

**April Screen, Helen Frankenthaler, 1972
by Timothy Leary, 2016**



Color, tonal modulation, and one unexpected line are the tools Helen Frankenthaler uses to invite the viewer into an open-ended experience with April Screen. The large unprimed canvas, a gift to the museum by Steve Chase, is covered in rose and orange tones. Frankenthaler speaks to the viewer on a non-verbal level, defying the impulse to identify and explain. The goal of the abstract expressionist is to communicate feelings. With this work, Frankenthaler describes a nonverbal experience of the unconscious. Works like this are meant to create an encounter with the art, rather than to reveal a story to the viewer. Initially drawn to this painting by an interest in abstract expressionism and color field painting, there was also what appeared to be a technique recently used in one of my own paintings. This required further study.

Born in 1928, Helen Frankenthaler was the daughter of a New York State Supreme Court judge. She started her career in the 1950s and continued working until her death in 2011. In the 1960s Frankenthaler began using watered down acrylic paints to create color washes. Without the use of a primer the paint soaks into the fibers of the canvas. This creates softened colors that appear flat and muted in appearance. The colors blend and the boundaries between the areas of color are blurred.

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April Screen was painted while Frankenthaler was working as a color field painter. An amorphous orange shape dominates the canvas. The orange core of the painting may invite interpretation. However, it is best to resist that impulse and simply be with the colors and enjoy them. There is no right or wrong, there are no specific visual references. The best way to understand a painting like this is not through words, but by silence, perhaps even through mindfulness. In the upper right quadrant of the painting is a single vertical slash or line in dark gray. It seems out of place at first, but after sitting with the painting it seems to offer a counterpoint to the rest of the canvas. It is a compositional element that helps to create a visual equilibrium in the work.

Sources

Helen Frankenthaler American Painter, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-frankenthalerhelen.htm>

Wilkin, Karen, Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011). American Art, Fall 2012, Vol. 26, Issue 3

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