

Helen Frankenthaler and Jo Sandman: Without Limits
September 15, 2022–March 12, 2023
Bowdoin College Museum of Art | Brunswick, Maine
Exhibition Labels

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This exhibition explores what can be learned by juxtaposing the work of two pioneering artists: Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) and Jo Sandman (b. 1931). Born a mere three years apart, the artists would nonetheless come to occupy different creative generations, Frankenthaler, the elder artist, more closely identified with image-making, and Sandman, the younger, with process and conceptualism. Although not personally acquainted, Frankenthaler and Sandman matured in similar circumstances, benefitting from educations obtained at progressive liberal arts institutions, and absorbing artistic training largely rooted in Abstract Expressionism. In the early 1960s, both dared to move beyond the constraints of painting, while not abandoning the practice, in a period when it dominated critical discourse. Pushing themselves in new directions, both Frankenthaler and Sandman refused to be confined by convention. Each came to recognize, although by employing different strategies, the exciting potential in redefining the relationship between pigment, mark, and surface in works of art. Growing out of a close study of Frankenthaler’s intimate engagement with printmaking over five decades, and enriched by careful attention to the contemporary artmaking strategies developed by Sandman, this exhibition sheds light on the new creative pathways pioneered by these remarkable artists from the 1960s forward.

Curated by Elisha Osemobor ’22 and Anne Collins Goodyear, Co-Director.

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We also extend our thanks to Jo Sandman and Sydney Reaper ’21.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Untitled, 1967

screenprint on paper, edition 88/100

Published by Chiron Press, New York

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.1

With its bold application of primary colors and the addition of green and powerful shapes, Helen Frankenthaler demonstrates a firm assertiveness in this early silkscreen print. A stencil process through which color is applied to the surface through a screen (traditionally made of silk), the screenprint permits Frankenthaler’s vivid colors to float on the surface, reading as shapes rather than washes. As form and color become indistinguishable from one another, Frankenthaler’s early command of this medium reveals itself.

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HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Sanguine Mood, 1971

pochoir and screenprint on paper, edition 17/75

Published by the Women's Board Commission, San Francisco
Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern
Art)

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.29.2.9



Sanguine Mood, 1971, trial proofs 1–8 (left to right)

pochoir and screenprint on paper

Published by the Women's Board Commission, San Francisco
Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern
Art)

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.29.2.1–8

Sanguine Mood, exhibited here with its eight trial proofs, demonstrates Frankenthaler's ongoing dialogue with her experimental process. As she laughingly remarked: "... One of the fascinating things to me ... is that some place in your head, working in black and white, you already see [the print] in its colors, but they have not yet really been mixed or tried or thought out ... [and then, as we proceed] I feel, 'no that's not quite what I had in [mind] here.' And then something will happen that surprises you that looks better than what you had envisioned. That whole dialogue is wonderful, very rich, and then if you're lucky, something comes down and says: 'Stop.' You know, 'you've got it.'" In *Sanguine Mood*—printed by Patricia Yamashiro of Maurel Studios, New York, and Frankenthaler—the artist fills her page with a vivid orange wash which soaks into the paper, allowing its texture to show through in the final image. Using the technique of pochoir (or stencils) the artist applies green and white washes in varying configurations, even shifting the orientation of the work. Silkscreened lines in black and red ink create a dynamic interplay between the colored zones. The white and orange fade into many gentle shades of peach, suggesting the instantaneity of a blush of happiness consistent with the spirit invoked by the title.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Passeggiata Romana, 1973

sugar-lift etching and aquatint on paper, edition 24/32

Published by 2RC Editrice, Rome

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.3



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Employing both sugar-lift etching and aquatint, two modes of treating metal plates with exposure to an acid bath to capture and then print the resulting image, *Passeggiata Romana* is a deceptively complex work. Like many of Frankenthaler's works of the 1960s and 70s, its color palette is limited to a few, essential colors with little variation in shade. Named for the long-standing Italian tradition of *passaggiare* ("to stroll"), or chatting, flirting, and observing, as the sun sets on a warm evening, *Passeggiata Romana* evokes the feeling between two strangers who share a smile as they pass each other on the street. With its green linear forms on peach background, and the thin burnt orange line which connects them, the bright yet gentle colors bring to mind the brilliant glow of the setting sun on a white stone building, and the pale shadow of the late afternoon. Frankenthaler freezes this fleeting moment of encounter.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Harvest, 1976

