

**Recent Paintings: 1975-1978**



**Helen Frankenthaler**

**cover:**  
*Santa Rosa*, 1976  
acrylic on canvas  
8'9" x 6'2" (266 x 184 cm)  
collection: Mr. and Mrs. F. R. Weisman

**Lenders to the Exhibition:**

Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Brumder  
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Mr. and Mrs. Alan Freedman  
Mr. Guido Goldman  
Mr. and Mrs. David Hermelin  
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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

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**Helen Frankenthaler**

**Recent Paintings: 1975-1978**

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

# Helen Frankenthaler

## Notes on Some Recent Paintings

by E. C. Goossen

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, turgid in line and splash in a seeming attempt to wrest from 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 were more restrained, more completely converted into analogues and more adapted to double-sided truth. Certainly the paintings of the 1970's have their moods, but the preponderance now seem to fall on the side of light. Even the darker pictures are not *all dark*.

Much has been made of Frankenthaler's introduction of the staining method to modern painting. It would be more accurate to say that she upgraded the qualities of what is usually (incorrectly, I think) considered a minor art—watercolor—by applying its natural charm and spontaneity, as well as its irreversibility, to an equality with traditional oil and acrylic painting. Herself a fine watercolorist, she accomplished what the great watercolorist, Turner, never did, probably because he shared the prevailing hierarchical prejudice of his time about that medium. Turner carried over some of the *images* from his studies of light and color in watercolor to his oils, but he was never able to translate its most basic and pristine qualities: purity and transparency. His own watercolors are superbly pure and transparent and should be classified among his major works. He was content to imitate these qualities by *scumbling*, using a light speckling of one color over another to produce an atmospheric iridescence, somewhat analogous to the watercolor effect, but too palpable to the eye to achieve the limpidity in oils that he apparently desired.

The two artists said to have been earliest affected by *Mountains and Sea*, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, did not persist in taking advantage of the inherent qualities of the staining method. Louis did achieve a great degree of transparency in the series called the *Veils* 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 closely aligned with their predetermined abstract formats.

There are other affinities of Frankenthaler with Turner. She not only lifts his watercolor approach from paper to canvas, but seems to share the psychological ambiguities attributed to him by Lawrence Gowing, who wrote of Turner: "Water gave some of its meaning to watercolour. The wetness of the medium had fateful connotations. The colour of clouds, and eventually all colour, soaked out into it, bleeding and drowning. The wonder and terror of the moment are arrested and preserved. . . . The uncontrollable hazards of watercolour were the meaning of Turner's private imaginative life. [but] He was at home with them and trusted them. . . ."

Though I do not want to press the point too far, there are certain Frankenthaler paintings, especially from recent years, that have spiritual, as well as visual affinities with Turner. These are rather naturally those Frankenthalers that are landscape-type paintings by virtue of their imagery and horizontality. *Royal Fireworks*, 1975, is a Turner-esque blast of sunset orange heightened by a bright blue, and subtly modified by purples and pinks. The orange "sky" is not a dead plane of color but is a transparent flooding in which varying densities and saturations of reds and yellows simulate, but do not describe, "clouds." Moreover, the instantaneousness—the speed of its creation, as demonstrated overtly by the wetness that must have been required to arrive at this result, and the boldly-brushed blue—conveys directly that occasional fleeting moment at sundown when the world is golden-red. The Frankenthaler is a contemporary shorthand version of what Church and Bierstadt labored for in their great *Twilight* and *Sunset* pictures over a hundred years ago. A high realism, of course, was the rock upon which they built their displays of Nature's wonders. The authenticity of their vision depended on that rock. In abstract painting nature is not a model but a standard. Despite all our contemporary faith in pure art, Nature is still the highest standard of them all. Authenticity in Frankenthaler's work depends on her ability to convince us that her feelings are real and that she is intellectually capable of building a structure for them *equal* to the structures of Nature.

Two other pictures of 1975 have characteristics similar to those of *Royal Fireworks*, but are totally different in mood. *Kingsway* and *Blue Seducer* are also of the landscape-type, but for all of these paintings it is necessary to stress the idea of "type" rather than the

literal meaning of the word "landscape." Any horizontal painting not specifically something else suggests a panorama, since its shape more or less coincides with the flattened ellipse of our binocular vision. Without internal indications to the contrary, we have the right to read any horizontal abstract canvas as intentionally of the landscape genre.

