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Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty review – the most sublime show of the year?

★★★★★



📷 'An afterlife beyond the passions of this one': Madame Butterfly, 2000 by Helen Frankenthaler. Photograph: © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc/ ARS, NY and DACS, London/ Tyler Graphic Ltd, Mount Kisco, NY

Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

Slow, determined and infinitely hard-won, the woodcut prints of the late American artist transcend their rigid medium with visions of radiant liberation

The show of the season, if not the year, is a sequence of 36 visions of such overwhelming beauty [at the Dulwich Picture Gallery](#) that the urge is to remain there all day. It is like being surrounded by some ever-changing song. Ostensibly abstract, each work nonetheless touches on nature's infinite sublime – snow pines and green glades, early spring and deep autumn, the curlicued complexities of late crab apples suspended in volumes of pale morning light.

Their soaring radiance is an abiding characteristic of the paintings of Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011), one of the great pioneers of American postwar abstraction. Yet a further astonishment, at Dulwich, is that these are not paintings at all; not canvases stain-soaked with her trademark colour washes, but something else entirely - formidably large woodcuts.



Freefall, 1993 by Helen Frankenthaler. Photograph: © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc/ ARS, NY and DACS, London/ Tyler Graphic Ltd, Mount Kisco, NY

Freefall (1993) envelops you on entry: a glowing blue light, stratospheric, bowing slightly at the sides as if to imitate the way the eye sees the world. Darkness along the bottom suggests a kind of ground, or at least a measurement of depth, its undulations traced with brilliant yellow as if dawn was breaking elsewhere. But what is above and what below (and even what is where) are complicated by free-floating inky striations in the void.

Twelve different colours were used to make this print, and 21 wooden blocks. It is among Frankenthaler's largest feats, being more than six feet high. But there is not the slightest indication of how it came into being, unless you look deep into its voluminous surface and notice microscopic impressions of wood grain. It is the optical glory, and not the medium, that overwhelms.

Frankenthaler found fame with what is variously called colour field painting or post-painterly abstraction. The daughter of a New York supreme court judge, educated on the Upper East Side, she and her sometime husband, the painter Robert Motherwell, were enviously known as the Golden Couple. Her earliest inspirations included Jackson Pollock, but she left the grandiloquence of abstract expressionism behind in the late 1950s. Her own advance, followed by painters such as Morris Louis, was to brush or pour turpentine-thinned paint directly into raw canvas, so that the two become indivisibly one. Her compositions were open, partly improvised, and of such lyrical grace that they were all too frequently pegged as feminine by male critics.

The Dulwich show feels mercifully distant from otiose arguments about whether she was actually a feminist - "Looking at my paintings as if they were painted by a woman," Frankenthaler retorted, "is superficial, a side issue." It starts with the apparently counterintuitive disavowal of improvisation. What you see is slow, pure, determined and infinitely hard-won.

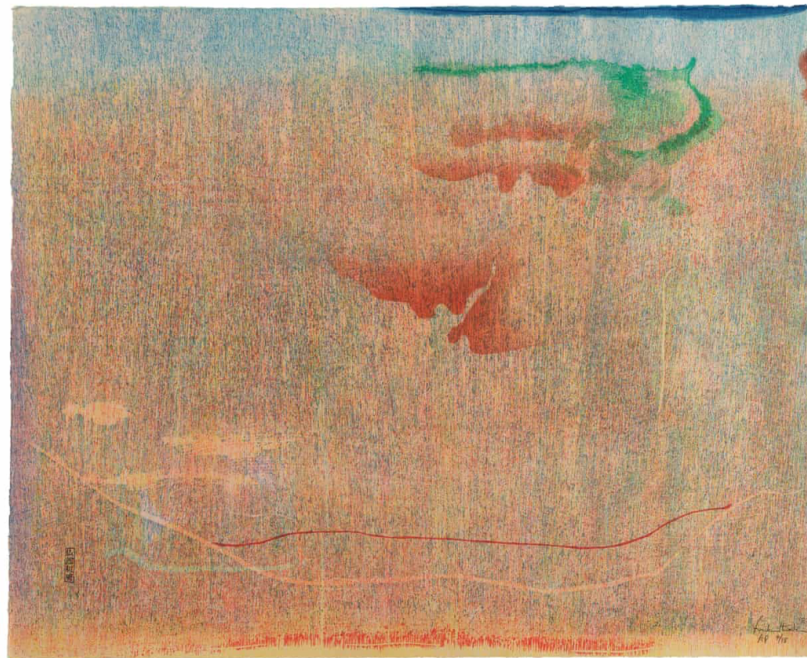
/// The image calls on your sense of touch, as if you might read it like braille as much as take it in with your eyes

