

# Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975



**M**ORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AGO, IN THE EARLY 1950s, a very young Helen Frankenthaler first began staining thin, luminous paint onto raw canvas, exploring the implications of Jackson Pollock's all-over poured paintings in a personal language. Frankenthaler's way of simultaneously painting and drawing with delicate washes on unprimed canvas—which her colleague Morris Louis famously described as “the bridge between Pollock and what was possible”—pointed the way to a new kind of American abstraction based on expanses of radiant, uninflected hues. Color Field painting, as this approach came to be known, tests the expressive limits of abstractness—above all, to see just how much emotion and how many associations can be wrested from our varied, individualized responses to colors, both alone and in relationship to other colors. Color Field painting can be described as a translation of Henri Matisse's chromatic innovations into a brashly American dialect rooted not in appearances, as Matisse's meditations on the marriage of perception and two-dimensionality were, but rather on the characteristics of the raw materials of painting itself: color, shape, expanse, layering, and transparency. It includes some of the most powerful and beautiful pictures in the history of recent art. Yet in the wake of Post-Modernism, with its cynicism, irony, and political agendas, Color Field abstraction, with its wholehearted quest for visual impact and wordless eloquence, has been somewhat overlooked in recent years. *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975* offers an opportunity to explore and reevaluate this important aspect of American abstract painting through a selection of outstanding examples of Color Field works assembled from public and private collections.

*Color as Field* both celebrates the achievements of the Color Field painters and traces their origins, beginning with their relationship to American postwar abstraction of the 1950s. Like their immediate forebears, the Abstract Expressionists, and like most progressive artists of their generation, the Color Field painters believed that the source of creativity was the unconscious and that the

artist's role was to make the unseen visible, rather than to depict what could be seen. However, the Color Field painters were unusual in rejecting the gestural, layered, hyper-emotional approach typical of such Abstract Expressionists as Willem de Kooning and his followers. By the early 1950s, so many younger New York artists had adopted this gestural manner that critics referred to it derisively as "the Tenth Street touch." The future Color Field painters instead found stimulus in the ideas about all-overness and the primacy of color posited by the work of other Abstract Expressionists: Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock (from whom Frankenthaler said "you could depart"), Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still.

The potential impact of this version of Abstract Expressionism—with its large expanses of relatively unbroken hues and often clearly bounded shapes—on the subsequent generation can be seen in Rothko's *Number 18* (FRONT COVER) and Still's *Untitled* (FIG. 1), as well as in works by Hofmann, Gottlieb, and Motherwell. But the relationship between the older Abstract Expressionist painters and the younger Color Field painters was not simple. Motherwell's *Open 165* (FIG. 2), for example, a restrained, elegant picture, whose centralized, geometric structure is both an homage to Matisse and typical of this youngest member of the Abstract Expressionists, depends—as much as any Color Field painting—on the power of sheets of color to engage and move the viewer. Similarly, the all-over, transparent sweeps of Hofmann's *Gray Monolith* (FIG. 7) suggest that at the end of his life Hofmann was paying close attention to ideas announced by the work of his younger colleagues and, as Frankenthaler said of her former teacher, saying, "O.K. kids, this is how you do it."

At the heart of the exhibition are the pioneers of Color Field painting: Frankenthaler herself and Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, who were the first to grasp the implications of her stain technique and adapt it to their own predilections. These artists are represented by multiple works that illustrate the evolution of their personal idioms over time. Frankenthaler's explosive *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (FIG. 4),

for example, is typical of her earliest exploration of the potential of staining on raw canvas; the development of the expressive possibilities of her approach is visible in works such as the lush *Flood* (FIG. 3). Similarly, Louis's and Noland's contributions to the discussion can be tracked in early works such as Louis's mysterious Veil series and Noland's confrontational Circle series (FIG. 6), as well as in later pictures such as Louis's Unfurled series (FIG. 5), and Noland's Stripe series. Jules Olitski is also represented in depth, as a key member of the initial group who developed this uniquely American approach to abstraction; the monumental *Julius and Friends* (FIG. 8), with its glowing "field" and emphatic, defining "edge-drawing," is a prime embodiment of Olitski's famous declaration that he wished to spray color in the air and have it remain there.