*Kingsway* seems to be the result of a recollected experience of an intense natural phenomenon of light and color. It appears as a vaporous cloud cover seen from the distance. This misty translucence given shape and formal identity by the judicious use of horizontal strokes at the top and at the bottom compresses it just enough to clarify, but not enough to destroy its fragile atmosphere. These are some of the structural devices Frankenthaler uses in subtle, masterly ways to keep the sentiment in such a risky painting from turning sentimental. The cleanly primed area above the "clouds" may or may not be a "sky." It is a relatively recent, and somewhat problematical addition to her approach. In former days the white of unsized canvas was enough to provide an indeterminate spatial field suitable for her purposes. Now she seems often to begin with a tint-primed surface and to build outward from it. That this should appear in a landscape-type painting indicates clearly that Frankenthaler views landscape as a *structural* vehicle for conveying certain of her emotional preoccupations as an artist.

*Blue Seducer* may have had a primed layer under it, but the ultimate painting shows no such evidence. The strategy here follows Frankenthaler's "classic" method since the mid-1960's: the full-flooded surface, worked while wet into uneven densities of color that emit light from behind, while other areas, like the "spume" in lower center and "rain mist" toward the right, are superimposed transparently. Thus the space is as vaporous as the images that produce it. Again, parallel concrete lines of color establish an aesthetic distance from which the emotionality of the rest of the picture can be viewed and limited.

Three other landscape-type canvases from 1976 and 1977 demonstrate the great variety of visual experiences that Frankenthaler's individualistic attitude toward her paintings permits her to explore. *Natural Answer* (1976) is an unusually frank, axial picture. As such it is almost a dead-ringer for Washington Allston's *Moonlit Landscape* of 1819. *Natural Answer* has other referents in a number of American nineteenth century landscapes wherein the moon or the dying sun creates a central shaft of light descending vertically across the horizon. Church's *Cotopaxi* of 1862 as well as any number of other paintings of the period, including a number of Turners, employed the device of light for structural purposes. Frankenthaler's sophistication is never to be underestimated.

Touches that would have been considered anomalies in the realistic painting of the nineteenth century, French or American, become, in Frankenthaler's "landscapes" the means of saving abstraction from itself. Perversely she sets up analogies and images that suck us into a world of reverie and then she dispels the dream-state with jerks back to reality. *September* (1976), for example, has all the charm and evocativeness of a Kodachrome taken in a lush season. The greens are a little too greeny, the blues a little too violet, and the pinkish-red somewhat too obvious. In the middle of all this excessive politeness appear a few scraggly, discourteous lines which point out the harsh reality that this is, after all, a painting. In the 1950's Frankenthaler had to modify the bitter stew she was brewing with sweet and gentler passages; in the 1960's with the bright new colors came harder edges and tougher compositional roles for them. Now it is all understatement, but statement nevertheless.

In the major painting *Into the West* (1977) the corrective passage is only found after a time of looking, partly because one becomes almost completely lost in its vast, warm space. An extraordinarily ambitious painting, and quite a new departure for Frankenthaler, *Into the West* throws down the glove not only to the Hudson River School, but to Newman, Rothko and Still as well. It was obviously arrived at palimpsest fashion, in a process of stating and erasing until a rich depth of incident and light emerges. But all of this might have been lost in a sea of unrelieved romanticism except for a few deft strokes; one, the blatantly unconcealed mop swash in right center, and the two interjections of the precise complementary green in the lower left and upper right. Small things, but perfectly placed, as are the blips of alien white that define the edges where the color might otherwise slide off the canvas.

The landscape-type paintings keep coming, but for such a restless self-driven artist as

this, no one mode can serve all the daily urges. A look backward now and then is important to continuity and self-rediscovery. *Sphinx* (1976) employs the freed, floating form she had developed in her early work, and reworked in the mid-1960's in *Small's Paradise*, *Tangerine*, and others. But *Sphinx* 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 implosive 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 pretinted 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



