

The Museum of Modern Art

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HELEN FRANKENTHALER: A PAINTINGS RETROSPECTIVE

June 5 - August 20, 1989

The vast, lyrical canvases of American artist Helen Frankenthaler are the subject of a major exhibition premiering at The Museum of Modern Art from June 5 to August 20, 1989. Organized by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, HELEN FRANKENTHALER: A PAINTINGS RETROSPECTIVE is the first full-scale museum exhibition since 1969 of work by this influential contemporary artist. The New York showing is supported by a generous grant from The Bohen Foundation.

The exhibition consists of forty of Frankenthaler's most important canvases dating from the last four decades and chosen from American and European collections. A highly selective survey, it reveals the full range of the artist's painting, from her breakthrough soak-stain canvases of the 1950s to her more impastoed works of recent years.

Frankenthaler's seminal painting Mountains and Sea (1952) introduced the technique of pouring thinned-down paint directly on unprimed canvas so that the canvas absorbed the paint rather than was coated by it. This work established numerous characteristics--among them, washes of transparent and translucent color, a linear substructure, and a landscape-like sense of place--that have informed much of her art to the present. Mountains and Sea

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had a profound impact on Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis and may be said to have given rise to the Color Field painting of the 1960s.

Frankenthaler properly belongs with neither the Color Field painters she influenced nor the Abstract Expressionists from whom she learned. Avoiding the serialism of the former and the repeated imagery of the latter, her work displays an extraordinary range of techniques, motifs, and inspirations. In 1962 the artist began using acrylic paint, which would become her principal medium. Working on the floor on large canvases, she varies her methods of painting: pouring as well as brushing paint, saturating the surface in an all-over tint, layering veils of paint, or applying "clumps" of color in distinct shapes. Her palette ranges from the muted, watercolor-like hues of her earliest paintings to the vivid colors of the late 1960s and to the dark, somber tone of her recent work. In all her paintings, Frankenthaler is mainly concerned with what she calls drawing in color: that is, with using color to describe space.

Frankenthaler's paintings of the 1950s are explicitly drawn. They often comprise linear webs, evocative of idealized landscape. The paintings of the 1960s become more clearly abstract as area gains new prominence and drawing becomes more geometric. In the early 1970s, linear drawing is reintroduced; then the illusion of lush painterliness gradually emerges and with it broad, open fields of atmospheric color. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the paintings have been frequently darker and moodier, broken with flashes of color drawing, often in more heavily applied paint. Some are directly inspired by the works of old and modern masters the artist admires.

All of Frankenthaler's works suggest a kind of place. Some call on the experiences of her travels within this country and in Europe; others of her

living and working in New York City, Connecticut, and Cape Cod. Her titles evoke places of personal and artistic interest as well: natural, religious, mythological, and imaginary. For the artist, the physical painting in itself becomes a place, an environment into which we look.

Born in New York City in 1928, Helen Frankenthaler graduated from Bennington College in Vermont in 1949. In the early 1950s she was part of the so-called second generation of the New York School and was particularly influenced by the work of Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock, to whom she was introduced by the critic Clement Greenberg. She developed close friendships with the sculptors David Smith and, later, Anthony Caro, and from 1958 to 1971 was married to Robert Motherwell.

Since her first solo exhibition at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1951, Frankenthaler has exhibited extensively, including retrospectives at The Jewish Museum (1960) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (1969). In addition to painting, she has worked in a variety of mediums, including printmaking, illustrated books, tapestry, sculpture, and stage and costume design. She has taught painting at many institutions, including the School of Visual Arts and Yale University. The recipient of numerous honorary degrees and awards, Frankenthaler is a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the National Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts. She lives and paints in New York City and Stamford, Connecticut.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER: A PAINTINGS RETROSPECTIVE was organized by E.A. Carmean, Jr., director of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, and coordinated for The Museum of Modern Art by John Elderfield, director of the Department of Drawings and curator in the Department of Painting and

Sculpture. After its New York showing, the exhibition travels to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (November 5, 1989 - January 7, 1990), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (February 8 - April 22, 1990), and The Detroit Institute of Arts (June - September 1990).

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No. 50

For further information about the New York showing, contact the Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 212/708-9750.
For information about the organization or tour, contact the Press Office of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 817/738-9215.