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‘No Rules: Helen Frankenthaler Woodcuts’ and ‘As in Nature: Helen Frankenthaler Paintings’ Reviews: In the Restless Innovator’s Studio
Two focused exhibitions reveal the artist’s relentless urge to experiment.

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Frankenthaler’s ‘Abstract Landscape’ (1951) PHOTO: 2017 HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

“The only rule,” Helen Frankenthaler often said, “is that there are no rules,” a dictum reflected in her notable adventurousness in the studio. Over her long working life—born in 1928, she died in 2011—she made paintings, works on paper and sculptures; worked in ceramic; designed ballet sets and costumes; and explored a wide gamut of printmaking techniques—among other things.

This summer, two concurrent exhibitions at the Clark Art Institute offer a glimpse into this restless innovator’s responses to different materials, approaches and methods. “No Rules: Helen Frankenthaler Woodcuts,” organized by Jay A. Clarke, the Clark’s curator of prints, drawings and photographs, and installed in the Manton Center, surveys the artist’s transformative use of a time-honored medium through 17 large-scale works, from her first woodcut, made in 1973, to her last, printed in 2009. The title comes from an admonition in a 1994 interview to “Go against the rules or ignore the rules, that is what invention is about.” In the Tadao Ando-designed Lunder Center at Stone Hill, “As in Nature: Helen Frankenthaler Paintings” assembles 12 major canvases from 1951 to 1992 for a staccato overview of her evolution, organized by guest curator Alexandra Schwartz. Both exhibitions, which bring together works from the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, the Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection, and the Williams College Museum of Art, are spectacular.

Frankenthaler relished the challenges and exchanges of ideas inherent in the collaborative printmaking process. Excited by the unexpected and by new discoveries, she used multiple proofs to explore possibilities. Even when working with traditionally trained Japanese woodcut artisans, she was deeply involved, from start to finish, rather than making images for “translation,” as was usual. As a result, her woodcuts (like all her prints) enlarge the boundaries of the discipline. They depend on unprecedented contrasts of transparency and opacity, pools of layered color, delicate drawing, and gestures usually associated with painting, played against woodgrain and a variety of paper textures.



Frankenthaler's 'Madame Butterfly' (2000) PHOTO: 2017 HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Among the most striking works in “No Rules” are the deceptively economical “Essence Mulberry” (1977), with its stand-off between saturated red-purple and the warm tan of handmade paper, and the virtuoso “Madame Butterfly” (2000), with its subtle vertical divisions, like memories of the folds of a Japanese screen, and fluid runs of transparent color; this 6 1/2-foot-wide masterwork, we learn, required 102 colors, 46 woodblocks, and three sheets of paper. Six gorgeous prints from the series “Tales of Genji” (1998), each roughly 4 feet square, are equally arresting, with their “painterly” compositions and luminous hues, produced with anything from 34 to 53 colors and 12 to 21 blocks, plus stencils. The ravishing works in “No Rules” both affirm Frankenthaler’s pre-eminence as a printmaker and permanently alter our conception of what a woodcut can be.



Frankenthaler's 'Essence Mulberry' (1977) PHOTO: 2017 HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

“As in Nature” allows us to follow some of Frankenthaler’s dominant painting concerns over five decades, beginning with the Miró and De Kooning-influenced “Abstract Landscape” (1951), a muscular, airy improvisation by an ambitious 22-year-old Bennington graduate who was pitting herself against the best art on view in her native New York and already finding her own voice. We see her preternatural alertness to the expressive character of her materials in early paintings breathed into being with her influential method of staining with thinned-out oil paint, and in crisper, more nuanced, later compositions in acrylic. We admire the lyrical, operatic Frankenthaler in the enormous, radiant “Off White Square” (1973), with its sweeps of pink, mauve-gray and yellow animated by the pulse between the eponymous white square and a half-hidden darker one. (Frankenthaler always described herself as “a space-maker.”) We meet the tough, truculent painter of the ocean-gray “Tethys” (1981), with its hovering, dense ovals, the playful author of the sharp-edged “Scorpio” (1987), with its discs and bubbles, and the brooding creator of the stormy, thickly brushed “Barometer” (1992), one of her last canvases.



Frankenthaler's 'Tales of Genji I' (1998) PHOTO: 2017 HELEN FRANKENTHALER FOUNDATION, INC./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Occasionally, as is typical of Frankenthaler, elusive images seem to assert themselves and then subside into the abstract construction of unnameable hues. The exhibition's curator interprets this as evidence of a struggle between abstraction and references to nature, an idea she supports by identifying presumed allusions to landscape in the paintings, prompted by Frankenthaler's titles. (In fact, the artist attached titles after the fact, choosing them from an ongoing list of possibilities.) As a thesis, this view is somewhat over-determined. That Frankenthaler was acutely aware of everything around her, both in nature and the built-environment, among many other things, is hardly news. Neither is the fact that her feelings about experiences of all kinds informed her work, as is true for many artists. But both "No Rules" and "As in Nature" are full of wonderful works to be studied and savored. For nature, there are the Clark's walking trails through the Berkshire landscape.