

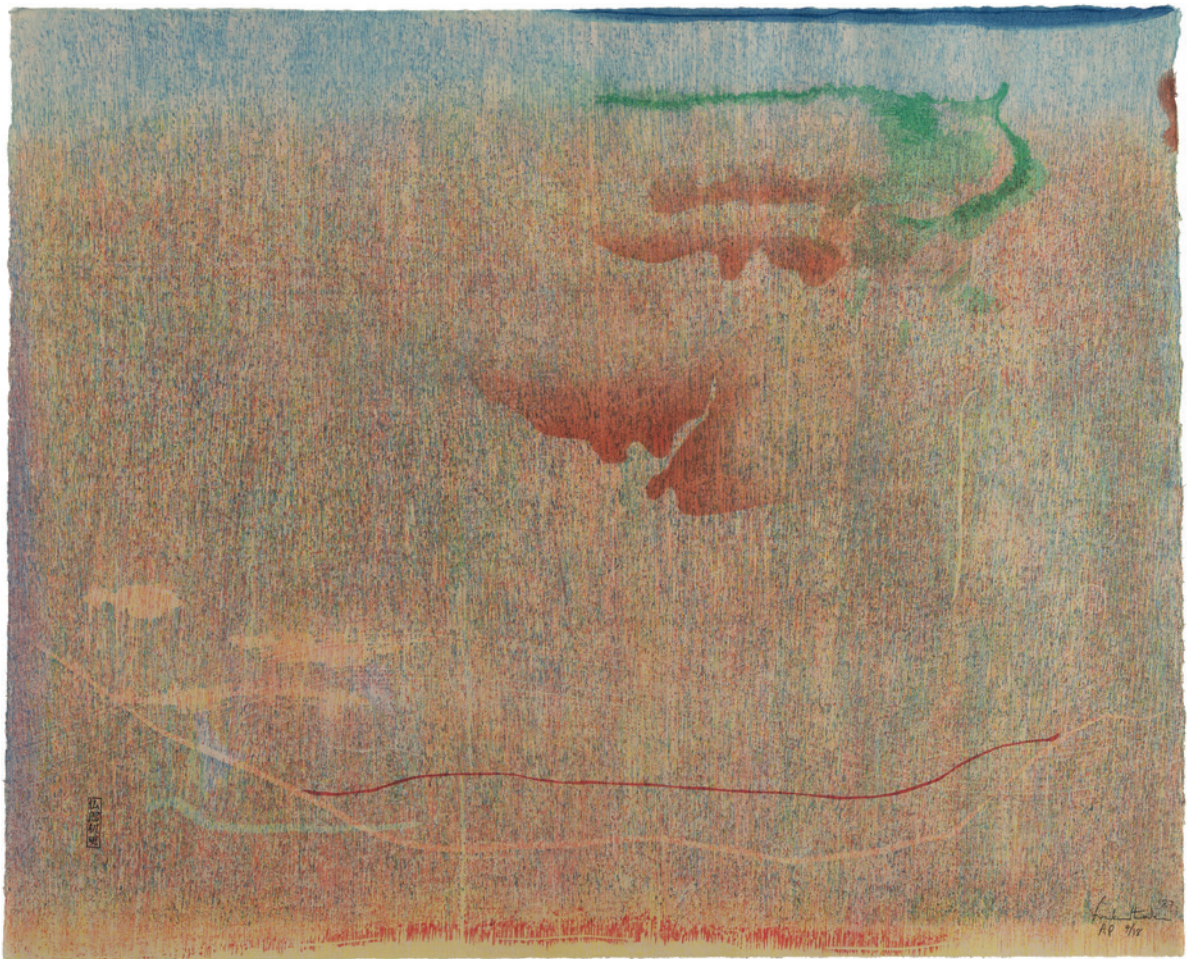
Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty

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Jane Findlay and Jennifer Scott, exhibition catalogue, London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 15 September 2021–18 April 2022, London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2021, 74 pp., 56 ills., £25.

The American artist Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) sought to make paintings that were immediate. When speaking to the critic Barbara Rose in 1972 she said how for her ‘a really good picture looks as if it’s happened at once’, where you cannot see the sequential decision-

making and labour. Famously, in her large abstract canvases Frankenthaler, who can be seen to mark the shift between the abstract expressionist and the later colour field painters, developed a light elegant staining technique where oil paint thinned with turpentine was painted and poured directly onto raw canvas so that they become one. What is perhaps less well known is that Frankenthaler was a truly accomplished printmaker and throughout her career experimented with a range of techniques including monoprints, lithography and



1. Helen Frankenthaler, *Cedar Hill*, 1983, ten-colour woodcut from thirteen blocks, 514 x 629 mm (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation / ARS, NY, and DACS, London / Crown Point Press, Oakland, CA.).



2. Helen Frankenthaler, *Essence Mulberry Trial Proof 19*, 1977, woodcut, 1,003 x 470 mm (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation / ARS, NY, and DACS, London / Tyler Graphics, Bedford Village, NY).

most notably woodcuts.

