

"Vital Curiosity" at Usdan Gallery Highlights Work of Alumni

JUNE 19, 2017

A new show at Usdan Gallery opens June 28. *Vital Curiosity* draws connections with other exhibitions in the region this summer, and marks the arrival of a new director and curator for the gallery.



Vital Curiosity at the Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery at Bennington College explores the use of color and abstraction by artists associated with the College from the 1940s to the 1990s.

The exhibition includes work by Helen Frankenthaler '49, Grace Wapner '55, Stephen Mueller MFA '71, Carrie Moyer '82, Odili Donald Odita MFA '90, Noam Rappaport '94, and Paul Feeley (faculty member, 1940–66). *Vital Curiosity* focuses on the ways each of these artists—who represent a diversity of generations, formal approaches, and experiences—seize upon color as a dynamic, and often ineffable, element in their abstraction.

One of Frankenthaler's major canvases, *Red Square* (1959) will be on view, drawn from the College's collection. The exhibition aims to demonstrate the ways in which Frankenthaler's well-known engagement

with color is part of a long history of Bennington artists exploring the possibilities of pigment.

The show is curated by painting faculty member Josh Blackwell '95 and Erin McKenny, Design and Planning Coordinator at the College.

The curators expect the show will resonate far beyond campus. The Clark Art Institute in nearby Williamstown, MA will be mounting two exhibitions of the work of Helen Frankenthaler this summer—one focusing on her paintings and another on her prints. Additionally, the Bennington Museum will be presenting a major exhibition on Grandma Moses' work in the context of Modernism, which will include a work by Helen Frankenthaler on loan from the College.

The show grew out of a course Blackwell and McKenny co-taught this spring. "There has been a growing interest in the College's collection over the years," says McKenny. "We used it as a lens through which to study painting. Students were very interested in works by their predecessors and the connections across generations of artists."

Blackwell '95 sees the exhibition as a way to bring Bennington's long history as a center for some of the most advanced art making in the U.S. to a wider audience. "Usdan does not always mount shows during the summer," he notes. "But a unique convergence of exhibitions this year presented us with a chance to join the wider conversation of arts programming in the region. We hope these sorts of 'conversations' will happen more often in the future."

Opportunities to mine the collection and to connect with other arts institutions and the public will only increase, says Blackwell, thanks to the arrival of artist and curator Anne Thompson as the inaugural director and curator of the Usdan Gallery, starting July 1. In that role, Thompson

will be responsible both for programming and mounting exhibitions, teaching and creating opportunities to integrate curatorial work across the curriculum, and developing partnerships with arts organizations locally, regionally, and globally.

Thompson, an artist whose work incorporates writing and curating, is the founder of the I-70 Sign Show, a public art billboard and event project that positions the Midwestern interstate as a site for cultural and political commentary. Her artist books are in numerous public collections, including the Yale Art Gallery, the New York Public Library, the Harvard Fine Arts Library, and the Library of Congress. Before receiving her MFA from Yale, Thompson studied literature at Vassar and was a foreign correspondent for the Associated Press.

There will be a public reception celebrating the exhibition, and introducing Thompson, on Friday, July 14 from 5:00–7:00 PM. The gallery will be open Wednesdays through Sundays, 12:00–4:00 PM through early September. Admissions is free. Additional events, including cross-programming with The Clark and the Bennington Museum, will be listed on the Bennington College calendar.

*Photo: Helen Frankenthaler, Red Square, 1959, oil on canvas.
Collection of Bennington College. © 2017 Helen Frankenthaler
Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

About the Usdan Gallery

The Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery is a 3,200 square foot exhibition space on the main level of the Helen Frankenthaler '49 Visual Arts Center. It was the site of the first retrospective exhibitions of Jackson

Pollock and Robert Motherwell, and continues to mount exhibitions driven by faculty and student interest, as well as the College's own important art collection. A list of recent exhibitions is available at [**http://usdan.bennington.edu**](http://usdan.bennington.edu). It is within driving distance of The Clark Art Institute, the Williams College Museum of Art, MASS MoCA, and the Bennington Museum of Art.