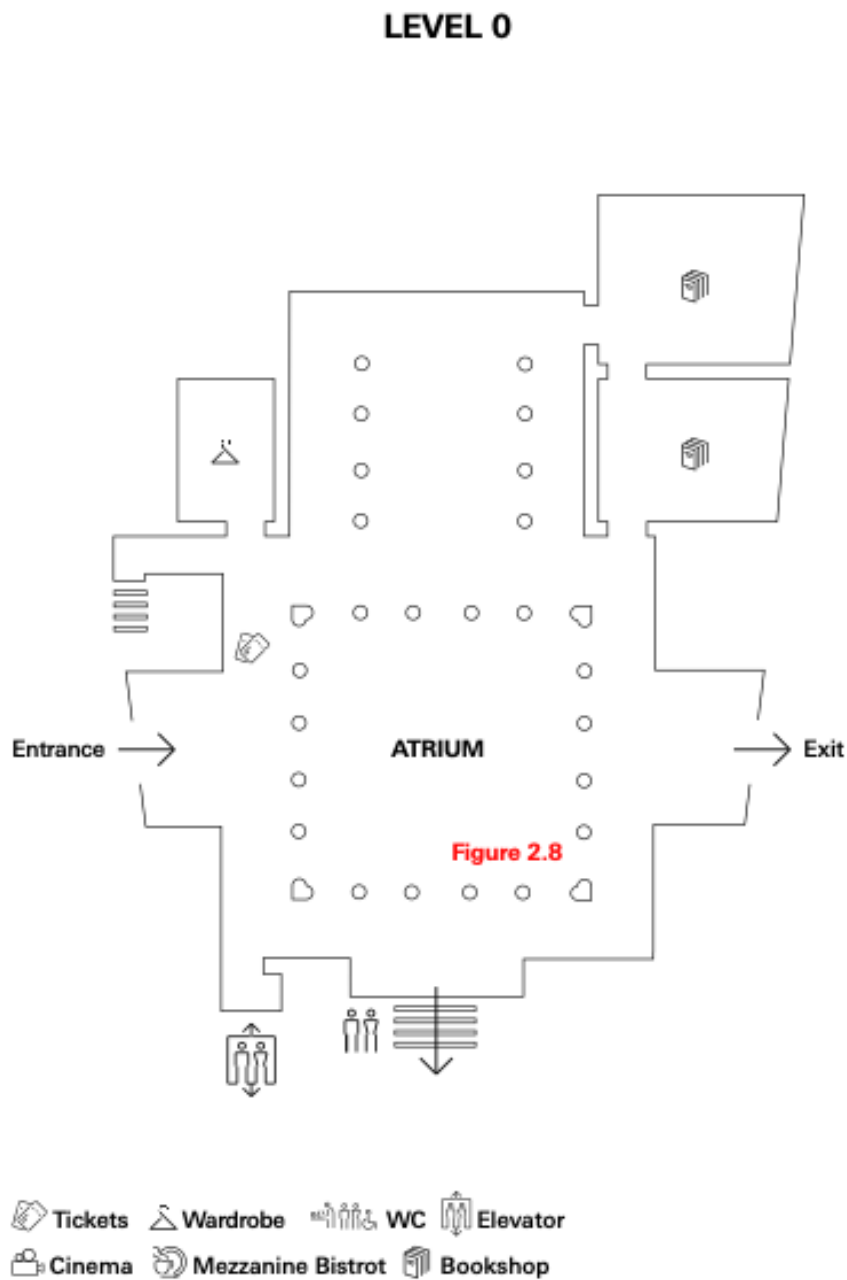


Figure 2.10: Floor plan of Level 0, Palazzo Grassi.

