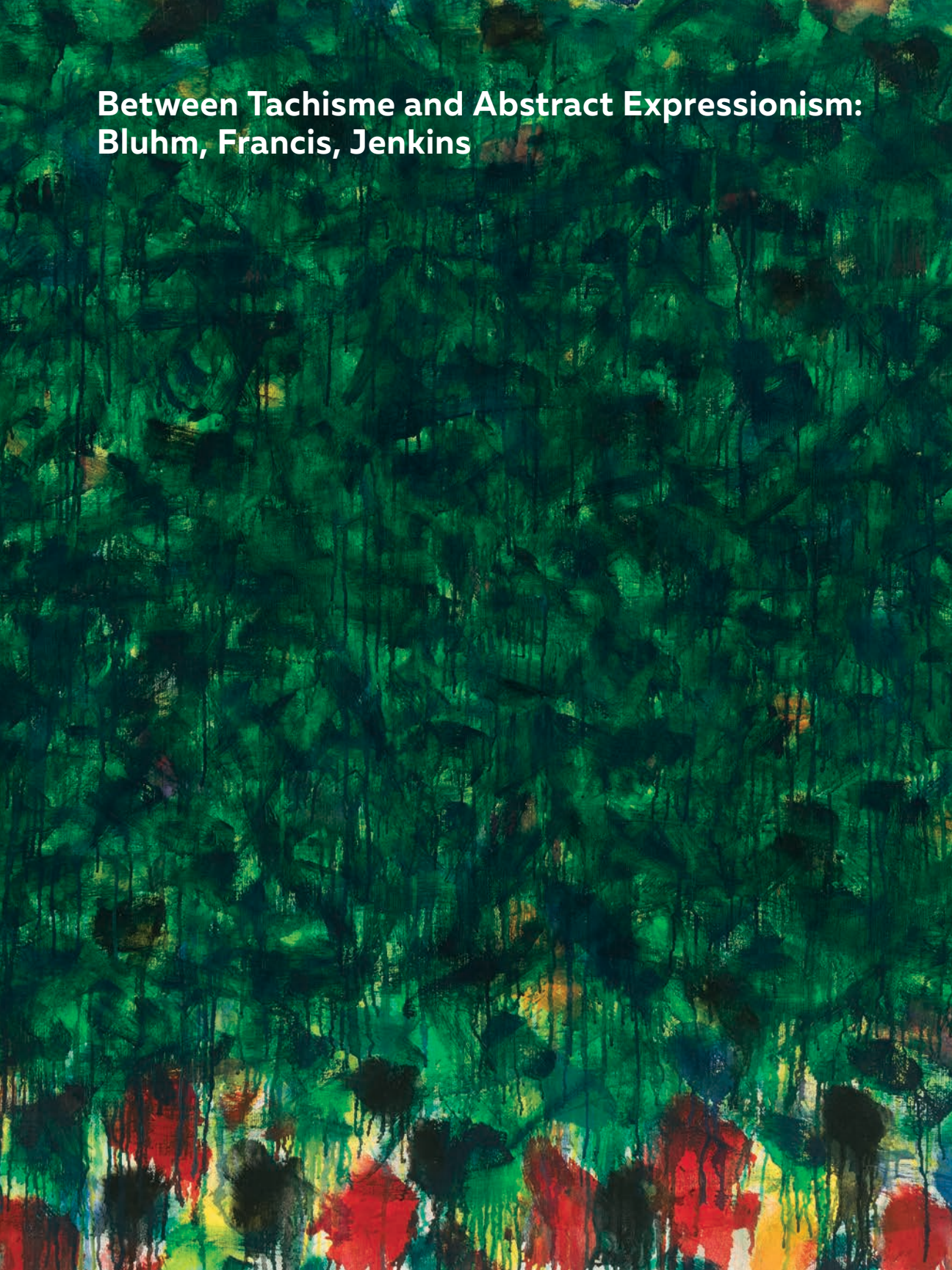


**Between Tachisme and Abstract Expressionism:
Bluhm, Francis, Jenkins**





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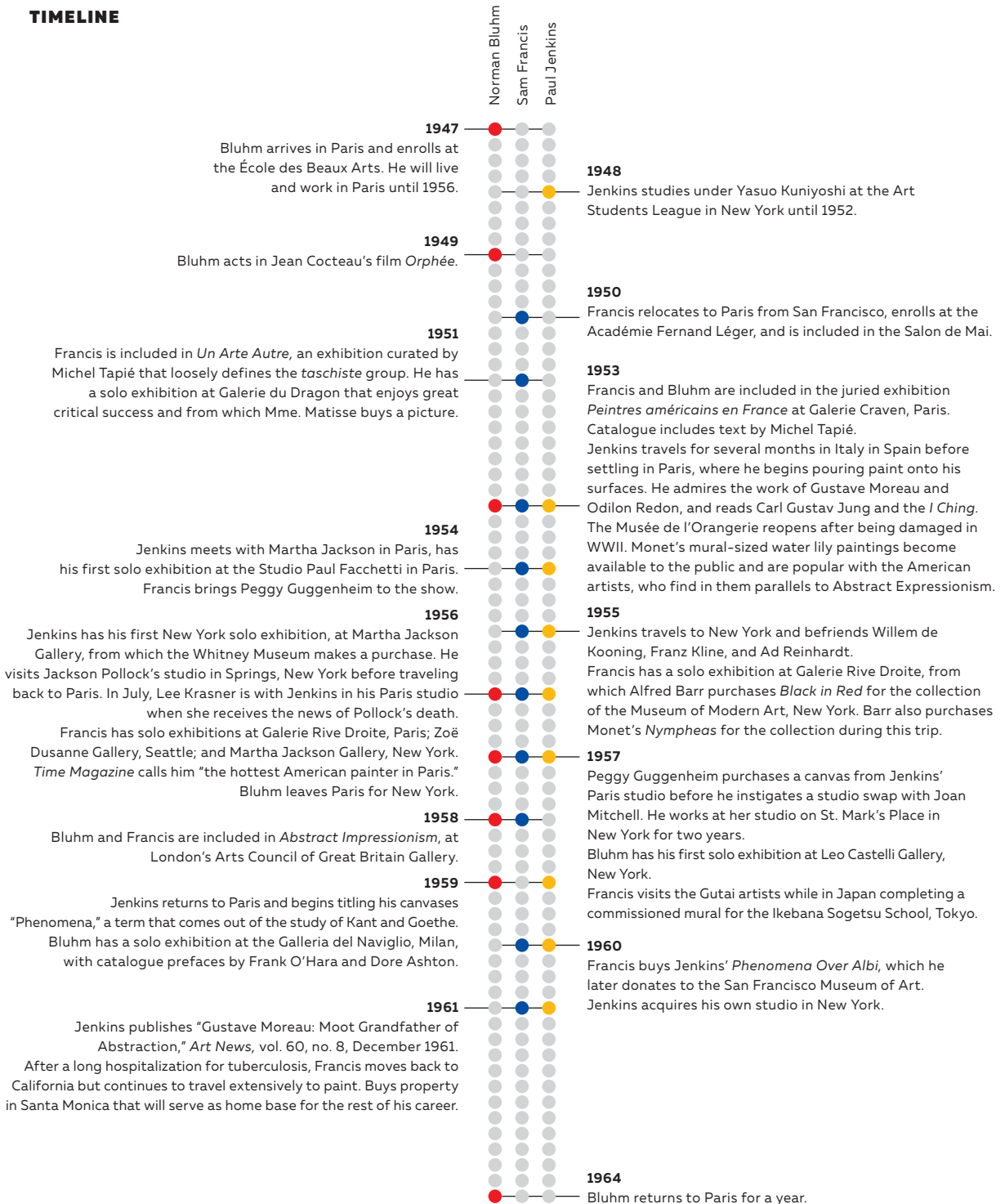
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HOLLIS TAGGART GALLERIES

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BLUHM FRANCIS JENKINS

TIMELINE



Bluhm, Francis, and Jenkins: A Bridge Between New York and Paris

ASHLEY PARK

As the capital of the international art world shifted to New York in the years after the second World War, many American artists chose to settle not in the huddled studios of downtown Manhattan, but instead set their sights on the lofty atmosphere and illuminating light of Paris. Lured by the city's deep cultural history, its celebrated monuments and museums, and its famed art schools, these artists sought the enticement of Paris that is discovered anew by each generation.

While the attraction of Paris had not been dimmed by the war, attitudes towards Americans had changed since the jazzy 1920s. American artists arriving in the 1950s received a welcome informed by the ascendancy of American art. No longer were these foreign artists considered retrograde or behind the aesthetic times, but rather the cutting edge of the postwar avant-garde. Abstract Expressionism represented, in the oft-repeated phrase of critic Irving Sandler, "the triumph of American painting" not just in America but across the Western art world.

A large part of this influx of American expatriates in Paris was due to the G.I. Bill, which granted money for educational use to those who had served in the war. Norman Bluhm, who had been a pilot in the Army Air Force, began his studies at the École des Beaux Arts in 1947. There he befriended several artists working in and around Surrealism, including Alberto Giacometti and Jean Cocteau. Paul Jenkins used his G.I. funding to study under figural painter Yasuo Kuniyoshi at the Art Students League in New York beginning in the late 1940s, but settled in Paris after several months of travel in Italy and Spain in 1953.

