

Helen Frankenthaler – The Incredible Lightness of Beauty

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ABSTRACT

Radical Beauty, a first ever show of Helen Frankenthaler’s woodcuts at Dulwich Picture Gallery in the United Kingdom, provides a great insight into this American painter’s approach to woodcut printmaking. Throughout her career Frankenthaler returned to woodcuts as an alternative to the freeform soak ‘n stain painting technique she initiated, that later evolved into Colour Field Abstraction. The remarkable ‘painterliness’ of these woodcut works, involving a jigsaw technique and the plywood medium, draws parallels with Norwegian modernist Edvard Munch’s. Frankenthaler’s radical innovations challenged traditions of the woodcut medium while enabling a new generation of printmakers to go still further. As the author demonstrates, Helen Frankenthaler was a painter who changed the face of printmaking forever.

THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS OF BEAUTY

“There are no rules. That is how art is born, how breakthroughs happen. Go against the rules or ignore the rules. That is what invention is about” states a wall quote at the entrance to Helen Frankenthaler’s Radical Beauty show of woodcuts at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London. This remarkable show captures the development of breakthrough printmaking techniques through the woodcuts of one incredibly influential artist.

The show is a celebration of Frankenthaler’s (1928–2011) remarkable innovations with printmaking, and of her place as a second-generation Abstract expressionist (AbEx) painter. Early on, Frankenthaler studied Cubist theory at high school with Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991) and painting with Paul Feeley (1910–1966) at Bennington College, Vermont. An interest in classic painting and Wassily Kandinsky, Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning likewise fed her ongoing interest in all things visual.¹ While Frankenthaler’s career coincided with the rise of abstraction in New

York, abstraction as an art movement remained a predominantly a male phenomenon, at least officially. Female painters like Elaine de Kooning, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler were, in my opinion, said to paint for personal reasons – the ultimate put down.

On first encountering Jackson Pollock’s paintings in 1951, Frankenthaler later commented to one of her main advocates and biographers Barbara Rose that,



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Helen Frankenthaler, Snow Pines, 2004. Thirty-four color woodcut © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London / Pace Editions, Inc., NY

Figure 2. Helen Frankenthaler, Cedar Hill, 1983. Ten color woodcut © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London / Crown Point Press, Oakland, CA

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. I wanted to live in this land; I had to live there, and master the language.

Helen Frankenthaler, as quoted in Kathan Brown, *Painters and Sculptors of Crown Point Press* (1996)

Helen Frankenthaler went on to marry Robert Motherwell, the youngest of the first generation of AbEx painters and this was, I believe, something of a mixed blessing. She could learn about the ways of the art world from Robert, but was also overshadowed by his fame as a painter. As she says,

I looked at and was influenced by both Pollock and de Kooning. (...) I found that in Pollock I also responded to a certain surreal element – the understated image that was really present: animals, thoughts, jungles, expressions. You could become a de Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror, but you could depart from Pollock.³

Helen Frankenthaler, as quoted in Kathan Brown, *Painters and Sculptors of Crown Point Press* (1996)

So many of these woodcuts have a painterly surface effect, as if they were actual paintings. As such, they are testament to the artist's resolution to break the bounds of what perceived print works could be. When the painter Adolph Gottlieb chose to include a much earlier painting by Frankenthaler titled *Beach* (1950) for the 1960 Kootz Gallery show *Fifteen Unknowns; Selected by Artists of the Kootz Gallery*, it was symbolic of a kind of acceptance of her work by the AbEx painters.