LEVEL 1

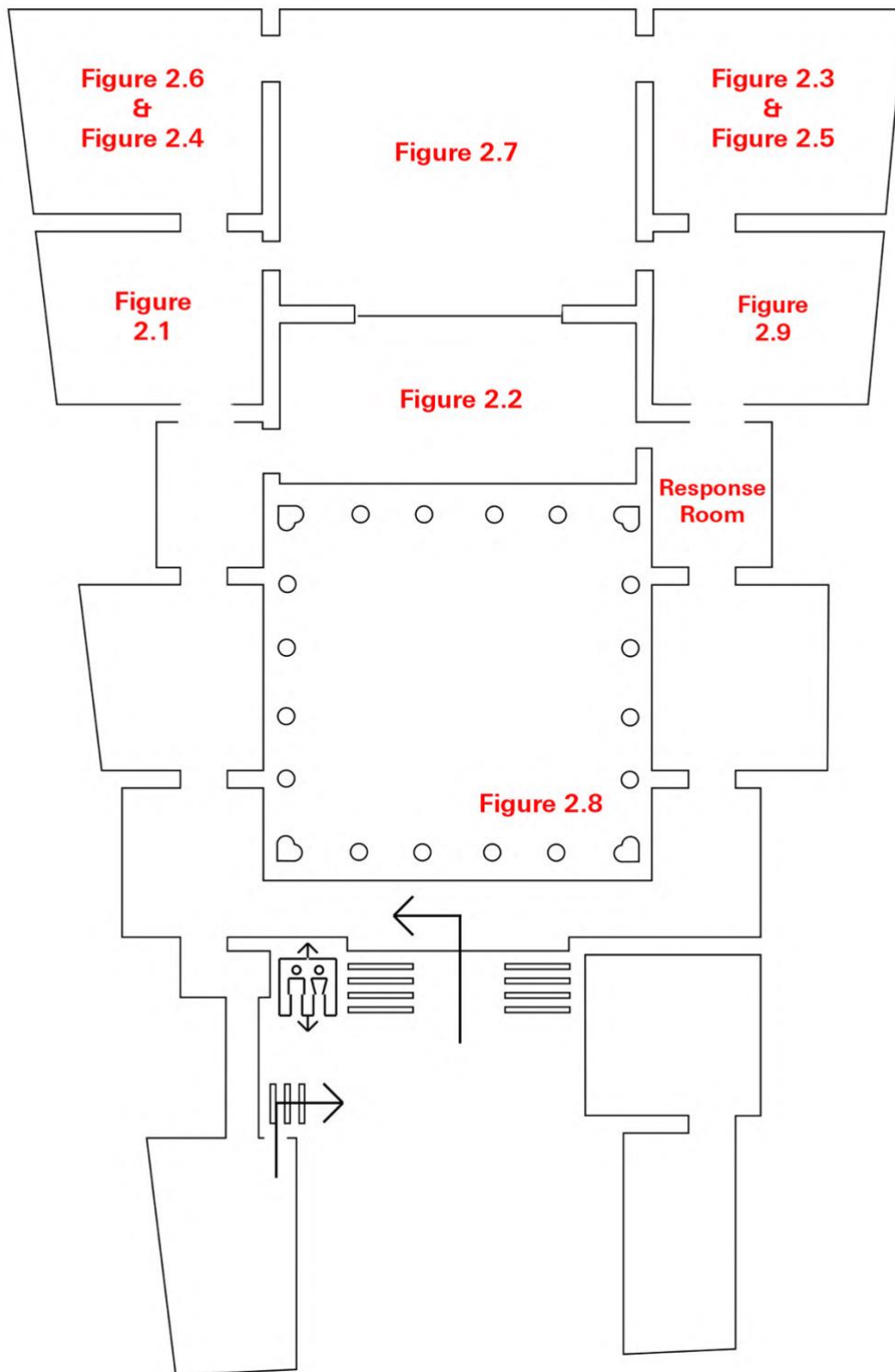


Figure 2.11: Floor plan of Level 1, Palazzo Grassi.



Figure 2.12: Level 0, Atrium. *Amplituden, Intervention*, Nadine Schemmann.



Figure 2.13: Floor 1. *Saturn*, Helen Frankenthaler.



Figure 2.14: Floor 1. Left to right: *Myacamas No. 6, March 12 1963*, Bernice Bing, *Your heart knows the truth No. 02*, Maja Dlugoleki.



Figure 2.15: Floor 1, Front view. *Casus fortuitous*, Lara Merrett.



Figure 2.16: Floor 1, Side view. *Casus fortuitous*, Lara Merrett.



Figure 2.17: Floor 1, *Renaissance*, Helen Frankenthaler.



Figure 2.18: Floor 1. Left to Right: *They Laid Him in the Tomb*, Alma Thomas, *Sound*, Toko Shinoda.

