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AT DULWICH

Helen Frankenthaler

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HELEN FRANKENTHALER is best known for her vivid, large-scale ‘soak-stain’ paintings, which initiated the colour field works of the so-called second generation Abstract Expressionists. She claimed that her visit to Jackson Pollock’s exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950 changed her sense of what could be done with colour, space, line and movement – and convinced her of the value of allusiveness over narrative. ‘It was as if I suddenly went to a foreign country and didn’t know the language, but had read enough, and had a passionate interest, and was eager to live there,’ she said. ‘I wanted to live in this land; I had to live there, and master the language.’ Two years later, aged 23, Frankenthaler painted *Mountains and Sea* (1952), its watery veils of green, blue, pink, ochre and grey spread irregularly across the surface in unusual shapes. This was the first work in her new style and it was produced by a new technique. She poured oil paint diluted with turpentine directly onto unprimed canvas laid on the floor, so that the colours bled and soaked into the weave, the image becoming fused with its support.



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'Mountains and Sea' (1952)

One weekend in 1953, when Frankenthaler was out of town, her then boyfriend, Clement Greenberg, brought the painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland to her studio to see *Mountains and Sea*. Louis described it as 'a bridge between Pollock and what was possible', and said later that he and Noland immediately began 'staining' in their own work. (Greenberg went on to champion them as leading colour field painters, without ever mentioning Frankenthaler; his policy, he said, with former lovers.) Frankenthaler continued to paint in this mode for more than six decades, and to diverse ends: spare works with vast stretches of untouched canvas, bright primary colours writhing at their centre; pale pastel arcs and lines ('ropes and lassoes', she called them) gently suffusing the canvas, sometimes suggesting a landscape or a figure; full floods of rich colour – waves, clouds, skies, seas – covering the canvas edge to edge. Fans of Frankenthaler's paintings who missed the exhibition of her work at the Gagosian Gallery this summer should seek out the five paintings on display at Tate Modern until the end of the year. But perhaps most significant is *Radical Beauty*, the exhibition of her woodcuts at Dulwich Picture Gallery (until 18 April). This is the first time Frankenthaler's paper works have been shown in Britain, and they are testament to her continued technical innovation and formal invention.

'A really good picture looks as if it's happened at once,' Frankenthaler once said. 'It's an immediate image. For my own work, when a picture looks laboured and overworked ... there is something in it that has not got to do with beautiful art to me.' Her work is distinguished by its spontaneity, by big, bold, courageous gestures. Woodcut, by contrast, is the most rigid of media and requires a team of collaborators. It can't be completed in the privacy of the studio.

The idea to experiment with another medium came from her friends Larry Rivers and Grace Hartigan. In the early 1960s they suggested she visit Universal Limited Art Editions, a workshop in New York run by the print publisher Tatyana Grosman. Grosman was known for her work on artists' books and print editions, and in particular for helping them translate their images from one form to another. Grosman thought that woodcut held unique possibilities for Frankenthaler's use of colour and abstraction and encouraged her to experiment with a jigsaw, cutting single blocks into shapes that she could then arrange into a final composition. Her first print was *East and Beyond* (1973), made from eight lauan mahogany plywood blocks. It's dominated by a large swathe of orange flanked by strips of red that descend into a purple U-shape, with flickers of green, yellow and blue. The texture created by the coarse vertical grain of the wood was enhanced by Frankenthaler's method of gouging the blocks to produce stark white lines and curves in the otherwise solid colours. After her death in 2011, the art critic Grace Glueck wrote that *East and Beyond* 'became to contemporary printmaking in the 1970s what Ms Frankenthaler's paint staining in *Mountains and Sea* had been to the development of colour field painting twenty years earlier'.

In 1976 she began working with the master printmaker Kenneth Tyler, who had recently left Los Angeles to set up a workshop in New York. Tyler was known for combining traditional print techniques with new technologies, sometimes of his own devising. He designed new kinds of paper, developed hydraulic lithographic presses and became an expert at complicated mixed-media printing. It was with Tyler that Frankenthaler created the strange, painterly print *Essence Mulberry* (1977). Although she was still using the jigsaw to cut and assemble shapes, the print is filled with slender, sinuous forms. It was printed from four blocks, one each of oak, birch, walnut and lauan, on handmade paper, an expanse of which continues below the print like a scroll. The layers of colour – long vertical washes – are as important compositionally as the more precise shapes that hover within them. Subtle textures emerge from the different grains of each wood.

