

JACKSON POLLOCK AT WORK:  
An Interview with Lee Krasner  
by Barbara Rose

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**Barbara Rose**

## **JACKSON POLLOCK AT WORK: AN INTERVIEW WITH LEE KRASNER**

As Jackson Pollock's paintings are slowly beginning to be understood as works of art belonging to a tradition of modernist painting, as opposed to scandalous personal acts that created the Pollock myth, any information regarding Pollock's own intention and methods becomes critical in defining the actual historical context within which the unprecedented masterpieces—the mural-sized, so-called “drip” paintings he began in 1947—were created. In the following interview with Pollock's widow, painter Lee Krasner, the circumstances leading up to Pollock's discovery of a new style that involved pouring diluted paint onto an unstretched piece of canvas on the floor, rather than applying paint to the conventional stretched painting on the easel or wall, are clarified. The interview, inspired by the forthcoming publication of Hans Namuth's celebrated action photographs in a book called *Pollock Painting*, reveals Krasner's intimate relationship as a colleague with her husband whose principal champion and greatest supporter she was.

Recent interest in Krasner's own career as a pioneer Abstract Expressionist, overshadowed by Pollock's celebrity, has raised the question of why her reputation suffered in relation to those of her male contemporaries. The interview makes it clear for the first time why Krasner was prohibited from painting the big pictures that were essential to the creation of the major reputations of the New York School until after Pollock's death in 1956. For, although she was an abstract artist earlier than any of the first generation New York School painters, except Reinhardt and Gorky (she was painting abstractly while her teacher Hans Hofmann was still a figurative artist), her development as a painter of large-scale, monumental works was artificially postponed as the result of the primacy both she and Pollock gave to his career. Pollock's large “drip” paintings date from the move of his studio from the bedroom in the house the couple purchased in 1945, when they moved from Greenwich Village to Springs, East

Hampton, to the barn behind the house which became his studio in 1947. He had already been painting on the floor in the bedroom, but the move into the barn permitted the kind of physical freedom documented in Namuth's photographs and the film made in fall 1950.

With Pollock painting in the barn, Krasner finally had a studio of her own. (She had been working in the living room.) The "little image" series, her own version of all-over painting done with a conventional brush technique on easel-sized canvases, was done in this small bedroom in the late forties. After Pollock's death in 1956, Krasner began using the barn as her studio, working on a very large scale, although she never painted on the floor as Pollock had. Her memories of life in Springs, during the most productive decade of Pollock's life, add to our understanding of Pollock's central role in the history of the New York School, as well as the nature of their relationship as two working professionals.

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*Barbara Rose:* When did Pollock begin to use the Springs studio?

*Lee Krasner:* We moved out there in November 1945. Pollock started to work in the bedroom upstairs in the house because the barn, which later became the studio, was a mess, filled with lots of rough iron things and some farm implements. Mr. Quinn, the former owner of the house, had something to do with the town roads, so there were all kinds of things in there. You could barely get in, so it was a matter of clearing it out. And that would take time, so he started to work in the house. Pollock's 1946 show was painted in one of the bedrooms upstairs in the house. He painted *The Key* in the bedroom. I remember because it was in the '46 show.

As you know, Pollock painted on the floor: *The Key* took up the whole space on the bedroom floor. He could barely walk around it. The move into the studio had to follow that, because in addition to clearing the barn out, we also moved it, to the site it's on now. (It was directly behind the house and cut off our whole view.) The next show he has is in 1949—in fact, he had two shows in '49, so it must have been between 1947 and 1949 that the building was cleared out and moved, and he began to work in the bigger studio in the barn.

*Barbara Rose:* Was there a change in scale because of Pollock's move of his studio from the bedroom to the barn?

