

bernard jacobson gallery

Sam Francis Works on Paper

11th November – 19th December 2009

'This is great! People can enter this painting', was Sazo Idemitsu's first reaction to Sam Francis' work, when he encountered the newly finished White Line hanging on the walls of New York's Chelsea Hotel, in 1959. It was in the wake of this encounter that the Japanese collector set about amassing an unrivalled body of Francis' work and looking at the works on paper displayed at Bernard Jacobson Gallery this November it is easy to share his enthusiasm. Ranging across close to thirty years of practice the works present a thoroughly absorbing prospect - as refined as it is seductive.

Francis was born in 1923 in San Mateo, California and began to paint as occupational therapy whilst recovering from severe back injuries sustained as a fighter pilot in the Second World War. Between 1944-46, confined to convalescence in Californian hospitals, Francis made studies of the shifting light of the passing day falling across the neutral confines of his wards - bringing life to the immaterial passage of light in a manner that can be traced right through to his final works. By the time he was discharged it was to begin a degree in painting rather than complete his war-interrupted studies in Botany, Medicine and Psychology that Francis returned to University of California, Berkley.

In 1950, spurred on by his complementary studies of Art History, Francis decided to go to Paris and enrolled at Fernand Leger's private academy. Over the next ten years he split his time between Paris, New York and Japan, absorbing influences from the New York School, Monet, Matisse, Bonnard, Still, French Tachistes and Zen calligraphers. His work, however, remains singular in its ability to fuse these influences with an approach to light and colour, structure and composition, which is uniquely his own. If this has made Francis difficult to place neatly within the narratives of West Coast American Art, New York or Parisian Schools, it has also led to the exhilarating experiential pleasure Idemitsu discovered on the walls of that celebrated melting pot - the Chelsea Hotel - in the late 1950s.

Whilst Francis made many works on canvas, it is arguably on paper - with its direct luminosity and partial absorbance of pigment - that his work really comes into its own. Here, against the

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plain white ground, the interplay of gesture and colour, pigment and light, take on a dynamic relation at once exuberant and elemental, theatrical and poetic, which not only allows, but demands, that the viewer enter the works and partake in their material flow.

The show offers a cross-section of works on paper by this giant of the American scene and will run from November 11th.