Younger artists, such as Walter Darby Bannard, Larry Poons, and Frank Stella, who came of age during the ascendancy of the Color Field painters, used many of their ideas as points of departure for their own innovative investigations. Poons's *Han-San Cadence* (FIG. 9), Stella's *Moultonville II* (FIG. 10), and Bannard's *Yellow Rose #4* (FIG. 11) combine vibrant color and dispassionate, almost systematic structures. Poons's *Yellow and Brown Womb* (FIG. 12), executed almost a decade after *Han-San Cadence*, bears witness to his later abandonment of preconceived organization in favor of uninhibited methods that co-opt gravity to the painting process; as in Frankenthaler's first stain paintings, an uncanny combination of the artist's unpremeditated will and the ability of liquid color to flow seems to have determined the resulting image.

The potency of such convictions about what a painting could be can be seen in the exhibition's inclusion of a wide range of artists, many of whom worked outside of the New York area, all of whom discovered ample room for personal expression in the idea of structuring a painting with essentially unmodulated expanses of color. They include Jack Bush, Gene Davis, Ronald Davis, Friedel Dzubas, Sam Francis, and Sam Gilliam. The Canadian, Bush, in Toronto; the German-born Dzubas in the New York area; the Americans, Gene

Davis and Gilliam, in Washington, D.C.; and Francis and Ronald Davis in Los Angeles—all created idiosyncratic, powerful works in which color is the main event. But other considerations, such as unnamable, almost ungraspable images, syncopation, chance, the influence of Asian calligraphy, and density, all play a role. Bush's extraordinary ability to orchestrate a great variety of hues makes him a natural companion of a master colorist such as Noland, but the eccentric structure of many of his paintings are evidence that the Canadian colonized a territory of his own.

The connections among these artists were complex. Often the common link was their relationship, sometimes intimate, sometimes peripheral, with Clement Greenberg. The controversial critic was both a champion of the Color Field painters and a valued studio visitor for the majority of the artists associated with the movement. Greenberg's direct encounters with the work of the painters exploring the limits of color-based abstraction—which often seemed to question how much could be left out of a painting without sacrificing visual interest or expressiveness—helped him to formulate his own ideas about the course of modernism as each discipline's gradual jettisoning of everything not intrinsic to the medium. At the same time, his critical analysis of the aspirations of the Color Field painters as an extreme, disembodied, self-referential form of abstractness was crucial to how these works were perceived. The younger critic and art historian Michael Fried was both a valued studio visitor and important for articulating, in his writings of the 1960s, the desiderata of Color Field painting in terms of radical opticality—as painting that seemed to aspire to exist for the eye alone, almost without physical manifestations.

It is Greenberg who largely can be credited with announcing the existence, in the early 1960s, of increasingly widespread interest among ambitious, mostly young abstract painters in an alternative to the well-established model offered by gestural Abstract Expressionism. In 1964, the critic served as co-curator of *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, a large survey show organized by the Los Angeles Coun-

ty Museum of Art that focused on a diverse group of artists linked by their common desire to construct non-referential images out of large masses of thin, often uninflected color. Both the exhibition and Greenberg's catalogue essay essentially defined what was later known as Color Field painting, itemizing its characteristics and distinguishing it from what had come before. *Post-Painterly Abstraction* included works by Bannard, Bush, Gene Davis, Dzubas, Francis, Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, Olitski, Poons, and Stella, all of whom are represented in this exhibition, often by paintings from the same series as those seen in the seminal Los Angeles County Museum show.

When the work of the Color Field painters was first seen, as it was in *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, it seemed markedly different not only from what had preceded it, but also from that of their contemporaries, the Minimalists and the Pop artists. Today, with the clear-sightedness afforded by the passage of time, it appears that all of these artists shared formal ideas, despite the obvious differences in their conceptual bases. (Bannard's radically stripped-down paintings, such as *Yellow Rose #4* [FIG. 11], can even be interpreted as anticipating Minimalism.) The Color Field painters were not attracted to the mass-culture phenomena that fueled the Pop artists and led them to adopt the imagery and, often, the methods of advertising art. Nor did they aspire to the extreme neutrality and singularity sought by the Minimalists in their effort to make objects that appeared to be machine-made and virtually devoid of the internal relationships of most works of art. But like both the Pop artists and the Minimalists, the Color Field painters courted relatively anonymous, sleek surfaces, impersonal paint handling, and, frequently, crisp edges; the thinned-out paint with which the Color Field painters flooded their pictures often appears to have been applied without the obvious intervention of the hand and, soaked into the canvas like dye, it creates chromatic sensations almost unrelated to real substance.