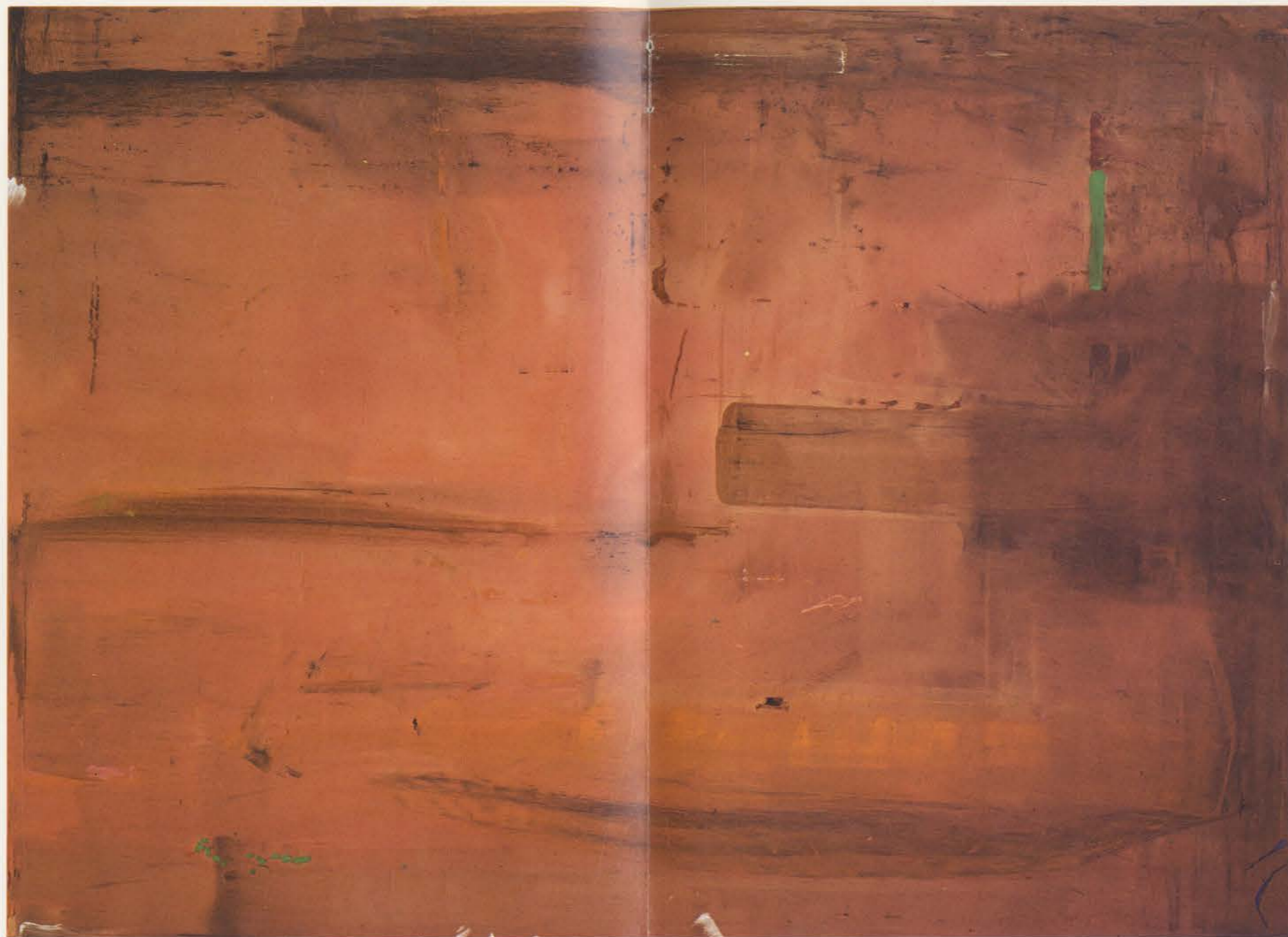
*Blue Seducer*, 1975  
acrylic on canvas  
5' x 11' (152 x 333 cm)  
collection: Mr. Guido Goldman



*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



*Into the West*, 1977  
acrylic on canvas  
8' x 11' (243 x 335 cm)  
private collection





