

Helen Frankenthaler's Tribute

Paul would have been proud, respectful but embarrassed by this new building. Many here who remember him might conjure up a vivid pose: his head cocked to one side, one hip thrust out, his knuckles running under his chin. He'd laugh nervously — eyes wide, darting, curious — the very essence of the vitality and charisma he made echo through the art department and the College.

Our studio was one room off the dining room on the second floor of Commons, where we painted easel to easel on our own projects. Or as a group, confronted by a shivering model or dusty still life. Seminars in that studio were conducted in front of a bulletin board covered with color reproductions from art magazines. Under Paul's aegis we would dissect Cezanne's "Card Players," Matisse's "Blue Window," a late Mondrian, Titian's "Venus and Adonis," examples of analytic cubism, old masters, the works —! A melange that would ignite seminars of exchange, argument, enlightenment. Paul brought an aura to that room. We had brain-tickling, drawn-out conversations, questions, battles, over how artists had arrived at a certain solution. The meaning of space, light, content. And within his orbit we also confronted each other as artists and critics — a wonderfully fragile, suffering business! Often we'd leave puzzled but in pursuit of more answers, more questions; going further to confront others, ourselves and the canvas. He guided that spirit of discovery and detective work to see what art is about.

Paul was a serious, involved, ambitious painter. A true artist, an inspired teacher, he challenged us, encouraging students to be independently productive. He was a marvelous teacher because as a painter himself he seemed to creatively wrench from his students the questions that he himself wanted answers to; yet steering us, opening new possibilities. He milked his students in order to investigate what he wanted to know more about; that is the true benefit of learning firsthand from one who is fully committed to practicing his own art. He assumed that strangeness and shock of the unknown were necessary aspects of growth. Nothing seemed too outrageous, no clumsy idea too awkward to play

with. It was exciting, fun, and hard work.

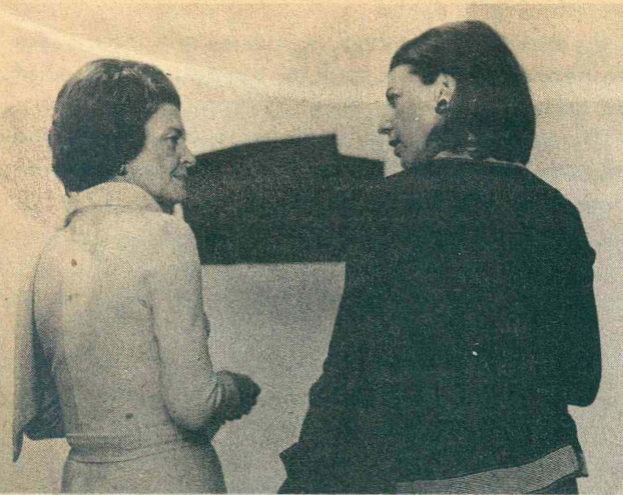
We learned from a painter charged with that healthy spirit of energy and drive. He defined the art department at Bennington from the forties, giving it a unique stamp on campus and throughout the country. Along with his great sense of elegance, style, humor, there was a raw, rough, risk-taking, dare-devil quality — all reflected in his teaching; he combined a young vet fresh from the Marines with the radiance and mystery of art.

During the fifties and sixties he was instrumental along with others in bringing contemporary art and artists to the College; so that one could get the magic and reality from the source. Bennington became a kind of link of the avant-garde, and people from all over were eager to participate.

There are inherent limitations within any campus situation but, relatively, an education should open up the experiences of life: susceptible to all kinds of attitudes, strains, potentials, anxieties, changes. That is part of its vitality and hopefully contributes new ideas and growth.

Paul's reactions to this event today would have been laughing embarrassment — to hide his great sense of pride in the place. Overwhelmed by the sight of the building, its great facilities, enormous spaces. And the anticipation of what they will hold; excitement similar to starting a fresh canvas.

"Knock it off" he'd say — to make you feel: let's use the space and get to work.



Helen Frankenthaler discusses the dedication art exhibit "Artists At Bennington" with Betty Ford.