

Fluid Expressions

The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler

THE NAME HELEN FRANKENTHALER (1928–2011) conjures iconic images of large soak-stained canvases, their surfaces pooled with translucent colors and animated by free-floating abstractions. Although less known for her graphic work, Frankenthaler was an equally inventive printmaker who took risks in a medium not frequently explored by abstract expressionists. *Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler* calls attention to this highly original and thoroughly whimsical body of work by a major contributor to postwar American art.

Frankenthaler came of age as an artist in the heart of New York's avant-garde art world. Married to artist Robert Motherwell and close friends with Jackson

Pollock and the critic Clement Greenberg, Frankenthaler carved out her own successful career in a male-dominated field. In 1952, she catapulted to fame with her invention of the soak-stain technique, a method of pouring thinned paint onto an unprimed canvas to create a luminous watercolor effect. Her gestural process—crouching low over a canvas installed on the ground and flicking her wrist to pour the pigment—broadened the

practice of Abstract Expressionism and pioneered the Color Field movement.

Frankenthaler was outspokenly reluctant about making prints. “I was very suspicious and full of questions,” she once recalled. “It was challenging because I wanted to make what was in my head. . . . I had to learn that printmaking cannot be done impatiently if it's to be done well.” Indeed, many abstract expressionists avoided the medium because

it was antithetical to the direct and spontaneous aesthetic they promoted. Printmaking required assistants, multiple proofs and impressions, and resulted in a final print far removed from the initial drawing.

Yet in 1961, at the age of thirty-three, Frankenthaler made her first print at the Universal Limited Art Editions in New York. She would make more than two hundred editions of prints over the following five decades, working across the printmaking mediums—lithographs, etchings, monoprints, screenprints, and woodcuts.

From a distance, it is easy to mistake the fluid forms and milky translucency of these prints for oil paintings or watercolors. The splatters of pigment and transparent layers of ink in *Grey Fireworks* (2000), for example, evoke an immediacy and vibrancy seemingly at odds with the slow, technical printmaking process. Yet Frankenthaler's adaption of her soak-stain method to printmaking, during which she often placed the stone on the ground and pooled ink on its surface, allowed her to imbue the print with her signature painterly verve. “At times I feel that when I'm throwing this tusche down on the stone, it's just like a canvas on the floor in my studio. I want to make the stone have that same gesture and feel.”

Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler investigates more than just the parallels between the artist's print and painting careers. Bringing together a diverse selection of printing processes, including Frankenthaler's innovative woodcuts such as *Japanese Maple* (2005), this intimate show examines how Frankenthaler pushed the boundaries of possibility for the graphic medium. Richly colorful and alive with imagination, the creative pulse of Frankenthaler's printmaking is on full display here. ■

On view March 18 through September 10, 2017.

Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler is drawn from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and his Family Foundation.



Opposite page top:
Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011)
Grey Fireworks, 2000
Silkscreen
27 3/4 x 46 1/2 in.
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List Posters and Prints

Opposite page bottom:
Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011)
Japanese Maple, 2005
Woodcut
25 x 38 in.
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