



Icarus, 1964 © Pollock-Krasner Foundation  
Lee Krasner1964/1964

## **Lee Krasner: Living Colour The Barbican, London**

Exhibition Review by Adrian Coleman  
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Imagine that your grandmother was once young and she too raised hell. It is almost inconceivable. Whatever rules and hearts she broke, you know her as the respectable elder of sage advice and cardigans. This dissociation is something like the experience of “Lee Krasner: Living Colour,” the artist’s retrospective at the Barbican. A viewer today can hardly grasp how radical the painter would have seemed in the 1950 and 60s. Krasner’s visions of searing crimsons burned down the historic order. And yet, Krasner is now part of the canon. Since her death in the eighties, Krasner has been deservedly recognized as a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism. That school of riotous Modernism is now some seventy years old. How does controversy age? When a shocking artform becomes institutional, does it retain its power to awe?

In 2019, Krasner’s enormous canvases feel classical. This represents her and her contemporaries’ triumph over the establishment, not a compromise. Her best paintings exude a gravitas in the way that Beethoven still sounds thunderous and prophetic two centuries on.

The exhibition, as its title suggests, emphasizes Krasner’s chromatic flair. Since Matisse’s penchant for cobalt blue, perhaps no painter has been so strongly affiliated with a pigment as Krasner and alizarin. This is a deep purple-red, suggesting wine or deoxygenated blood. Her collage *Desert Moon* (1955) is a jangly composition of cool pinks against fragments of smoldering red, black, and orange. Her masterpiece *Icarus* (1964) is an inferno of crackling black scrawl scorched with reds and magentas. Famously, the critic Robert Hughes once described her colour schemes as “rap[ping] hotly on the eyeball from 50 paces.” Krasner’s paintings contain an emotional intensity not always present in the formal explorations of her colleagues. Her husband, Jackson Pollock, espoused drama and bravado, and her neighbour, Mark Rothko, resonated a kind of Zen sublime. Krasner sometimes painted as if humanity were under siege.

This is most evident in the series, *Night Journeys*, which are my favourite paintings in the retrospective. In this case, the colour is not the source of energy. Shortly after Pollock died in a car crash, Krasner assumed his renowned barn studio. The move was a confrontation with death. Unable to sleep, she worked through the nights, and to avoid the colour distortion of the artificial lighting, reduced her palette to white and umber. Now operating on an unprecedented scale, the result was a group of stark, massive abstractions. The paintings' turbulence stemmed from an inherent sense of figuration. Krasner incorporated, if not explicit references to the anatomy, the arcs and geometries of bodily motion. *The Eye is the First Circle* (1960) is a sprawling twenty-foot painting of ragged trajectories and collisions. Michelangelo was once commissioned to paint the *Battle of Cascina*, a violent medieval encounter. The painting was never completed, but the surviving studies - sepia-toned and gestural - share something of Krasner's raw chaos.

In the 21st century, Abstract Expressionism appears stately rather than revolutionary, but all art that stands the test of time must outlive its novelty and prove its enduring substance. Krasner's paintings feel familiar - they are now part of the culture - but they remain compelling and explosive. The long view of history allows us to appreciate other aspects of her hard-fought career: her uphill struggle against entrenched prejudice and her slow emergence from the shadow of her partner. AbEX was largely a boys club of self-styled machismo, but ultimately, Krasner was perhaps its grittiest member. Sometimes the most subversive act is to survive and to pursue the creative yearnings of the heart. In that respect, Krasner's radicalism still blazes, more boldly apparent to our generation than her own.