

COLOUR IN SPACE: SAM FRANCIS

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“The process of painting is one of devotion to that image. The illusion is what you make of it . . . each painting is like my body print, taken at different moments of my life.”

—Sam Francis

Samuel “Sam” Lewis Francis (1923–1994) is one of the most internationally acclaimed American painters of his generation. With a career spanning five decades, from the late 1940s to the early 1990s, Francis’s oeuvre derived inspiration from the French Impressionists and Fauvists, San Francisco Bay Area Modernists, and ancient and contemporary Asian scroll and sumi-e artworks. Francis’s paintings balance the artist’s ability to capture light, colour, and gestural energy in ways that fuel our imagination.

Pearl Lam Galleries’ presentation is the first gallery exhibition in Hong Kong to feature Francis’s works on paper and canvas. The show offers an abridged view of the artist’s colourful oeuvre with a compilation of his early *Cellular* paintings, the *Blue Balls* and *Edge* paintings of the 1960s, the *Grids* and *Mandalas* of the 1970s, the *Archetypal* paintings of the 1980s, and the powerful *Last Works* completed in the summer of 1994, months before his death. This exhibition provides a unique opportunity to enter Francis’s world and experience his moments in time, to join in his exploration of infinite space, and to question the dualities of the universe that we know and imagine. His works are infused with universal concepts in their balance between the physical and the spiritual, the material and the immaterial, mind and body, man and nature. His paintings reveal themselves through their silence with areas of white space and light-filled voids for meditation and contemplation.

Born on 25 June, 1923, in San Mateo, California, Francis spent his early years in the San Francisco Bay Area and as a teenager loved to read, especially books on science and philosophy. He began his college studies at the University of California, Berkeley, studying medicine and botany, but with the onset of World War II, he left school in 1943 to become a fighter pilot in the Army Air Corps. An emergency landing during his flight training injured his spine, and Francis was hospitalised, at some point contracting tuberculosis. For almost four years he was forced to lie flat in a hospital bed encased in a body cast, and he was isolated for long periods of time. In 1945, he was given a set of watercolours, and while lying in his hospital bed he started to paint. This activity rejuvenated his soul and spirit. Francis realised he possessed a facile hand, an intuitive nature, and a masterful approach to working with colour. He soon found his own voice as an artist using his brush and the fluidity of watercolours.

After his release from the hospital in 1947, Francis returned to Cal-Berkeley and received his master’s degree in art. Living on the Pacific Coast, he was exposed to Asian cultures, and he read Chinese literature and philosophy as well as studied sumi-e painting, Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, and Zen Buddhism. His ongoing fascination and inspiration from Asian cultures manifested itself in his artworks over the decades. After college, with the support of the U.S. government’s GI Bill, Francis moved to Paris in 1950 for further studies and to paint. Paris was a stimulating environment, and he quickly embraced the lifestyle of

painting during the day and meeting friends and colleagues in cafés at night. Francis was fortunate to be championed by the influential art curator Michel Tapié and art historian Georges Duthuit (the son-in-law of the artist Henri Matisse). Francis was also interested in the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, such as Claude Monet and Pierre Bonnard, so living in France allowed him to see firsthand many of their paintings. Through his friendship with Duthuit, who wrote the seminal book *Chinese Mysticism and Modern Painting* (1936), Francis was further exposed to the poetic atmospheres and uninterrupted, sinuous lines of Asian painting, attributes he was exploring in his own paintings. Francis realised that many of his predecessors, such as artists Paul Cézanne and Joan Miró, were also inspired by Chinese masters such as Zhou Fang (730–800), Zhou Wenju (fl. 942–961), Xu Daoning (970–1053), Mi Fu (1051–1107), Li Song (fl. 1190–1230), Wuzhun Shifan (1178–1249), and Zhou Zhimian (fl. 1572–1610).