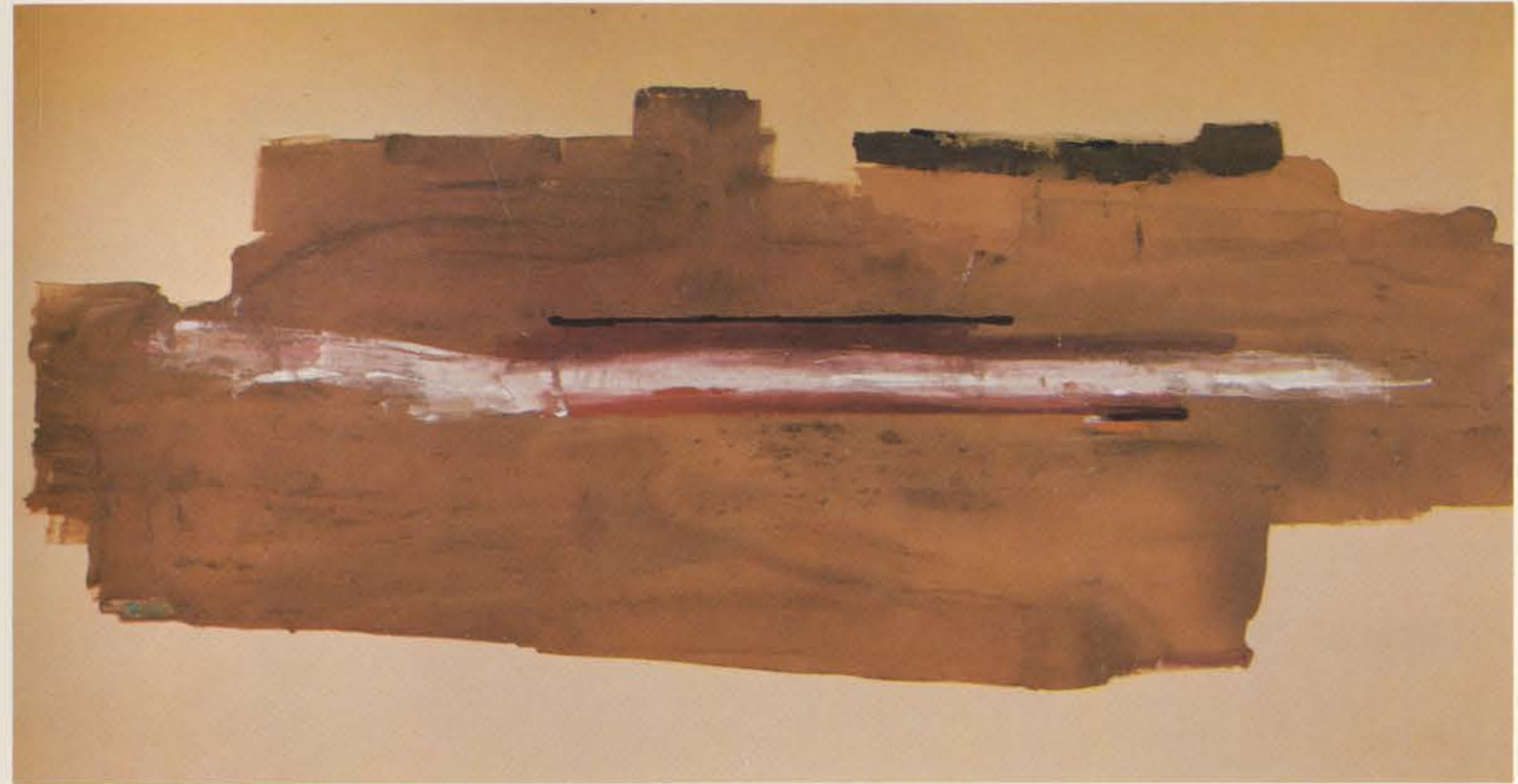
*Sphinx*, 1976  
acrylic on canvas  
8'8" x 9'6" (266 x 289 cm)  
collection: Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Brumder



