

[HUSBANDS AND]
WIVES



WOMEN IN ART,
AS IN OTHER FIELDS, HAVE
HISTORICALLY TAKEN
A BACKSEAT TO THEIR MEN.
BUT TIMES ARE CHANGING—
AND SO ARE PRICES, AS
THE MARKET TURNS
TO OVERLOOKED ARTISTS.
BY CAROL KINO

Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, in a circa 1946 photograph. Krasner felt she wasn't given a major museum show largely because "I am Mrs. Jackson Pollock." Recently, however, prices for her paintings have been on the rise. Stars in their own right, opposite, from left: Helen Frankenthaler, Frida Kahlo and Barbara Hepworth.



IN HER 2001 MEMOIR, *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World*, Dorothea Tanning recounts her first meeting with her future husband, the great Surrealist Max Ernst. It was 1942 and he was scouting for the survey show “Thirty-one Women” when he arrived at her apartment for a brief studio visit, stayed for a lengthy chess game and, a week later, moved in.

“That we were both painters did not strike me as anything but the happiest of coincidences,” Tanning writes. That, however, was before their relationship was exposed to the art world, where, to her dismay, she often found herself pigeonholed as merely “his wife.” As she noted of the Surrealists, “the place of women among these iconoclasts was not different from what it was among the population in general, including the bourgeoisie.”

Certainly, it is no secret that throughout history, the art world has been a tough place for women—whether they’re up against the sexually charged politics of the Surrealists, the purported egalitarianism of the Bauhaus or the machismo of the Abstract Expressionists. And when the woman in question is married to another artist—especially a renowned one, like Ernst—the problems can be compounded.

Ask market specialists, and they’ll probably tell you that generalizations are impossible. Apart from the individual dynamics of each union, the respective acclaim of husband and wife also depends on how well developed their careers were before marriage; which spouse outlives the other; and who is the most prolific, works in the more popular mediums or has the most recognizable style.

But ask an art historian, and you’ll likely get a different answer. “I don’t think it’s so much the relationship that adds a damper as it is society,” says Maura Reilly, the curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. “The art market is a microcosm of society, which is extraordinarily sexist. Whether or not the men and women within those relationships consider themselves equal, their prices are always unequal, because society maintains that inequality.” The record concurs.

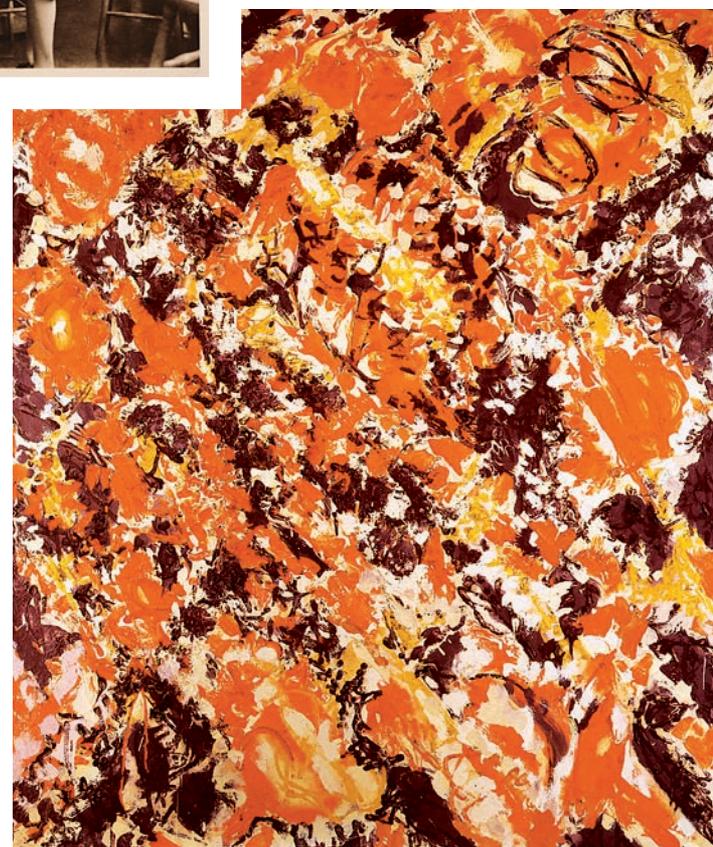
Take Sonia and Robert Delaunay, both proponents of Orphism, a sensuous and colorful offshoot of Cubism. Although they collaborated, she devoted a great share of her later years to promoting his work. Sonia outlived Robert by decades and is generally acknowledged as the better artist, but his pieces have frequently exceeded the million-dollar mark at auction, while hers have done so only once, in 2002, when her *Marché au Minho* of 1915, a vividly hued abstraction of a Portuguese market scene, achieved \$3,878,902.

