

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Sam FRANCIS (San Mateo 1923 - Santa Monica 1994)

Blue, 1961

Gouache and watercolour on paper; a page from a sketchbook.

Signed and dated *Sam Francis / 1961* in black ink on the verso.

240 x 125 mm. (9 1/2 x 4 7/8 in.)

As has been noted of the artist, '*Francis pursued works on paper with no less intensity than he did paintings on canvas.*' This beautiful and vibrant gouache drawing was executed in 1961, when Sam Francis was hospitalized for most of the year at the Tiefenauhospital in Bern in Switzerland, due to a recurrence of tuberculosis. He turned his room into a studio and was allowed to paint, for short periods of time, with watercolours and inks. During this year of intense activity he produced a handful of paintings and almost five hundred small-scale works on paper; all characterized by combinations of blue and white tones. As William Agee has noted, between 1955 and 1963 '*blue became Francis's signature color, replacing red and gray...With blue, in a mural format, Francis could realize on a new scale his ambition for a more expansive and open space, aerial and seemingly limitless. The entire surface of his paintings now seemed to unfold and billow...while the boundaries of shapes became less distinct and discrete, pulling apart and even blurring, one fusing with another.*'

Writing in the catalogue of a 1967 museum exhibition of the artist's works on paper, the curator Anneleise Hoyer noted that '*Sam Francis prefers to call many of his gouaches "drawings", although they are not drawn with a pen or pencil but brushed in full color in wide areas. Drawings, as Francis conceives of them, have a special place in his work. They are, in fact, at the very root of it, its first and most direct manifestation... A painting by Sam Francis is a continuum, all-encompassing, a "walk-in" world in itself; a drawing represents a moment of creation made visible.*' Francis's friend and dealer André Emmerich has pointed out that '*Painting on paper... always held for him a special magic. He approached paper with a sense of freedom and spontaneity which is clearly reflected in the perceptible immediacy of the resulting works. Their gestural assurance and vibrant color endows them with a transcendent sense of joy and spirituality.*'

The Sam Francis Foundation has documented this work in their archive under the number SF61-057.

Exhibitions

Bern, Klipstein & Kornfeld, *Sam Francis: Werke 1960-1961*, 1961, no.40.

Literature:

Sam Francis Online Catalogue Raisonné Project, no. SF61-057.

Artist description:

An Abstract Expressionist painter who was one of the first American artists of his generation to develop an international reputation after the Second World War, Sam Francis was a prolific painter, printmaker and draughtsman of extraordinary talent. In 1943, the young Francis crashed during flight training for the Army Air Corps. The following year he was diagnosed with spinal tuberculosis and was hospitalised, confined to bed for several years, in a body cast with only his arms free. During this period, a physiotherapist suggested that he take up watercolours, which became a therapeutic activity and the beginning of his career as an artist. In 1950, after obtaining BA and MA degrees in Fine Art from the University of California at Berkeley, Francis left California for Paris, studying there with Fernand Léger under the GI Bill. To the earlier influence of older Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still was now added that of the Canadian artist Jean-Paul Riopelle, who had worked in Paris since 1947. He also closely studied Claude Monet's series of monumental paintings of Nymphéas (Water Lilies) installed at the Musée de l'Orangerie.

Francis had his first exhibition at a gallery in Paris in 1952, and his work came to be promoted by the French art critic Michel Tapié as part of the Tachisme movement; a European response to American abstract expressionism. Indeed, Francis was the first American painter of his generation to establish a reputation in Europe. Further exhibitions in Paris took place in 1954 and 1956, when he also had his first show in New York, at the Martha Jackson Gallery, which came to represent him. Also in 1956, Francis was included in the exhibition *Twelve Americans*, alongside Phillip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Larry Rivers and others, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which acquired a painting by the artist for its collection. In 1957 he made his first visit to Japan, where his work was already popular with collectors – indeed, many of Francis's finest paintings are in Japanese collections today – and the influence of Japanese art was to be evident in his paintings and works on paper from then on.

The later years of the 1950s saw Francis working in France, Switzerland, Mexico and Japan, producing highly original paintings that were shown in galleries in Paris, New York, Antwerp, London, Seattle and Bern. Museum exhibitions at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. in 1958 and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art the following year firmly established the artist's reputation in America. Francis also received a number of important public commissions during this period, notably large-scale murals

for a school in Tokyo, the Kunsthalle in Bern and the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York. Among his most significant works of the late 1950s was the monumental and immersive Basel Mural triptych, commissioned to decorate the Kunsthalle in Basel and installed there between 1958 and 1964, after which they were shown at Documenta III in Kassel and subsequently dispersed.

In the early 1960s, while recuperating in Switzerland from a recurrence of tuberculosis, Francis began to produce the Blue Balls series of paintings that are now regarded as some of his finest works. In 1962 he left France for southern California, making his home in Santa Monica, although he kept studios in Paris, Tokyo and Bern. He continued to work productively over the next two decades, with numerous gallery shows and museum exhibitions worldwide, and also undertook mural projects for buildings in Berlin, San Francisco, Brussels, Bonn and elsewhere. Francis maintained several studios around the world and continued to work while very ill in the late 1980s, though with less physical capacity. Even in the final year of his life, while dying from the effects of prostate cancer, he managed to produce over 150 small paintings and works on paper.

Sam Francis's work as a painter and printmaker is characterized by an exuberant use of colour, and early in his career he was loosely associated with such artists of the second generation of Abstract Expressionists as Helen Frankenthaler. As has been noted of Francis, however, 'Unlike most successful abstract painters of his era, he never settled into a 'signature style'.' His work combined elements of the New York school of Abstract Expressionism, Japanese and Chinese art and calligraphy and Colour Field painting, as well as displaying the influence of the work of Claude Monet and the French Impressionists, together with Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse. As one recent critic has noted, 'It has never been easy to place Sam Francis in the development of American painting, not least because the appropriate criteria for judging his legacy remain unclear. He is more highly regarded in Europe and Japan than the United States, where his delicate but irrepressible colours seem light when compared with the gravitas of his more renowned contemporaries. His rise as part of the 'second wave' of Abstract Expressionism also coincided with a shift in critical taste towards deadpan inscrutability and engaging objects. One result of this uncertainty is sincere but perhaps qualified respect, expressed as admiration for his mastery of colour or acknowledgment of his standing as a West Coast artist rather than as a full member of the celebrated heroic line. There remains a sense that his career deserves more careful scrutiny than has yet emerged.' Today Francis's work is held in the permanent collections of over 130 museums around the world.