

bernard jacobson gallery

Helen Frankenthaler

Paintings 1959 - 2002

29th May – 5th July 2008

'A painting too beautiful, to use an old fashioned word, to regard merely as a historical moment in the march forward of the modernists, and too compelling, to see only as a work that influenced some important artists to begin staining canvas. This is as beautiful as painting gets.' - Arthur Danto, 1994 (on *Mountains and the Sea*, by Helen Frankenthaler, 1952)

Born in 1928, and shooting to prominence in the bustling New York scene of the 1950s, Helen Frankenthaler has forged a career that has consistently confirmed her status as one of the giants of Modernist painting whilst eschewing the sense of formal and historical detachment that such a position may at times seem to confer. Rightly, her name will always be associated with the introduction of the stain painting technique that she began to employ in her works of the early 1950s, by absorbing thinned layers of pigment into un-primed canvases. Not only did such a technique denote a decisive step in the methodological narrative of American post-war abstraction; marking at once the genesis of the 'Color Field' painting of the coming decade and a triumphant postscript to the Abstract Expressionist tradition of the preceding one, but it also allowed her to explore new realms of visual possibilities. As John Elderfield has observed of her work, 'the staining of paint seems to distance and disembodify the images it creates so that irrespective of their brightness, they seem strangely to be removed from the sharply practical world of real objects and events. Not as much objects as shadows or echoes of objects'.

Such innovation, however, marks the departure point for a blossoming career rather than the crowning achievement of a historical moment, to which an overly formalist account might reduce it. Frankenthaler's works on display at Bernard Jacobson Gallery, which date from 1959 to 2002, bear testament to the diverse range of means Frankenthaler has employed to give expression to the 'amorphous inner-world perspectives', she has consistently made the subject of her works. From the complex painterly surfaces of *Spellbound*, 1991 or *Maelstrom*, 1992 to the elegant simplicity of *Mountain Pool*, 1963, or the flattened, more graphic clarity of *Red Hot*, 2002, the works display a virtuoso exploration of the material possibilities of paint that cannot but give weight to Anthony Caro's assertion that Frankenthaler is indeed, 'a

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painters' painter'. Throughout, however, her ability to create sophisticated surface dynamics, nuanced spatial ambiguities and sumptuous colour harmonies suffused in radiant light, is used to evoke an ambitious complex of atmospheric allusions rather than as an end in itself. Gentle and resonant, the works draw the viewer into the world of their internal play and irresolute meanings.

In her striving for technical advancement in the service of heightened self-expression, Frankenthaler is undoubtedly deeply indebted to the formalist/New York School discourse in which she was immersed both during her schooling at Bennington College, Vermont, in the late '40s and her New York artistic circles of the '50s. Her works are also enriched, however, by a rare ability to absorb thoroughly the lessons of tradition; be it the harmonious compositions of Piero della Francesca or the spatial complexities of Manet or the Cubists. As such, the gestural abstraction of the preceding generation of Abstract Expressionists is tempered by a more considered and nuanced approach to compositional matters, and a bridge established between American post war avant-gardism and the tradition from which it ultimately descends. This exhibition offers a fantastic opportunity to view rarely seen works from throughout her career.