

NEWS RELEASE

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[Digital images available upon request]

NO RULES: HELEN FRANKENTHALER WOODCUTS TO OPEN AT CLARK ART INSTITUTE

Exhibition explores abstract artist's groundbreaking approach to the medium

Williamstown, Massachusetts—*No Rules: Helen Frankenthaler Woodcuts*, on view exclusively at the Clark Art Institute July 1–September 24, explores Helen Frankenthaler's (American, 1928–2011) inventive and groundbreaking approach to the woodcut. Seventeen large-scale prints, on loan primarily from the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation and the Williams College Museum of Art, present the full range of Frankenthaler's experimentation with the medium from the 1970s through 2000s. The exhibition explores the artist's collaborations with printers, publishers, woodcarvers, and papermakers that pushed the medium in new directions. In 1994, during an interview with printer/publisher Ken Tyler, Frankenthaler stated, "There are no rules, that is one thing I say about every medium, every picture . . . that is how art is born, that is how breakthroughs happen. Go against the rules or ignore the rules, that is what invention is about." *No Rules* celebrates the pioneering spirit that expanded the possibilities of the woodcut and established Frankenthaler as one of the medium's great innovators.

No Rules is one of two Frankenthaler exhibitions on view at the Clark this summer. In addition to the exhibition of her woodblock prints, the Clark presents *As in Nature: Helen Frankenthaler Paintings*, which focuses on nature as a long-standing inspiration for the artist. *As in Nature* is presented in the Lunder Center at Stone Hill and is on view July 1–October 9.

The Clark renews its association with the artist this summer through these exhibitions. Helen Frankenthaler maintained a lifelong connection to Bennington College, located less than twenty miles from Williamstown, and established numerous connections to the local region. During the 1979–80 academic year, Frankenthaler was part of the Williams College Artist-in-Residence Program. At the culmination of her tenure, the Clark presented and toured a comprehensive exhibition of her prints, curated by Thomas Krens, then director of the Artist-in-Residence Program and incoming director of the Williams College Museum of Art.

"The Clark is grateful to the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, the primary lender to the exhibition, and Williams College Museum of Art for their generous support of this exhibition," said Olivier Meslay, Felda and Dena Hardyman Director of the Clark. "Frankenthaler experimented with the woodcut until the end of her career, creating a

body of work that both engages with printmaking and challenges a conventional understanding of the medium. We hope that showing her paintings and woodcuts in tandem will serve as a reminder and a reaffirmation of Frankenthaler's status as an artist of enduring value—and introduce her exceptional works to new audiences as well."

"Not only are Frankenthaler's works visually mesmerizing, they are technically complex," said exhibition curator Jay A. Clarke. "She was not content to use earlier methods of production; she wanted to push herself in new directions and allowed herself to be encouraged and challenged by the printers and publishers with whom she collaborated. Frankenthaler's paintings were created in the isolation of her studio, but the process of carving and printing woodblocks in collaboration with others brought new challenges to the artist—ones she relished."

Frankenthaler's printmaking experience began with creating lithographs at Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), the print publisher founded by Tatyana Grosman in West Islip, Long Island, New York. Grosman played a significant role in Frankenthaler's early print career, encouraging her to continually push forward into new media, such as lithography, etching, and aquatint.

In 1973, when Frankenthaler made her first woodcut, *East and Beyond*, at ULAE, she was already a very well-established painter. The title reflects her fascination with Japanese woodblock prints, especially the subtle colors found in the work of Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), an artist whose work she owned. The print was made by carving a single block of wood into pieces and inking each one with a different color. After ink was applied to the pieces, instead of reassembling the blocks like a jigsaw puzzle before printing, the printer would carefully register each color block separately to avoid negative space between them.

Savage Breeze (1974) is considered one of Frankenthaler's finest printed works and, together with *East & Beyond* (1973), has been credited with marking the beginning of a woodcut revival in America. When the artist first printed this work, it did not have the luminosity she desired, so she decided to print an entire block of white-inked wood over the surface of the paper before adding the eight separate color blocks. The layer of white ink brightened the colors that were subsequently placed over it.

Despite difficulties she experienced creating *Savage Breeze*, Frankenthaler returned to the practice in 1976, working with another major print publisher, Kenneth Tyler, at Tyler Graphics in Bedford Village, New York. The resulting print, *Essence Mulberry* (1977), was created using a method that allows the grain of the wood to remain visible within deep and blended coloration and leaves a portion of the paper untouched. Frankenthaler used these three elements in her printmaking—visible grain, depth of blended color, and paper treatment—throughout the rest of her career.