Then there’s Sophie Taeuber-Arp, who, with her husband, Jean Arp, was at the center of Swiss Dada until her accidental death at 53, in 1943, from carbon-monoxide poisoning. Today her work is considerably less known than his. It’s also less costly: At auction, her record stands at \$1,411,764—about half of Arp’s \$2,673,796 top price.

Although Lee Krasner outlived her husband, Jackson Pollock, by 28 years, her auction high is only about a quarter of his. Ditto for the 79-year-old Helen Frankenthaler, whose career always seemed roughly on par with that of Robert Motherwell, both before and after



Lee Krasner, seen here around 1938, painted in a bedroom while husband Jackson Pollock worked in an expansive barn. She moved into his studio after his death, in 1956. Below: Krasner’s *Bird Image* of 1963.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY JACKSON POLLOCK AND LEE KRASNER PAPERS, CA. 1905-84. ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION. CLOCKWISE FROM CENTER: COURTESY ROBERT MILLER GALLERY; CHRISTIE’S; LARRY LARKIN.

ALTARED STATES

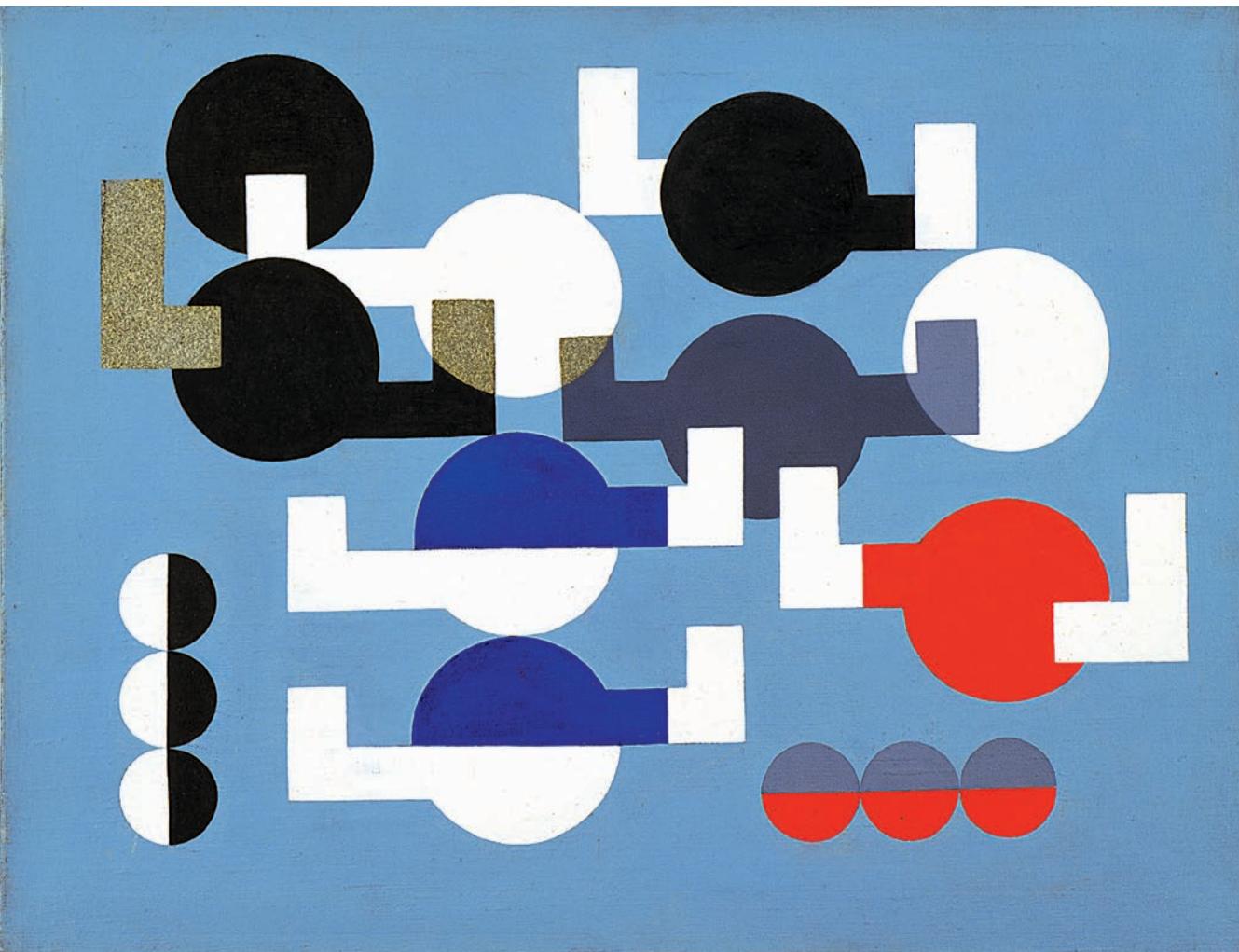
How do wives and husbands stack up in the salesroom? The answers can be surprising.

Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock

Since November 2003, when her *Celebration*, 1960, nearly quintupled its high estimate to achieve \$1,911,500 at Christie’s New York, Krasner’s prices have been catching up to Pollock’s.

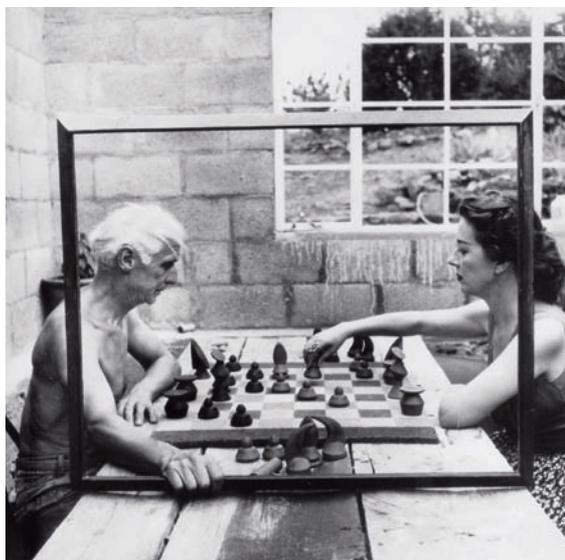


HERS: *Polar Stampede*, 1960, \$3.2 million (Sotheby’s, 2008) HIS: *Number 12*, 1949, \$11.7 million (Christie’s, 2004)



Clockwise from left:
 Sophie Taeuber-Arp's
 1930 *Composition of
 Circles and Overlapping
 Angles* and 1926 *Self-
 Portrait with Dada-Kopf*;
 Dorothea Tanning's 1988
Table of Contents; and
 Tanning playing chess
 with Max Ernst in 1948.

“THAT WE
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their 10-year-plus marriage. As for Tanning, now 98, who has studiously tried to avoid being identified as a “woman artist” or even a Surrealist, her auction prices top out at \$70,237, achieved in 1990 for *The Philosophers*, a shadowy scene from 1952 in which two figures appear to tussle over a drink in a bar. That’s a drop in the bucket compared with the \$2,429,500 record commanded by Ernst, whose work, experts generally agree, is undervalued.

