

Press release

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Helen Frankenthaler. Move and Make

World premiere: Museum Reinhard Ernst (mre) presents the largest private collection of paintings by the American abstract expressionist

Wiesbaden, 28 January 2025 - The year 2025 at the Museum Reinhard Ernst is dedicated to exploring the work of Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) through two exhibitions. The New York painter is one of the most influential representatives of Abstract Expressionism, widely credited with launching the movement known as „colour field painting,“ and her rich artistic oeuvre is as inspiring today as it was in her time.

The mre's first exhibition of the year, *Helen Frankenthaler: Move and Make*, provides a comprehensive insight into the life and work of this extraordinary artist. Frankenthaler explained her desire for renewal and her creative self-image in the early 1970s in the quote that gives the show its title in condensed form. 'I'd rather think and *move and make* than halt.'

The exhibition also draws attention to the significance of the Reinhard Ernst collection. Since the mid-1980s, the Wiesbaden entrepreneur and museum founder has built up a sensational collection of around 1000 items of abstract art since 1945. With 50 works from five decades, he owns the world's largest private Helen Frankenthaler collection.

'I saw my first works by Helen Frankenthaler at the end of the 1980s in a gallery on Avenue Matignon in Paris. At that time, Frankenthaler was

practically not exhibited in Germany or Europe, and American art hardly played a role in this country at all. When I spent a long time in New York on business in 2011, I discovered her huge paintings everywhere - I was later able to buy some of them at auctions. I felt more and more drawn to her art. At first, I couldn't tell what fascinated me more about her. Her colours? Her generous use of pictorial space? I would describe this time as the beginning of my passion for Helen Frankenthaler,' Reinhard Ernst recalls.

The exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler. Move and Make* shows exclusively works from the Reinhard Ernst Collection. They span the period from 1950-1989, with the exhibition focussing on works created in the 1970s. Self-testimonials, which precede the rooms as leitmotifs, provide an insight into her tireless joy of experimentation. *Helen Frankenthaler. Move and Make* celebrates a reunion with large-format canvas works that have not been seen in Germany for over two decades.

Frankenthaler's wealth of invention, her dedication to the medium of painting and, above all, her determination to leave the conventional paths of art and break new ground are revealed in captivating worlds of colour.

In the New York art scene of the 1950s, the then 23-year-old made a name for herself with her invention of the soak-stain technique, in which she allowed diluted paint to seep into untreated canvases. She was one of the first artists of the time to roll out the canvas on the floor and spread the paint over the surface with sponges and brushes - a revolutionary move. She created compositions that explored the relationship between colour, form and space in a new way. Frankenthaler's contemporaries Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland recognised the genius of this idea and promptly adapted it in their works, for which they were praised by the art critics of the time. With unshakeable self-confidence, courage and innovative strength, Frankenthaler succeeded in building an unparalleled career in the predominantly male-dominated art scene of the time.

'Frankenthaler's way of creating, her *making*, is a significant contribution to a decidedly modern understanding of artists, in which authorship and control were unchallenged in the foreground until the first decades of the 20th century,' says Dr Oliver Kornhoff, Director of the Reinhard Ernst Museum. 'She took a different path to her male contemporaries, who let fly with action-packed brushstrokes and drops of colour. With her very own soak-stain technique, she opens up new spaces for painting. She literally declares colour to be her creative accomplice, allowing it to flow directly from the bucket, gush after gush. This results in paintings that are both deeply emotional and gestural,' explains Kornhoff.

At the Museum Reinhard Ernst, visitors have the rare opportunity to see Frankenthaler's paintings in close proximity to the works by her teachers, friends, companions and mentors: *Provincetown Harbor*, an early watercolour created in Hans Hofmann's painting school in 1950, hangs right next to a painting by her teacher. Robert Motherwell, to whom Helen

Frankenthaler was married for thirteen years, is represented in the collection presentation with, among other works, *The Wedding*, the enigmatic painting created in 1958, the year of their marriage. Adolph Gottlieb, whose recommendation Frankenthaler owed her participation in her first group exhibition in 1950, is just as present in the exhibition *Colour is everything!* as Friedel Dzubas, with whom she cultivated a deep friendship, or Lee Krasner, with whom she briefly shared a studio. In the permanent exhibition *Colour is everything!* Frankenthaler's pioneering role is shown in the context of her contemporaries.

'Helen Frankenthaler created a completely new application of colour and an incomparable pictorial effect. In doing so, she gave American post-war art a decisive turn. Today, she is celebrated as a pioneering mediator between action painting and colour field painting. She not only inspired her contemporaries. The dynamic flow of the sprawling and pulsating colour fields also allows today's viewers to breathe a sigh of relief and wonder,' says Lea Schäfer, the curator of the exhibition.

Frankenthaler's extraordinary use of colour and materials continues to inspire generations of artists to this day. The second part of the Helen Frankenthaler exhibition year from 19 October 2025–22 February 2026 will therefore explicitly focus on the current relevance of her work. With Jenny Brosinski, Ina Gerken and Adrian Schiess, three contemporary positions have been invited to enter into a dialogue with Frankenthaler's works.

The exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler. Move and Make* will be on display at the Museum Reinhard Ernst in Wiesbaden from 16 March to 28 September 2025.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue in German and English published by Hirmer Verlag. With contributions by Douglas Dreishpoon, Reinhard Ernst, Larissa Kikol, Oliver Kornhoff and Lea Schäfer. 160 pages, 75 illustrations in colour, hardcover, ISBN: 978-3-7774-4538-0 Available in the museum shop from March 2025.

About the Reinhard und Sonja Ernst Foundation

The Reinhard & Sonja Ernst Foundation was established in Wiesbaden in 2004 and in order to promote the key values of the founding couple. These values are reflected in art and culture as well as in places where people live and learn together. The founders aim to utilise their donations, their commitment and their networks as effectively as possible for the benefit of the community. The Foundation realises these ideas exclusively through its own projects. Examples include the 'House of Hope' in Natori, Japan, which became a meeting place for many children and elderly people after the tsunami disaster in 2011, and the music school building in Eppstein. Among the listed buildings, the restoration of the Walderdorffer Hof in Limburg an der Lahn is an equal testament of what is important to the donors.