During his formative years in Paris, Francis garnered the attention of collectors, critics, dealers, and curators, and by 1956 he was exhibiting with major institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. He was written about in magazines such as *Time*, which claimed Francis was “the hottest American painter in Paris”. Although a contemporary and colleague of the New York Abstract Expressionist painters such as Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline, Francis approached his paintings with a different perspective. His works, called “lyrical abstractions” by some, are more serene and contemplative with a light touch. Although Francis’s paintings are not directly influenced by Asian sensibilities, one senses a philosophical reverence for these cultures. The Swiss museum curator Franz Meyer, Jr. noted that “Francis’s early white or reddish tinted paintings show movement of cloud packs and shreds; their fluctuation and swirls elude the grip and the viewer looks in vain for a centre from which the universe of the painting could be ruled...it seemed to me so strange and fascinating that I made a note that the painting of Sam Francis had to be inspired by the Chinese view of the world.”

Francis was intrigued by the meditative qualities of Asian philosophies and often referred to different books on Zen poetry, Taoism, the *I Ching* (1950 version with foreword by C.G. Jung) and the various printings of *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*. His affinity with Asian culture was also manifested in some of the titles of his artworks, such as *Asian Dyes No. 2* (1973), *China Nine Puffs* (1974), *Chinese Planet* (1963), *Green Buddha* (1982), and *My Chinese Soul* (1981). The ties to Asia are especially evident in his Jungian period of the 1970s, when his paintings incorporated mandala forms and archetypal imagery associated with Eastern symbolism of the earth. In general, Francis’s paintings reveal his ability to capture “Qi” with spontaneous and simple gestural strokes of colour. Like the Zen masters, he offers controlled accidents—pure, meditative actions without any reworking or editing of his strokes and application of colour. Francis’s fluid compositions pay homage to the abstracted waterfalls, rocks, landmasses, and stone palisades of Chinese ink landscapes. The references to air, sun, sky, earth, and water radiate through open white spaces juxtaposed against vibrant blues, reds, greens, oranges, and yellows.

The art historian Peter Selz, a former curator at MoMA, has written about the *Edge* and *Fresh Air* paintings of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. “For Francis,” he explains, “the white is a source of light that fills the centre of the picture plane with stillness or contemplation. As in Chinese Song and Ming period paintings, with which Francis is quite familiar at this time, it is not about an unpainted background, but about the pictorial interaction of the coloured areas of the canvas with the white areas (or white tinted with colour).” The white space in Francis’s paintings—which some refer to as the hole of eternity or void—is an important stylistic element. Much like Chinese screens and calligraphy, Francis’s paintings value what is left out as much as what is put in. The white spaces provide moments for the paintings to breathe and to exist in limitless space. As in Zen Buddhist meditation, many of Francis’s paintings provide the viewer with a place to enter the world and be one with it.

With two of his close friends, the artists Doc Group and Walasse Ting (from Hong Kong), Francis exchanged ideas about Chinese art, calligraphy, food, literature, music, philosophy,

Zen Buddhism, and poetry. Francis often collaborated with Ting on paintings and poetic writings. His friends said his personality was like a "Free Floating Cloud" (the title of a painting he created in 1980), so Group, who was masterfully trained in Chinese calligraphy, designed a special Chinese emblem of a "cloud" for Francis to use as his signature seal. The choice of a cloud, which is made of water, seems appropriate, for the presence of water suggests the beginnings of life and the eternal.

Francis himself could be described as a Zen monk who has no place to live and is destined to roam the country, his only permanent abode being within himself. Over the decades, Francis maintained studios in multiple cities and countries, including San Francisco, Paris, Bern, Mexico City, New York, Santa Monica, Tokyo, among others. His artworks have found homes in the permanent collections of over one hundred museums around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Tate, London; and Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo.

The paintings on display at Pearl Lam Galleries actively engage the viewer in a personal dialogue with the artist. His oeuvre presents many questions (and maybe some answers) in relation to our understanding of the human condition. Francis embraced the anxious, chaotic, and sad moments as well as the beautiful, insightful, joyous, and serene emotions in his celebration of life. Over the decades, Francis's imagery may have changed form, moving from the cloud-like atmospheric paintings of the 1950s to the grid-like matrixes of the 1970s to the thick "all-over" paintings of the late 1980s and early 1990s; however, in all these transformations of light, form, and colour, one feels a continuum of his luminous spirit. About his life's work, Francis said, "I work in a circular, gyro-like manner—a spiral...I keep coming back to something from before, but from a different point of view...a rearrangement of the psyche."