Similarly, the G.I. Bill allowed Sam Francis to venture to Paris, where in 1950 he enrolled at the Académie Fernand Léger. He travelled from his native California, having completed a master's degree in art history at Berkeley and studied painting in San Francisco with the Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still. From the outset Francis served as an essential link between Paris and the New York School. Once abroad, his talent was quickly recognized. He exhibited in the 1950 Salon de Mai and was included in the seminal 1951 exhibition *Un Art Autre*, organized by Michel Tapié. The latter defined the loosely affiliated practitioners of *tachisme*, Paris' answer to gestural abstraction, and Francis' inclusion in the exhibition cemented his status as the American emissary to the Parisian avant-garde.

As such, and due to his oversized, jovial personality, Francis became the center of a small group of like-minded artists who gathered in studios and cafés almost daily. Among these were the French critic Michel Duthuit, Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle, and the Americans Joan Mitchell, Paul Jenkins, and Norman Bluhm. Duthuit, the son-in-law of Henri Matisse, termed the group's aesthetic *abstrait chaud*—"hot abstraction"—for their use of high color and loose brushwork, as opposed to the *abstrait froid* of more geometric painters.¹

The aesthetic of hot abstraction comes through in works such as Bluhm's *Unknown Nature* (1956, p. 8) and Jenkins' *Phenomena: Hokusai Fall* (1974, p. 19): both employ high-keyed color and loose, indexical mark-making. Bluhm allowed his paint to drip down the canvas, the drips like visual aftershocks of the energetic action of paint application itself. His many-layered

composition reveals in a dichotomy of accessibility: it both reveals and conceals its palimpsest of paints, its dark haze of blacks and greens hovering over but not quite obscuring the underlying reds, yellows, and greens.

Jenkins later described the group to the art historian Albert Elsen: "Bluhm was ever-present at the openings and the cafés. He was aloof and did not show his work in galleries. He was a ubiquitous loner, who did saturated lyric and often monochromatic paintings which had density and illumination. Riopelle was showing with Pierre Loeb when I arrived. Sam Francis expressed magnitude in simple, if subtle, emblematic paintings, which were referred to as *École de Pacifique*."² Bluhm, Jenkins, Francis, and their coterie developed an aesthetic that brought together the raw gesturalism of the New York School and the sensuous color that is the hallmark of the French tradition.

Francis and Bluhm shared a Paris studio in the early 1950s, and this physical proximity comes through in aesthetic parallels between their respective works. Each painted in an allover style that emphasized surface but allowed for depth through the layering of color to produce the effect of light (see Bluhm's *Black and Red*, 1953, p. 7). It is this light that is the inheritance of French painting, and its incorporation into non-objective art "made apparent the possibilities of a poetic and painterly abstraction, carried to a new scale."³ Both Bluhm and Francis were selected for the juried exhibition *Peintres Américains en France*, held at Galerie Craven in 1953.

Jenkins approached his compositions from an entirely different angle, settling on his signature pouring technique while in Paris in 1953. He received his first solo exhibition the next year, at Studio Paul Facchetti. Francis brought Peggy Guggenheim to see Jenkins' show, and its general success allowed Jenkins to establish a permanent studio in the city. Francis would continue to champion Jenkins throughout his career, even purchasing a canvas in 1961 (*Phenomena Over Albi*, 1960), which he later donated to the San Francisco Museum of Art. Jenkins' interest in the effects of light ran more toward the scientific than that of Bluhm or Francis—he studied the properties of the Newtonian prism and the different effects of translucent and opaque light to perfect his densely-colored canvases.

In the mid-1950s *Time* magazine named Francis "the hottest American painter in Paris" for his open compositions and amoebic forms. Like Francis himself, the canvases radiated a vibrant and colorful joviality. Michael Plante identifies his 1951 solo exhibition at the Galerie du Dragon as one third of a tripartite arrival of American abstraction onto the Parisian scene. This show, along with a Jackson Pollock exhibition at Studio Paul Facchetti and a survey of Abstract Expressionism at Galerie de France that same year, emphatically introduced Parisian society to the American avant-garde, and firmly established the Americans at the forefront of postwar art.⁴