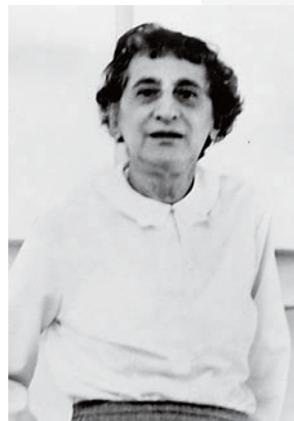
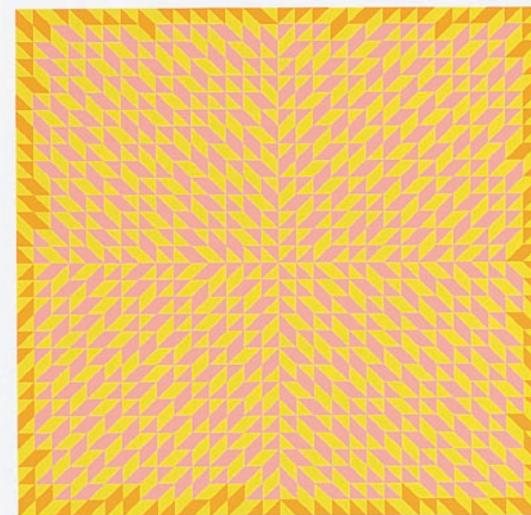
“Historically, women have been somewhat underappreciated,” acknowledges Robert Manley, the head of postwar and contemporary art at Christie’s New York. Yet in recent years, he adds, the market for many women—especially Krasner, Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell—has dramatically improved. One might logically assume the upsurge has something to do with several decades of feminist scholarship and activism prompting a reassessment by curators and critics. Not so. “It’s just a sign of the overall art market,” he says. “People are looking to overlooked artists, period. I guess looking at women is a natural start.”

The Abstract Expressionist wives seem to have had it worse than many. Although the market was not really a factor in those days (Manley notes that in the early ’50s “nobody was buying anything by anyone, man or woman”), the movement itself was legendarily unfriendly to women. Elaine de Kooning, Mercedes Matter and Krasner might have been asked to join the Eighth Street Club, an influential Ab-Ex discussion group founded in 1949, but they weren’t included in board meetings. The Sidney Janis Gallery threw some of them a bone that year by mounting the show “Artist: Man and Wife.” Then there’s the famous comment Krasner’s teacher, Hans Hofmann, once made about one of her paintings: “This is so good you would not believe it was done by a woman.”

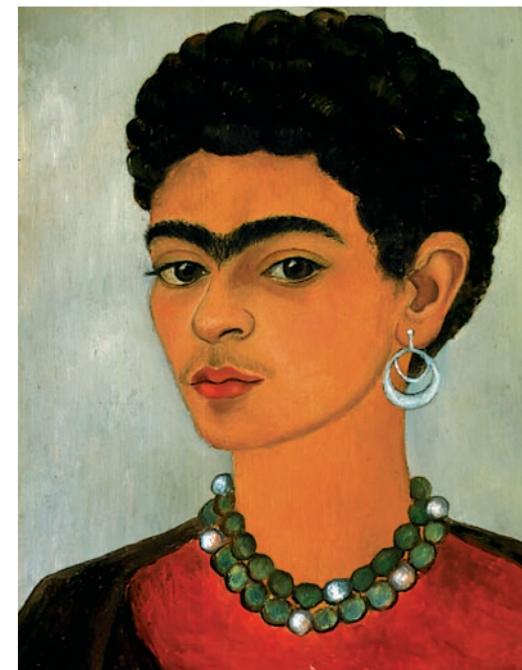
For Krasner especially, “the market has shown that there was an ill effect from being married to someone who was such a proponent of that field,” says Anthony Grant, a senior international contemporary-art specialist at Sotheby’s. She seems to have spent much of her marriage introducing Pollock to influential people, keeping him sober and generally putting his needs before her own. In East Hampton, he painted in an expansive barn, while she worked in a bedroom. “In 1950s America, she was still expected to play the traditional role of wife,” says Reilly. “If we didn’t have Lee Krasner, we wouldn’t have Jackson Pollock. She kept him alive—she was his rock.”

After her husband’s death, in 1956, Krasner moved into his studio and eventually arrived at the exuberant abstractions that she’s known for today. Still, for decades, she didn’t have a major retrospective in the United States. Why? “I’d have to say principally because I am Mrs. Jackson Pollock,” she commented in a 1972 interview. She finally got one, in 1983, the year before her death; it was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and later traveled to the Museum of Modern Art, in New York.

Life seems to have been better for women active in more communal movements, such as the Bauhaus. The relationship between the weaver Anni Albers and her husband, Josef, began on somewhat unequal footing: She was a student at the Bauhaus; he was her mentor. He was working-class Catholic; she came from a prominent Jewish family in Berlin. Yet



Anni Albers, above, in 1964, worked in textiles, one of the few areas open to women at the Bauhaus after 1920. Top: her 1973 screenprint *Do I*. Right: Frida Kahlo’s *Self-Portrait with Curly Hair*, 1935. Opposite: Kahlo, circa 1930, with her painting *Me and My Parrots*.