*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



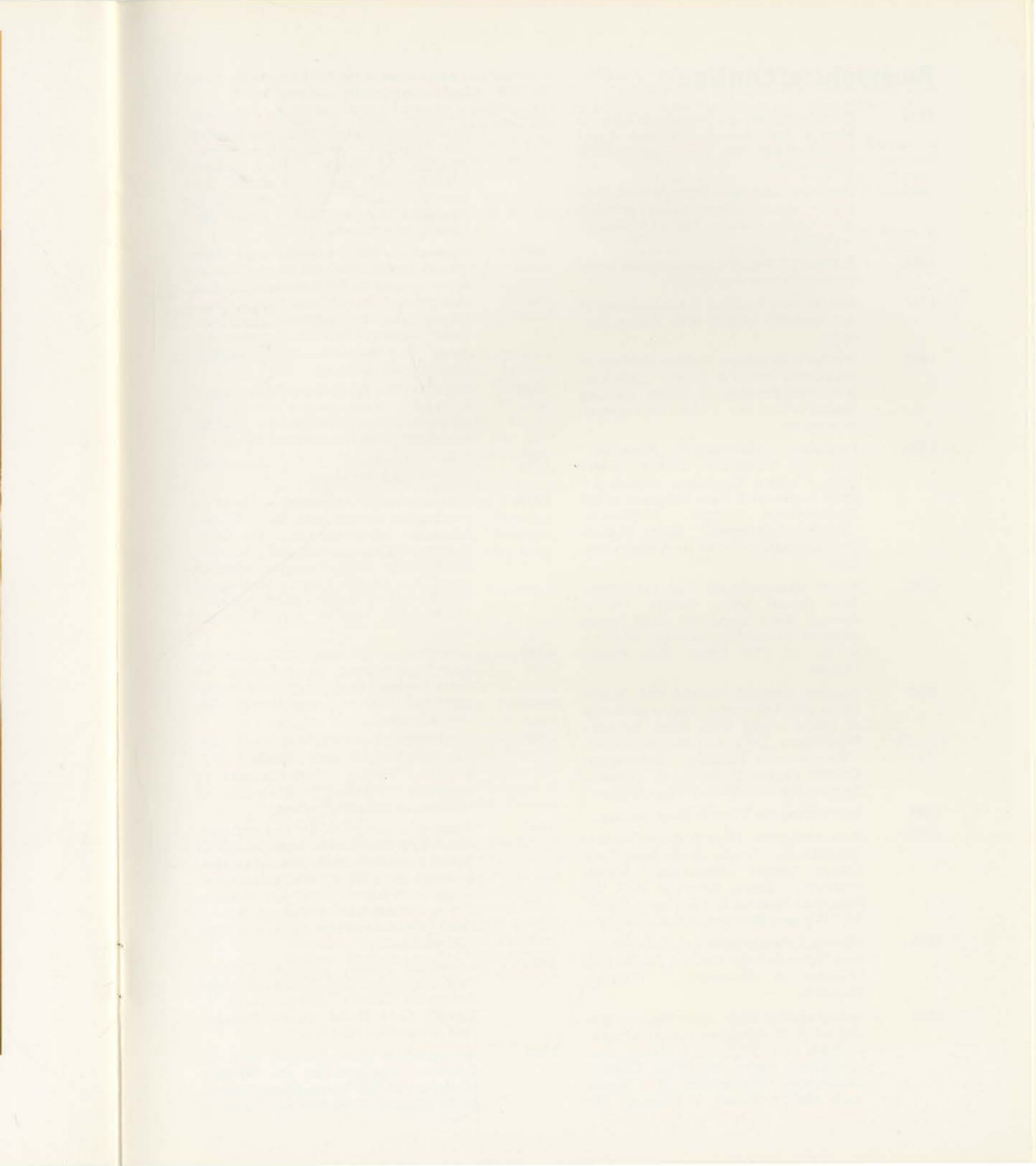
*Sea Level, 1976*  
acrylic on canvas  
7'5" x 5'4" (226 x 160 cm)  
collection: Mr. H. B. Sarbin



*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 Rufino 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 Vytlačil.
- 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.
- 1950** Organizes "Bennington Alumnae," May, for Seligmann Gallery. Meets critic Clement Greenberg. Studies for three weeks with Hans Hofmann at his Provincetown School. Exhibition: "Twelve Unknowns," Kootz Gallery (Frankenthaler selected by Adolph Gottlieb).
- 1952** Paints *Mountains and Sea*. Exhibition: First Annual, Stable Gallery. Travels through Nova Scotia and Cape Breton painting watercolors, summer. Shares a studio on 23rd Street with Friedel Dzubas.
- 1953** Painters Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis visit her studio. Begins exchange of studio visits with them between Washington, D.C., and New York City. "Nine Women Painters," Bennington College. Organized by E. C. Goossen. Solo exhibition: Tibor de Nagy Gallery.
- 1954** Solo exhibition: Tibor de Nagy Gallery.
- 1957** Solo exhibition: Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Exhibitions: "Artists of the New York School: Second Generation," Jewish Museum; "Young America 1957: 30 American Painters and Sculptors Under 35," Whitney Museum of American Art.
- 1958** Marries Robert Motherwell. Solo exhibition: Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Exhibition: "Nature in Abstraction," Whitney Museum.
- 1959** *School of New York: Some Younger Artists*, ed. B. H. Friedman, includes Frankenthaler essay by Sonya Rudikoff. Solo exhibition: André Emmerich Gallery. Exhibitions: Documenta II ("Kunst nach 1945"), Kassel; V Biennial, São

