



Helen Frankenthaler, *The Bay*, 1963. Acrylic on canvas, 205 x 208 cm (80 3/4 x 81 3/4 inches).
Detroit Institute of Arts, USA / Bridgeman Images. © Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / SODRAC (2015).

COLOUR ISSUES

Artist Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) once described her approach to the use of colour as “born out of idea, mood, luck, imagination, risk, into what might even be ugly.”¹ Arising from her curiosity about how colours operate in relation to one another, her desire to convey an allusive sense in her work of what she often referred to as atmosphere and, at times, as a purely pragmatic exploration of how to use what was at hand in the studio, Frankenthaler’s paintings reveal an agile, intuitive, and investigatory engagement with colour.

Over the course of her 60 year career, Frankenthaler’s colour palette and her methods of applying paint changed and evolved significantly, yet her thinking about and approach to colour remained largely consistent. For Frankenthaler, it was one of a set of possibilities put into play during the process of making a painting. Rejecting the notion of starting a work with decisions already made about the outcome, she once stated “I did not have a vision or a notion about color per se being the thing that would make me or my pictures work or operate.”² Instead, working in a way analogous to “call and response,” she developed each painting as a distinct problem in which one action or gesture would stimulate another, never depending wholly on colour but rather exploring its properties—along with line and drawing—as an agent of illusionism to create space and depth.

Frankenthaler’s complete corpus of work varies dramatically in terms of the range and juxtapositions of colours utilized, the relative surface area occupied by chromatic zones, and the density or thickness with which colour is a material property of her art. In 1965 she commented, “I will sometimes start a picture feeling, ‘What will happen if I work with three blues and another color, and maybe more or less of the other color than the combined blues?’ And very often midway through the picture I have to change the basis of the experience. Or I add and add to the canvas... I don’t start with a color order but find the color as I go.”³

Colour, for Frankenthaler, functioned as a framework of open-ended investigations and expressive possibilities rather than a rigid or rational system. Refraining from articulating a theoretical position about colour—or for that

¹ Frankenthaler, quoted in John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 185.

² Barbara Rose, “Oral History Interview with Helen Frankenthaler,” in *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution, 1968.

³ Frankenthaler, quoted in Henry Geldzahler, “Interview with Helen Frankenthaler,” *Artforum* 4, no. 2 (October 1965): 38, reprinted in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 30.

matter, any aspect of her practice—Frankenthaler's approach was seemingly intuitive and empirical. Her wholehearted embrace of colour, and even her use of the colour pink, with its feminine, infantile, and kitsch associations, reveal a fearlessness and a refusal, especially in the later decades of her work, to restrict or subordinate her predilections.⁴ Instead, she revelled in their capacity to lead her towards the creation of distinctive aesthetic statements. Yet it is important to understand that her use of colour was not arbitrary or undisciplined but rather depended on a keen, finely-honed attentiveness and sense of experimentation informed by her studies of and years of looking closely at earlier artists' work. She had asked,

*What made them work? What was 'light' in painting? What did that cadmium red [dot on the horizon in a Corot] painting do to the rest of the picture? Would it work without it? Were there other reds in it? If it were in another spot, would it work as well? Better? Similar questions were asked about the placement of a pipe in a 1910 Georges Braque or the yellow square in a Piet Mondrian.*⁵

Even during the first decade of her work, Frankenthaler's use of colour was exploratory and wide-ranging—from the ethereal, delicate tonalities of the celebrated 1952 painting *Mountains and Sea* to darker, more sombre hues in numerous works of the later 1950s, to vibrant primary and secondary tones in *Cool Summer* and vivacious pinks, browns, and various shades of blue in dense adjacency in *Pink Lady*, both from 1962. Seeing evidence of a contrarian sensibility in Frankenthaler's embrace of colour, art historian Barbara Rose pointed out that "she began to be interested in colour at precisely the moment when the leading New York painters—Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell—were painting in black and white."⁶ This notable early commitment on the part of the then-young artist underscores the distinctiveness of her work and the independence of her thinking.