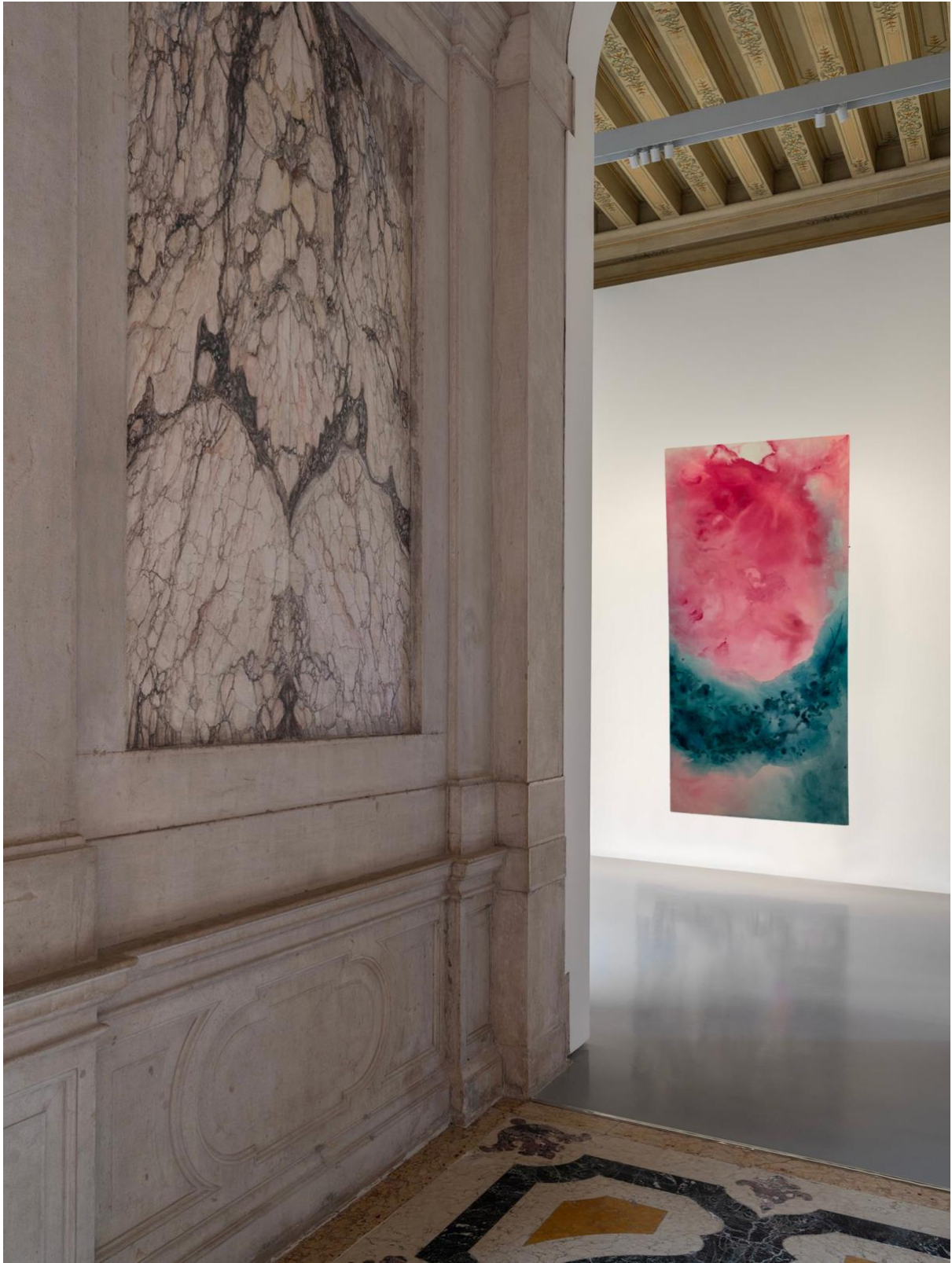


Figure 2.19: Floor 1. *Vessel I*, Olivia Runciman.



Figure 2.20: Floor 1, Response Room.

