

**For Immediate Release**

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***COLOR AS FIELD:***

*AMERICAN PAINTING, 1950-1975*

TO TOUR THREE AMERICAN CITIES



*New York, NY (October 12, 2007)* – The American Federation of Arts (AFA) is pleased to announce the November 2007 opening of *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950-1975*, an exciting exhibition of approximately forty magnificent paintings that mark a highpoint in American abstraction. *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950-1975* aims 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.

“The great Color Field paintings of the 1950s, ‘60s, and early ‘70s display an exquisite beauty and vitality, and the AFA is delighted to be presenting this overdue reassessment of one of the crowning achievements of postwar American abstract art,” said Julia Brown, Director of the AFA.

More than half a century has passed since Helen Frankenthaler first began staining thin, luminous paint into raw canvas, translating the implications of Jackson Pollock’s all-over poured paintings into a personal language. Frankenthaler’s way of simultaneously painting and drawing with delicate washes on unprimed canvas—famously described by Morris Louis 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.

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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  
© 1961 Morris Louis

The paintings compel attention by their ravishing color, large scale, and confrontational compositions such as flowing sheets or concentric rings of brilliant hues, discrete bands, or syncopated dots. For all their commanding presence, however, these paintings are also uncannily disembodied; the zones of color seem to have come into being almost independently of the hand.



Color Field painting, as this approach came to be known, 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. *Color as Field* offers an opportunity to reevaluate this important aspect of American abstract painting.

The exhibition begins by tracing the origins of Color Field painting in American postwar abstraction of the 1950s, as a rejection of the gestural, layered, hyper-emotional approach typical of Willem de Kooning and his followers and, at the same time, as a development and expansion of ideas about all-overness and the



primacy of color posited by the work of other members of the Abstract Expressionist generation, such as Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. In painterly abstraction, sweeping pigment over underlying layers created an appearance of spontaneity and endless mutability, but it often muddied color. Such overlapping and muddying is conspicuously absent in the thinly painted, economical canvases of Rothko and Newman and (in different ways) in the work of Gottlieb, Hofmann, Motherwell, and Still, where other concerns—especially color relationships—take precedence. These paintings were crucial to the next generation, the Color Field painters,

pointing the way to a new abstraction. It can be argued, in fact, that in their later work, Gottlieb, Hofmann, and Motherwell participated fully in the new color-based approach they had prefigured. Because of their pivotal roles as precursors—in the 1950s and later as de facto participants in the movement—Gottlieb, Hofmann, Motherwell, and Rothko are included in the exhibition.

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Helen Frankenthaler, *Off White Square*, 1973  
Acrylic on canvas, 79 1/2 x 235 inches  
Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York; Bernard Jacobson  
Gallery, London; Leslie Feely Fine Art, New York  
© 2007 Helen Frankenthaler

Adolph Gottlieb, *Sentinel*, 1951  
Oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches  
Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York  
Photograph Jordan Tinker  
Art © Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation/Licensed by  
VAGA, New York, NY



The next section of the exhibition focuses on the artists first associated with Color Field painting: Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski. These painters, along with most of their colleagues, quickly began to exploit the properties of newly developed acrylic paint after initially working in thinned-out oil paint. The rapidly changing technology of acrylic permitted large expanses of color to be both intense and very thin, allowing the Color Field painters to experiment with extremes of economy and clarity in their paint handling and resulting in the characteristic freshness and apparent directness of the best work of the period. Frankenthaler led the way with her large, transparent stain paintings that were as direct as watercolors but as commanding as any major works on canvas. Louis and Noland soon responded to the implications of Frankenthaler's method, each, in a personal way, exploring the structural possibilities of all-overness, clarity, and symmetry, as well as the expressive possibilities of color. By the early 1960s, even more extreme pictorial ideas were probed by their friend Olitski, in his seamless floods of luminous, sprayed hues. Over time, these artists continued to create fresh formats and challenges for themselves, testing the limits of how much meaning could be wrested from the inspired placement of color.

The exhibition concludes with an exploration of a number of works completed from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. At the time, many gifted, ambitious painters were exploring closely related ideas about making color a driving force among them, Walter Darby Bannard, Jack Bush, Gene Davis, Friedel Dzubas, Ronald Davis, Sam Francis, Sam Gilliam, Larry Poons, and Frank Stella. The inclusion of their work in this exhibition, along with that of their colleagues, broadens the view of the ideas about color, materiality, and process that engaged many of the most adventurous painters of the time.



Collectively, these works announce the individuality and originality of the practitioners of color-based abstraction while exposing the shared concerns and shared assumptions that connected—however loosely—this wide-ranging group of painters.

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Kenneth Noland, *Earthen Bound*, 1960  
Acrylic on canvas, 103 1/2 x 103 1/2 inches  
Courtesy the artist  
Art © Ken Noland/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Jules Olitski, *Cleopatra Flesh*, 1962  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 104 x 90 inches  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of G. David  
Thompson, 1964 (262.1964)  
Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by  
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Art © Jules Olitski/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

## **Exhibition Itinerary**

Denver Art Museum Denver, Colorado	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, Tennessee	June 20–September 21, 2008

*Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975* was organized by the American Federation of Arts.

This exhibition is made possible, in part, by grants from the Henry Luce Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts as part of American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius.

**Publication:** *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975* is accompanied by a fully illustrated 127-page catalogue published by the American Federation of Arts in association with Yale University Press, and includes essays by Ms. Wilkin and Carl Belz, Director Emeritus of the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, who has organized a number of important exhibitions of artists associated with the Color Field movement.

**American Federation of Arts:** The AFA is a nonprofit institution that organizes art exhibitions for presentation in museums around the world, publishes exhibition catalogues, and develops educational materials and programs. For more information on the AFA, please visit [www.afaweb.org](http://www.afaweb.org).

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