lithograph on paper, AP 4/10

Published by Tyler Graphics Ltd., Bedford Village, New York

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.4

Helen Frankenthaler's lithograph, *Harvest*, incorporates shades of yellow, orange, sepia, and magenta to achieve the appearance of delicate golden oranges so frequently associated with the ripeness of the fall harvest. Lithography, a planar printing technique relying on the mutual repulsion of oil and water, allowed the artist to apply a greasy tusche wash and crayon to the printing surfaces (both limestone and aluminum plate). The first printing process with which Frankenthaler experimented, lithography remained important to the artist throughout her career. This work represents her inaugural collaboration with Kenneth Tyler, who became one of her most important printmaking partners. Frankenthaler would later praise Tyler—like Tatyana Grosman of Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), who introduced her to lithography—for giving her a sense of endless opportunity. As Frankenthaler put it: "nothing you envisioned seemed impossible."

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Bronze Smoke, 1978

lithograph on paper, edition 13/38

Published by Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), West Islip, New York

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.5

"A really good picture looks as if it's happened at once," observed Helen Frankenthaler. Both through its title and its ethereal imagery *Bronze Smoke* belies the intensive process that led to this marriage of a toned handmade paper with the bronze



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and gray-black pigments layered upon it. Creating an image that would render the mode of making imperceptible was of utmost importance to Frankenthaler who noted: “It’s the result I care about ... Do I like it? Does it work? Is it beautiful? Do I want it? Does it give me pleasure? Does it grow?” The effect created by the delicate interplay of tonalities responding to the artist’s washes of tuche over a limestone matrix convey not just the wafting presence of smoke, but the vibrant bronze which fills the air during an untamed fire. The naturalistic notches produced by the ink during the printing process enhances this sensory experience, as the very paper itself seems to burn.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Deep Sun, 1983

etching, soft-ground etching, aquatint, spit-bit aquatint, drypoint, engraving, and mezzotint on paper, edition 7/16

Published by Tyler Graphics Ltd., Bedford Village, New York

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.6



The largest star in our solar system, the sun is not often associated with the color black, except, perhaps, during an eclipse or in the long shadows cast by its setting rays. In keeping with such dramatic moments, Frankenthaler’s *Deep Sun* is an extraordinarily ambitious print, combining a broad range of intaglio techniques that use acid to incise, or etch, line or broader areas into the surface of a metalplate (generally copper) to produce an image. Describing the collaborative process of making the experimental work with printer Kenneth Tyler, Frankenthaler explained that he solved the technical challenge inherent in her desire to allow the color yellow to bleed off the page to the left: “[T]hen I felt free to extend it on the right. What I like is that [the work] has a sort of pastel-y filmy quality and yet retains very much the essence of a print.” Expressing the uncontainable brightness of the sun itself, the work reveals ever more color the longer one looks at the image.

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HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Guadalupe, 1989

Mixografia on paper, edition 8/74

Published by Mixografia, Los Angeles

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.7



Once Frankenthaler entered the world of printmaking, her curiosity and determination led her to explore a broad range of techniques. In December of 1986, she began working with the Los Angeles workshop Mixografia, where director Luis Remba had developed a new eponymous printmaking process. The Mixografia technique merges handmade paper pulp and ink in high relief. Working with a wax matrix, from which a copper plate was produced, Frankenthaler built up and manipulated the surface. The resulting circular enclosure within a “sea” of violet and blue brings to mind both the Mexican island of Guadalupe in the Pacific and the French-controlled islands of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean. While leaving open the question of specific geographies, the work seems to allude to the process of discovery inherent in travel, an association encouraged by the titles associated with the four other works created using Mixografia: *Alaska*, *Hermes*, *Sirocco*, and *Tahiti*.

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Monotype IV, 1991

monotype from aluminum on paper, unique

Published by Garner Tullis, New York

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.8

Unlike other printmaking techniques, monotypes are generally unique rather than multiples. The work emerged during a prolifically creative three-week collaboration between Frankenthaler and the printer Garner Tullis that led, among other projects, to thirty distinct monotypes. The first of the series to be oriented vertically, the piece reflects Frankenthaler’s joy in experimentation. While seeming to mark the boundaries of the page with small florets in each corner, the artist simultaneously pushes against them. The decentered pool of chartreuse seems to reveal, rather than to obfuscate, the very texture of the paper. In drawing attention to the depth of the printed surface, Frankenthaler’s image seems to strain against its outer limits, pressing against the perimeter.