The slim and elegantly designed publication *Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty*, produced to coincide with an exhibition of the same name at Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, explains in detail how Frankenthaler translated this sensibility of immediacy and fragile elegance to the practice of woodcut printmaking. The catalogue, which includes foldouts, inserts and a variety of paper-stocks, does this splendidly with the authors illustrating and explaining the genesis and development of her woodcut techniques. In detailed notes and a highly informative essay by the exhibition's curator Jane Findlay, we are taken through the various steps and processes that Frankenthaler employed. Frankenthaler's work with woodcuts transformed and expanded the medium so that it could fully capture ephemeral softness and subtleties, qualities that are in keeping with her paintings. An extract from a lecture that Frankenthaler gave to the Drawing and Print Club / Founders Society at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1977 has been reprinted and included in this publication. The lecture was given in response to the exhibition 'Titian and the Venetian Woodcut', of 1977, organized by the International Exhibitions Foundation. Frankenthaler saw the exhibition and was deeply disappointed. For her, Titian's (c. 1488–1576) prints when compared to his paintings felt dead. They were too graphic, and this reaction helps illuminate how she strove to work in her new medium. She speaks in the lecture of how she developed a technique of drawing with a jigsaw and, although always working in collaboration with master printers, how she would insist on keeping control of her side of the processes by mixing her own colours and allowing the work itself, after each proof taken from the blocks, to dictate in an ongoing manner the slow development of each work.

Unlike the exhibition, the publication is arranged chronologically. Each of the 36 prints displayed in Dulwich is illustrated in full colour with notes. So, we move from Frankenthaler's first print *East and Beyond*, an eight-colour woodcut that we learn the artist's friends Larry Rivers (1923–2002) and Grace Hartigan (1922–2008) had encouraged her to make at the printmaker Tatyana Grosman's (1904–82) Universal Limited Art Editions in 1973, to her last print *Weeping Crabapple*, made with the master printmaker Yasuyuki Shibata (b. 1968) at Pace Editions Ltd in 2009. Both reveal the deep influence of the Japanese ukiyo-e tradition. These woodcuts, by artists such as Ando Hiroshige (1797–1858) or Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), depict folk tales or scenes from urban life and often have soft, subtle and atmospheric qualities within their clear graphics. Ukiyo-e translates from the Japanese as 'floating world' and for Frankenthaler, like James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and Claude Monet (1840–1926) before her, this characteristic resonated with her own

vision. In the astounding woodcut *Cedar Hill* from 1983, Frankenthaler seems to re-define what ukiyo-e could be (fig. [#1](#)). The work is made with ten colours and thirteen woodblocks on pale pink paper, and through incorporating the impression of woodgrain from the linden and mahogany woodblocks, as well as fine drawn stippling, Frankenthaler creates an almost effervescent softness. The print was made in Kyoto, with Frankenthaler working with the master carver Reizo Monjyu and printer Tadashi Toda.

Arguably Frankenthaler's most productive collaboration was with the American master printmaker Kenneth Tyler (b. 1931) of Tyler Graphics in New York. They first worked together in 1977 on the print *Essence Mulberry*, and the Dulwich catalogue illustrates six printer's proofs with handwritten notes in a gatefold along with a reproduction of the final print (fig. [#2](#)). The print, on Gampi handmade paper, incorporates juice from the berries of a mulberry tree and was the first instance that Frankenthaler used a new technique she developed and named 'guzzying'. This was a method of marking the surface of a woodblock by scratching or distressing it with unconventional tools. She used a cheese grater, sandpaper and even dentist drills. The resulting surface, with all its unevenness and incidents, was then printed. Another pivotal print where Frankenthaler and Tyler worked together was *Freefall* in 1993 (fig. [#3](#)). Here on a giant scale they sought to capture colour – a deep blue – in all its bold intensity. The print is two metres tall, a test on size and scale, and built from twelve different colours and 21 wooden blocks. Frankenthaler again used a new technique, experimenting with coloured paper pulps that she sprayed and combed onto the paper's surface prior to the printing of the blocks. This resulted in a rich optical intensity that was quite unlike ukiyo-e softness.

Frankenthaler and Tyler's creative relationship undoubtedly peaked with her sumptuous print *Madame Butterfly* of 2000 (fig. [#4](#)). This woodcut, which is over two metres in length and one high, incorporates 102 different colours and is made from 46 blocks. Here again using gatefold leaves, the authors present the initial painting on wood that inspired the print, proofs taken and adapted during its making, and the final work itself. What is so wonderful to see is how the final print surpasses the beauty and elegance of the painted panels that marked its inception. Inspired by a Japanese screen and taking its title from Puccini's opera, this glorious work speaks effortlessly and immediately of light, colour and touch. In it, and through examining the process through each illustration, we can see so clearly how Frankenthaler had fully captured the emotion and life that she had founding wanting when seeing Titian's woodcuts. It is a beauty built on a radical reworking of what a woodcut print could be.



3. Helen Frankenthaler, *Freefall*, 1993, twelve-colour woodcut from 1 plate of 21 mahogany blocks, 1,994 x 1,537 mm (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation / DACS / Tyler Graphics, Mount Kisco, NY).



4. Helen Frankenthaler, *Madame Butterfly*, 2000, 102-colour woodcut from 46 blocks, triptych 1,060 x 2,019 mm (© Helen



Frankenthaler Foundation / ARS, NY, and DACS, London / Tyler Graphics, Mount Kisco, NY).