

# Lee Krasner Deal with It

This episode focuses on Lee Krasner (1908–1984). Joining host Helen Molesworth are artists Lari Pittman and Amy Sillman. In interviews from 1972, 1975, and 1978, the first-generation abstract expressionist discusses her formation as a painter, the progression of her work, her relationships with fellow artists, and her role as guardian of Jackson Pollock's legacy.

## Additional Resources

- ◆ Pollock Krasner Foundation (<https://pkf.org/>)
- ◆ Cindy Nemser Papers Finding Aid (<http://archives2.getty.edu:8082/xtf/view?docId=ead/2013.M.21/2013.M.21.xml>)
- ◆ Barbara Rose Papers Finding Aid (<http://archives2.getty.edu:8082/xtf/view?docId=ead/930100/930100.xml>)
- ◆ Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel Papers Finding Aid (<https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/bdiamon/>)

## Transcript

Episode transcripts are provided to make this podcast accessible to a wider audience. Please note that interviews featured in this episode have been edited for concision and clarity.

Original interviews: Cindy Nemser interview with Lee Krasner, November 8, 1972, box 26, R34, Cindy Nemser papers, 2013.M.21, Getty Research Institute; Barbara Rose interview with Lee Krasner, ca. 1975, box 10, C77, Barbara Rose papers, 930100, Getty Research Institute; Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel interview with Lee Krasner, for the television program *Inside New York's Art World*, 1978, Diamonstein-Spielvogel Video Archive, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

**LEE KRASNER:** He said, "This is so good. You would not know it was done by a woman." [Barbara Rose laughs] Meaning, you know, like, the highest compliment he could pay me.

**HELEN MOLESWORTH:** This is *Recording Artists*, a podcast from the Getty dedicated to exploring art and artists through the archives of the Getty Research Institute. I'm your host Helen Molesworth.

In this season we focus on audio interviews with six women artists whose lives span the twentieth century. These recordings were made by the New York-based art critic Cindy Nemser and art historian Barbara Rose. Most of these interviews come from the 1960s and '70s, in the midst of the civil rights movement and the feminist revolution. Hearing these artists in their own words talk about their work and about their experiences as women making art is a revelation.

This episode focuses on Lee Krasner. Cindy Nemser's recordings were made in November 1972. Barbara Rose's around 1975. You'll also hear audio from a 1978 interview with Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel that was recorded in front of an audience. Krasner was in her 60s.

I've invited painters Amy Sillman and Lari Pittman to join me. I chose Amy and Lari because they are the two artists that have taught me the most about how to look at and think about abstract painting, and because they are both stand up feminists who I knew would have compelling things to say about Krasner and her remarkable paintings.

Lena Krasner was born in 1908 in Brooklyn to Russian Jewish immigrant parents. As a teenager she liked to be called Lenore. By the time she enrolled in Hans Hofmann's art class in Greenwich Village, at the age of 29, she went by Lee. After a lifetime dedicated to painting and printmaking, she died in 1984, six months before her traveling retrospective landed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She is considered a first generation abstract expressionist. Her paintings can be found in major museums, although often they are not on view. Her 2019 retrospective exhibition at the Barbican Gallery in London may change that.

She is one of only a handful of "woman artists" to emerge in the New York art scene of the 1940s and '50s. Her position in this small group is vexed because she was also married to the most famous, influential, and iconic American artist—Jackson Pollock.

Over the course of her life Krasner had three distinct and overlapping identities: She was Lee Krasner, woman abstract expressionist. She was Mrs. Jackson Pollock, wife of America's most famous painter. And, ultimately, she was Lee Krasner, painter and Jackson Pollock's widow, the heir and gatekeeper to the most charged artistic career of the post-war period. None of these positions was uncomplicated. And Krasner, a woman of shrewd intelligence who suffered no fools, never made out like it was easy. Nevertheless, as difficult as her position was, she was quick not to let anyone overstate sexism as its root cause.

Here she is telling critic Cindy Nemser what it was like to be a woman employed by the WPA—the Works Progress Administration—a federal program designed to give artists jobs during the Great Depression.

**CINDY NEMSER:** It was remarked you were one of the few women on the WPA. Is that so?

**KRASNER:** No, I can remember a few women. Well, naturally, at this point, women proportionately are few in any given art situation. But I certainly am not the only woman on WPA. Not by a longshot.