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HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Round Robin, 2000

etching, aquatint, and mezzotint on paper, edition 27/30

Published by Tyler Graphics Ltd., Mount Kisco, New York

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.4

Created late in Frankenthaler's career, *Round Robin*, using a combination of etching, aquatint, and mezzotint, conveys Frankenthaler's mastery of intaglio printmaking techniques (which use acid to etch a plate for printing). The combination of approaches captures her delicate line and provides for a beautiful and gentle gradation of color that gives her shapes in the work a subtle vibrancy and sense of depth. Indeed, while the image's prevalent curved forms may have helped suggest the work's title, *Round Robin*, this multivalent phrase might also refer to the many processes at work in this print or, even more broadly, in the artist's approach to artmaking more broadly. Remarking on the "romance of a new medium," Frankenthaler reflected: "I feel essentially that I am a painter, and involved in paint per se and the beauty of paint. But there is something equally exquisite about seeing the acid bath make something bleed on copper..."

HELEN FRANKENTHALER

American, 1928–2011

Weeping Crabapple, 2009

woodcut on paper, edition 3/12

Published by Pace Editions, Inc., New York

Gift of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

2019.28.10



Helen Frankenthaler's final woodcut print, *Weeping Crabapple* is a tour de force, representing a combination of thirty-one colors and eighteen woodblocks. With her characteristic gracefulness, Frankenthaler captures the visual sensation of the weeping crabapple tree in full flower. Printed with Pace Editions, Inc., the work builds on the artist's nearly four decades of experience with the medium of woodcut. With a self-referential nod to the medium of wood itself in her image, the work's subject matter also hints at, appropriately it would seem, to fertility and to love, creating an inviting association with Frankenthaler's own allusion to the productive "romance" of the many new mediums suggested by printmaking more broadly. Describing her first engagement with the technique of woodcut, Frankenthaler reflected on her exposure to the jigsaw in words that would seem to characterize her comfort with creative experimentation more generally: "Off I went! And then I learned [that] you break the blade if you pull back. You can only go forward: good motto."

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JO SANDMAN

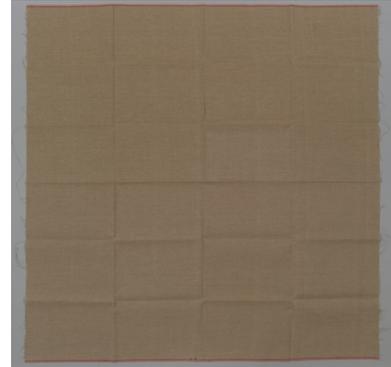
American, born 1931

#18, ca. 1970–71

folded fabric drawing, Belgian linen

Gift of the artist

2020.36.8



Although Sandman considered the concerns reflected in this work and others like it analogous to those she addressed in her painting, she also acknowledged the experimentation it reflected. Sandman later recounted: “In the sixties, being a fourth-generation Abstract Expressionist didn’t mean much to me. So, I started stretching large canvases that I no longer gessoed. I would float acrylic colors on them, but within a structure. . . . [T]he washes got fainter and fainter. Soon I was putting clear water washes on the canvas. I began experimenting with raw canvas to discover other ways to mark it. I found that I could fold and crease it.” Sandman learned that rather than using brush or pencil, she could work with industrial presses to apply the requisite pressure—also a critical element of lithography and etching—to create geometric patterns with no pigment at all.

JO SANDMAN

American, born 1931

Untitled [Folded Drawing], ca. 1970–71

folded fabric drawing, white duck

Gift of the artist

2020.36.9



Trained by the legendary abstract painter Hans Hofmann—with whom Helen Frankenthaler also studied—Sandman absorbed the artist’s theory of push and pull. She became fascinated by how line and color could move the eye across a surface, both laterally and in terms of the perception of depth. As she remarked in the early 1970s: “My work still exhibits that concern. How do I place a shape on a surface to make it come to life?” The crisp lines Sandman achieved using industrial presses to create such works as *Untitled [Folded Drawing]*, and *#18* (exhibited nearby) both built on and transformed the act of painting by creating works of visual art that relied upon perception rather than pigment. As the artist noted: “This process of making the material mark itself alters the surface; light striking the folds and creases creates a remarkable range of value shifts.”