Remarkably, Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* (1952) a work inspired by the glacial landscape of Nova Scotia, that involved pouring thinned paint onto raw unprimed canvas, is credited by art historians and artists alike as the painting that led to the development of a new art style, something more lyrical and less physically bound than Pollock's drip technique. The process, referred to as Post-Painterly Abstraction by Clement Greenberg, a friend of Frankenthaler's, was like action painting. One could work the canvas from any of its sides. Frankenthaler's breakthrough approach involved applying thinner surface sensitive paints that soaked into the canvas. This moved AbEx in a direction that emphasized the linen or canvas surface as they became stained with colours. Both Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland experimented with the new stain method Frankenthaler had initiated, while still others like Jules Olitski went on to produce *Colour Field Painting*. A new generation of artists were drawn to Frankenthaler's way of building real flatness into abstraction, an allegorical ambiguity that brought shape, line and void into an intense surface dialogue in painting. This is what Griselda Pollock, in discussing Helen Frankenthaler's paintings' relation to Monique Prieto's more recent works referred to as 'spatial ambiguity as painting'.⁴

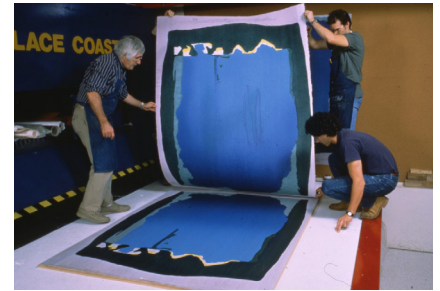


Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 3. Kenneth Tyler, Robert Myer and Tom Strianese pulling proof impression from Helen Frankenthaler's 'Freefall' assembled woodblocks on hydraulic platen press in workshop, Tyler Graphics Ltd., Mount Kisco, New York, 1992. Photo by Steven Sloman, 1992. Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002. Courtesy: National Gallery of Australia

Figure 4. Helen Frankenthaler marks up proofs for 'Valentine for Mr Wonderful' with proofs for the 'Tales of Genji' series in the Tyler Graphics studio, 1995. Photo by Marabeth Cohen-Tyler, 1995. Gift of Kenneth Tyler 2002. Courtesy: National Gallery of Australia.

Pollock goes on to say,

If the painter chooses to act with colour on canvas in a liquid state, she welcomes the consequences for whatever intentions she may set out with of its prolonged instability and cannot but attune and re-attune her responses to the activity of the material.⁵

Griselda Pollock in conversation with Alison Rowley, as quoted in Jonathan Harris, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting; Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism* (2003)

Later this fluid, performative, painterly style would expand into other hybridized evolutions and variations on abstract painting and the freely interpretive movement of Op Art.

In the exhibition, there is a sense of how ‘process art’, which had developed in painting of that time, was now being transferred to the print studio, in collaboration with the master printers who Frankenthaler worked with. The level of printmaking technique required to produce the works she envisioned obliged the artist to work in collaboration with the master printers of her era. The woodcut medium itself encouraged a textural surface language somewhat challenging for a “process artist”. She played with lithography, dropped the medium, and produced her first eight colour woodcut *East and Beyond* (1973) at Tatanya Grosman’s Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) using plywood blocks and handmade Nepalese paper. The plywood woodgrain is itself abstraction in microcosm equally has a surface presence. Frankenthaler exploits this with great capacity. The near landscape-like canyon-structure of *East and Beyond* challenges our notions of what abstraction can be.

Working with Kenneth Tyler, whose place in American printmaking is seminal, Frankenthaler witnessed a lot of woodcut breakthroughs both in terms of scale and technique, all this after seemingly endless trials and retrials, particularly in achieving the remarkably subtle tones and colours. They adopted a jigsaw technique using cut sections of wood, not unlike the way the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch had worked. For surface effect, the monoprint *Grove* (1991) truly captures the Munch spirit. The graphic character of the woodgrain jumps out and feeds great energy into this 10-colour work. *Essence Mulberry* was inspired in part by the mulberry tree that grew outside Kenneth Tyler’s print workshop. Using a cheese scraper and power sanding-wheel, the plywood surface was further stressed and marked, in a process which Frankenthaler herself called “guzzying” the wood surface. We can see the same effect in *Radius* (1993) a work that uses a maquette to build the print from, as was often the case. More subtle and evocative, less hard-edged, *Essence Mulberry* conceals the arduous development of the image using transparent inks, layerings, and a rainbow roller. The final print is the result of no less than 65 proofs.