**NEMSER:** Well, I know Alice Neel told me she was on that program.

**KRASNER:** That's right. I'm sure that if I, you know, started to dig up, [Nemser: Yeah] I'd dig up quite a few names of women.

**NEMSER:** Did they treat you like a colleague, the men artists?

**KRASNER:** Yeah. Yeah. I was not aware that, you know, I had a special—That I was being held back especially because I was a woman. I was geared to having artists around me. A few women. Well, that's— you accepted that.

**MOLESWORTH:** So far so good, she notes that there were a “few women;” even though she's in the minority, she still possesses a distinct sense of her equality. And there were opportunities. In January of 1942, as America was getting ready for full blown war, a maverick artist named John Graham opened an exhibition called *French and American Painting*. Held in a design firm in midtown Manhattan, the purpose of the show was to introduce European avant-garde painters such as Matisse, Braque, and Picasso to an emerging group of American artists. All of the artists were experimenting with the radical effects of cubism on contemporary painting. Graham's show identified the young American painters poised at the footsteps of stardom: Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollack, and the exhibition's only woman artist, Lee Krasner.

Here's Krasner telling Cindy Nemser how she happened to be included in this legendary show.

**KRASNER:** I am walking towards my place on Ninth Street, and Kaldis stops to greet me and he introduces me to John Graham. And John Graham says to me, “Ah, you are a painter.” And I say, “Yes, how do you know?” And he points to my feet, which were stockingless at the time. Had a big blob of paint on my feet [she chuckles]. So he said, “I'd like to see your work sometime.” And I said, “Certainly.” I say, “Why don't you come up now?” You know, I'm in front of my studio on Ninth Street then. And his response is very positive. He says something like, hmm, this is interesting. This is very interesting, especially a woman doing this kind of work. By now, I'm used to that and it just brushes right off.

There's a passage of time—I can't remember how long—and I receive a postcard from John Graham, asking if he can come up with somebody to select paintings for an exhibition he's doing of French and American painting. And some of the painters in this show are Matisse, Braque. Well, you can imagine the effect. I quickly answered, “Yes, please come.” And he was showing a few Americans, but three totally unknown ones: Willem de Kooning, someone called Jackson Pollock, and Lee Krasner.

**MOLESWORTH:** Even though Krasner has to brush off Graham's “especially for a woman” remark, what fascinates me about this story, is that it implies when Krasner and Pollock first met, they did so as equals. When I suggested that to the New York-based painter Amy Sillman she disagreed that John Graham saw them that way:

**AMY SILLMAN:** I doubt if he does see them as equal.

**MOLESWORTH:** Oh, you don't think he does?

**SILLMAN:** No. I think it's very possible that he doesn't. I think the tear in the fabric is that he included her in the show. I'm not convinced that if she dated Jackson Pollock and then wasn't married to him and had just moved on, that we would know much about her.

And she says in the interview consistently that it was very difficult. And it was her toughness that got her to that position and her talent— you know, and her insistence on herself that got her into the position where she would be taken seriously enough to be in that show.

**MOLESWORTH:** What Sillman is describing is one of the most nuanced and difficult aspects of being a woman artist. Historically, many of the women artists we know about we know about because of their relationships with powerful and well-known men. For instance, both Helen Frankenthaler and Eva Hesse, who are featured in other episodes of this podcast, are part of this group. This in no way diminishes the accomplishments of these artists. Women artists who were connected to powerful men tended to be excellent artists. The difficulty emerges when as an artist one is equal to other artists, but when as a woman one is not considered equal to men.

For Krasner these difficulties were compounded by the fact that she was also Mrs. Jackson Pollock. I think we hear her challenge quite plainly when she recounts to Barbara Rose the events leading up to the famous 1950 *Life* magazine photograph called *The Irascibles*. The somber black and white image depicted many of the most famous abstract expressionist painters of the day. Lee Krasner was not among them.

**BARBARA ROSE:** You were very much in the painters' milieu, a member of the Abstract Artists, working on the WPA, always, you know, among them in their discussions, really a member of the first generation of the New York School. Yet never acknowledged as such, although your paintings were, in every way, as advanced as what anybody was— You were showing with them at Betty Parsons and you were involved in all their activities. Do you feel, you know, the fact that you were a woman was a reason that this has, you know, not been acknowledged? I know it's a difficult thing to talk about.

