

LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

KUNST

SAM FRANCIS

1923 San Mateo (California) – Santa Monica 1994

Untitled

Acrylic on canvas board

Signed, dated and inscribed on the verso: *Sam Francis 1964 PM*¹

32.4 x 38.9 cm

PROVENANCE: Estate of the artist, California – Galerie Proarta, Zurich – Galerie Koch, Hanover – Galerie Salis & Vertes, Zurich – Private collection, Belgium

LITERATURE: Debra Burchett-Lere (ed.), *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings 1946-1994*, Los Angeles 2001, no. SFF. 429

Sam Francis was called to military service in 1943 and joined the Army Air Corps to train as a fighter pilot. Injured in an accident on a training flight, he was hospitalized with severe spinal problems. While recovering, he contracted spinal tuberculosis and was forced to spend years lying prone in a hospital bed. This would change his life. In hospital, he was given a box of watercolours and began to paint and draw. Art provided an escape from illness, and gave him a new impetus for life.²

In the early 1960s, blue became a dominant feature of his work. For Francis, each colour had a symbolic value – blue corresponded to water and the cosmos. But it also signified personal suffering and pain– he experienced a renewed bout of tuberculosis in 1961 and was again hospitalized for almost a year. On his recovery he returned to a more varied palette.

Francis's use of large, void spaces reflects his immersion in Oriental art, and Japanese art in particular. This is evident in the 'Bright Ring' series of 1963 to 1964, where clusters of organic shapes – bubbles and spheres, sinuous strips and clear bands of vibrant, unmodulated colour – are deployed around the edges of the canvas. These were 'bridge' paintings for Francis, a product of the 1960s but at the same time referring back to the 1950s, their drips and splashes activating the large white spaces at their centre. As Nicholas Wilder has noted: *From the late 1940's on, in Francis's paintings there were no totems, no inscriptions, no icons. Present even existed in space alone – the canvas as space. Space is the subject, the passion at the centre of Francis's art*³.

Towards the end of the 1960s, he began to explore a different format in what came to be called his 'Edge' paintings. It was as if he were trying to escape paint and colour by reducing them to a few thin bars confined to the outer edges of a large rectangle of white canvas.⁴

¹ Francis used the abbreviation *PM* [Private Museum] to designate works reserved for his own holdings/collection and unavailable for sale at the time. The work also bears the inventory number '10' on the verso (in a different hand).

² William C. Agee, *Sam Francis: A Painter's Dialogue with Color, Light and Space*, in Debra Burchett-Lere, *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2011, p. 7.

³ N. Wilder, *A statement*, in *Sam Francis: Edge Paintings*, exhib. cat., James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles, 26 April – 25 May 1991, p. 6.

⁴ W. Hopps, *Deliverance – Thoughts regarding a set of paintings by Sam Francis*, in exhib. cat., James Corcoran Gallery, op. cit.

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Stylistically, the present work belongs both to the 'Blue Balls' and 'Bright Ring' series [see Fig. 1], and to the 'Edge' paintings [see Fig. 2]. Francis valued it so highly that he reserved it for his own holdings.

This work is registered in the Sam Francis Foundation Archives. It has been assigned the work-on-paper identification number SF64-587.



Fig. 1: Sam Francis, *Red over Blue*, c.1963-4.
Centre Pompidou, Paris



Fig. 2: Sam Francis, *Untitled*, 1967-8.
Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Japan