As her work progressed in the 1960s, toward what one writer would call the "total color image"⁷ characteristic of her more mature painting, Frankenthaler's

4 Notable ranges and shifts in critical responses to Frankenthaler's work have occurred over time. Commenting in the early 1970s about Frankenthaler's work of the 1950s and 1960s, Barbara Rose said, "Frankenthaler's art was misunderstood by fellow artists and sometimes reviled by critics for the very qualities for which it is esteemed today." Rose, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1972), 12. The same can be said of critical response to her work in the latter decades of her career and its reappraisal today.

5 Frankenthaler, quoted in Bonnie Clearwater, *Frankenthaler: Paintings on Paper (1949–2002)* (North Miami, FL: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 12.

6 Rose, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972), 60.

handling of colour became bolder and more simplified. This resulted, in part, from her shift from oil to acrylic paint in the early 1960s but was stimulated also by her desire to make more emphatic pictorial statements with larger areas of colour that increasingly absorbed almost the entire space of the canvas. For Frankenthaler, the union of colour and drawing became increasingly important to generate spatial depth through pictorial means including the handling of colour. "For me, color always comes out of drawing... I start out as a spacemaker on a flat thing with four corners. But color is the first message on the picture plane. From there it takes its place as scale and drawing," she once said.⁸

Although she rarely articulated the reasons behind her choices of colour in terms of correspondence to human emotions or environment, Frankenthaler spoke of the presence of an "atmosphere of landscape" in many of her paintings.⁹ Colour evoking place is evident throughout her work. Paintings such as *Ed Winston's Tropical Gardens* (1951), *The Bay* (1963), or *Into the West* (1977), all reveal particular correspondence to specific locales or landscapes—yet never too directly or insistently, as Frankenthaler always preferred ambiguity to be central in her work. In some cases, she utilized colours and chromatic pitch in a referential way with keen intentionality. In others, suggestion of experience and memory of a particular place was serendipitous: at times, she chose to title her finished paintings based on these unanticipated resonances.

Certain of Frankenthaler's works reveal her attentiveness to the complex handling of colour utilized by the old masters and by earlier modernists whose work she admired. In *Hint from Bassano* (1973), for instance, she translated aspects of the colour and form in paintings by the Venetian Renaissance master Jacopo Bassano into a point of departure for her own. Recalling the earlier artist's renditions of skies, this work offers a vaporous ethereality, underscored by its heroic scale. In terms of its colour, Frankenthaler's 1967 painting *Flood* offers less overt but equally intriguing references to Renaissance precedents. As noted by Rose in 1972,

The sumptuous color of Flood is based on a fresh palette Frankenthaler has recently developed: a high-key, brilliant range of hot oranges and ochers, pinks, and magentas is

7 B.H. Friedman titled an essay on Frankenthaler's work "Towards a Total Color Image," *Artnews* 65.4 (Summer 1966): 31–33, 67, 68.

8 Elderfield, 185.

9 Frankenthaler, quoted in Christopher Andrae, "Helen Frankenthaler Speaks: Dialogue with an Artist," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 6, 1969: 4.

contrasted with an equally intense range of greens and purples that are only nominally cool.... [this painting is] all that the art of the sixties has not been: free, spontaneous, romantic—full of light, air, and uninhibited joie de vivre. We are back again with Veronese's feasts and Tiepolo's skies.¹⁰

Informed by the palettes of these and other art historical figures whose works became sources for some of her own abstractions, Frankenthaler expanded and further refined the range of her approaches to chromatic function. In the later 1970s the darker hues in the work of Rembrandt, Titian, and Manet began to impact her own—a departure from the bright tonalities of her earlier work. Additionally, instead of the adjacencies of areas of colour characteristic of much of her 1960s work achieved largely through the pouring of paint, she explored interplay and dense layering of colours, building up pigment on the canvas. *For E.M.* (1981) conveys an expressive, dynamic sense of movement arising from the properties of its colours and how these illusionistically suggest the upturned tail of a writhing fish on a table, as in the small still life painting by Edouard Manet on which it is based.