**KRASNER:** It's very difficult. At that point, if you had asked me the question, I think I would've said, in a very glib tone of voice, don't be absurd. It's not so.

**ROSE:** Why weren't you one of the Irascible Eighteen? I'm sure you were just as irascible as anybody.

**KRASNER:** Oh, yes, yes, [Rose laughs] I was irascible. I think— Well, that's an interesting question, damn it, because actually, what really took place on that is that I was in the house, when the phone rang. And it was Barney Newman. We chatted for a second and he said, "I've got to speak to Jackson." And I said, "Well, he isn't in now, Barney. Is there a message or you know, should he call you?"

And while we were talking, Jackson walked in the house. And I said, "Hold, here he comes," and Jackson picked up the phone. I heard Jackson say, "Yes, I certainly go along with it. You can put my name down," or something like that. And when he hung up, he told me what it was about. They were protesting this. Now, Barney had spoken to me, relayed none of the message to me.

So I would say I wasn't invited. I would say Barnett Newman was at the other end of the phone. [Rose chuckles] So I was not included in the Irascibles.

**MOLESWORTH:** Such was the position of the woman artist at the dawn of the 1950s. Even though Krasner's work was in group exhibitions and solo shows, and even though she was well-known to the most prominent artists of her day, it didn't occur to Barnett Newman to include her in the *Life* magazine photograph. She was in a tricky spot. On the one hand she is not being taken seriously, and on the other hand she is receiving accolades.

Here is an important one from her idol, the painter Mondrian:

**KRASNER:** One winter, Mondrian and Léger are here, and the American Abstract Artists invite them both to participate in our exhibition, and they do. And Mondrian

asked me to accompany him to one of these exhibitions. And each artist has some three or four paintings hanging. And we started at some point and I gave him the name of the artist and he made a very short, crisp comment. And we moved from one to the other.

When we got to the Léger[s], he walked by as though they weren't on the wall, which interested me enormously. And pretty soon, mine were coming up and I was getting plenty nervous. And lo and behold, there we were and I have to say, "These are mine." And his comment, I must say—beautiful comment—was, "You have a very strong inner rhythm. You must never lose it." And we moved on to the next thing.

**MOLESWORTH:** Despite Modrian's praise, Krasner also had to face a kind of backhanded disparagement. Like many ab-ex artists, she was a student of Hans Hofmann. But when she recounted Hofmann's assessment of her work to Barbara Rose her tone is bittersweet at best:

**KRASNER:** However, one day, [she chuckles] when he came in and looked at the canvas I was working on, he said, "This is so good. You would not know it was done by a woman." [Rose laughs] Meaning, you know, like, the highest compliment he could pay me. [Rose laughs] Okay. [inaudible]. Now, this is coming from a guy who's saying wonderful things about my work, you know? So that thing always stays there. You know? Always.

**MOLESWORTH:** "This is so good, you would not know it was done by a woman." I talked about this clip with Los Angeles-based painter Lari Pittman.

The thing that haunts me in this clip is the way she says, "always" at the end. And the "always" just dangles there. That there has always been this issue, and of course always implies the future as well as the past. That this problem of men and women is not going to be something she can outrun. How do you hear that now?

**LARI PITTMAN:** Well, I'll tell you a little story. I don't even remember the date, but it was the height of '90s culture wars and the first kind of wave of identity politics. You know, it was a time when we spoke about gay identity, not queer identity. And so I was excited that that was propelling my work, that that was a discussion around my work that was also propelling it. But I was also sensing that what was propelling it might also strangle it.

And I remember at a talk, I got a question from the audience and I blurted out, in a very unguarded way, "You know what? I'm tired of being gay." That nomenclature, that complicated nomenclature, the thing that frees you, can also tether you. And I think it's irresolvable, and it remains irresolvable.

I can feel her conundrum. And what might seem as resistance actually isn't. I think that still is with us, you know. I think it's moved into all sorts of other areas. There's more prefixes now.

**MOLESWORTH:** So you agree with the always at the end.

**PITTMAN:** Totally. I'm a happy person by nature; but I also believe in the kind of melancholia of always.

**MOLESWORTH:** If Pittman believes in the melancholy of always, it's possible that Krasner believes in the logic of always. Always is the logic of art, because always is about timelessness and people who believe in art believe in its timelessness. Krasner was a true believer and she believed in the timelessness of Pollock.