Although Frankenthaler made only two woodcuts in the 1980s, *Cameo* (1980) and *Cedar Hill* (1983), they remain among her most significant woodcuts. They mark a new layered approach to color and an increased engagement with the medium's eastern origins. *Cameo* furthered the use of layered color found in *Essence Mulberry*, resulting in a field of color that influenced the artist's future works. It also introduced the technique of "guzzying," a term Frankenthaler used to describe the way she would manipulate the surface of the woodblock, marking it in this case with sandpaper and dental tools to achieve the desired textured effects before printing. The resulting colors are not static and distinct, but rather are subtle and diaphanous.

In 1983, Frankenthaler traveled to Japan and worked with the expert woodcarver Reizo Monju and the printer Tadashi Toda. While there she created *Cedar Hill*, a woodcut that features trailing lines and washes of color combined with a sense of the texture of the wood itself and a spare use of small marks.

Frankenthaler continued to experiment in *Freefall* (1993), working with dyed paper-pulp printed with color blocks to create layers of color. Here she made the paper by hand-dyeing the pulp in various colors. The size of *Freefall* is significant in its own right—78 1/2 x 60 1/2 inches. To create a sheet of paper this large is a feat, and to complicate it further by adding twenty-one woodblocks illustrates Frankenthaler's willingness to push the boundaries of the medium.

The series of prints *Tales of Genji I–VI* (1998) was created in the nineteenth-century tradition of Japanese *ukiyo-e* (scenes of the floating world), in which the artist creates the initial painting, and woodcarvers and printers make the final print. Frankenthaler first made six different paintings on wood, after which woodcarvers and papermakers interpreted them under her supervision. All variations on a theme, the series takes its title from the eleventh-century Japanese literary tale about an emperor's son and his life in the Imperial Court, written by Murasaki Shikibu (c. 978–1014), whose knowledge of Japanese court life came from her experience as lady-in-waiting to Empress Shōshi. *Madame Butterfly* (2000) is considered by some to be Frankenthaler's version of a Japanese screen in printed form. As in the *Tales of Genji* series, she began by making a painting on wood that was translated over a period of two years into woodcut form, with the assistance of expert woodcarvers and papermakers. Sharing its title with a 1904 opera by Giacomo Puccini, the triptych *Madame Butterfly* is infused with light pastel colors and stained, expressive marks. However, as with many of the artist's prints, it does not demonstrate an explicit connection to its title.

This is also true of the titles of Frankenthaler's final woodcuts, which refer to different types of trees found and observed through the seasons on her property in Darien, Connecticut. *Weeping Crabapple* (2009), the last woodcut she made, looks less like a woodcut than any of her previous works. It uses the effects of a wash drawing with

charcoal in woodcut form to evoke the gray drooping branches and vibrant pink tones of the flowers.

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ABOUT THE CLARK

The Clark Art Institute, located in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, is one of a small number of institutions globally that is both an art museum and a center for research, critical discussion, and higher education in the visual arts. Opened in 1955, the Clark houses exceptional European and American paintings and sculpture, extensive collections of master prints and drawings, English silver, and early photography. Acting as convener through its Research and Academic Program, the Clark gathers an international community of scholars to participate in a lively program of conferences, colloquia, and workshops on topics of vital importance to the visual arts. The Clark library, consisting of more than 270,000 volumes, is one of the nation's premier art history libraries. The Clark also houses and co-sponsors the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art.

The Clark is located at 225 South Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Galleries are open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 am to 5 pm; open daily in July and August. Admission is \$20; free year-round for Clark members, children 18 and younger, and students with valid ID. For more information, visit clarkart.edu or call 413 458 2303.

ABOUT THE LENDERS

The New York City-based Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, established and endowed by the artist during her lifetime, is dedicated to promoting greater public interest in and understanding of the visual arts. For more information, visit: www.frankenthalerfoundation.org.

The Williams College Museum of Art makes dynamic art experiences to incite new thinking about art, museums, and the world. At the heart of the Williams College campus, the museum draws on the collaborative and multidisciplinary ethos of the surrounding college to enliven the more than 15,000 works in its growing collection. The museum and its collection are a catalyst for student learning and community engagement.

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