*Lee Krasner:* Surely, since his 1950 show had some big paintings. It had *One*, *Autumn Rhythm* hanging opposite it, *Lavender Mist*, plus the big black and white painting in Düsseldorf, the Muriel Newman

painting in Chicago, which is about the size of *Lavender Mist*, plus some other big paintings. However, I want to point out that before we moved out to Springs, when we were living on Eighth Street in the Village, Peggy Guggenheim commissioned the mural for her apartment, which is the largest painting Pollock ever painted. That was in 1943. Incidentally, that's not painted on the floor. Pollock didn't always paint on the floor, although he painted a great deal on the floor. For that mural, we had to rip out a wall and carry out the plaster in buckets every night. We weren't supposed to live in the building, which we rented from Sailor's Snug Harbor. At any rate, we needed to create a wall large enough to hold the mural, so we broke down a partition between two rooms. That created a wall long enough for him to get that big mural painting on.

*Barbara Rose:* Was that Peggy Guggenheim's dimensions or Pollock's?

*Lee Krasner:* The mural was a commission from Peggy of a fixed dimension to fit into the hallway, I believe. She specified the dimension.

*Barbara Rose:* Can you be more specific about the date Pollock began painting in the barn?

*Lee Krasner:* In 1949 he had two exhibitions. Those paintings were done in the barn, so I would say the move took place probably in 1947. When he took the barn, I took the bedroom as my studio. I do know that my mosaic table was done in 1947, before I got the bedroom. (I was working in the living room.) I remember I moved into the bedroom after the mosaic table was done. It was probably in 1947, not long after Pollock had his 1946 show.

*Barbara Rose:* The first "drip" paintings were made in 1947. Do you think moving into the barn had anything to do with greater physical freedom?

*Lee Krasner:* It would be very convenient to think along those lines, but I don't believe that was it. Pollock had a lot more space on Eighth Street. He wasn't confined to one tiny little room. I think the increase in size has more to do with the fundamental aspects of why he did what he did. He certainly needed the physical space to work as he did, but I think he would have found the physical space whenever he was ready to paint with large gestures.

*Barbara Rose:* Do you remember how and why Pollock started the "drip" paintings? Did he speak of experimenting with a new technique?

*Lee Krasner:* I am always rather astonished when I read of a given date. I actually cannot remember when I first saw them.

*Barbara Rose:* Was there a perception that he was entering a new area?

*Lee Krasner:* There was certainly a sense of "I never saw this before."

There is that feeling. But with Pollock one had a lot of that surprise to deal with.

*Barbara Rose:* Did he have a sense of how important the "drip" paintings were at the time?

*Lee Krasner:* I can only surmise that; I cannot quote him. I have a feeling that he was aware of their importance.

*Barbara Rose:* When was the first time you recall seeing him paint on the floor?

*Lee Krasner:* He didn't do it when we lived on Eighth Street in New York. But, I remember *The Key* on the floor in the bedroom in 1946. I can't remember him working on the floor in New York, so he must have begun in Springs. I don't have the remotest idea of why he wanted to work on the floor.

*Barbara Rose:* Was there any precedent?

*Lee Krasner:* The only thing I remember hearing was that he had seen the Indian sand painters working on the ground. As you know, Pollock didn't verbalize at all times. He kept things pretty much to himself; occasionally he said something. I only remember hearing about the Indian sand paintings from him in terms of a precedent for working on the ground.

*Barbara Rose:* Yet formalist critics discount the Indian influence in order to make him a thoroughly European artist.

*Lee Krasner:* Of course he was very aware of European art, but what he identified with was about as American as apple pie. His stories about the Indians—and he made many trips to the West—were not European in any sense. In finding this flow of paint, this thrust of paint, this aerial form which then landed—his so-called breakthrough—he could merge many traditions of art. You recall he had said in a '44 interview that here in the East, only the Atlantic gave him a sense of space that he was accustomed to. He did work with his father, who was a surveyor, in the Grand Canyon, so he really had a sense of physical space. In finding this technique of expressing what he expressed, he merged many things out of his American background—which does not disconnect him from tradition and his knowledge of European painting. His art was a synthesis.

*Barbara Rose:* Was the barn heated at this time?

*Lee Krasner:* The barn was not heated at that time. In some early photographs you can literally see between the boards, which means

it wasn't insulated or heated. And that means seasonal work.

*Barbara Rose:* So he didn't work in the winter?

