Recent Paintings: 1975-1978

Helen Frankenthaler
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Mr. and Mrs. Alan Freedman
Mr. Guido Goldman
Mr. and Mrs. David Hermein
Mrs. Herbert C. Lee
Mr. Jack Lindner
Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Perelman
Mr. H. B. Sarbin
Mr. and Mrs. F. R. Weisman
Mr. Robert Weiss
Mr. Hanford Yang

exhibition directed by
E. C. Goossen

catalogue design: Alex Brown
printed by Queen City Printers Inc.

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Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery
Bennington College
Bennington, Vermont
15 April - 13 May, 1978

Bennington College takes ever-increasing pleasure and pride in the achievements of one of its most accomplished alumni, Helen Frankenthaler. She has, in the course of her career, never failed to credit the College with a role in the nurturing of her extraordinary talent. We are grateful for the love she has for Bennington and her steadfast support of it.

It is fitting, therefore, that her art be heralded in the Usdan Gallery. To do so has required the generosity of those prudent and perspicacious patrons of the arts who have lent us their Frankenthalers: we are grateful to them.

Another stalwart friend of the College is the keystone in the organization of this fine exhibition. Former faculty member Eugene Goossen—a long-time devotee of Bennington and Frankenthaler—selected the paintings exhibited, and directed and installed the show.

Joseph S. Murphy
President, Bennington College
Twenty-five years have passed, yet everyone still remembers the light, fresh spirit of Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* of 1952. But we also remember that after that *tour de force* came nearly a decade of painting in a darker mood, turning Frankenthaler's non-objective art into an object. Seemingly intent on distorting the canvas every last shred of pictorial power and from the artist every last particle of psychic energy. In the 1960's this moodiness began to dissipate or, rather, to distribute itself more equitably across the larger field of the endeavour. The dark thoughts of the 1950's were more restrained, more completely converted into analogues and more dark. It would be more accurate to say that she upgraded the qualities of what is usual—painting. Herself a fine watercolorist, she accomplished what the great watercolorist, Turner, did not persist in taking advantage of the inherent qualities of the medium. Turner carried over some of the qualities by virtue of their imagery and horizontality. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Vels* and the *Florals* but he did not continue to develop it as such in his later work. As they went on both Louis and Noland became more interested in a saturated color more staining method.
and at other times specifically assigned to states of feeling. Sphina (1976) employs the freed, floating form she had developed in her early work, and reworked in the mid-1960’s in Small’s Paradise, Tangente, and others. But Sphina has a quality these did not; it strains less for power in an overt way. The ambiguous image here is allowed to expand freely in an equally ambiguous space, while the 1964 pictures were impulsive and constrained by framing devices. This new freedom given to the ‘image’ to find its own space implies an affectionate attitude toward the act of painting and the release of the spirit from former anxieties. It also implies freedom from the rigid canons of easel painting—another reminder of Turner and his persistent individualism in the face of academic criticism. Had he given in, there would have been no Turner as we know him.

Ocean Desert (1975), Giant Step (1975) and The First of the Year (1976) are three good examples of the artist adjusting the ruling conventions to fit her own needs rather than the other way around. The risks are large even though perhaps temporal. Casting a discrete area into a pre-tinted field, while tying it only casually to the ‘framing edge’ (a concession) is risky. One is reminded, especially when these pictures are seen in small reproductions, of those flower pieces and ten-minute pastel portraits on colored paper made by self-taught artists in every flea-market and department store. The colored paper raises our hackles more than the subject matter does. Poor drawings on white paper do not offend us in the same way. But colored paper and pre-tinted canvas breed automatic responses on the part of the artist and connoisseur alike. There may be something puritanical about these reactions because they tend to have moral implications. Pre-tinting seems to have reduced the challenge and predetermined the outcome; thus it suggests laziness. A critical problem ensues. Knowing that Frankenthaler knows the difference between the pretty and the beautiful as well as anyone—the evidence of her past painting proves this—one must pass through prejudice to get at what is really going on in this group of paintings.

Putting prejudice aside with, I admit, some difficulty, I now see these paintings, including the vertical titled Sea Level (1976), as fragments of landscapes. Landscape is used here metaphorically, and the fragment is something like that extraction we make from the field of vision when only a portion of it interests us. This is a common but rarely documented experience. Cast into the atmosphere of the white surface, because of convention and the indeterminacy of whiteness, such a fragment would expand and reconstitute the missing areas from which it was removed. The tinted setting, however, like the jeweler’s blue velvet, lets the piece on display show forth in and of itself. The difference here is not only in what is singled out and displayed, but also in the overall scale. The heroic size of these canvases—9, 10, 11 feet wide—entices the viewer to come in close and immerse himself in the intricacies of their fabrique. The distance between him and that to be viewed is determined by him and not by the perimeter of the canvas. One is reminded of Georgia O’Keeffe’s remark that if she had painted her flowers as small as they really were, nobody would bother to look at them.

