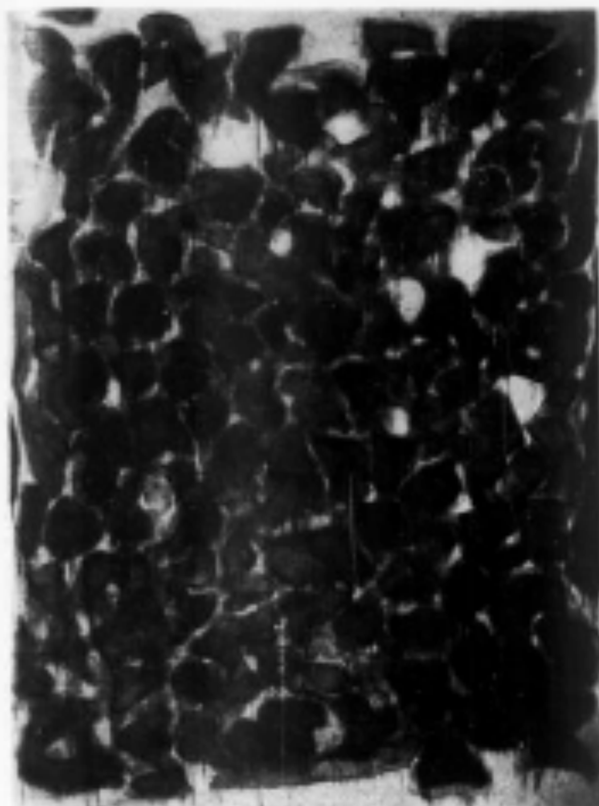

Sam Francis. *Opposites*, 1950. Whitney Museum

Sam Francis. *69-697*. Acrylic/paper, 30" × 22". André Emmerich Gallery

NEW YORK LETTER

APRIL KINGSLEY

Sam Francis is currently enjoying a major retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. It was organized by Robert T. Buck, Jr. of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. Franz Meyer, Wieland Schmied and Mr. Buck wrote the catalogue essays which fall well within the category of purple-prose adulation that has categorized the worst art writing of all ages. Accompanying the Whitney show is a mini-retrospective of acrylics on paper at the Andre Emmerich gallery. There is barely any discernible difference between the many confetti-colored, splatter-filled drawings on view, except for a general increase in the amount of white space over the years from 1964 to 1972.

Sam Francis began to paint in a California hospital while recovering from an airplane crash in 1943. Four years later and a student at Berkeley, he burst forth with fully mature works and by 1950, seven years later, he abandoned "provincial" California for France with an M.A. in his pocket and with major contributions to Abstract Expressionism under his belt. At least that is how his career opens according to his chroniclers. Actually, his work is highly derivative of Gorky, Still, and Rothko until he develops his "cellular" style in 1949–50. Perhaps an unconcious transcription of his concern with the internal structure and functions of his body during his long illness six years before, this cell-like image seems to be genuinely and deeply obsessive for Francis. He never found another. Francis by-passed academic art training, and leapt into the middle of the most avant-garde art of his time. His red, yellow and black corpuscular paintings of 1949–55 remain his strongest works; *Big Red*, *Red in Red*, *Big Orange* and a few others still seem outstanding.

Francis immediately grasped the need for large size to give his work impact and force and he has used size for this end consistently ever since. The American notion of "big is better" found an embodiment in his painting. He received some of the biggest commisions of his time for gigantic murals—the Basel tripcych being the most notable among these. None of the other American painters who were his peers received such monumental commissions. But in fact Francis' paintings have no real scale. Whether blown up to look good on a 26' high canvas or reduced to fit nicely on a standard piece of drawing paper, his images remain unchanged. None of his work looks bigger big or smaller small, and this crux is one of his primary problems. Non-representational painting is obliged to include internal scale referents that make clear the essential progression from large to small ocurring among its parts in order to have "scale". Scale is not just size. Francis came closest to defining a scale progression in his heavily dripped paintings of the early fifties, because a drip is a visually measurable unit. He loses it later because a splatter is not. The drip reemerges in the midsixties to take a prominent position in a few of his Frankenthaler–derived paintings, like *Bright Ring II* and *Iris* of 1965. These paintings are the strongest he produced after the early fifties, because they have solid structures, albeit uncomfortably close to those of Helen Frankenthaler.