*Lee Krasner:* No, not dead, dead winter, until later on. At one point he got one of those terrible kerosene stoves, and if he was working he could ignite it, which terrified me. A little wooden barn, full of pigment and all sorts of flammable stuff, heated by one of those kerosene potbellies. You know, with a chimney and a big kerosene container on the bottom. Very frightening.

*Barbara Rose:* When he didn't paint, did he draw?

*Lee Krasner:* Not necessarily. He really worked in cycles. When he was working, the weather didn't especially stop him. He would put layers and layers of clothing on and would ignite that kerosene thing and work. But there were some months, about four or five months of the year when it was bitter, bitter cold out there, when you really couldn't work. Otherwise, he could manage somehow or other. He did an enormous amount of work considering that there was no heat in the barn.

*Barbara Rose:* Did you feel that temperamentally the seasons had an effect on him out there?

*Lee Krasner:* At the time I wasn't aware of it as such. Certainly his relationship to nature was intense. For example, the moon had a tremendous effect on him, and he liked gardening. Just walking on the beach in the wintertime, with snow on the sand was exciting. He identified very strongly with nature.

*Barbara Rose:* What do you mean by the moon having an effect on him?

*Lee Krasner:* He painted a series of moon pictures, and spoke about it often. This is one of the things we had in common, because the moon had quite an effect on me, too. It made me feel more emotional, more intense—it would build a momentum of some sort for me. He spoke of the moon quite often. He referred to *Portrait in a Dream* as the "dark side of the moon." There was a whole series of moon paintings—*Moon Woman*, *Mad Moon Woman*, *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*.

*Barbara Rose:* Do you know where his knowledge of mythology came from?

*Lee Krasner:* I think his interest in myth originally stems from one of his high school teachers in California. I can't remember the man's name, but he was interested in Eastern philosophy. He introduced him to Eastern philosophy, and consequently he attended lectures by

Krishnamurti. All of which happened long before I met him. By the time I had met him, he had been in Jungian analysis, which had a mythic basis.

*Barbara Rose:* Did he know anything about Indian legends actually?

*Lee Krasner:* He used to relate how his father took him on trips where they used to see where the Indians used to live, so he must have had some contact back there. How much he knew of the myths, I don't know. He had the Smithsonian books on the American Indian. I think there were twelve volumes of that, and since he had them I assume he had read them. In there, he could have dug out myths, if he didn't know of them prior to that.

*Barbara Rose:* Pollock's actual materials—his brushes, paints, etc.—where did he get them? And did he prefer a certain range of color?

*Lee Krasner:* He preferred house painter's brushes, rather than fine art brushes. He indulged in materials very heavily. That is to say for drawings, he had the most fantastic collection of pens I had ever seen. He would go into Rosenthal's art supply store before we moved out to Springs and would pick out every new form of pen that would come out. With regard to color, he started at some point in the late forties to use commercial paints. I don't know why. He never explained why.

*Barbara Rose:* You didn't have plastic paints yet. No matter how you thinned oil down you could never get the liquidity of enamel or house paint.

*Lee Krasner:* Exactly. I think that had more to do with his decision in getting commercial paint. He could do what he wanted to do with it. He also at one point got Du Pont to make up very special paints for him, and special thinners that were not turpentine. I don't know what it was.

*Barbara Rose:* Do you remember how he got in touch with the paint chemist?

*Lee Krasner:* I don't remember, but at the time the painting Rockefeller owned was burned, the restorer got in touch with me, and I had to go to the studio and write it out so they could contact the Du Pont people and find out precisely how to deal with it.

*Barbara Rose:* What were these special paints that Du Pont developed for Pollock?

*Lee Krasner:* I don't know. I simply gave them the name of the paints and asked them to be in touch with Du Pont's chemists to find out.

*Barbara Rose:* During the period, when Pollock was doing the "drip"

paintings, did he use a limited range of colors? After *The Key* he begins to use a completely different palette from the high-key Fauve color of the early forties.

*Lee Krasner:* Why he shifts from one thing to another I couldn't say. Even in those commercial paints, there is quite a range of color. I would pick one color, and he would pick quite another. Color is a very personal thing. He had a choice within the range of commercial paints. He certainly never used the full range that existed. He chose what he wanted.

*Barbara Rose:* Do you have any idea why he used silver paint? Was that radiator enamel?

