

## SAM FRANCIS:

The publication of his long-awaited catalogue raisonné provides the second-generation Abstract Expressionist with a first-rate reexamination



SAM FRANCIS PAINTING, 1971, **Malcolm Lubliner**  
PHOTO: © MALCOLM LUBLINER, COURTESY CRAIG KRULL GALLERY, SANTA MONICA

Exultant, improvisatory, and unabashedly sensualist, the paintings of Sam Francis (1923-1994) figure prominently in the collections of the world's major museums, yet in a sense, Francis' legacy rests in the long shadow of his immediate predecessors in the history of post-WWII abstraction. Eleven years younger than Jackson Pollock, nineteen years younger than Willem de Kooning, Francis is usually characterized as one of the world's preeminent second-generation Abstract Expressionists. While temporally accurate, "second-generation" is a description that can carry the same sort of back-handedly pejorative connotations that rub Chicagoans the wrong way when their hometown is called "America's Second City." Indeed, because Francis was younger than his elders and moved to Paris rather than to New York City to make his initial mark on the art world—because he enjoyed robust sales at an early age and did not embody the threadbare *vie bohème* that many of his New York counterparts did—and perhaps because his style itself tended toward bold primary colors and expansive compositions in marked contrast to the darker, denser, more angst-ridden sensibility of the New York School—Francis has in some circles been pigeonholed as an exemplar of a kind of "AbEx Lite." The stereotype is a caricature of the sun-kissed California *bon vivant*, a continent and a generation removed from the grit, gravitas, and psychosexual bogymen mythically exorcised in the works of Pollock & Co.

Those who champion Francis to AbEx "purists" have found themselves pivoting between the roles of aficionado and apologist: *Well, he may not be on the same playing field as the Big Boys, but among the second generation, he's gold.* To reduce Francis in this way is to sidestep his range and depth as a painter and a thinker, and his astoundingly eclectic, proto-multicultural synthesis of Post-Impressionist opticality, Tachisme, Chinese and Japanese painting and ink-drawing traditions, Zen philosophy, and thoroughly American approach to gesture.

"WHY THEN OPENED, I"  
1962-63, **Sam Francis**, 96" x 72"  
THE DORIS AND DONALD FISHER COLLECTION  
PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST, SANTA MONICA, © 2011 SAM FRANCIS FOUNDATION  
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This fall, in a move that will do much to redress misimpressions of this important painter, Francis is receiving a long-awaited and long-overdue reexamination: a thorough, probing, technologically *au courant* study, courtesy of the Sam Francis Foundation, headquartered in Glendale, California. Nearly two decades after Connie Lembark's catalogue raisonné of Francis' prints, the Foundation is releasing a "Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946-1994," published by the University of California Press. The catalogue presents the 1,855 paintings that Francis is known to have made on canvas and panel, including more than 600 works that have never before been reproduced.

For Debra Burchett-Lere, the catalogue's editor and the foundation's director, the publication caps a nearly two decade-long labor of love. She first met the artist in the mid-1980s, when she was director of Gemini G.E.L. print studio, then began working with him in 1992, two years before his death, when she and George Page were co-curators at Francis' Santa Monica-based print studio, The Litho Shop. During that period, Burchett-Lere and Francis discussed the possibility of a catalogue raisonné, but Francis was initially opposed, given his notoriously unorganized studio practices. "Unlike say, an artist like Barnett Newman," Burchett-Lere recalls, "Sam was not someone who numbered everything, wrote down the date, and had a specific chronicle. Not at all! So for me, bringing everything together in a systematic, chronological way, from this cacophony, this creative hodgepodge of a life, has been quite the challenge." After initial discussions, Francis began to warm to the idea, however, and showed Burchett-Lere a 1964 Japanese exhibition



catalogue, "Sam Francis: The Flesh of Mist," whose layout, he suggested, could serve as a general model for a future catalogue raisonné: a large, image-rich format with a poetic relationship between plates and text.

While the current catalogue—the culmination of Herculean research and authentication—does bear an overarching spiritual relationship to the Japanese book, it is very much a publication of our current moment. A boxed set, it consists of a 320-page printed volume and two Mac- and PC-compatible DVD-ROMs containing more than 2,000 color images and 2,000 black-and-white images of the artist's work and personal archives, all cross-indexed to the physical book, which can be zoomed in on in considerable detail by the reader. An online component gives readers access to updates of paintings discovered after December 2010, when the layout of the book was finalized.

"With the DVDs," Burchett-Lere says, "we've been able to include so many images that we couldn't in a book alone. And the photos themselves are not just lifeless, postcard images. I was very concerned about showing the paintings in a way where you could actually see some depth, where it wasn't just flat looking, with perfectly square edges. I wanted to be able to show that there is an edge and a shadow. If the painting is framed, you see the frame."

The editor's fact- and anecdote-packed biographical chronology of Francis complements a mellifluous and insightful essay by art historian William C. Agee. The DVDs also include complete exhibition histories, film footage of Francis painting two works from start to finish, and additional essays about his studios and technical aspects of his painting methods. Two invitation-only events will launch the catalogue, one at Sotheby's in New York on October 11, the other at Jonathan Novak Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, on October 28.

In aggregate, the catalogue shows Francis' knack for consistency of quality and scale. Without looking at the works' dimensions, it is hard to know whether a given piece is monumental or intimate; the forms have similar rhythms regardless of size. Another striking impression flows from the uncanny way Francis also was able to time-travel, as it were, through his own stylistic development. While he certainly traversed distinct phases—among them his mid-1950s evocations of Matisse's stained glass at the Chapel of the Rosary in Venice; the *Blue Balls* series of the early 1960s; the minimalist-leaning *Edge* paintings of the late 60s; the increasingly dense grid-based paintings of the 1970s and beyond; and so on. He was able to inhabit his former stylistic selves, to commune and co-habitate with his sensibilities along the continuum of his evolution and allow them to dialogue with more current insights. Rather than entering and leaving discrete periods à la Picasso or Mondrian, Francis allowed himself to skim and sluice through his own lineage, such that, for example, a 1986 work such as *My Shell Angel*, with its corridor of negative space bordered by dollops, dribbles, and estuaries of pure and mixed color, seems to spring from the same vein as, and actively converse with, the river of negative space flowing through a similar channel in the *White Line* series of the late 1950s.

This was an artist who was uniquely integrated both aesthetically and intellectually, whose formal and thematic leitmotifs appeared and recurred throughout the span of a career that bridged a diverse period in 20th-Century art. Burchett-Lere describes this period as "that radiant area between the 1940s and the '70s and beyond, which he was able to tie together with elements of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field painting, Minimalism, and the geometric abstraction of the grid paintings—and even incorporating a Pop sensibility, both chromatically and in terms of his jet-setting lifestyle. We wanted to capture this in the catalogue raisonné in a way that those of us who already know his range can revel in, and those who don't can learn from."

—RICHARD SPEER