Here she is describing how she sees Pollock's role in the development of her own work.

**KRASNER:** I think of my art training in the following way. The Academy first. The break with the Academy is when I hit the Hofmann school, which is cubism. [Nemser: Right] The real break. [Nemser: Right] And the next real break follows when I see Pollock's work. Once more, another big transition occurs. [Nemser: Yeah. Now—] That's the simplest way I can project this.

**MOLESWORTH:** The story Krasner is telling about her own training is also the dominant story of art history, in which academic painting is permanently altered by cubism and then cubism is broken by Pollock. But, I've digressed, and we've started to talk about Pollock, which is often what happens when we talk about Krasner.

By 1941 they shared a railroad apartment in the Village that had studio space for each of them at either end, with a shared kitchen and bedroom in the middle. This meant Krasner was living and working in intimate proximity to an artist she felt was changing the very history of painting. She described the intense difficulty of this period for her to Cindy Nemser:

**NEMSER:** You were telling me somewhat the other day about what it was like at that time, sharing the studio. You said you were kind of working very quietly and into some kind of building up of paint on the canvas?

**KRASNER:** [over Nemser] Well, what was happening to my work at the time was, since I was dissatisfied and was trying to break with what I had been doing up till that point, and I had no grasp as yet of what I was moving into, I went into a— my own blackout period, which lasted two, three years, where the canvases would simply build up till they got like stone, and it was just always a gray mess. The image wouldn't emerge. But I worked pretty regularly on that.

**NEMSER:** You were fighting to find that image.

**KRASNER:** I was fighting to find I knew not what, but could no longer stay with what I had had.

**MOLESWORTH:** This sounds like it must have been excruciating. I asked painter Amy Sillman to help me understand what this must have been like for Krasner.

**SILLMAN:** I can only imagine the difficulty of having your roommate-slash-partner-slash-lover-slash-Jackson Pollock, you know, be that guy. I'm sure that made it much harder—to have this mega-psyche right next door.

I just feel like that psychic landscape of trying to produce new knowledge, new subjectivity, new insight, new form—that's the mandate of that kind of a painter. And that is such a burden.

**MOLESWORTH:** Can I ask you a sort of— what I think might be a pedestrian question? Is part of this going to gray on the canvas and an image not emerging or coming through, is that because the abstract painter enters her studio not knowing what the picture is going to look like already?

**SILLMAN:** Yeah. It's totally the case still. You know, it's ab-stract. It's away from everything, so there's no plan. But there's also oil paint. And I don't know if you know this, but like, when you put oil paint on oil paint on oil paint, basically, after a while, it just goes gray. It's just a murk. It's not something you can see through. There's no

light, there's no luminosity. And there's no way to make an oil painting where you don't really know what you're doing without the risk of every kind of light inside of it being extinguished, because each increasing layer will blot out any kind of luminosity that you had underneath.

But if you're a real abstract painter in this sense, you cannot just fuss around with a corner or diddle around with, like, you know, a little bit of the hand or something, because you're not building a painting through see-through layers that go from the back to the front like a Baroque or a Renaissance painting. You're building something that's kind of made out of slabs to begin with. And after a couple slabs worth, even if you scrape it, you just can't see through it anymore. So those are the problems that make it turn to mud.

**MOLESWORTH:** In addition to Krasner's technical difficulties, she was also trying to navigate her new role in this particularly dynamic and freighted artistic coupledness. Nemser brings a 1970s feminist sensibility to Krasner's 1940s story and the difference between their accounts of what it means to be a wife and an artist is striking.

**KRASNER:** It's '43 where he has his first public showing. So like, he's making it, so to speak. I'm trying to find myself, so to speak. Once more, that is. And guard religiously that nobody get in my way and interfere with what I'm about. I'm also married. That means sharing my life with someone, as against living alone, independently. So much is taking place.

**NEMSER:** Yes. It would seem to me, though—I mean, to deal with a woman's issue—that it would be [Krasner: Oh?] very hard for you in that position to have been married to a painter who was getting so much attention, so much development, and sort of have to be in the kind of— people seeing you as the wife or in the background, and here you are striving to retain your own identity, and so torn between wanting him to succeed and to wish him well and so on; on the other hand, trying to reach out for yourself. I think that's a very natural problem, which [Krasner: Absolutely] many people would, you know, just go under.