Frankenthaler described working with Tyler as a kind of magic, and the 'problems' of the jigsaw as a kind of 'romance'. 'That woodcut medium, that workshop, the tools, the people, all forced and suggested, helping with the whole dialectic between artist and woodcut.' *Essence Mulberry* required 65 different proofs to reach the final work. Six are on display at Dulwich, each a different peregrination of the image: *Working Proof One* is a faint print covered with scribbles and smears of pastel, crayon, mulberry juice; *Progressive Proof One* is composed of plain, flattened washes in yellows; *Trial Proof Twenty* has turned to jagged streaks of bright colour; *Trial Proof Two* has been flipped upside down. *Working Proof Five* is heavily annotated, showing the extent to which Frankenthaler interrogated her images. In the left corner are notes to the workshop technicians: 'a) like striations from wood here (ditto on other side); b) at top like vividness where mulberry meets ochre; c) ochre edge must remain. Don't allow mulberry to hit paper edge.' And to the right: 'Ps. I like the nuance difference in printing here between two sides left + right compared w. 2

others which seem more symmetrical + “bannered” in “even” printing. So try – but NO schmaltz pliz! Also like woodmarks. Thanks.’

Later prints such as *Cameo* (1980) and *Freefall* (1993) push the experiments further. In *Cameo*, the rose-coloured paper peeks through in blots and scratches where Frankenthaler has subjected the wood to her technique of ‘guzzying’, distressing the blocks with unusual implements – a power sanding wheel, a cheese grater, dental tools. The mauve is delicate, as if in half-light. For *Freefall*, a monumental twelve-block woodcut (measuring almost two metres by one and a half), Frankenthaler saturated the paper in deep blues by applying dyed pulp with brushes, combs and a turkey baster. The colours were mapped to correspond to the registration of the blocks, which were applied with a wet hydraulic press. This intensity of colour creates a sort of mirage: the colour seems to stream, hover, pour down the centre of the work, its shifting depths and layers never quite settling.

Like her paintings, Frankenthaler’s woodcuts have suggestive titles. ‘You want clues?’ she once asked a journalist. ‘There are no clues.’ *Madame Butterfly*, an enormous triptych almost seven feet wide, was inspired by a Japanese screen: at its centre is a thick white stroke above a line of rose and an oblong of pale, murky greens and blues that descend into a roil of rainbow-coloured hues. From this central form, licks and curls of colour branch off to the right and left panels. A bolt of navy stretches down the right edge of the image, as if reminding us that this is, in fact, a work with spatial boundaries. At the bottom, a tiny boat and a small squiggle, almost like a prancing animal, float above a purple miasma. Behind all these colours is the knotted and textured grain of the wood, as if the paper itself is thick and solid.



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‘Madame Butterfly’ (2000)

Frankenthaler's work is often described as light and lyrical, but it has a solemnity. Details yield like little shocks. Recognisable forms emerge and disappear again. You might see a butterfly, or colours, or movement. You might feel that the largesse of purple opens a world behind this world. You might feel nothing at all. As Frankenthaler's studio partner, Friedel Dzubas, said on first seeing *Mountains and Sea*, 'the point is, what do you make out of what you see? How can you accept what you see?'

Frankenthaler has sometimes been dismissed as a painter of good fortune, her success and productivity the result of being born when she was, and where, and to whom. The answer to this is to think how many other Frankenthalers there might have been. The women of both 'generations' of Abstract Expressionism were subject to what the painter Jane Freilicher called 'anthropological art criticism', which focused as much on their lives as their art. Writing of Lee Krasner, Edward Albee said that these painters were constrained by 'extra-art garbage ... these piles of garbage were named "female artist" and "wife of artist"' – appellations designed to prevent any effort 'to move into the pure centre and experience the painting for its own sake'. In the early years, critics derided Frankenthaler's paintings as 'sweet and unambitious', 'merely beautiful', 'crazy looking', and as resembling the work of her first husband, Robert Motherwell. In later years, her paintings were described as incomprehensible and her smaller works for the marketplace as an 'indication of moral bankruptcy' for which she 'must be held accountable' (surely not just Frankenthaler, then).

'Beautiful,' Frankenthaler said, 'is always a tricky word.'

You can't prove beauty, it's there as a fact and you know it and you feel it and it's real, but you can't say to somebody *this* has it. I might be able to say it and others might recognise it. But it gives no specific message other than itself, which in turn should be able to move you into some sort of truth and insight and something beyond art. Initially, it's pleasure that grows, but it isn't just the shock of a message, which you can have and dismiss.

It's not easy to say just how she managed to produce prints so painterly and fluid in a process so uncompromising, nor what gives them their beguiling, ungovernable aspect. But for beauty, see [this](#).
