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Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty

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**About the author(s)**


was Reader in Cultural Theory at the University of Huddersfield until 2021. In 2007 she published the book *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting history, writing painting*.


Cover image: **Fig. 6** *Cedar Hill*, by Helen Frankenthaler. 1983. Ten-colour woodcut from thirteen blocks, five mahogany and eight linden, on light pink Mingei Momo handmade paper, 51.4 by 62.9 cm. (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation; Artist Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; Crown Point Press, California; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).

# Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty

by Alison Rowley • 10.11.2021

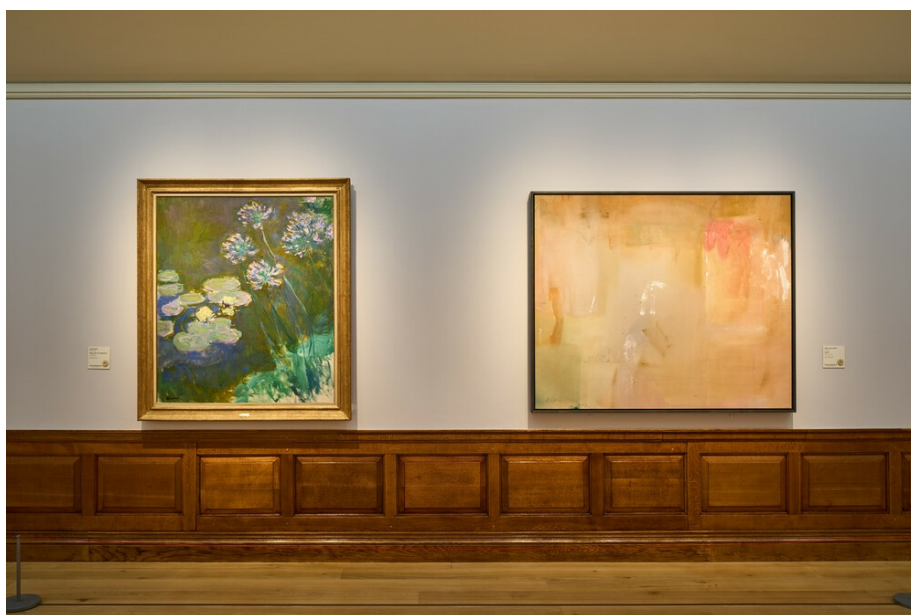
It is rare in the United Kingdom to have the opportunity to study a significant body of work by the American artist Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011). The last time this was possible was in 2014, when the J.M.W. Turner scholar James Hamilton curated the exhibition *Making Painting: Helen Frankenthaler and J.M.W. Turner* at Turner Contemporary, Margate. Citing the idea that their work ‘shared fundamental qualities in the use of paint, colour and form’, Hamilton brought together twenty-four of Frankenthaler’s Abstract Expressionist paintings and a selection of Turner’s works.

An echo of that exhibition can be found in *Radical Beauty* at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, in the form of an additional display that places Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies and Agapanthus* (1914–17) in dialogue with Frankenthaler’s 1979 painting *Feather* . <sup>1</sup> The pairing introduces the importance of the relationship between tradition and innovation in Frankenthaler’s oeuvre. This is also at the forefront of the main exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery, which is dedicated to the artist’s woodcuts. The exhibition’s five rooms are arranged thematically, focusing on process-driven elements of Frankenthaler’s experiments in printmaking. In particular, there is an emphasis on the collaboration between the artist, master printmakers and skilled technicians, and their collective practical knowledge of the history, possibilities and limitations of the medium.

At one end of the five galleries is the working proof and the final print of *Madame Butterfly* , a 102-colour woodcut made from forty-six blocks. The work – mural-like in scale at over two metres wide, and featuring surprisingly fluid, painterly forms – defies preconceived notions of what can be achieved with the woodblock technique. Although the work appears to be an effortless translation of the pooling and soaking technique pioneered by Frankenthaler in her paintings of the early 1950s, the technical description in the catalogue reveals the hours of labour involved in its production: it was created over the course of one year. At the other end of the galleries hangs the much smaller *East and Beyond* (1973), the artist’s first woodblock print. Of the thirty-six works included in the exhibition, this conveys the purest confluence of the flowing, open shapes of her paintings, and the colour and formal qualities of the Japanese tradition of ukiyo-e printmaking, to which the artist was drawn. Dating from the Edo period (1615–1868), ‘ukiyo-e’ translates as ‘floating world’; prints



typically depict female actors, sumo wrestlers, scenes from folk tales, travel scenes and landscapes.