**KRASNER:** But if you remember, my whole background is one where I don't have encouragement right from the beginning, so this is another tough nut to crack. Okay. It's self-imposed, and I'm aware of that. Nobody has asked me to live with Pollock; it's my choice. I want it. Okay. Deal with it. I want my independence. Deal with it. I want to make my own statement. Damn well deal with it. So like, no one's imposed this. I undertake this myself, and I feel, okay, I've got to work. Now, I haven't the patience or time to deal with knuckleheads who are some I don't know how many years behind me. And that's true as of today.

**MOLESWORTH:** Lari and I found ourselves laughing as we listened to this clip.

**PITTMAN:** Knucklehead.

**MOLESWORTH:** Knuckleheads is one of the great East Coast words.

I asked Lari what stood out to him in this amazing display of Krasner's fierceness.

**PITTMAN:** She says, "I'm trying to find my voice." Meaning, the previous voice is now lost. And then in close proximity, in the studio next to her, there's someone who is not finding his voice; that artist is speaking in direct address only.

As a feminist, I still see it in my students or in the difference in still, how men and women are enculturated. And that sometimes gender breakdown is still

heartbreaking to see, you know? I don't think men are taught even to articulate that, "I'm trying to find my voice." They're operating from the certainty of having a voice; it's just how do we clarify it?

**MOLESWORTH:** The question remains, what exactly did the encounter with Pollock's work mean for Krasner? What voice was she able to find? What happened to her as a result of what she calls this "real break"?

After she broke through the grey slabs she made what she called her Little Image works, paintings with small hieroglyphic forms laid down across the canvas in a grid that resemble mosaics. The Little Image works show the influence of Pollock, which Amy Sillman describes succinctly.

**SILLMAN:** I understand Pollock's true significance as being sort of the first non-compositional painter, in a way.

**MOLESWORTH:** Another way art historians describe what Sillman terms non-compositional painting is to call it "all-over composition." Krasner's Little Image works are a prime example of this. An all-over composition is a picture in which the action is not confined to the center. The artist uses the corners and edges of the canvas in equal measure to the middle. This helps to create an image that reads as a field rather than one with a center and a periphery.

After the Little Image paintings, Krasner took this pictorial innovation and ran with it. Her paintings were filled with rhythmically placed large circles, biomorphic shapes, and fat crescents. The shapes have gestural outlines and evoke natural forms such as eyes, leaves, petals, and seedpods. And they tend to sway and move across the canvas as if they were writing or dancing.

It wasn't only Krasner's pictures that danced. In front of a public audience, she tells Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel about her adventures with Mondrian on the dance floor:

**KRASNER:** I'm a fairly good dancer. That is to say, I can follow easily. But the complexity of Mondrian's rhythm was not simple in any sense. Woo. It wasn't easy for me to do it. And the other dancing partner was Jackson Pollock, my husband, who was ghastly and stepped all over me. So those were my two dancing partners in the art world.

**MOLESWORTH:** I love that anecdote. But back to the painting. After she adopts all-over composition to make her Little Image paintings her next breakthrough was her use of collage. She describes the first time she arrived at this technique to Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel:

**KRASNER:** So it started in '53. I had the studio hung solidly with drawings. You know, floor to ceiling, all around. Walked in one day, hated it all. Took it down, tore everything, and threw it on the floor. And when I went back, which was a couple of weeks later, before I dared open that door again, it was seemingly a very destructive act. I don't know why I did it except I certainly did it. The floor was solidly covered with these torn drawings that I had left. And they began to interest me, and I started collaging. I started with drawings, and then I took my canvases and cut, and began doing the same thing.

**MOLESWORTH:** I asked both Lari and Amy what they heard in this tale of frustration and destruction.



Lari Pittman:

**PITTMAN:** I think that she was working in what we might see a more contemporary way. Collage isn't a noun or an object of arrival in and of itself, but is just simply a way to get to somewhere else. The matrix is painting, and it's also her matrix. So I think she's seeing collage as a verb, and even more specifically, as a transitive verb, collaging, to get to somewhere else. To make a painting, not to make a collage.

**MOLESWORTH:** Amy Sillman:

**SILLMAN:** I mean, when I hear that, I'm like, yes, I did that yesterday. It's very, very normal. And I think hating and wrecking and ruining and dissatisfaction and frustration all seems like exactly why you make the kind of art that I make, which comes out of this tradition.