Many of Frankenthaler's later works appear monochromatic but with marked variations and striations within the textured fields that lend depth, density, and richness—a complexity counterpoised to an increased reductiveness and unity. In such paintings, pictorial incident and variations within a predominant tonality become highly nuanced, as in the vibrantly green *Overture*, or *Barometer*, which is largely white yet full of tonal variations, both from 1992.

Today Frankenthaler can be viewed as one of the most important, distinctive colourists of the twentieth century, occupying a place in a spectrum of artists of the modern and contemporary periods who have reinvigorated colour and its expressive possibilities as key components of their art.¹¹ As poet Bill Berkson commented,

Her more difficult works reject associations as quickly as you can make them. One orange shape might be an eagle taking flight and dragging its prey (a snake?), or Loie

10 Rose, *Frankenthaler*, 100.

11 See David Batchelor's analysis of "chromophobia" as an attitude toward colour as connoting superficial, secondary characteristics in art that needed to be subordinated or contained—a line of thought he traces back to the time of Aristotle but analyzes closely as a late nineteenth century debate, especially in the writings of critic Charles Blanc, who viewed colour as inferior to drawing and at a lower level of artistic skill, conflating colour with what Blanc called the undisciplined, feminine side of the mind and drawing with the rational and masculine. Around the same time, a contrary position about the significance of colour as an artistic property, articulated by poet Charles Baudelaire, signals the longstanding nature of this debate. See Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 23–31.

*Fuller and her Chinese veils. But you are finally forced to see it as itself, a dancing, gravity-defying hue that looks miraculously applied and related to everything around it. It is a game of suspended allusion between painting and looker—a sport in the sense of Valéry's vision of a poetry that would be a sublime sport with language. It is an affirmative bet on the intrinsic meaning of art as itself.*¹²

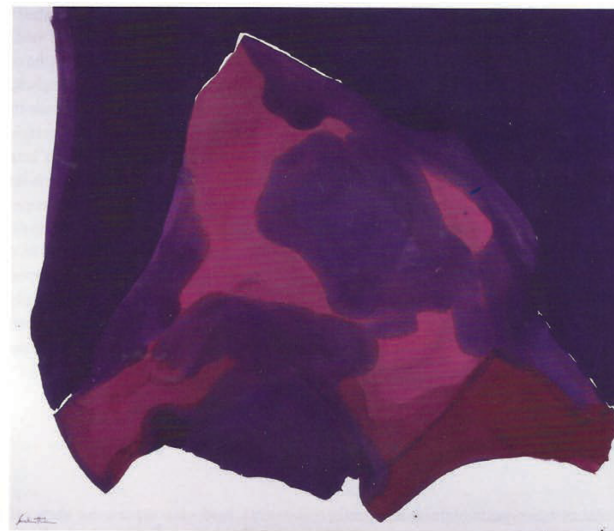
The power of colour, in Frankenthaler's hands, to spark such ambiguous, disruptive readings and responses on the part of the viewer points not just to the singularity of her vision but also the degree to which she was fearless and risk-taking in her embrace of its potential, and its possibilities.

—Elizabeth A. T. Smith

12 Bill Berkson, "Poet of the Surface," in *Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings 1961–1973* (San Francisco: John Berggruen Gallery, 2010), 8. Excerpted and edited from a text of the same title originally published in *Arts Magazine*, May–June 1965.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Into the West*, 1977. Acrylic on canvas, 244 x 335 cm (96 x 132 inches).
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Helen Frankenthaler, *Monoscape*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 263.5 x 315 cm (103 3/4 x 124 1/8 inches).
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