

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Uncovering Discovery: Frankenthaler's Printmaking

By Ruth Fine



Helen Frankenthaler, *First Stone* (1961), lithograph, 22 x 30 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago, ULAE Collection acquired through a challenge grant of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Dittmer, restricted gift of supporters of the Department of Prints and Drawings; Centennial Endowment; Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 1982.459. © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, NY. Courtesy Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. Photo: Tim Pyle.

"Helen Frankenthaler Prints: The Romance of a New Medium"

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Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) is best known for a compelling body of abstractions on canvas, including *Mountains and Sea* (1952), in which she used a soak-stain technique that is frequently credited with inspiring color-field painting, about which more below. Less

familiar to most aficionados of second-generation Abstract Expressionism, where Frankenthaler's art is generally categorized, is her impressive body of approximately 250 prints. They include works in lithography, screenprint and pochoir, intaglio (etching, aquatint, drypoint, mezzotint), woodcut and monoprint, listed here in the order Frankenthaler first explored each technique.¹ And explore she did, completing hundreds of unique proofs as part of her working process.

Now on view at the Art Institute of Chicago, "Helen Frankenthaler Prints: The Romance of a New Medium" consists of approximately 70 editioned prints and carefully chosen trial and working proofs that include hand-work by the artist and annotations for the printers. The exhibition, organized by Emily Vokt Ziemba, the museum's director of curatorial administration for prints and drawings, is drawn from the AIC's collection (works in their Universal Limited Art Editions



Above: Helen Frankenthaler, *First Stone (Working Proof 2)* (1961), lithograph with hand additions, 22 x 30 inches. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York, © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, NY. Courtesy Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. Photo: Tim Pyle. **Below:** Helen Frankenthaler, *Essence Mulberry* (1977), woodcut, 39 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago, restricted gift of Solomon B. Smith, 1978.30. © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Tyler Graphics Ltd., Bedford Village, NY. Courtesy Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. Photo: Tim Pyle.

(ULAE) archive along with several individual gifts, supplemented by nine loans from the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. (Full disclosure: this writer serves as a consultant for the foundation.)

The exhibition opens with the aptly titled *First Stone* (1961) and a working proof that reveals the artist's experimental bent from her very first exploration of lithography with ULAE's first master printer, Robert Blackburn.² The show highlights Frankenthaler's early prints, including *Door* (1976–1979), which marked the end of her period of serious engagement with ULAE (she returned late in life to make two lithographs published in 2006 after Tyler Graphics, her second great workshop collaborator, closed). The three-year span of *Door's* date reflects the time Frankenthaler often spent developing individual prints. Her task on occasion solely involved thinking, rather than printing, as she determined whether or not a composition "worked."

In 1976, Frankenthaler shifted her print activity from Long Island to Westchester County. *Harvest*, her first publication with Tyler Graphics, was issued that year. This groundbreaking workshop is represented in the AIC show by

the greatly admired woodcut, *Essence Mulberry* (1977), inspired by the juice from mulberries that flourished on the Mount Kisko property, and by *The Red Sea* (1978–1982), a lithograph printed on brilliant pink handmade paper.

A deep concern with special papers was embedded in Frankenthaler's introduction to printmaking by ULAE's founder, Tatyana Grosman, and is further reflected in the artist's work at Tyler Graphics. Indeed Ken Tyler's own love of special papers caused him to establish papermaking as part of his workshop offerings. Frankenthaler embraced this focus, creating distinctive publications in the early 1990s that make use of pigmented paper pulp, such as *Freefall* (1993).

The AIC show includes one pochoir, printed at Maurel Studios and published by Abrams Original Editions in 1970. Titled *Wind Directions* (from *Four Pochoirs*), it is installed adjacent to two related ULAE publications. One is the aquatint, *Weather Vane* (1969–1970); the other is *Free Wheeling* (1971), which combines etching and pochoir on sheets that were a byproduct of *Wind Directions*. Close by is a 1971 painting, *Hommage à H.M.*, from the AIC collection. The grouping affirms the coherence of Fran-

kenthaler's oeuvre, which in no instance depended upon either prints or paintings as immediate examples for works using the other medium.³

The AIC prints and drawings galleries are fluid, allowing viewers to chart their own course through the exhibition. But starting with those impressions of *First Stone* there is an evolving logic to the installation, if one seeks it out, that reveals how the challenge of making these unfamiliar processes her own appealed to Frankenthaler.

"The Romance of a New Medium" (the exhibition title is a quotation from the artist) quietly offers an introduction to printmaking through brief labels describing each technique in readily understandable terms, unobtrusively placed at appropriate locations. Related images and variant proofs are installed throughout the show, and two galleries are specifically devoted to the visual explanation of Frankenthaler's evolving mastery of printmaking. One highlights the lithograph *I Need Yellow* (1973) and a related offset lithograph, *Card*, published two years earlier by Telamon Editions as a commission from the Whitney





Helen Frankenthaler, *White Portal* (1967), lithograph, 30 x 22 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago, ULAE Collection acquired through a challenge grant of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Dittmer, restricted gift of supporters of the of the Department of Prints and Drawings; Centennial Endowment; Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 1982.467. © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, NY. Courtesy Craig Starr Gallery.