**Fig. 1** Installation view of *Frankenthaler x Monet* at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, 2021. (Photograph Alick Cotterill).

Included in the room titled 'Process' are a series of working proofs for two additional prints made in the 1970s: *Savage Breeze* (1974) and *Essence Mulberry* **FIG.3**. These proofs provide insight into the development of the print as it moves towards its final state. *Essence Mulberry* is notably closest to the traditions and characteristics of ukiyo-e printmaking. Six proofs with handwritten annotations are shown alongside the final print. Printed on Gampi handmade paper and incorporating juice from the berries of a mulberry tree, the works call to mind Hiroshige's ukiyo-e series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (1856–59). By comparison, the six prints titled *Tales of Genji* **FIG.4** **FIG.5** – Frankenthaler's homage to the eleventh-century story by the Japanese writer Murasaki Shikibu – seek to replicate the fluidity of the artist's soak-stain method of painting. Although this is a significant technical achievement, the results are less compelling than those in which there is a closer engagement with the Japanese tradition, as in the remarkable *Cedar Hill* **FIG.6** – the smallest print in the exhibition and arguably the most outstanding. The print was made in Kyoto, where Frankenthaler worked with the wood carver Reizo Monju and the master printer Tadashi Toda.

Whereas *Essence Mulberry* refers to ukiyo-e works in tangible ways, such as shape and composition, in *Cedar Hill* Frankenthaler reinvented the tradition in her own vocabulary. Here, fluent forms in red and green that resemble the edges of small waves float on a yellow-blue ground, which is textured by the grain of the woodblock. The print appears effortless, as though it was miraculously breathed onto the paper all in one smooth motion.

Despite this, the catalogue entry details the time-consuming technical reality of its process: 'a ten colour woodcut from 13 blocks, five mahogany and eight linden' (p.35). In this respect it achieves the quality Frankenthaler most valued in her work: apparent spontaneity. At the other end of the technical spectrum, the exhibition includes the monoprints *Grove* and *The Clearing*, both made in 1991, which are closer to the lithographs of natural forms made by Graham Sutherland in England in the late 1970s.

A film installed in the rotunda at the centre of the exhibition offers a glimpse of the printmaking process, showing Frankenthaler at work with the American master printmaker Kenneth Tyler and his team at Tyler Graphics, New York, a studio renowned for producing prints with such leading American painters as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Tyler retired from printing in 2000 – the same year that Frankenthaler's *Madame Butterfly* was completed. Throughout the exhibition, there are frequent reminders that Frankenthaler's intentions, and the final prints that we encounter in the gallery, were dependent on collaborative activity.



**Fig. 2** *Madame Butterfly* (triptych), by Helen Frankenthaler. 2000. 102-colour woodcut from forty-six blocks of birch, maple, lauan and fir on one sheet of light sienna and two sheets of sienna TGL handmade paper, 106 by 201.9 cm. (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation; Artist Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; Tyler Graphic Ltd., Mount Kisco, New York; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).

The exhibition catalogue is itself an object of beauty, including high-quality colour reproductions and foldouts of the progression of working proofs for *Savage Breeze* and *Essence Mulberry*, as well as the working proof and final print of *Madame Butterfly*. It also includes an extract from a lecture about woodcuts that Frankenthaler delivered to the Drawing and Print Club / Founders Society at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1977. That year the institute's programme included the touring exhibition *Titian and the Venetian Woodcut*, which had been initiated by the International Exhibitions Foundation.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition had a

profound impact on Frankenthaler, when she realised her displeasure at seeing Titian's prints rather than paintings: 'I saw the exhibition of *Titian and the Venetian Woodcut*, and I was disappointed. Something went dead, and the disappointment worried me' (p.21). This response raised questions for the artist and she goes on to describe the experience of working in a new medium. She detailed how she learnt to draw with a jigsaw in order to cut woodblocks to the shapes she wanted and how she mixed the colours herself; she also acknowledged the role of expert printers in judging pressure and registration to produce the results she sought to achieve.

To be radical is to change the fundamental nature of something. As such, *Madame Butterfly* apart, the title perhaps sets up a hyperbolic premise for this exhibition. Overall, it is an exceptional and welcome display of a lesser-known aspect of Frankenthaler's activity; it is there to be studied and enjoyed. There is no doubt about the beauty of the exhibition, but it just falls short of being radical.