For anyone who believes that political currency is a necessary component of works of art, it may be surprising to realize that the

Color Field painters were at work during the years marked by the burgeoning women’s movement, nascent gay rights activism, an escalating civil rights movement, and growing resistance to the Vietnam War, among other notable events. That there is no overt reference to such unrest in the paintings in this exhibition has led some critics to assume that these paintings affirm the status quo. Like many works of art that at first viewing apparently refuse to be about anything but themselves and their own history, they have been dismissed as empty, corporate, “merely” decorative, or, in some circles, patriarchal and imperialist—no matter how multivalent the associations they provoke with longer engagement, or how potent their ability to move or disturb. The Color Field painters, whatever their convictions, saw the studio not as a place for political effort but rather as an alternative to political and social upheavals, a place of “luxe, calme, et volupté” (richness, quietness, and pleasure)—in Charles Baudelaire’s memorable phrase. In the studio, they rigorously investigated how the purely visual could deeply affect the viewer. This exhibition provides an overview of the results of that research, which constitute a highpoint in American abstraction. *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975* aims not only to clarify misconceptions but also to underscore the significance and importance of work that tests the limits of how completely art can address our emotions and intellect through the eye, just as music does through the ear, without recourse to explication or interpretation.

**Karen Wilkin**  
*Guest Curator of the Exhibition*

FIG. 1

**CLYFFORD STILL**

*Untitled*, 1965-PH-568

Oil on canvas, 111<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 89 inches

Private collection, Denver

Photograph Denver Art Museum, 2006

© The Clyfford Still Estate

FIG. 2

**ROBERT MOTHERWELL**

*Open 165*, 1970

Acrylic on canvas, 53<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 108 inches

Collection Mr. and Mrs. David Mirvish,  
Toronto

Photograph Sean Weaver

Art © Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed

by VAGA, New York, NY

FIG. 3

**HELEN FRANKENTHALER**

*Flood*, 1967

Synthetic polymer on canvas,

124 x 140 inches

Whitney Museum of American Art,

New York; purchase, with funds from

the Friends of the Whitney Museum

of American Art (68.12)

Photograph Geoffrey Clements

© 2007 Helen Frankenthaler

FIG. 4

**HELEN FRANKENTHALER**

*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1957

Oil on canvas, 95<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 70<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

Private collection

© 2007 Helen Frankenthaler

FIG. 5

**MORRIS LOUIS**

*Theta*, 1961

Acrylic resin (Magna) on canvas,

102 x 168 inches

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston;

anonymous gift (67.623)

Photograph © 2007 Museum of Fine

Arts Boston

Art © 1961 Morris Louis

FIG. 6

**KENNETH NOLAND**

*Earthen Bound*, 1960

Acrylic on canvas,

103<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 103<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

Courtesy the artist

Art © Ken Noland/Licensed by VAGA,

New York, NY



1



2



7





3



8





4



5



9



10





6



11



12

FIG. 7

**HANS HOFMANN**

*Gray Monolith*, 1963

Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches

The Renate, Hans and Maria Hofmann Trust; courtesy Ameringer & Yohe Fine Art, New York

© 2007 The Hans Hofmann Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

FIG. 8

**JULES OLITSKI**

*Julius and Friends*, 1967

Acrylic on canvas, 71 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 149 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Private collection; courtesy Foley

Hoag LLP, Boston

Photograph Dennis Griggs

Art © Estate of Jules Olitski/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

FIG. 9

**LARRY POONS**

*Han-San Cadence*, 1963

Acrylic and fabric dye on canvas,  
72 x 144 inches

Des Moines Art Center; purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust; Nathan Emory Coffin Collection of the Des Moines Art Center (1970.19)

Photograph Michael Tropea

Art © Larry Poons/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

FIG. 10

**FRANK STELLA**

*Moultonville II*, 1966

Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 124 x 86 inches

Collection Mr. and Mrs. David Mirvish, Toronto

Photograph Sean Weaver

© 2007 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

FIG. 11

**WALTER DARBY BANNARD**

*Yellow Rose #4*, 1965

Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 62 inches

Private collection

Art © Walter Darby Bannard/Licensed

by VAGA, New York, NY

FIG. 12

**LARRY POONS**

*Yellow and Brown Womb*, 1972

Acrylic on canvas, 118 x 73 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Collection Mr. and Mrs. David Mirvish, Toronto

Photograph Sean Weaver

Art © Larry Poons/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

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## EXHIBITION ITINERARY

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Denver Art Museum  
November 9, 2007–February 3, 2008

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.  
February 29–May 26, 2008

Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville  
June 20–September 21, 2008

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### FRONT COVER:

**MARK ROTHKO**

**Number 18**, 1951

Oil on canvas, 81½ x 69⅞ inches

Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, NY (53.216)

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