Anni and Josef Albers

Although devoted collectors ardently pursue both halves of this couple, prices for Anni’s technically adventurous weaving pale in comparison to those for Josef’s paintings.

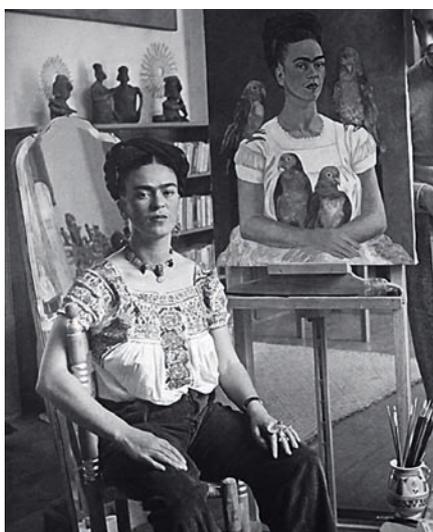


HERS: *With Verticals*, 1946, \$125,600 (Phillips, de Pury, 2004) HIS: *Homage to the Square: Joy*, 1964, \$1.5 million (Sotheby’s, 2007)

KAHLO PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY THROCKMORTON FINE ART, NEW YORK. BOTTOM: FROM LEFT: EMMY LOU PACKARD, COURTESY OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION. TWO IMAGES: SOTHEBY'S, OPPOSITE. ALBERS ART ©2008 THE JOSEF & ANNI ALBERS FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/ART RESOURCE, NY. ALBERS PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY TAMARIND INSTITUTE; KAHLO PAINTING: CHRISTIE'S. BOTTOM, FROM LEFT: ©HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS; COURTESY PHILLIPS, DE PURY & COMPANY; SOTHEBY'S

they were “two soul mates from the start,” says Nicholas Fox Weber, the executive director of the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation. Their work also had much in common: Both were essentially geometric abstractionists who experimented endlessly—she with materials and structure, he with color and light.

In addition, each had relationships that were beneficial to the other. Philip Johnson, who helped get them to America in 1933, after the Nazis closed the Bauhaus, was primarily Anni's acquaintance and preferred her work to Josef's. In 1949 he gave Anni a solo retrospective at MOMA that “at the time was a more major museum exhibition than any Josef had had,” Fox Weber says. By the same token, he notes, “when museum directors or world-famous photographers would walk into the house to see Josef, they would see Anni. There were collectors who would go to see work by one and then buy work by the other. The Hirshhorns [Josef and Olga, who later founded the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.] collected her because of him.” Yet today, in large part because Anni worked in textiles—one of the few disciplines open to women at the Bauhaus after 1920—her art is far less known than Josef's and commands a fraction of the price.



Certainly, marriage to an older, more renowned artist offers some advantages. For Tanning, it provided an entrée into “the ongoing Surrealist adventure,” as she put it. Likewise, Frida Kahlo's 1929 union with Diego Rivera, a star of Mexican Muralism, immediately “catapulted her into a very international cosmopolitan life,” says Carmen Melián, the director of the Latin American art department at Sotheby's, which has achieved most of Kahlo's recent records.

Kahlo, a great character and wit who was fluent in four languages, soon developed a cult following for her introspective, *retablo*-like paintings. She also threw fabulous parties and managed Rivera's business dealings and accounts. “She ran his life so that he could go out and create, and he opened her to the intellectual jet set of the world,” says Melián.

Yet after her death in 1954, Kahlo's work fell into obscurity until Hayden Herrera's 1983 biography *Frida* helped transform her cultural reputation. (The 2002 movie based

on Herrera's book and starring Salma Hayek brought Kahlo even broader popular recognition.) By the 1990s, her work was reaching the million-dollar range at auction. In May 1995, in Sotheby's IBM Collection sale, Kahlo overtook her husband's auction record when her 1942 self-portrait, *Autorretrato con chango y loro* (“Self-Portrait with Monkey and Parrot”), sold for \$3,192,500. She continued to break barriers. Five years later, her 1929 self-portrait in folkloric Tehuana attire achieved \$5,065,750, which for a time made her the highest-priced female artist, as well as Latin American artist, at auction. And in May 2006, a 1943 self-portrait, *Roots*, depicting her floating above a barren landscape with lush green vines growing from her body, sold for \$5,616,000—setting another Latin American record that remained until May 2008.