*Lee Krasner:* I think it can be used on radiators, or pipes, or anything else. No, I have no idea why he used it. As a matter of fact, it came up quite recently. I think it was O'Connor who dug up some literature that Pollock read when he was involved with Eastern philosophy. He came up with an illustration of something that was very heavily dripped. If Pollock had seen that, it would mean he was aware of silver paint as well as the so-called "drip" way back somewhere. I can remember O'Connor saying that it was conceivable Pollock had read this pamphlet before he came East. It could have been something that he was aware of way back in California.

*Barbara Rose:* Did he ever speak about materials?

*Lee Krasner:* Rarely. I think he had read quite a bit about technique because in his library there were books about it. In fact, I still leave his books in Springs. So he was conscious and aware of the technical aspects of painting. But he would also say that you could not deal too much with the technique; there are certain basic rules you have to know, and then forget it.

*Barbara Rose:* Do you have any idea why he used crushed glass in his paintings?

*Lee Krasner:* He didn't use all that much. It was for a very short time. Texture interested him. Crushed glass created texture.

*Barbara Rose:* Did you ever observe him painting?

*Lee Krasner:* Yes. I saw him painting the mural on Eighth Street. I saw him painting *Number 7*, and *Number 8*, and *Moon Woman*. So I saw him paint before he moved out to the barn. Out in East Hampton, when he was in the barn, I saw him paint there too. When he called me in, I would see what he had done. He might start to work while I was there.

*Barbara Rose:* He would call you in when he wanted to reflect on something?

*Lee Krasner:* No. The pattern was that if he went out to work, I did not ever just come into the studio. But he might come back from the studio and I might say something like, "How did it go?", although I could tell before I asked the question. And he would say on occasion, "Not bad, would you like to see what I did?" I would go out with him and see what he did. Sometimes on these occasions he might pick up and start to work while I was there. I saw him do some cutouts, for example. At different times I saw him do bits and pieces.

*Barbara Rose:* Do you have any idea why he cut out parts of the canvas?

*Lee Krasner:* No more than why I might start to collage at some point.

*Barbara Rose:* Is there anything you can remember about his working process? I guess he was simply very absorbed.

*Lee Krasner:* When he worked, oh yes.

*Barbara Rose:* You get the impression that it was like a trance.

*Lee Krasner:* It's a romantic idea, but to a degree it is true. He would take off so to speak. It is a form of leaving your surroundings. There were periods when he would just observe his work or be critical. There are both aspects—the total involvement and the subsequent objective criticism.

*Barbara Rose:* That's very important. E. A. Carmean writes in his National Gallery text that there was a series of paintings all painted at the same time. He claims that the first layer of the "drip" was applied on all equally. He then left them and went back to them at different stages as a kind of critical revision.

*Lee Krasner:* Sometimes he did revise and sometimes he didn't.

*Barbara Rose:* He might do something, look at it, leave it, then go back to it?

*Lee Krasner:* Certainly, although he didn't have a standard procedure. A painting like *Blue Poles* he reentered many, many times, and just kept saying, "This won't come through." That went on for quite a long time.

*Barbara Rose:* How long, normally, would it take him to paint a painting?

*Lee Krasner:* It really varied. When he got hung up in something, like *Blue Poles*, where he did get hung up, it took quite a long time. This went on beyond weeks. He might just walk away from it for a stretch of time, and then come back, reenter. Others came through more easily for him. When they came through, they came through rather rapidly. Relatively.

*Barbara Rose:* What percentage of the work was destroyed?

*Lee Krasner:* Very little. Generally, he wouldn't give up a canvas. He

would just stay with it until it was resolved for him.

*Barbara Rose:* It was my impression that a lot was destroyed because of the high risk element.

*Lee Krasner:* Not at all. His assuredness at that time is frightening to me. The confidence, and the way he would do it was unbelievable at that time.

*Barbara Rose:* How did this confidence evolve? Was it an outcome of all the years of drawing and the translation of that drawing into a larger gesture?

*Lee Krasner:* That's right. Because the backlog of what he has, the drawings you speak of, was quite a body of work. At some point he was ready to let it all happen in the scale he wanted it to happen on.