Chapter 3: Curatorial Aims and Influences

3.1: Choice of Location

The decision to have the propositional exhibition in Venice comes from the city's art historical connection to the abstract expressionist movement. In 1956 at the 28th Venice Biennale, the US pavilion featured an exhibition called *American Artists Paint the City* (1956), curated by Katherine Kuh (1904-1994), curator of modern art at the Art Institute of Chicago (Simpson, 2007). In their summary comments on the exhibition Dr Claire Brandon states 'Kuh brought works by New York-based abstract expressionists together with other concurrent stylistic movements and mediums in contemporary American art (including realism and photography) by including thirty-six different artists from all over the country.' (Brandon, 2018). This exhibition was a key factor in connecting a European and international audience with American abstract expressionism during the mid-20th century. In her essay *Katherine Kuh, Norman Lewis and the Italian Reception of Abstract Expressionism*, Raffaele Bedarida states that 'Europeans, and especially the Italians, remained largely indifferent to the New York School until around 1956... It was in fact only during the second half of the 1950s that indifference and scepticism gave way to interest and acceptance.' (Bedarida, 2018). *American Artists Paint the City* undoubtedly played a role in this widespread acceptance of abstract expressionism, especially as the exhibition was included in the Venice Biennale. This meant the show received a large international audience as part of a prestigious, globally renowned arts festival, in a city with a rich art history and cultural significance. The significant role *American Artists Paint the City* had in establishing American abstract expressionism on a global stage is supported by a historical account of the show from Italian historian and art critic Linoello Venturi's catalogue text for Kuh's exhibition where he stated, 'American art has truly come of age' (Venturi, 1956, p.6). This historic connection between abstract expressionism and the city of Venice influenced the decision to hold the exhibition here.

3.2: Choice of Venue



Figure 2.21: Exterior of Palazzo Grassi Museum, Venice, Italy.

When choosing a venue for *Andiamo!* the US Pavillion where *American Artists Paint the City* (1956) was exhibited was considered for its historic relevance. However, as this propositional exhibition includes a variety of women painters from different countries, it was not wholly appropriate or relevant for the exhibition to be held in a solely American venue.

A second gallery that was considered for this exhibition was the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Home to the personal collection of prominent American art collector Peggy Guggenheim (1898-1979) the museum is 'one of the most important museums

of European and North American art of the twentieth century in Italy' (Peggy Guggenheim Foundation, 2025). Hosting the propositional exhibition here would have supported the themes of championing underappreciated abstract expressionist artists as Peggy Guggenheim's legacy 'endures through her significant contributions to the promotion of contemporary art and her foundational role in supporting emerging artist, which has left a lasting impact on the art world' (Rothenberg, 2022).

The third gallery considered for this propositional exhibition was the Palazzo Grassi contemporary art museum in Venice. After researching the floor plans and gallery spaces available in both this gallery and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Palazzo Grassi was more suited to the works included in *Andiamo!*.

Built between 1748-1772 and designed by Italian late-Baroque architect Giogio Massari, Palazzo Grassi is a Venetian Classic style building located on the Grand Canal in Venice, Italy (Pinault Collection, 2025). When considering an atmosphere and environment for this exhibition it was important the space was big enough that each work, regardless of the scale, had space to breath. The mezzanine and first floor galleries in the Palazzo Grassi have the right layout and dimensions to successfully display the selected works and ensure the exhibition is spacious whilst remaining cohesive. The juxtaposition between the ornate highly decorative interior of the building against the white walled gallery space creates an impactful contrast and tension to the exhibition. This creates visual impact that makes viewers further appreciate the bright, gestural works. This venue allowed the selected artworks to stand out and demand attention, whilst still remaining harmonious and at home in their surroundings.

3.3: Critical Analysis of Existing Exhibitions

Women of Abstract Expressionism – Denver Art Museum

Women of Abstract Expressionism was a 2016 exhibition at the Denver Art Museum in Denver, Colorado that ran from 12th June to 25th September. The show was described as 'the first major museum exhibition to present the work of female painters

who came to age artistically in the heady avant-garde milieu of late 1940 and 1950s America' (Heinrich, 2016, p. 7) and included more than fifty works from women abstract expressionist painters. Curated by Gwen Chanzit, Denver Art Museum's curator of modern art, *Women of Abstract Expressionism* was a key influence for this propositional exhibition thematically and curatorially.

The exhibition focused on the materiality and techniques these artists explored throughout their careers and links these innovative, groundbreaking elements to the core principles of abstract expressionism; 'the expressive freedom of direct gesture and process' (Chanzit, 2016, p. 10). This directly influenced the curatorial choice to select paintings for this propositional exhibition based on how they effectively harness the key elements of abstract expressionism - gesture, composition, colour, scale and materiality.