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JO SANDMAN

American, born 1931

Untitled [from *Removals*], 1976

collage, interior insulation foil

Gift of the artist

2020.36.1



Instead of following a traditional process of adding pigment to the surface to create marks, in this untitled work from her *Removals* series, Sandman scrapes away a black coating to produce line. The action is in some sense analogous to the removal of a waxing coating from an etching plate to create an image that will ultimately be printed in reverse. According to Sandman: “My interest in allowing the material to dictate the form of the object led to *Removals*. A pattern is made through extraction. In a sense the drawing is wrenched out of the material. ... The work ... opens itself up to a dialogue between art as process and art as illusion.”

JO SANDMAN

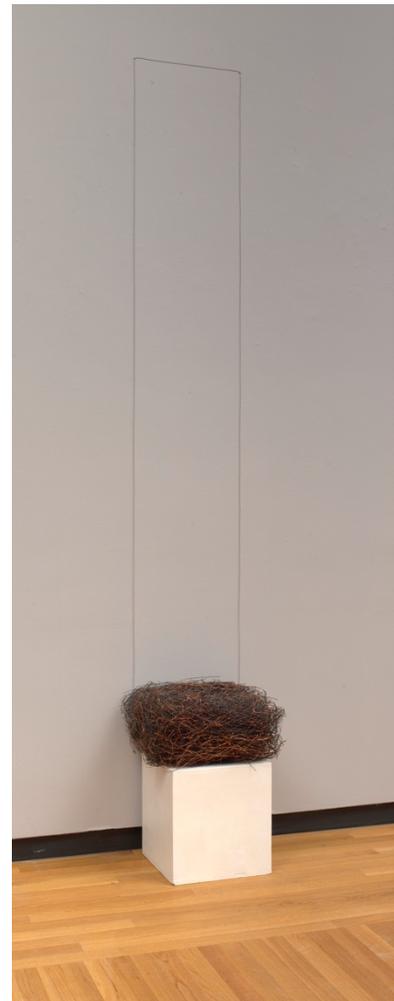
American, born 1931

Compressed Drawing, 1982

copper wire, painted wooden pedestal, nails

Gift of the artist

2020.36.3



Hovering between two and three dimensions, Sandman’s *Compressed Drawing* confronts the spectator with the raw materiality that undergirds and stimulates creative practice through the questions it provokes. As though removing a line from a copper surface, Sandman effectively reverses the etching process used by Frankenthaler. Freed of its enclosure, this tentacle of copper crawls up the wall marking its own space. As the artist recounted: “I had been having discussions with a friend about what constitutes a drawing. ... I was playing with used metal left over from electrical motor windings. As I bunched it and extended it, I realized that line can become mass, and one can make a drawing without putting pencil to paper.”

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JO SANDMAN

American, born 1931

Courtyard [from *Tarpaulin Series*], 1983

collage, found painter's dropcloth mounted on museum board

Gift of the artist

2020.36.4



Like other works in her *Tarpaulin* series, *Courtyard* implicitly references the artist's Abstract Expressionist training in its incorporation of strips from a paint-splattered drop cloth used by house painters. Here, however, the brightly colored surfaces do not in themselves reflect a form of expression, but rather something of the residue of the past, hinting at the readymade history of art into which Sandman originally entered as a young artist. In putting what she described as the "extraordinary richness" of this material to a new end, a form of drawing, Sandman both reclaims this history and makes it her own. Describing her technique, Sandman explained: "I started cutting [these used tarps], making a kind of energy trails with scissors. Then, I'd pin these spattered surfaces to the wall to make very large spatial enclosures ... I pushed it as far as I could and said what I needed to say."

JO SANDMAN

American, born 1931

Reversed Chevron II, 1988

roofing tar on archival paper mounted to museum board

Gift of the artist

2020.36.6

As Sandman has noted about her unconventional medium: "The inherent difficulty in handling the tar, an essentially sticky material, is offset by its plastic potential." Through what the artist describes as "the ensuing struggle," form emerges. Inspired by the ancient form of the chevron (resembling an inverted "V") associated with architecture or heraldry, Sandman breaks the shape into its most basic elements. The "reversal" referenced in the title may have less to do with a particular form than with the attitude toward it manifested in the piece. Rather than dictating a particular configuration, Sandman permits the curator to hang its components either at right angles or in a parallel configuration. Just as tar itself resists easy manipulation, so Sandman herself resists easy adherence to the stability of convention, insisting on a more fluid and flexible approach.