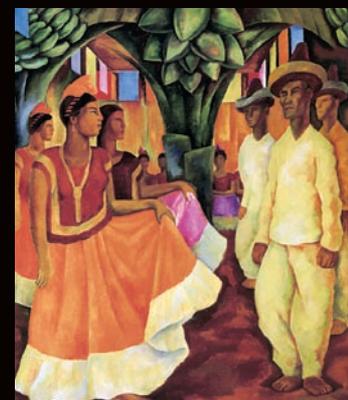
LADIES FIRST

HISTORY OFFERS PROMINENT EXAMPLES OF women who were more successful than their partners. Judith Leyster, a renowned 17th-century Dutch genre painter, produced much less work after marrying the painter Jan Miense Molenaer, but today her reputation and market far exceed his. Natalia Goncharova, who cofounded Rayonism with her lifelong partner, Mikhail Larionov, has recently become a star of the Russian avant-garde at auction, with a record of more than \$10.9 million—far beyond those of any of her comrades but Malevich. And the work of Franco-Portuguese abstract painter Maria Elena Vieira da Silva, a major artist in postwar Paris, remains better known—and pricier—than that of her husband, the late Hungarian abstractionist Arpad Szènes.

These days, the picture for married artists has changed considerably: Often the wife is more famous and successful. The Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović had been a star for more than 30 years by the time she married the much younger Italian sculptor Paolo Canevari. The Turner Prize winner Rachel Whiteread is married to another sculptor, Marcus Taylor; although they were both in the first wave of YBAs, his career has never taken off as dramatically as hers. Cornelia Parker's husband, the painter Jeff MacMillan, was her studio assistant in the ArtPace residency program in 1997. And Inka Essenhigh's painting career first bloomed in the 1990s, long before that of her husband, Steve Mumford. He went to Iraq in 2003 to chronicle the American invasion and believes her emotional support was crucial. “The fact that she's made more money is something I've struggled with,” says Mumford, who produced written and painted dispatches that were later published as a book, “but it's inspiring to be in a relationship with another creative person. The benefits outweigh the costs.” c.k.

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera

Kahlo's auction record—nearly double Rivera's—suggests that her work is more highly valued. But the discrepancy stems from Kahlo's relatively minuscule output, says Virgilio Garza, the head of Latin American Paintings at Christie's New York, and the fact that both markets are dampened by Mexican patrimony laws, which prevent work by certain “national treasures” from being sold internationally.



HERS: *Roots*, 1943, \$5.6 million (Sotheby's, 2006) HIS: *Baile en Tehuantepec*, 1928, \$3.1 million (Sotheby's, 1995)

Melián says these prices are due in part to the fact that the work is rare (Kahlo's total output was around 100 to 150 pictures). But she also believes that the artist's works sell because "people can relate to her self-examination—I think it speaks to the 20th and 21st centuries."

Kahlo's great grief in life was her inability to bear children—although they can sometimes impede a career. Anthony Caro's wife, the painter Sheila Girling, has said that she stopped working in the 1950s while she raised their children. That's the story for many. Yet motherhood didn't hold back the sculptor Barbara Hepworth. In 1934 she was living amid the avant-garde of Hampstead, London, with her future husband, the abstract painter Ben Nicholson, when she gave birth to triplets. A month later, she returned to the studio.

"Despite being a young mother, she was extremely keen to pursue her work," says Philip Harley, a British pictures specialist at Christie's London. "Consequently, a lot of criticism has come her way for being too focused on her career." The births provoked a great change in Hepworth's sculpture, leading to her use of triple elements and groupings and eventually resulting in the monumental pierced forms for which she is now known. Hepworth also suffered from the mistaken assumption that she was a younger follower of the sculptor Henry Moore. They were, in fact, classmates at the Royal College of Art.