Museum of American Art, and includes a group of variant impressions (distinct from proofs that show the development of the image).⁴ A special feature here is a layered acetate collage proof with annotations by the artist. (Indeed, such proofs play an important role in explaining the artist's thinking throughout the show.) The other gallery is hung with proofs that *do* emphasize the evolution of an image, the sugar-lift aquatint, *Connected by Joy* (1969–1973). Six impressions, including working proofs and experiments with ink hues and paper types and colors, lead to the final editioned version.

Other aspects of Frankenthaler's printmaking practice were her penchant for reusing a matrix in more than one image, and for making variant versions of an idea. Examples in the exhibition include *White Portal* (1967) and *Silent Curtain* (1967–1969), the latter a group of consistent color proofs from the former—another by-product edition. Other such examples on view in lithography are *Variation I on "Mauve Corner"* and *Variation II on "Mauve Corner"* (both 1969); and in woodcut, three versions of *Trial Premonition: I* (1974–75), *II* and *III* (1974–76).



Helen Frankenthaler, *Silent Curtain* (1967–69), lithograph, 30 x 22 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago, ULAE Collection acquired through a challenge grant of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Dittmer, restricted gift of supporters of the of the Department of Prints and Drawings; Centennial Endowment; Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 1982.470. © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, NY. Courtesy Craig Starr Gallery.

This exhibition celebrates the multiple ways in which Frankenthaler molded printmaking to her artistic needs. From the very start of the show one can see how the lean layers of lithographic ink come as close as possible to her color-field surfaces on canvas. Later, her embrace of woodcut helped revolutionize our contemporary understanding of what is possible with this oldest of major print technologies, through her transformation and conflation of Western (think Edvard Munch) and Eastern (think Hiroshige) traditions.

For many viewers the show will be a revelation, but it should be acknowledged that Frankenthaler's prints have never been ignored. In addition to several museum and commercial gallery shows early on (some with accompanying publications), as early as 1980 the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute mounted a retrospective exhibition that traveled to four additional sites, and was accompanied by the first catalogue raisonné of Frankenthaler's prints, compiled in association with the Williams College Artist-in-Residence Program.⁵ A retrospective organized by the present writer opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in April 1993, traveling to three fur-



Helen Frankenthaler, *Wind Directions* (1970), pochoir, 30 1/2 x 22 inches. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York. © 2018 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Abrams Original Editions, New York. Courtesy Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. Photo: Tim Pyle.

ther venues.⁶ In 1996 an updated and far more comprehensive catalogue raisonné was compiled by Pegram Harrison, with an introduction by Suzanne Boorsch.⁷ Moreover, Frankenthaler's prints have been included in numerous group exhibitions, especially those that featured works published by ULAE and Tyler Graphics Ltd., the two workshops where most of her editions were completed.

Two solo exhibitions in 2016 and 2017 put a renewed focus on Frankenthaler as printmaker: "Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler," orga-

nized by Michaela R. Haffner for the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, featured a selection of approximately 25 prints from the collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation⁸; and "No Rules: Helen Frankenthaler Woodcuts," organized by Jay A. Clarke, for the Clark Art Institute, followed up on the 1980 show with 17 works stretching from her first woodcut, *East and Beyond* (1973), to her last, *Weeping Crabapple* (2009).⁹

What is needed now is a full retrospective overview (it would be the first since

Frankenthaler died) that reflects the achievements of her complete printmaking oeuvre, from the early period featured in this splendid show at the Art Institute of Chicago through that last woodcut. ■

Ruth Fine was Curator for the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, from 1972–2012. She is currently Chair of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation Board, on the board of the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, and doing independent curatorial projects.

Notes:

1. See Frankenthaler: A Catalogue Raisonné, Prints 1961–1994, compiled by Pegram Harrison with an introduction by Suzanne Boorsch (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996). An excellent chronology of Frankenthaler's printmaking activity to that point is found on pp. 491–496.
2. Per 23 Apr. 2018 email from Emily Vokt Ziemba to the writer, this selection was made from some 221 sheets by Frankenthaler in the AIC collection, only three of which are not ULAE publications.
3. Exceptions are several screenprints, mainly printed by Brand X and published for fundraising purposes in both an edition of signed prints and a larger one of unsigned posters, primarily on behalf of Lincoln Center by the List Art Posters and Prints, later renamed the Vera List Art Project. They reproduce canvases and works on paper, the use of which images was donated by Frankenthaler for this purpose. My thanks to Maureen St. Onge for clarification of this information.
4. Telamon Editions (1970–1982) was established by ULAE founder Tatyana Grosman as a lower-cost complement to ULAE's limited edition fine prints.
5. Helen Frankenthaler, Prints: 1961–1979 (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) accompanied the exhibition. It included a section, "Perceptions of Helen Frankenthaler" that features excerpts from interviews, primarily those conducted from April through September 1979 by Susan Earle, Ned Hawkins and Vivian Patterson, as well as by Thomas Krens, who also wrote the introductory essay, "Prints and Helen Frankenthaler." Catalogue entries for the prints are based on what was provided by the print publishers, and vary greatly.
6. Ruth E. Fine, Helen Frankenthaler: Prints (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1993), accompanied an exhibition originally intended to celebrate the publication of the Harrison/Boorsch catalogue raisonné, which ultimately was delayed by two years.
7. See endnote 1.
8. This exhibition is traveling and is scheduled to be on view at Colorado College in 2019.
9. The works for this exhibition were borrowed from the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation in Manhattan, which has supported educational initiatives such as exhibitions, publications and public programs.