It can be argued that another impact of the 1952 wave of Abstract Expressionist exhibitions in Paris initiated, or at least invigorated, an interest in the late works of Claude Monet. "Through the lens of an Abstract Expressionism exported to France," writes art historian Ann Gibson, "the water lily paintings began to be seen not as dead relics of a past era, but as the epic landscape of a great soul's existential struggle."⁵ The Musée de l'Orangerie had been damaged during the war, but reopened in 1953 and was a major draw for the foreign artists. The Parisian gallerist Facchetti, who had shown Pollock and Jenkins, mused that, "the American

painters, those who came to Paris after the war with their famous G.I. bills, they were impressed by European culture, and they all rushed like flies to one place: the Orangerie, to look at the *Nymphéas* by Monet. Those colored rhythms with no beginning or end.”⁶

Francis visited the small museum the year of its reopening with Duthuit, and on several occasions explicitly compared himself to the Impressionist master. He claimed to “make Monet pure,” and did so by adapting Monet’s organization of pictorial space and his vibrating color structures to pure abstraction.⁷ This focus on the forms but not the content of nature united Francis, Bluhm and Jenkins. Elsen, writing about Jenkins in 1974, could have been describing any one of them when he wrote: “While not explicitly about art or nature, he wants his paintings to have beauty and the look of nature.”⁸

Indeed, the three American painters also looked further back in the history of French painting, finding inspiration in the work of the Symbolists. Jenkins had a revelatory experience in the depths of the Musée Gustave Moreau, while Francis greatly admired the stately works of Bonnard. All three artists loved Redon’s otherworldly compositions. While at first the connection between the figural paintings of the Symbolists, with their magical auras and allegorical underpinnings, and the modernist abstractions of the 1950s may seem elusive, these Americans had good reason to turn their eye on these paintings.

The Symbolists mastered a unique luminosity, one which shines through often densely painted canvases. Bluhm captures this same inner luminosity in *In the Earth* (1958, p. 9). This canvas almost appears lit from behind, and reminds the viewer of peering through stained glass from inside a darkened cathedral. The Symbolists also render the invisible visible. While their subjects tend less toward the mystical, the pure abstractions of the 1950s perform the same feat of visually manifesting invisible forces—the inner psyche of the artist, the spiritual realms of nature, or the aesthetic of the divine.

Norman Bluhm, Sam Francis, and Paul Jenkins bridged not only the visible and the invisible, but also the American and the French. Their time together in Paris came at a pivotal point in each of their respective careers, and would prove to be a formative experience for each. The aesthetic problems that collectively challenged them in their studios and were the topics of discussion in cafés around the city would occupy them for many decades forward, as each sought, and found, a unique and significant solution.

Notes

1. Michael Plante, “Fashioning Nationality: Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell, and American Expatriate Artists in Paris in the 1950s,” *Out of Context: American Artists Abroad*. (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 142.
2. Albert Elsen, *Paul Jenkins*. (New York: Abrams, 1974), 44.
3. William C. Agee, “Sam Francis: A Painter’s Dialogue with Color, Light, and Space,” *Sam Francis: A Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946-1994*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011), 2.
4. Plante, 138.
5. Ann Gibson, “Things in the World: Color in the Work of U.S. Painters During and After the Monet Revival,” *Monet and Modernism*. (New York: Prestel, 2001), 115-116.
6. *Ibid.*, 116
7. *Ibid.*, 127
8. Albert Elsen, “The Marvels of Occurrence,” *Art International*. March 1964, 67.

NORMAN BLUHM

(1921–1999)

Black and Red, 1953

Oil on canvas, 48 x 32 inches

Signed, titled, and dated verso: "Norman / Bluhm / Black & Red / 1953"

Unknown Nature, 1956

Oil on canvas, 51 x 76 ½ inches

Titled, signed, and dated verso: "UNKNOWN / NATURE / NORMAN / BLUHM 1956"

In the Earth, 1958

Oil on canvas, 71 ⅞ x 83 ⅞ inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso: "NORMAN / BLUHM / 1958 / IN THE EARTH"

Pequod, 1963

Oil on canvas, 65 ¾ x 90 ½ inches

Signed, dated, and titled on verso: "bluhm / '63 / 'PEQUOD"

Titled, inscribed, and signed on stretcher verso: "PEQUOD / 66x90 N Bluhm."