**MOLESWORTH:** Collage is one of the artistic maneuvers that makes Krasner's paintings very different from those of her abstract expressionist peers. And it allowed her to produce shapes and gestures that Amy Sillman had a great way of describing.

**SILLMAN:** Krasner still, all through her life, is made out of parts. And even when she's collaging and even when it's disks and even when it's flowers or huge shapes with color and stuff, there's always this relationship in Krasner, between one thing and the thing next to it. And parts are my interest. There's a lot of people who just instinctively get the whole, and then they maybe like the part thing. But there's also a lot of people who like parts first, and then they kind of get the whole. And I'm that. So she's more parts-y.

**MOLESWORTH:** We can begin to see how collage helps Krasner amplify her interest in parts and shapes. Sillman also sees Krasner's collage as related to the surface of her paintings.

**SILLMAN:** As an artist, she sees that there's energy. At some point, she builds these collages out of pieces. And she's clearly seeing it as a form, a process for developing a new surface. And maybe it's even a surface that competes with Pollock's all-over, because her early collages that I've seen are kind of all-over.

**MOLESWORTH:** Collage and all-over composition weren't the only parts of the picture that Krasner was developing. With titles like *Rising Green*, *Meteor*, *Pollination*, *Comet*, and *Primeval Resurgence*, many of Krasner's paintings, especially those made in the wake of Pollock's death in 1956, have a strong affinity for landscape and the observation of phenomena in the natural world.

Lari Pittman:

**PITTMAN:** I'm so intrigued about this binary palette that she develops later on, of magenta and green or a very reddish-brown and magenta. And I don't come across her really speaking that much about it. Have you, Helen?

**MOLESWORTH:** I will say that for me personally, her palette is really linked to Long Island. That magenta, and even the shape of it often, is sumac in the fall. The flower dries out into this large kind of seedpod-like shape that you see in her canvases a lot. There's a kind of yellowing green that is forsythia in the spring. It's one of the first flowering shrubs in the east. When I'm in front of Krasner, I am very aware that she is painting a landscape I associate with my childhood. You know, I grew up in Queens up at the end of one tip of Long Island and those pictures feel like home.

**PITTMAN:** One of the things I'm hearing you talk about it, that it is both— comes out of observation, observational painting. But then you connected it with the temporality of the seasons. And also, you added the inflection of a certain wistfulness.

**MOLESWORTH:** Yes. Fall on the East Coast is wistful, as is spring. These are melancholic periods of change. They're liminal and things happen that are very precise. And they're fleeting. And you have to pay attention, otherwise you'll miss 'em.

**PITTMAN:** That wistfulness starts getting close to memento mori to me. And I've always sensed that in her work.

If you grow up as an artist in Southern California, which we're not aware of the seasons, and then the attendant wistfulness of the seasons—dying, living, rebirth—if you come of age as a painter in Southern California, we don't conflate our sense of color in quite the same way. So I really see that very strongly in her work.

**MOLESWORTH:** Amy Sillman also commented on Krasner's unique palette:

**SILLMAN:** I always feel like her later work is the most profound and incredible, because of the move that she makes—I think it's after the collages and into the mid-fifties—when she starts working with this really high-keyed color. It's kind of both free of and built out of the shape of forms and the shape of marks, and it's in pink and yellow and those wild crimsons and violets and greens that are so— Incredible colorist.

**MOLESWORTH:** I think it's fair to say that Krasner's most important teacher was Hans Hofmann. For Hofmann the task of the abstract artist was to transform the natural world into abstract shapes and colors. Pollock denied this by saying he wasn't abstracting from nature, because, as he notoriously declared, "I am nature." Krasner's relationship to nature is more circumspect but allusions to its forms and colors can be found everywhere. Given this, I see her collaging of her own work as a cycle of destruction and rebirth as crucial for her painting as it is for nature. But once again, I've compared Krasner to Pollock. This trap seems to be unavoidable. And Krasner was well aware of the conundrum:

**KRASNER:** Anytime *my* name comes up as an artist, it's always in relation to Jackson Pollock. Who the hell else is ever related to Jackson Pollock, except those that are riding his back and trying to [Nemser: Right] take a little off that way. Is Rothko compared to Pollock? [Nemser: You know who's always compared to—] Is Newman compared to Pollock? [Nemser: You know—] Is Still compared to— Is de Kooning compared to Pollock? Lee Krasner's always compared to Pollock.

