Hirshhorn Presents “Gravity’s Edge”

Works from the Collection Offer an Expanded View of Color Field Painting

One of a series of exhibitions drawn from the collection of the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in celebration of the museum’s 40th anniversary, “Gravity’s Edge,” running Feb. 7 through June 15, offers an expanded view of Color Field painting. Spanning the period 1959 to 1978 and featuring works by canonical East Coast Color Field painters such as Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, the exhibition also includes paintings and works on paper by California-based artist Sam Francis and self-described “abstract phenomenist” Paul Jenkins, as well as sculptures by Lynda Benglis and Anne Truitt. The exhibition’s title refers to its two main themes: the exploration of the force of gravity as a determining factor in artistic production and the increasing attention paid to the edge as a compelling aspect of the structure and perception of an artwork.

In the 1950s and 1960s a generation of American abstract painters turned away from the painterly emphasis of Abstract Expressionism, rejecting the primacy of self-expression and the effects of the brush. A pivotal figure in this development was Helen Frankenthaler (American, b. New York City, 1928–2011), who in the early 1950s pioneered the staining of large fields of color into raw, unprimed canvas. Represented in the current exhibition by the later “Indian Summer” (1967), Frankenthaler served as an inspiration for Morris Louis (American, b. Baltimore, Maryland, 1912–1962) and Kenneth Noland (American, b. Asheville, North Carolina, 1924–2010). In 1953, the two men, based in Washington, D.C., visited the younger painter’s New York studio at the urging of Clement Greenberg, the critic who in 1964 assembled an exhibition of the work of these three artists and 28 others under the rubric of “post-painterly abstraction,” a category that overlapped significantly with Color Field painting.
The best-known exponent of Color Field painting was Noland, whose series explored in depth several fundamental forms: concentric circles, diamonds and horizontal stripes, for example. “Dusk” (1963), from Noland’s series of chevron paintings, is characteristic of the importance of shape (in this case a nested group of vees) as neither a property of the stretched canvas nor of any depicted object, but as an assertive entity unto itself. The combination of thinned acrylic paint and unprimed canvas allowed Noland little room for accident; because mistakes could not be fixed, he referred to these as “one-shot” paintings.

Working in a studio so small that he would never see most of his paintings stretched and displayed, Louis manipulated his canvases by hand, guiding rivulets of thinned acrylic as they ran down the fabric, soaking into its fibers. His Unfurled series features bands of color streaming from the left and right sides of the canvas into the unbroken expanse of the vast, untouched middle. “Delta Theta” (1961) is joined for the first time at the museum by “Gamma Pi” (1960), a recent acquisition that has just undergone conservation.

It was the cascading color washes of the paintings of Louis’ Veil series, such as “Buskin” (1959), that inspired Paul Jenkins (American, b. Kansas City, Missouri, 1923–2012), a figure not commonly grouped with Color Field painters. In works such as “Phenomena Reverse Spell” (1963), however, it is evident that here, too, paint is a physical entity with weight and momentum, having been guided into luminous sheets of color by Jenkins’ ivory knife, one of the artist’s favorite tools. An international figure who moved between New York and Paris, Jenkins explored Goethe’s color theories in prismatic works such as “Phenomena Tibetan Banner” (1973), “Phenomena Voyager” (1972) and “Phenomena Heart of the Matter” (1972).

The puddle-thin sculpture “Corner Piece” (1969) by Lynda Benglis (American, b. Lake Charles, Louisiana, 1941) is a solidified swirl of latex paint that seemingly flows out from the corner formed by two walls. It offers a radically different perspective on the physicality of color, the paint being both subject to gravity as it dried and shaped by its relation to the hard edges that surround it.

A West Coast painter who showed and worked often in Europe and Japan, Sam Francis (American, b. San Mateo, California, 1923–1994) became known for an individual style of abstraction characterized by exuberant cell-like forms. The ribald, punning title of “Blue Balls” (1962)—a reference to the artist’s recuperation from renal tuberculosis—belie’s the weightless disposition of blue forms that appear to float outward from the center of the canvas. In the intimately scaled gouache and watercolor “Untitled (Mako’s Rain)” (1965), Francis pushes imagery further out toward the edges of the picture plane, a process that culminates in “Untitled” (1967), in which all pigment is restricted to
short strips around part of the perimeter of a large rectangle of white gesso, as though an Abstract Expressionist allover composition had been emptied out.

Noland’s “Rich Rhythm” (1978) furthers his explorations of shape, which by this point in his development had extended to the employment of idiosyncratically shaped canvases. The linen support is an irregular octagon; parallel bands of color appoint every other side, discrete units suggesting lines that could intersect invisibly beyond the boundaries of the painting. “Night Naiad” (1977) by Anne Truitt (American, b. Baltimore, Maryland, 1921–2004) takes the exhibition’s expanded consideration of Color Field painting into three full dimensions. One of the artist’s well-known abstract columns, the work tests perception by engaging both body and mind. As Truitt observed of the “narrative” nature of her art, “The emotional impact of the work depends on memories accumulated as one walks around the sculpture.”

Ultimately, rather than reinforcing an art historical divide between gestural and geometric abstraction, the exhibition proposes a heightened sculptural and phenomenological sensibility that connects painting across diverse media and geographic regions.

“Oh Gravity’s Edge” is organized by assistant curator Mika Yoshitake.

**About the Hirshhorn**

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Smithsonian’s museum of international modern and contemporary art, has nearly 12,000 paintings, sculptures, photographs, mixed-media installations, works on paper and new media works in its collection. The Hirshhorn presents diverse exhibitions and offers an array of public programs that explore modern and contemporary art. Located at Independence Avenue and Seventh Street S.W., the museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). Admission to the galleries and special programs is free. For more information about exhibitions and events, visit [hirshhorn.si.edu](http://hirshhorn.si.edu). Follow the Hirshhorn on Facebook at [facebook.com/hirshhorn](http://facebook.com/hirshhorn), on Twitter at [twitter.com/hirshhorn](http://twitter.com/hirshhorn) and on Tumblr at [hirshhorn.tumblr.com](http://hirshhorn.tumblr.com). Or sign up for the museum’s eBlasts at [hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/social-media](http://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/social-media). To request accessibility services, contact Kristy Maruca at marucak@si.edu or (202) 633-2796, preferably two weeks in advance.

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