Today it seems vastly more possible for art world couples to share power. In many cases, the wife's career outshines the husband's (see "Ladies First," page 165). Yet the issue remains loaded. Of the many artists contacted for this story, either directly or through their dealers—including Frankenthaler, Helen Marden, Nancy Rubins, Lisa Yuskavage and the sculptor Sophia Vari, long married to Fernando Botero—most either did not respond or declined to be interviewed. One of the only artists willing to speak on the record was the painter April Gornik, who married another painter, Eric Fischl, in 1998. They have a "figure-ground relationship," she likes to joke, because while she is known for emotive, luminous landscapes, he paints highly charged figurative scenes.

Their relationship has been going strong since they met at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax in 1975. He was on the faculty and she was a student, but they moved to New York together and their careers took off roughly in tandem in the 1980s, as representational painting resurged. Today the 55-year-old Gornik shows with New York's Danese gallery, while her husband has been represented for years by Mary Boone.

Since the beginning, Gornik says, each has been a great influence on the other. Still, she laughs, "it's always been competitive. No matter how much success we've had and attention we've gotten, we're both the sort of people who feel insecure and easily flustered by lack of attention. I can still get very jealous of him, and he of me."

What about prices? After all, her record at auction is \$29,900, while Fischl's is \$1.92 million. In the primary market, according to one dealer, her paintings sell for \$25,000 to \$65,000 while his can command upwards of \$500,000. "I rarely think of that," Gornik says. "Pricing art is such a peculiar activity. It's just too weird a thing to figure out." ▣

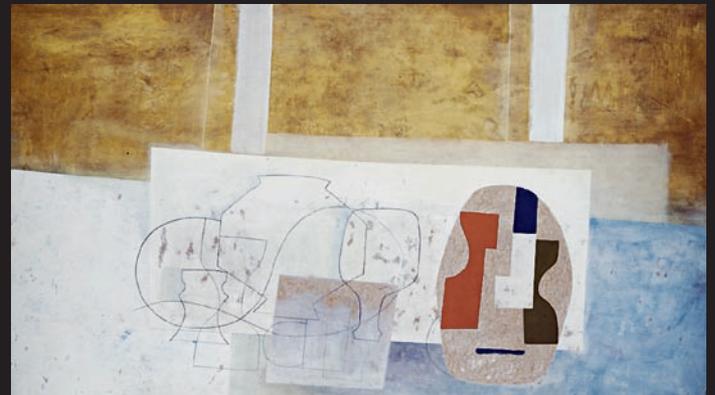


Above: Barbara Hepworth's *Three Obliques (Walk-In)* brought \$1.5 million at Sotheby's in 2006. Right, the artist peers through the hole in her *Pierced Form*, 1963, at London's Tate in 1965.

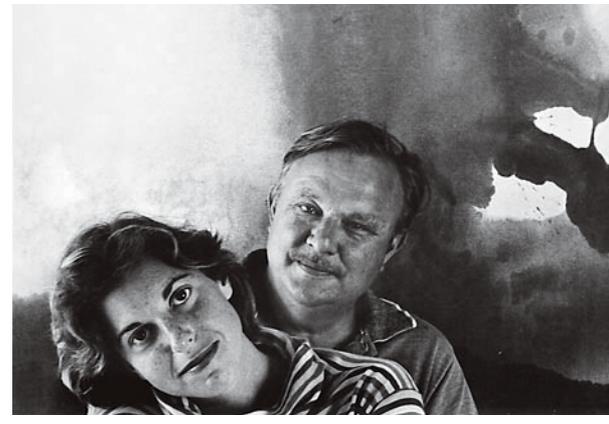


Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson

Curiously, both Hepworth and Nicholson produced their most-valued work before they married and after they divorced, notes Philip Harley, a British pictures specialist at Christie's London. Purists seek out her carved marbles and his white bas-relief paintings of the early 1930s, but it's work from the 1950s—after they split up—that commands top dollar (or pounds sterling).