**MOLESWORTH:** Sixteen years into her being Pollock's widow and Krasner is clearly fed up. She had entered yet another phase of her difficult artistic journey. She had become, as art historian Anne Wagner once called her "the best living source of information about Pollock." When I looked through the Getty's archival holdings of Irving Sandler, the American art historian who coined the phrase "New York School" to describe the abstract expressionist painters, I encountered his typewritten notes of thirteen questions to ask Krasner about Pollock. Not one of them addresses the possible role *she* might have played in his artistic life. This must have stung. You can hear some of the edge in Krasner's voice as she tells Cindy Nemser about this difficult legacy:

**KRASNER:** And the cliché is Lee was overshadowed [Nemser: Right] by her husband, and that's easy and we don't have to think about that, you see. [Nemser: Of course.]

**MOLESWORTH:** And then again when she tells Barbara Rose:

**KRASNER:** I know that Pollock affected me enormously as an artist; I dare say I must've had some effect on him.

**MOLESWORTH:** It must have been enormously difficult to be Jackson Pollock's widow. And Krasner was not shy about telling Barbara Rose that it was a burden.

**KRASNER:** Since his death, Mrs. Jackson Pollock takes another kind of load. It's an art world load that has to do with—you name it.

**ROSE:** Being a legend in history, [inaudible]

**KRASNER:** [over Rose] Well, you name it, and I'm called that. Now, this is a burden that's incredible.

**ROSE:** But really, which had nothing to do with your relationship with Pollock when he was alive.

**KRASNER:** Exactly.

**ROSE:** Yeah.

**MOLESWORTH:** This is part of Krasner's ongoing legacy. When we look at her work we can't help but see her in relation to her much more famous husband. And no matter how excellent we understand her work to be, we can't deny that the role of widow has long overshadowed her identity as an artist.

Lari Pittman:

**PITTMAN:** I don't think that Lee Krasner has gotten her due. And it's heartbreaking to hear me say that. But as an artist, when I'm standing in front of one of her paintings, I'm filled with admiration and envy.

**MOLESWORTH:** Lari's admiration and envy, and Amy's love of Krasner's shapes and colors, means that Krasner is alive for contemporary artists in powerful and exciting ways. This is partly the case because Krasner's life and pictures offer us a deep truth about being human, namely that being human means being open to revision. She changed her name. She sought out different art teachers. She continually shifted her approach to painting. She cut up her work only to reuse it. She deftly navigated the shifting roles of artist, wife, and widow.

I've often been tempted to ask if there something about being a woman that informs her sense of revision? In her work do we see the nascent seeds of a feminist approach to identity? A feminist approach to art? I'm not at all sure that there is any way to answer these questions definitively.

I want to let Krasner have the last word. In the end her belief in art for art's sake propelled her into the studio to make ravishing canvases that we are still coming to terms with today. And even though she lived through a lifetime of discrimination based on her gender, she refused to capitulate to any definition of art that would have the adjective woman attached to it. Here she is with Barbara Rose fiercely debunking the need for any modifier to the words art or artist. Such was her belief in the capacity of art.

**KRASNER:** Art is art, no matter where it is. And the minute you try to clamp it down to American or New York or Paris—I had some very staunch arguments on it. The last one I had on the subject, I think, was with Clement Greenberg, on this very phrase, “American painting.” It offends me in every— Call the man a painter and speak about the painter. The fact that he’s American, yes. But the minute you send up a slogan, you can put anything in the bag and the slogan carries it. Well, that’s pretty boring stuff, finally; and provincial, in thought and concept; and the antithesis of what I mean when I say art.

**ROSE:** Do you feel the same about the new feminist movement and the attempt to isolate, quote, you know, “feminine” subject matter as something very special?

**KRASNER:** You know, I don’t know what’s meant by feminine subject matter, any more than I know what’s meant by masculine subject matter. You know, I’m aware of the women liberation today. I’m sympathetic to an awful lot of what they’re about. I grant freely there is hideous discrimination. I could never support anything like feminist art, any more than I could support American art, per se.

**MOLESWORTH:** For episode transcripts, images, and additional resources, visit our website at [getty.edu/recordingartists](http://getty.edu/recordingartists).

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