**Fig. 3** *Essence Mulberry, Trial Proof 19*, by Helen Frankenthaler. 1977. Woodcut proof of blocks one and two, alternative block A, and uncorrected blocks three and four, all inverted, printed on buff Maniai Gampi handmade paper, 100.3 by 47 cm. (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation; Artist Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; Tyler Graphic Ltd., Bedford Village, New York; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).





**Fig. 4** *Tales of Genji III*, from the series *Tales of Genji*, by Helen Frankenthaler. 1998. Fifty-three colour woodcut from eighteen blocks and two stencils on grey TGL handmade paper, 119.4 by 106.7 cm. (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation; Artist Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; Tyler Graphic Ltd., Mount Kisco, New York; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).





Fig. 5 *Tales of Genji V*, from the series *Tales of Genji*, by Helen Frankenthaler. 1998. Forty-nine colour woodcut from twenty-one blocks of maple and mahogany and one stencil on light rust TGL handmade paper, 106.7 by 119.4 cm. (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation; Artist Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; Tyler Graphic Ltd., Mount Kisco, New York; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).

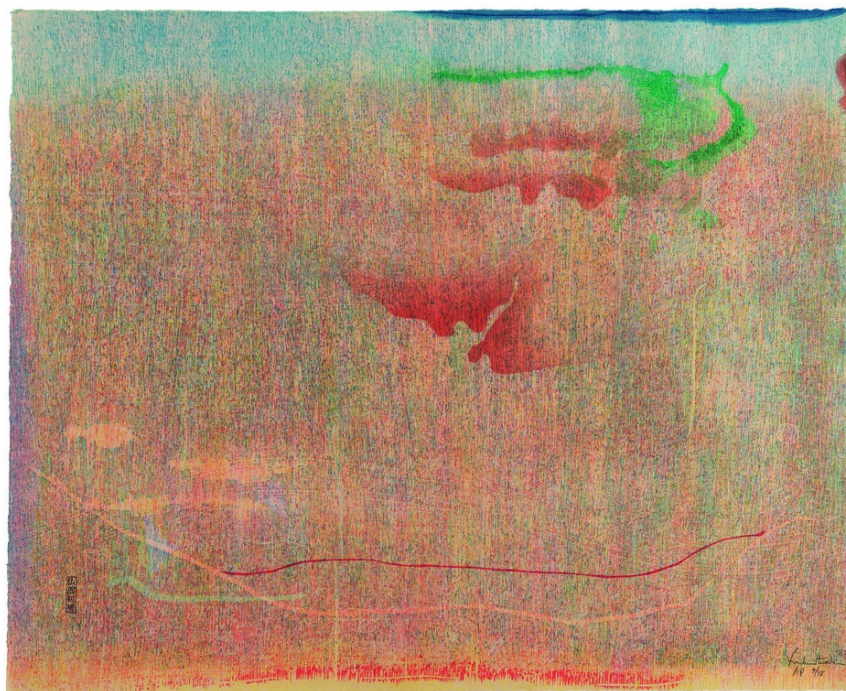


Fig. 6 *Cedar Hill*, by Helen Frankenthaler. 1983. Ten-colour woodcut from

thirteen blocks, five mahogany and eight linden, on light pink Mingei Momo handmade paper, 51.4 by 62.9 cm. (© Helen Frankenthaler Foundation; Artist Rights Society, New York, and DACS, London; Crown Point Press, California; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).

**Exhibition details**     **Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty**  
Dulwich Picture Gallery, London  
15th September 2021–18th April 2022

## Footnotes

- 1**     Catalogue: *Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty*. By Jennifer Scott and Jane Findlay. 73 pp. incl. 54 col. + 3 b. & w. ill. (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London), £25. ISBN 978-1-898-51945-4. Shown in conjunction with the exhibition is the additional display *Monet x Frankenthaler*, which brings together Monet's *Water Lilies and Agapanthus* and Frankenthaler's painting *Feather* (1979). It is the first time that Monet's *Water Lilies and Agapanthus* has been shown in the UK.
- 2**     D. Rosand and M. Muraro: *Titian and the Venetian Woodcut*, Washington (National Gallery), Dallas (Museum of Arts) and Detroit (Institute of Arts), 1976–77.

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