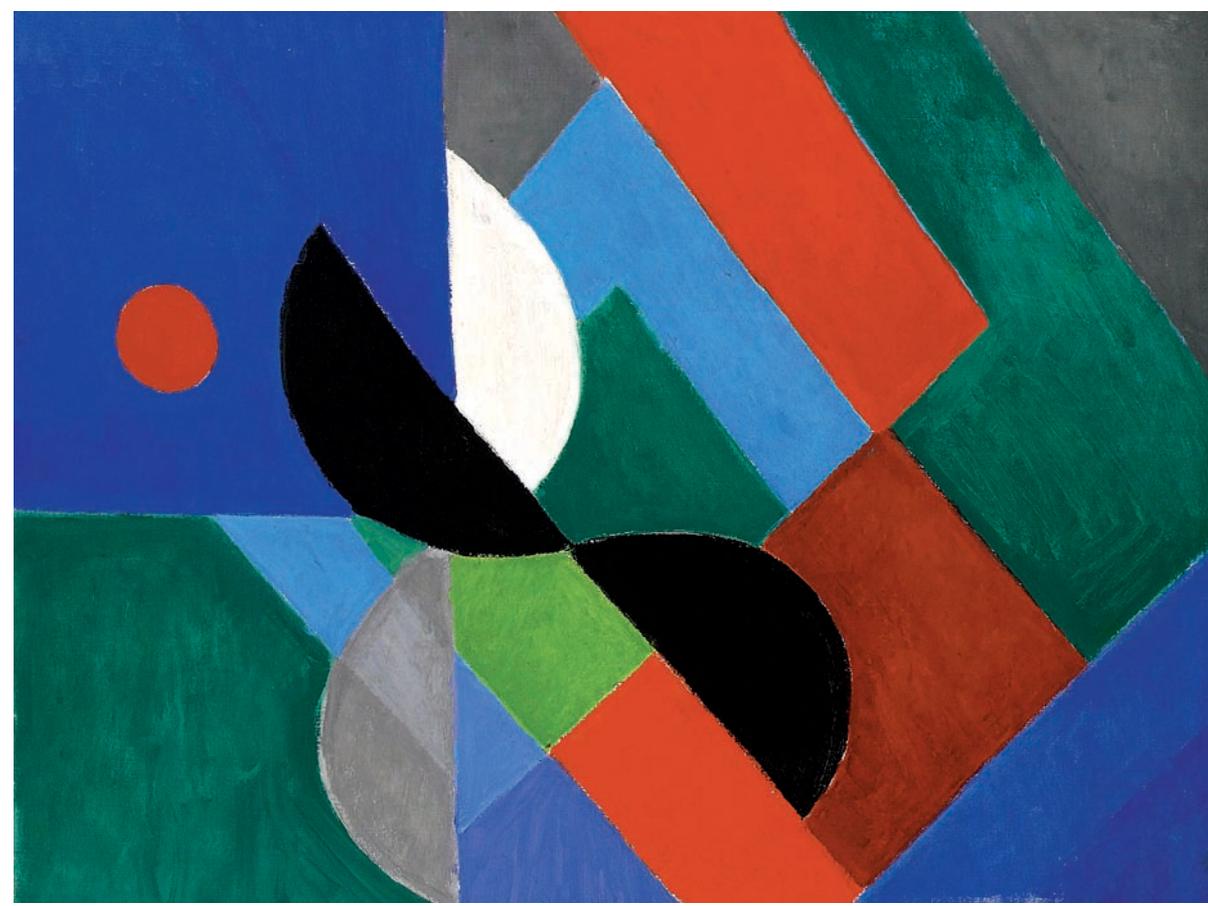


HERS: *Ultimate Form (The Family of Man)*, 1970, \$2.6 million (Sotheby's, 2006) HIS: *La boutique fantastique*, 1956, \$2.1 million (Christie's London, 1990)



TODAY IT'S MUCH MORE POSSIBLE FOR ART WORLD COUPLES TO SHARE POWER. IN MANY CASES, THE WIFE'S CAREER OUTSHINES THAT OF THE HUSBAND.

Clockwise from above: [Helen Frankenthaler's Provincetown I, 1961](#); [Frankenthaler with Robert Motherwell](#); [Sonia Delaunay's Rythme coloré \(618\), 1954-57](#); and the [French painter herself, in 1979](#).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ©2008 HELEN FRANKENTHALER, COURTESY KNOEDLER & COMPANY; ARNOLD NEWMAN, GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIE'S; RICHARD KALVAR, MAGNUM PHOTOS. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SOTHEBY'S; GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIE'S; SOTHEBY'S; GETTY IMAGES