Untitled, 1967

Acrylic on paper, 29 ⅞ x 22 ⅞ inches

Signed and dated lower right: "bluhm 67"











SAM FRANCIS

(1923–1994)

Untitled, No. 35 (SF64-628), 1964

Gouache on paper, 4½ x 5¾ inches

Signed and dated on verso: "Sam Francis"

Inscribed on verso: "Pasadena Box / 35"

Untitled (SF62-020), 1962

Acrylic on paper, 22 x 30 inches

Signed and dated on verso: "Sam Francis / 1962"

Untitled (Tokyo Series), 1970

Watercolor on paper, 41 x 29 inches

Inscribed, signed, dated, and titled verso: "07-008 / Sam Francis / 1970 / Tokyo"

Untitled (SF92-54), 1992

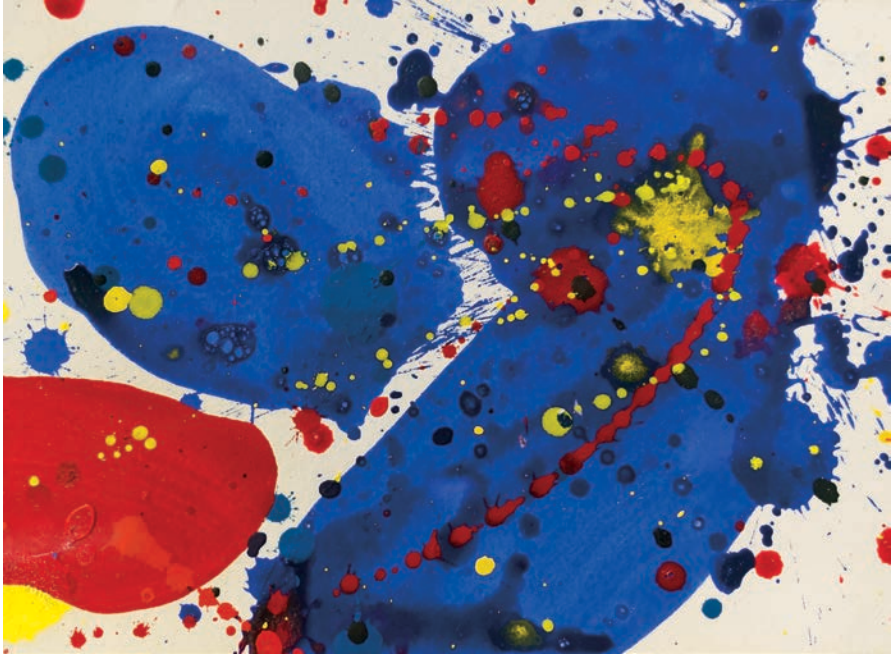
Acrylic on paper, 22½ x 30½ inches

Stamped on verso with the Sam Francis Estate stamp

Untitled (SFP94-80), 1994

Acrylic on canvas, 14 x 18 inches

Dated and stamped on verso: "7/25/94"











PAUL JENKINS

(1923–2012)

Phenomena Hokusai Fall, 1974

Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

Signed twice upper left: "Paul Jenkins / Jenkins"

Signed, titled, and dated on stretcher verso twice: "Paul Jenkins Phenomena Hokusai Fall 1974 / 'Paul Jenkins Phenomena Hokusai Fall' 1974"

Signed, titled, and dated on canvas overlap verso: "Paul Jenkins Phenomena Hokusai Fall' 1974"

Phenomena Sanctuary, 1975

Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 60 inches

Signed lower right: "Paull Jenkins"

Signed lower left: "Jenkins"

Signed, titled, and dated on canvas overlap verso: "Paul Jenkins / 'Phenomena Sanctuary' 1975 / Sept. New York"

Phenomena Ultra Scape, 1977

Watercolor on paper, 22 ³/₈ x 29 ¹/₂ inches

Signed lower left: "Paul Jenkins"

Signed, titled, dated, and inscribed verso: "Paul Jenkins / Phenomena Ultra Scape / 1977 St. Croix"

Phenomena Hamlet The Dane, 1989

Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 13 inches

Signed lower left: "Paul Jenkins"

Signed and titled verso: "Paul Jenkins / Phenomenon / Hamlet / The / Dane"

Phenomena Manolette Red, 1979

Watercolor on Arches paper, 41 ¹/₂ x 30 inches

Signed lower center: "Paul Jenkins"

Signed, titled, dated, and inscribed on verso: "Paul Jenkins / 'Phenomena Manolette Red' / 1979 St. Croix"











This catalogue has been published on the occasion of the exhibition "Between Tachisme and Abstract Expressionism: Bluhm, Francis, Jenkins," organized by Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York, and presented from October 5 to November 10, 2017.

Front cover: Norman Blum, *Unknown Nature*, 1956, detail, p. 8

Back cover: Sam Francis, *Untitled (SF62-020)*, 1962, detail, p. 14

Front flap: Paul Jenkins, *Phenomena Sanctuary*, 1975, detail, p. 20

Back flap: Paul Jenkins, *Phenomena Hokusai Fall*, 1974, detail, p. 19

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