The Dulwich show is a kind of odyssey, a journey through printworks that reveals the influence of Japanese block prints, but never strays



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5. Helen Frankenthaler, *Madame Butterfly*, 2000. One-hundred-two color woodcut © 2021, Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London / Tyler Graphic Ltd., Mount, Kisco, NY
 Figure 6. Helen Frankenthaler, *Essence Mulberry*, Trial Proof 19, 1977. Woodcut proof © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London / Tyler Graphics Ltd., Bedford Village, NY

that far from the canons of abstract expressionism (an -ism invented by Greenberg to describe the creative movement in New York). One later monoprint *The Clearing* (1991) which was produced at Richard Tullis' Workshop in Santa Clara, California, again uses markings and hand additions coupled with the woodgrain surface to great effect. Again, we see how "painterly" Frankenthaler's approach to printmaking truly is. Technique is sacrificed sometimes, and additions, markings, even colour choices are evolved as the print process evolves.

The woodcuts produced in New York, by Frankenthaler with assistance, very much emphasized the rough grained plywood. The essence of woodiness was always a presence, as it had been for the great Norwegian Munch. Frankenthaler would print the striated texture of plywood into the works she produced. Her Japanese assistant Takada would seek out and cut a section of the ply, whereupon Frankenthaler would ask her to print separate colours onto each of them, in order to print the blocks on top of each other. The viewer senses the surface textures and became aware of the direction process of transcription of wood surface texture in the resulting print.

Gouging into the blocks enabled a further direct surface effect, akin to visual "writing. White marks – short and one long one were gouged into one block by Frankenthaler, whereupon her assistant Tadashi Toda would carve the others blocks to match. A rust coloured line was then added across the image in *Cedar Hill*, and the line was cut by Tadashi Toda to be added. Blocks cut from the original proof for the colour woodcut *Cedar Hill* (1983) were printed by master block carver Reizo Monjyu at Shiundo Print Shop in Kyoto, Japan. As with so many of Frankenthaler's woodcut works the collaboration involved three or even more principal players including the artist herself.

The *Tales of Genji* series of woodcuts has a truly Japanese inspiration, based on Murasaki Shikibu's 1022 fictional story of the failures and fortunes of an enigmatic prince. The almost calligraphic markings have a free-form lightness of being that radicalizes the dialogue. The result is a scroll-like woodcut which is markedly different from woodcut traditions and techniques. It is said the *Genji Monogatari Emaki*, a 12th century scroll could have been the inspiration for Frankenthaler's own project. Represented in the show by six woodcut prints it is the ultimate tribute to Helen Frankenthaler's capacity to bring aspects of painting into the printmaking medium. Measuring 121.9 x 214.3 cm, the impressive scale of the *Madame Butterfly* triptych (2000), (the last woodcut Frankenthaler ever produced), gives it a transcendent quality. Printed by Yasuyuki Shibata at Tyler Graphics in Mount Kisco, New York, its central butterfly-like form consists of 42 block and 102 colours. This piece references Puccini's opera and is the apotheosis of her printmaking career. The process begets the process with an ambiguity and sense of space, line and surface.

What emerges is the dichotomy between two very different ways of working a visual: a woodcut medium with its own particular processes and a fluid "painterly" style that resonates with tonalities and surface



Figure 7

effect but contrasts the tradition of the woodcut medium. A free style and a rigid execution leads to strange anomalies never before achieved enigmas of printmaking that will resonate in the history of the print medium henceforth. Though the Japanese expertise was there, Frankenthaler seemed minimally involved in the traditions available, and instead followed her own path as a printmaker. She confirms this when she says,

