

# bernard jacobson gallery

## Sam Francis

February – March 2023

To celebrate the centenary of his birth, Bernard Jacobson Gallery presents an exhibition of paintings, drawings, and prints by the great American painter Sam Francis (1923 – 1994). The selected works display Francis's personal style of abstraction that developed from the influence of Abstract Expressionism, Impressionism, early twentieth-century French artists, and Japanese art.

Born in 1923 in San Mateo, California, Francis first began painting as a form of physical therapy while hospitalised from 1945 to 1947 with spinal tuberculosis. Francis had paused his studies at the University of California, Berkeley, to join the Army Air Corps in 1943, and pain following a flight training accident eventually led to his spinal tuberculosis diagnosis. Once out of the hospital, Francis returned to Berkeley and abandoned the medical studies that he began before the war in favour of art. After graduating from Berkeley in 1950, Francis moved to Paris, where his encounters with works by artists such as Henri Matisse and Claude Monet encouraged him to experiment with colour and light.

In Paris, Francis immersed himself in the creative networks of the city and joined a highly global community of artists, writers, art critics, curators, and collectors. Surrounded by grey Parisian skies, in his early months in the city, Francis created muted, atmospheric compositions that differ from the highly colourful works that later became his signature. The former approach is exemplified by *Untitled (SF50-062)*, in which Francis absorbs viewers in an ambiguous space with biomorphic shapes as he investigates the substance of light. Vibrant colours soon dominated Francis's compositions, as in works such as *Untitled (SF57-001)*.

After seven productive years in Paris, Francis travelled extensively between 1957 and 1960, which solidified his international recognition. He stopped in New York, Mexico City, California, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Bangkok, among other places. His first visit to Tokyo in 1957 lasted two and a half months, and he would later return to the city on numerous occasions. As a result of Francis's time spent and relationships developed in Japan, his works have often been interpreted in dialogue with Japanese culture and Zen teachings such as the concept of the *ma* – the void or empty space. In works such as *Untitled (SF64-085)* from 1964, the empty space at the centre of the composition evokes a sense of infinity, inviting viewers to reflect on what lies beyond and within sight. The vivid colours that mark the work's edges emphasise the emptiness of the centre. This approach recurs in Francis's work throughout the 1960s, forming his *Edge* series. Francis's explanation of his *Edge* works highlights their meditative effect: 'The space at the centre of these paintings is reserved for you'.

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In works such as *Blue Balls (SF62-128)* from 1962, the action moves from the edge to the centre, where blue circular forms command the composition. Yet, white space remains important as it supports the floating, cell-like shapes which appear often in Francis's oeuvre. The work's title references the pain and testicular swelling that Francis experienced as a symptom of his renal tuberculosis, with which he was diagnosed in 1961.

During the 1970s, Francis reduced the size of his voids as he experimented with bands of colour and grid-like structures. In works such as *E V*, Francis presents viewers with white spaces that invite reflection, but the spaces are less intimidating compared to his *Edge* works. In his 1978 lithograph *Untitled*, gestural drips and bold colours disrupt both the precision of his perpendicular lines and the white spaces that construct the grid. The result is a balance of freedom and restraint, and colour and light. The light adds a sense of openness that breaks up the grid, and in these empty spaces, viewers are again urged to contemplate what lies within and beyond the picture plane. By the 1980s, Francis moved away from the grid, which he replaced with a renewed interest in free-flowing forms. During this period, he also depicted snakes on numerous occasions, as exemplified by his 1990 monoprint *Untitled*. As his health deteriorated, he continued painting with vigour until his passing in 1994.

## **PRESS ENQUIRIES**

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