The Denver Art Museum's exhibition also inspired the 'Response Rooms' within this propositional exhibition. As well as traditional white cube gallery space displaying the paintings, *Women of Abstract Expressionism* had an educational lounge area that 'offered a space for visitors to explore the climate of the 1950s through images, ephemera, and music to provide a glimpse into other aspects of the artists' lives, and a chance to reflect upon and share personal experiences' (Chanzit, 2016). As *Andiamo!* includes paintings spanning from 1958 to 2025, creating a space that immersed viewers in a specific era from history was not wholly relevant to the works or themes within the exhibition. However, upon hearing curator Gwen Chanzit's description of the educational lounge as a place to 'share a time when you've been an artist, explorer, rule breaker, activist, or friend' (Chanzit, 2016), a similar space was included in this propositional exhibit as it encourages engagement between the viewer and the works. The 'Response Rooms' is the final room of the exhibition where viewers are encouraged to write three words that capture the thoughts and feelings they had whilst experiencing the exhibition and add them to the wall. This connects each viewer to their understanding of the paintings and artists in the show, whilst also creating an ongoing visual dialogue about the power of abstract expressionist work, all between total strangers.

However, *Women of Abstract Expressionism* received a mixed critical reception and in a review from American curator and critic Karen Wilkin in *The Wall Street Journal*, Wilkin highlights that while the catalogue published from the exhibition contains a vast range of women abstract painters, the actual exhibition includes only twelve. (Wilkin, 2016). This gives a much narrower representation of women artists contribution to abstract expressionism, especially when many of those included in the exhibition are the most well acknowledged women painters from this movement such as Helen Frankenthaler, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell. Further still, the exhibition failed to include works from any Black or Asian women artists, instead all works are by white, American women. This narrows the representation in the exhibition further, as it fails to highlight other racial and social barriers that POC women artists had to face on top of fighting gender-based inequality.

This lack of representation and diversity reinforced the decision to include African-American, Asian-American and Asian artists from the mid-twentieth-century in the propositional exhibition *Andiamo!*. This is a key curatorial decision that contributes to the overall purpose of the exhibition; to highlight often forgotten and underappreciated women artists who made a significant contribution to abstract expressionism and whose work continues to influence abstract painters today.

Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940-70 – Whitechapel Gallery

A second exhibit that informed decisions for this propositional exhibition is *Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940-70* (Whitechapel Gallery, 2023). Held at the Whitechapel Gallery, London in 2023, the exhibition presented one hundred and fifty paintings from eighty-one international women artists who worked with gesture and abstraction in the mid-20th century (Smith, 2023). In contrast to the Denver Art Museum's exhibition, this show provided far wider representation of women abstract painters and highlights the role international artists had on the development of the abstract expressionist art movement. Due to this, the exhibition also delves far deeper into the political and social climate in each country that impacted these artists practice, including the rise of fascism in South America and East Asia and the influence of communism in Eastern Europe and China (Runciman, 2025). The inclusion of

international artists inspired the same decision in this propositional exhibition as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of abstract expressionism and its place in art history. Analysing a wide variety of paintings allows the viewer to draw comparisons in technique, materials and composition. This engages the viewer with the artists process, creating a deeper understanding of their work whilst also framing the abstract expressionist art movement in a wider historical context.

Chapter 4: Additional Curatorial Influences

4.1: Public Programme

To accompany the exhibitions run at the Palazzo Grassi there will be a programme of free workshops and talks to increase the public's engagement with the show. The programme will be curated to encourage deep analysis of each painting in the show, focusing on each artist's use of materials, use of space and personal artistic expression. In addition to this analysis, there will be workshops where the public can experiment with materials to create their own abstract works, stimulated by the works in *Andiamo!*. Please see appendix A for proposed public programme schedule.

This decision to run a series of events alongside the main exhibition is inspired by the Cooper Gallery, Dundee and their most recent exhibition *The Ignorant Art School, Sit-in 5, Grace Ndiritu: Compassionate Rebels in Action (2025)*. In addition to the works in the gallery space, the Cooper Gallery curated an events programme to supplement the exhibition called *The Ignorant Art School Sit in Curriculum 5: A Season of Peace Building (2025)*. This consisted of a series of talks, meditations, feasts, workshops and gatherings that ran throughout the duration of the exhibition, each one focused on a specific element within the show, linked by the theme of compassionate rebels. I attended a number of these events and felt each expanded the exhibition's impact on the local community by offering a free space for people to learn from and connect with the artwork and each other.

Many of these events were held in the gallery space itself, allowing the public to engage and interact with the work on a deeper level. Opening the gallery space up in the evening or at times when it is not normally open to the public creates an exclusive feeling to these events and creates a buzz around the public programme.