- Paulo; First Prize, I Biennale de Paris (for *Jacob's Ladder*).
- 1960** Executes first of fifteen different lithographic prints at Universal Limited Art Editions. Retrospective show, directed by Frank O'Hara, Jewish Museum. Solo exhibition: André Emmerich Gallery. Exhibition: "Sixty American Painters 1960," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.
- 1961** Appears on BBC, London, with interviewer David Sylvester. E. C. Goossen essay appears in *Art International*. Solo exhibitions: André Emmerich Gallery; Everett Ellin, Los Angeles; Galerie Lawrence, Paris. Exhibition: "American Abstract Expressionists and Imagists," Guggenheim Museum.
- 1962** Begins to use synthetic polymer (acrylic) paints. Retrospective show: Bennington College Carriage Barn. Solo exhibition: Galleria Dell'Ariete, Milan.
- 1963** Solo exhibitions: André Emmerich Gallery; Galerie Lawrence.
- 1964** Makes ceramic earthenware plates at Bennington Potters with David Smith, Alexander Liberman and Cleve Grey. Solo exhibition: Kasmin Ltd., London. Exhibitions: "Post-Painterly Abstraction," Los Angeles County Museum of Art; "Prints by Painters and Sculptors," Museum of Modern Art circulating show.
- 1965** Interview with Henry Geldzahler appears in *Artforum*. Designs poster for *Paris Review*. Solo exhibitions: André Emmerich Gallery; David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto.
- 1966** Solo exhibition: André Emmerich Gallery. Exhibitions: 33rd Biennale, U.S. Pavilion, Venice; "Two Decades of American Painting," Museum of Modern Art circulating show.
- 1967** Teaches at School of Art and Architecture, Yale University, and School of Visual Arts, New York. Elected trustee, Bennington College. Solo exhibitions: Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles; Gertrude Kastle Gallery, Detroit. Exhibition: "American Painting Now," Expo '67, Montreal.
- 1968** Appointed fellow, Calhoun College, Yale University. Solo exhibition: André Emmerich Gallery. Given Joseph E. Temple Gold Medal Award, Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts.
- 1969** Retrospective show, directed by E. C. Goossen, organized by the Whitney Museum and the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. Opens at

- the Whitney Museum and also shown in London, Hanover and Berlin. Solo exhibition: André Emmerich Gallery. Exhibitions: "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970" and "Prints by Four New York Painters," Metropolitan Museum. Made Doctor of Humane Letters, Skidmore College.
- 1970** Exhibition: "American Artists of the 1960s," Boston University.
- 1971** Designs and executes set for "Of Love" for the Erick Hawkins Dance Company. Solo exhibitions: Galerie Godard Lefort, Montreal; Gertrude Kastle Gallery, Detroit; David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto; André Emmerich Gallery.
- 1972** Receives Gold Medal of the Commune of Catania at Terza Biennale Internazionale della Grafica d'Arte, Florence. Receives Garrett Award at the 70th American Exhibition, Chicago Art Institute. Designs poster for the 15th Festival of Two Worlds at Spoleto. Uses Anthony Caro's London studio to make ten sculptures. Solo exhibitions: Heath Gallery, Atlanta; Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati; Fendrick Gallery, Washington, D.C.; Art Museum, Portland; André Emmerich Gallery; John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco.
- 1973** Receives Honorary Degree, Doctor of Fine Arts, Smith College. Paints two murals commissioned for the First Wisconsin Center building, Milwaukee. Ceramic tile wall commissioned for North Central Bronx Hospital, New York. Emile de Antonio's film "Painters Painting," including Helen Frankenthaler is distributed. Solo exhibitions: Waddington Galleries II, London; Janie C. Lee Gallery, Dallas; David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto; André Emmerich Gallery; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York ("Sixty-two Painted Book Covers").
- 1974** Receives Honorary Degree, Doctor of Fine Arts, Moore College of Art. Elected member, National Institute of Arts and Letters. Elected member, Corporation of Yaddo, Saratoga Springs. Receives Creative Artist Laureate, American Jewish Congress. Solo exhibitions: Fendrick Gallery, Washington, D.C.; André Emmerich Gallery, Zurich; Waddington Galleries II, London.

- 1975** "Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings 1969-1974," organized by Gene Baro, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. André Emmerich Gallery.
- 1976** Receives Honorary Degree, Doctor of Arts, Bard College. Receives Art and Humanities Award from Yale University's Women's Forum. Janie C. Lee Gallery, Houston, Texas.
- 1977** Exhibition: "New York: The State of Art," New York State Museum, Albany. André Emmerich Gallery.

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THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, New York. *Helen Frankenthaler: Tiles*. May 2-June 1, 1975.

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