The shadowy mauve form in *Geisha* (2003) seems to glide elegantly down the paper surface, like a nude sliding into a couch, or silk slithering from a body. Four perfectly judged crimson discs pin the composition together with erotic overtones, hints of makeup and chrysanthemums. The exposed grain of the wood ripples throughout like shifting air. It took Frankenthaler a year and 15 separate woodblocks.

At first she used a jigsaw to carve directly into the wood. But soon she invented a new technique she called "guzzying", chafing the block with sandpaper, dental tools and even cheese graters to introduce tiny incidents or unexpected softness. *Cameo*, from 1980, is as diaphanous as any Whistler or Monet. Pinpricks of light pierce through its lavender mists, along with the frisson of something like a bird's wing or ephemeral butterfly. These incidents emerge within the making - ghosts inherent in the process - rather than as incised, linear elements. This

mysterious potential was surely one of Frankenthaler's deepest ambitions for revolutionising the woodcut.

The only rule is no rule: that was her catchphrase. Look at *The Clearing* (1991), the surface erupting like sap, or developing the gnarled sinews of old oak bark, and the image calls on your sense of touch, as if you might read it like braille as much as take it in with your eyes. Frankenthaler worked the surface with wet pulp.



📍 Cedar Hill, 1983. Photograph: © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc/ ARS, NY and DACS, London/ Tyler Graphic Ltd, Mount Kisco, NY

Cedar Hill (1983) is minutely flecked all over, in multiple colours, as if you were looking through drizzling static at rust-coloured forms away in the distance: drifts of cloud-like hills. Frankenthaler studied Japanese ukiyo-e prints from first to last, and eventually began to work with a master printer in Kyoto. Distance is implied without perspective here, and the scene flows upwards with all the magic of the floating world.

And yet there is something quintessentially American about this show. *Grove* (1991), which is unusually graphic with its incised black lines, evokes planetary forms hanging above deep darkness, irresistibly recalling (for me, at any rate) Ansel Adams's great black and white photograph *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*. And though its title is *Japanese Maple*, the amazingly sumptuous deep red, purple and midnight blue landscape in one of Frankenthaler's last prints, from 2005, takes you straight to the magnificent skies of Connecticut in the autumn, where the artist had a studio. The wood grain is given its fullest declaration, mimicking mackerel skies at twilight.

More and more, the prints seem to speak of the wood with which they were made. Knots are incorporated: becoming suns or whirlpools. Grain spreads out like watered silk. Strange shoals of marks float like fish beneath these subaqueous ripples, or tangle like twigs. Several different working proofs of *Essence Mulberry* (1977) are presented together, revealing the stages of Frankenthaler's thinking in action as no finished painting ever could. The final print has both the hues of mulberry juice and the smoky reds of the tree itself.

"A really good picture," Frankenthaler once said, "looks as if it's happened at



📷 Helen Frankenthaler at work in 1969. Photograph: Ernst Haas/Getty Images

once.” There ought to be a tremendous contrast between this aesthetic and the inordinate time it took to make these woodcuts. Frankenthaler worked on only four in the 70s and not many more in the 80s. And though the Dulwich Picture Gallery gives exactly the right amount of technical data in this beautifully designed show, arranged around a short but piercing archive film in the rotunda of Frankenthaler talking about her work, it is almost impossible to grasp the complexities of the process.

Which inevitably raises the question of their method: if Frankenthaler could unleash visions of such radiant liberation in paint, why then did she turn to print? This has its fullest answer in the final gallery. Here are three versions of *Madame Butterfly* (2000): a painting, a trial print and the last grand woodcut homage to Puccini’s immortal opera. Or is it also to the devastating effect of a butterfly’s wing, inchoate in all except the final print. Everything has its summation in this colossal triptych - the colour purple speaking of love, the bright sun dissolving into light, the cross turning to gold as the soft, smoky air drifts away into another world, an afterlife beyond the passions of this one. Once seen, never

forgotten.

[Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty](#) is at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, until 18 April 2022