I am not interested in the techniques of printmaking. I am not interested in the patience it requires. I am not interested in the chemistry. I want it done for me. But I have to be there for every hairline of the doing. Everything ... I feel that wherever I work, I bring the same rules, the limits or lack of limits, the experimentations, the same sense of what quality is. and what beauty is to every place, whether it's my studio or the print workshop, and the workshop has to understand that, or the print won't work and I won't sign it. If a print has to be registered fifty time, it has to be. If I change my mind about the nature of the colour mauve here, then it has to be changed. If I say that I want to see twenty kinds of paper given those colours and the gesture, that has to happen. If it doesn't, you don't see the editions because I scratch them.⁶

Helen Frankenthaler, Print Collector's Newsletter, July/August 1977

Frankenthaler's use of assistants to produce colour prints without her present, often led to the failure of the process. Crown Point Press founder and director Kathan Brown concluded the only way for Frankenthaler to effectively produce prints was to be present during the process. Why did she need to be there? Probably it was to give a direction to the material and coloristic re-workings of the print forms she was creating and, through trial and error, to bring her vision to the place she wanted it to be. All ships, even woodcut prints, need a sense of direction even if their fluid surface effects are phenomenal and never entirely controlled.

As the Radical Beauty show evidences, Helen Frankenthaler was a painter who brought new innovations to the printmaking medium. As Riva Castleman makes clear in *Prints of the Twentieth Century*,

She (Frankenthaler) has created some of the most important prints in the mode of the action painters, notably because she has been able to translate into the print media the spirit of her style without trying to imitate the means she used to capture it on canvas.⁷

Riva Castleman, *Prints of the Twentieth Century; A History* (1988)

Frankenthaler's progression as a print artist from initiate to master was unparalleled. These were largely studio collaborations, aimed as "growing the medium" of woodcut into a fluid language of abstraction. The irony is that as a woman of her era, her woodcuts and breakthrough experiments in printmaking have few, if any, other artists of that era to be compared with, And so Radical Beauty, an overtime show demonstrates how this artist changed the face of printmaking forever.

FOOTNOTES

1. Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty (Dulwich Art Gallery, 2021) ISBN 9781898519454, p. 10
2. Kathan Brown, Painters and Sculptors at Crown Point Press, (San Francisco; Chronicle Books, 1996) p.186
3. Ibid, p. 187
4. Griselda Pollock in conversation with Alison Rowley in Jonathan Harris, ed., Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting; Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism (Liverpool University Pres + Tate Liverpool, 2003), pp. 57-58.
5. Ibid
6. Helen Frankenthaler, Print Collector's Newsletter, July/August 1977, p. 66.
7. Riva Castleman, Prints of the Twentieth Century; A History, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), p. 138.

**HELEN FRANKENTHALER: RADICAL BEAUTY WAS AT DULWICH
PICTURE GALLERY UNTIL 18 APRIL 2022**

AUTHOR

Specialized in art and ecology, John K Grande's publications include Art Nature Dialogues (SUNY Press, New York, 2003), Dialogues in Diversity; Art from Marginal to Mainstream (Pari, Italy, 2007), Nils-Udo; Sur l'eau (Actes Sud, France, 2015), Art, Space, Ecology; Two Views Twenty Interviews (Black Rose / University of Chicago, 2019) to be published in German by Klotz Verlag as Kunst Ram Natur in July 2022. His reviews and features have been published in Burlington Magazine, Sculpture Magazine (USA), Artforum, Border Crossings, British Journal of Photography, Public Art Review and Arte Es (Spain). www.johnkgrande.com

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1: Helen Frankenthaler, Snow Pines, 2004. Thirty-four color woodcut © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London / Pace Editions, Inc., NY