No other painter easily comes to mind who has been willing to risk such a variety of aims, methods and results within the short space of two or three years—except Picasso. In most artists this would suggest an identity crisis. In Frankenthaler I believe it is evidence of security. Moreover, as with Picasso, her stylistic signature remains in everything she produces. What this variety does suggest is that she creates a dialogue, not with other painters so much as between her own paintings, past, present, and probably even future.

Santa Rosa (1976) has references to the matte surfaces and dulled color of many of her 1950’s ‘stained’ pictures. It has for me a certain ‘tristesse’ emanating from the dragged red, blacks and browns set against a pale mauve tint. Frankenthaler’s color is always loaded with emotional significance, sometimes in direct association with external phenomena, and at other times specifically assigned to states of feeling.

The contrast of personal styles is especially apparent when one compares two such paintings as No Lady and Aton, both of 1976. The first, besides being a shift into extreme verticality has, perhaps because of its shape, a cubist or constructivist feeling about it, which is carried even further by its muted tonal color. Aton, on the other hand, is Frankenthaler at her softest and smokiest and most seductive. But this transparent color and evanescent image is placed in a philosophical as well as a spatial perspective by a centered gestalt of calligraphic blots and a few other externalizing notes. Aton thus survives as a painting though it skirts, as so many of her paintings do, the pitfalls of the expressionist temperament.

The expressionist artist has fewer guarantees than the more intellectualizing artist. The latter can test his ideas in advance through the normal systems of logic and reason. He can get some feeling of the validity of what he is going to do before he does it, but the expressionist chances all on a throw of the dice. The freedom to change direction daily, even hourly, is a terrible burden, and knowing just when to call upon the intelligence to prevent an overindulgence in mood without repressing the values of the latter requires a wholeness of personality most of us do not possess.
Royal Fireworks, 1975
acrylic on canvas
5' x 13' (152 x 399 cm)
collection: Mr. Jack Lindner

Kingsway, 1975
acrylic on canvas
7'7" x 11'7"
(234 x 354 cm)
collection: Mr. Hanford Yang
Red Zinger, 1976
acrylic on canvas
9'3" x 5'3" (285 x 163 cm)
collection of the artist

Blue Seducer, 1975
acrylic on canvas
5' x 11' (152 x 333 cm)
collection: Mr. Guido Goldman
Natural Answer, 1976
acrylic on canvas
8' x 11' (243 x 335 cm)
collection: Mr. Robert Weiss

September, 1976
acrylic on canvas
8' x 9'6" (244 x 290 cm)
collection: Mr. and Mrs. Alan Freedman
Sphinx, 1976
acrylic on canvas
8'8" x 9'6" (266 x 289 cm)
collection: Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Brumder

Ocean Desert, 1975
acrylic on canvas
5'6" x 9' (168 x 274 cm)
collection: Mrs. Herbert C. Lee
Giant Step, 1975
acrylic on canvas
7' 8" x 13' 3"
[236 x 404 cm]
private collection

The First of the Year, 1976
acrylic on canvas
6' x 11' 6"
[183 x 350 cm]
collection: Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Perelman
Sea Level, 1976
acrylic on canvas
7'5'' x 5'4'' (226 x 160 cm)
collection: Mr. H. B. Sarbin

No Lady, 1976
acrylic on canvas
8'4'' x 2'4'' (254 x 71 cm)
collection: Thomas J. Davis, Jr.
Aton, 1976
acrylic on canvas
8'6" x 6'6" (259 x 198 cm)
collection: Mr. and Mrs. David Hermelin
Biographical Outline

1928 Born December 12, New York City, to Martha (nee Lowenstein) and Alfred Frankenthaler, New York State Supreme Court Justice.

1945 Graduates from the Dalton School. During autumn, continues to study painting with Ruffino Tamayo, her art instructor at Dalton.

1946 Enters Bennington College, spring term. Studies art with Paul Feeley.

1947 Spends Non Resident term studying at Art Students League with Vaclav Vytlacil.

1949 Studies with painter Wallace Harrison at his school on 14th Street, graduates B.A., from Bennington. Enters Graduate School of Fine Arts, Columbia University, autumn.


1962 Solo exhibition: Andre Emmerich Gallery, Galerie Lawrence.


1971 Designs and executes set for "Of Love" for the Erick Hawkins Dance Company. Solo exhibitions: Galerie Godard Lefort, Montreal; Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit; David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto; Andre Emmerich Gallery.


Selected Bibliography

Statements by the Artist


Books and Articles


Selected Exhibitions