Conclusion

This curatorial dissertation forms an original contribution to knowledge through the creation of a propositional exhibition that explores women artists contribution to abstract expressionism throughout the mid 20th century and 21st century, through the lens of gender stereotypes. The exhibition will take place at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy and includes works from eight women abstract painters.

In chapter one, the dissertation outlined the curatorial thesis that is the inspiration and historical context of the exhibition together with the background to this work. This attends to aspects of history and theory to critically interrogate this subject. Chapter two provided textual analysis of the selected artworks that form the exhibition, including justification for their selection and a brief overview of the artists concerned as well as highlighting links and drawing comparisons between the specific works. This is modelled on Phaidon industry standards for artwork analysis (Phaidon Editors, 2022) which attends to aspects of practice. In chapter three, this paper discusses aspects of history by critically analysing the curatorial influences which have underpinned the organisation of the exhibition, including the *American Artists Paint the City* exhibition at the 28th Venice Biennale (1956) and the Denver Art Museum's *Women of Abstract Expressionism* exhibition (2016). Finally in chapter four, I discussed a proposed public programme, inspired by the Cooper Gallery's most recent exhibition programme, *The Ignorant Art School Sit-in Curriculum 5: A Season of Peace Building* (2025). This series of workshops, talks, and film screenings will accompany the propositional exhibition and was curated to increase the publics engagement with the show.

This dissertation has uncovered further gaps in knowledge that may contribute further to the academy. Whilst there have been a number of exhibitions and critical curatorial writings that interrogate the influence of gender stereotypes on the art historical depiction of 20th century women abstract expressionist painters, there has been very few that contextualise this research in a contemporary framework and analyse the influence of these artists on women artists working today. This includes writings on feminist art history and theory by key theorists such as Linda Nochlin (Why Have There

Been No Great Women Artists?, 1971) and exhibitions at established contemporary art galleries such as Whitechapel Gallery, London (Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940-70, 2023).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Exhibition Public Programme

The propositional exhibition *Andiamo!* will be supplemented with a free public programme hosted at the Palazzo Grassi, that will run throughout the duration of the show. As the exhibition will run from May until November, during the Venice Biennale, there will be a large number of international visitors in the city, which the public programme hopes to engage with.

Film screening of *Helen Frankenthaler: Let the Picture Lead You* (2025). Join us for a free screening of this documentary that explores Frankenthaler's techniques, artistic practice, and lasting legacy. Film directed by Maria Anna Tappeiner and produced by Westend Films.

Soak-stain Method Workshop. Join us for a free workshop to learn about Helen Frankenthaler's pioneering 'soak-stain technique' and create your own artworks inspired by the materiality of abstract expressionism.

In conversation with Katy Hessel, broadcaster and art historian, and Elizabeth Smith, executive director of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. Join us for a live discussion between Hessel and Smith on the *Andiamo!* exhibition and abstract expressionism's place in the contemporary art world.

Appendix B: Alternative, unsuccessful exhibition layout



View of alternative layout for level 0 gallery space with Lara Merrett's *Casus Fortuitus* (2016) installed in the atrium.

This layout was not successful as it blocked too much of the atrium's space and natural light. As part of the entrance to the gallery and the first thing visitors see, the atrium had to be spacious and guide viewers up the stairs to the other works, not block the view of the stairs entirely. Merrett's installation piece is far more successful in the Level 1 gallery space where it does not block the view to anything and can be lit artificially to maximise visual impact.

Appendix C: Personal Artistic Statement of Practice

The aim of my practice is to achieve total balance within abstraction. My focus is using colour and composition to create harmonious, colour-scapes. In each of my paintings, I strive for all visual elements to live organically together on the canvas.

Acrylic is my preferred medium as it allows me to experiment with value, hue and chroma. Working on raw, unprimed canvas I water down my paints and pour them to

create light handed, loose washes of colour that layer and mix, creating compositions organic in shape and form.

Mixing and testing colour through swatches is a large part of my practice that runs through each of my works. Colour theory is a tool I use to understand what I am trying to convey through each piece. Whether contrasting or complimentary, I view the colour palette of my paintings as the device that can create a variety of atmospheres and moods. Colour is always the main focus of my work and to achieve balance within it I experiment thoroughly with its changing qualities.

I have found that prioritising play and experimentation in my process allows me to work in an instinctive and reactive way. When painting, I strive to feel in tune with my mark making and application of paint, almost as if I am communicating with the canvas and listening to what it needs. Every move must work in harmony with the next to create dynamic, balanced paintings that embody my personal artistic practice