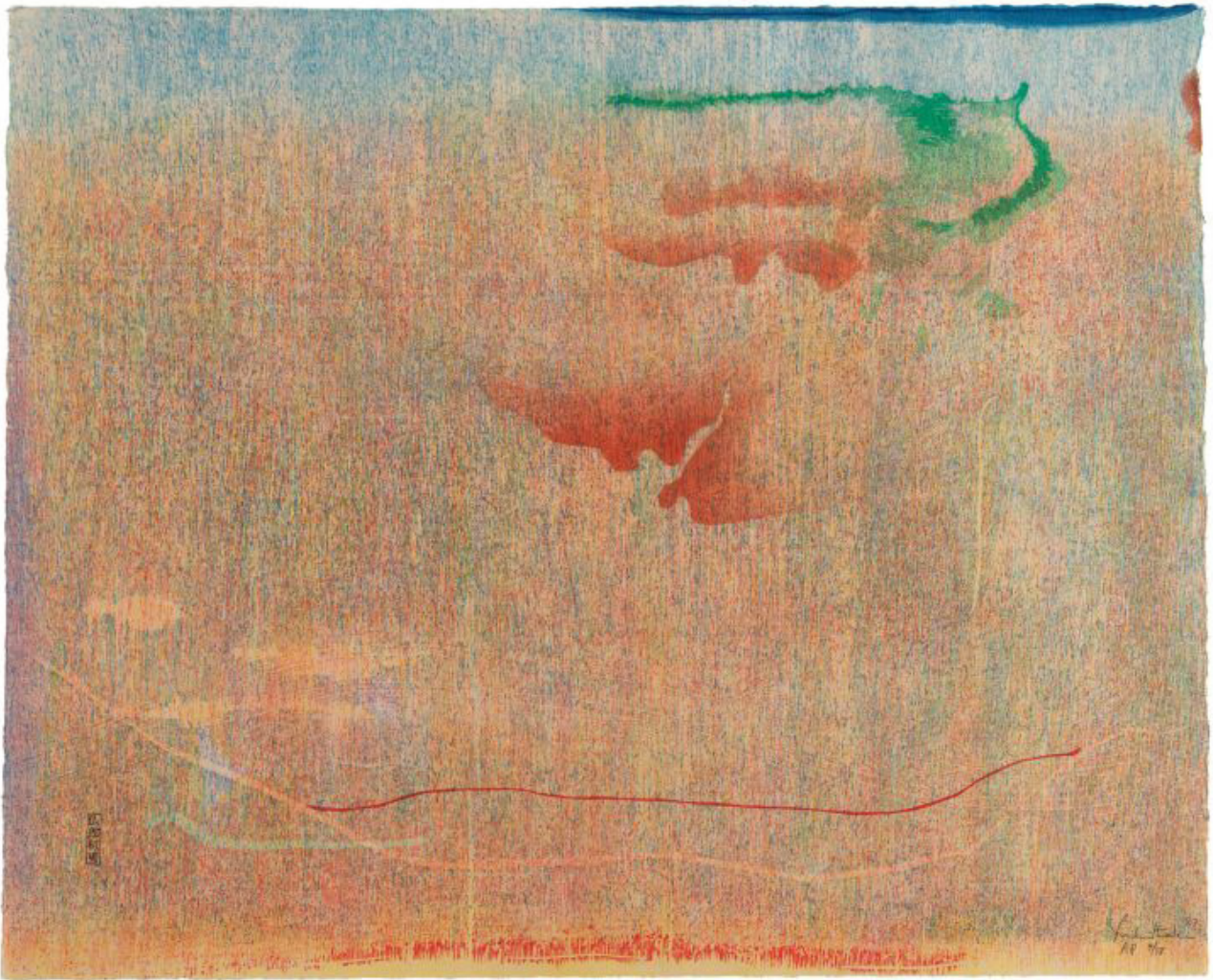


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Figure 6. Helen Frankenthaler, *Essence Mulberry, Trial Proof 19*, 1977. Woodcut proof © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London / Tyler Graphics Ltd., Bedford Village, NY



Figure 7. Helen Frankenthaler, *Tales of Genji V*, 1998. Forty-nine color woodcut © 2021 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / ARS, NY and DACS, London / Tyler Graphic Ltd., Mount Kisco, NY