*Barbara Rose:* Then you don't know what inspired the "drip" technique?

*Lee Krasner:* For me it is working in the air and knowing where it will land. It is really quite uncanny. Even the Indian sand painters were working in the sand, not in the air.

*Barbara Rose:* That implies that there must have been a whole period of practicing the aerial gesture.

*Lee Krasner:* There probably was on a smaller scale, but I wouldn't know.

*Barbara Rose:* There are small "drip" paintings of course. In descriptions of Pollock, there is often reference to Pollock's "balletic" movements.

*Lee Krasner:* It is all called dance in some form. He was a terrible social dancer. That's not a reflection of his rhythm.

*Barbara Rose:* The physical grace of Pollock in Namuth's film is simply breathtaking. Was he athletic?

*Lee Krasner:* No. No sport that I ever encountered. His interests were the antithesis of athletics. Except boxing. He liked to look at that occasionally on television.

*Barbara Rose:* You listened to jazz together.

*Lee Krasner:* He had his own thing about jazz. He would sometimes listen four or five consecutive days and nights to New Orleans jazz until I would go crazy. The house would be rocking and rolling with it.

*Barbara Rose:* Any classical music?

*Lee Krasner:* Not that I'm aware of. I like classical music, and if I had it on, Pollock would certainly listen. And he had some poetry on records that he would listen to.

*Barbara Rose:* Did Pollock paint by natural light or artificial light?

*Lee Krasner:* Natural light only, never artificial. He *never* worked at night.

*Barbara Rose:* I remember being struck by the fact that the barn is filled with brilliant light from high windows, but entirely closed off at eye level. Was the fact that the studio had good natural light important?

*Lee Krasner:* Oh, I think so. When the barn was moved, he wanted the window high, so as not to be able to look out. He didn't want to be disturbed by the scene around him. He wanted his studio totally closed off, I remember that very definitely. The barn was altered when it was moved to the side of the house from directly behind the house where it blocked our view. Where the window should be placed was really the only alteration. A new studio window was added. I remember asking him if whether it wouldn't be a good idea to place another window someplace else as well as where he said. He said, "No, no, I don't want to be disturbed by the outside view when I'm working."

*Barbara Rose:* Why did he allow Namuth to photograph him?

*Lee Krasner:* I haven't the faintest idea. He had been photographed by other people like Herbert Matter. It wasn't as if he had never been photographed before Namuth.

*Barbara Rose:* But was he ever photographed painting before?

*Lee Krasner:* No. That was the first time and consequently the only time he was photographed working.

*Barbara Rose:* Did he say anything about the experience?

*Lee Krasner:* In the past he said it made him uncomfortable. He wouldn't allow it.

*Barbara Rose:* Yet he is not self-conscious in Namuth's film, not like someone being observed.

*Lee Krasner:* When he was working, I think he would have been unaware of anything else.

*Barbara Rose:* The glass painting he works on in the film is a curiosity, unlike anything else in Pollock's oeuvre. I understand it was Namuth's idea that he should paint on glass.

*Lee Krasner:* Was it? I was there while Pollock painted it, certainly. But I wasn't there when Namuth suggested that he paint on glass. As far as I'm concerned, Jackson got a sheet of glass, and decided to paint on it, and Namuth photographed it.

*Barbara Rose:* It didn't have the status of an art object until Pollock decided it was a painting, however.

*Lee Krasner:* The first I heard of it, Pollock showed me a piece of glass. When I asked him what it was for, he said he wanted to try to paint

on it. As you know, he was constantly experimenting. I always thought he got the idea of painting on glass from Duchamp.

*Barbara Rose:* The painting on glass produced during the film is in a sense the literal realization of the idea of suspending an image in space—of eliminating the background by making it transparent. It evolves so logically out of Pollock's concerns at the time, I can't believe it was just a chance by-product of the film. However, the existence of the film is something of a miracle.

*Lee Krasner:* I do not know why Pollock agreed to permit Namuth to film him working. It was entirely contrary to his nature. However, we are very fortunate that he did and that we have such a document.

**ELIZABETH BISHOP**

**1911-1979**