Over the course of the fifties white space took over the clotted, coagulated cellular units pushing them into stringy clusters which float down the middle of a white surface like Clyfford Still's cracks and flame configurations, or bunching them up along its edges. In the early sixties, following another protracted illness, transparent, curving "blue balls" take the place of the cellular units. Giving most of the ground up to white so that the painting would read in a simple figure-ground relationship was a facile solution to Francis' dual problems of color and composition. Any painting with a lot of white in it seems light-filled; and any bright, unmodulated and highly saturated colors located on that white surface are bound to be dazzling. Francis has never had to worry about color since he discovered white space. His easy compositional system—a tasteful arrangement of similar units—evolved simultaneously with the white ground on which he placed those units. He has been relegating less and less of the empty white surface to color in recent years, banishing it to the margins of the canvas. Given this marvelously simple system, Francis has never since painted a bad painting; it would be next to impossible. But, neither has he painted a truly great one.

Francis has a definite decorative gift. His arrangements of soft, relatively uniform shapes, which never seem threatening or capable of doing harm have been pleasing viewers from 1947 to the present. But, in the tough context of a New York retrospective, in which only our very best painters like de Kooning, Pollock, and, more recently Helen Frankenthaler,

Frankenthaler. *Envelope Personal*, 1972. Steel, 13½" diameter. Emmerich, downtown

for example, succeed in overwhelming us with the range and richness of their art, Sam Francis' stature recedes dramatically.

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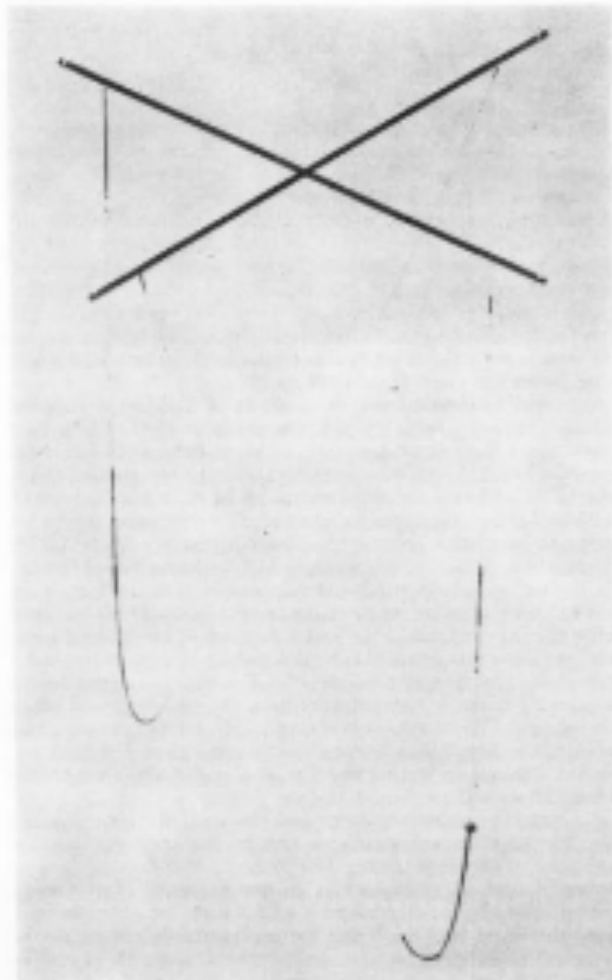
Helen Frankenthaler is one of the last artists anyone would associate with sculpture, her paintings being so two-dimensional and fluid, or atmospheric. But, apparently, she had access last summer to a studio filled with the remnant materials of Anthony Caro and David Smith, and she decided to see what she could do with them. The exhibition at the downtown branch of Emmerich includes 10 works in welded steel and 22 acrylic drawings on paper. Many painters have made sculpture "on the side", of course, Matisse, Picasso and de Kooning being among the most notable of this century. Though they tend to use traditional materials like plaster, bronze, clay or, more recently, welded steel, their results sometimes vie with the best work produced in those materials. Painters also seem to prefer casting, modelling, or assembling sculpture to carving it (Modigliani being an exception to the rule). But painters rarely make major alterations in avant-garde sculptural methodology; their work is usually conservative, even retrograde in its time. Picasso's *Man Carrying a Lamb* or de Kooning's *Clam Digger*, for example, are great sculptures, but they have little relevance to or for the advanced sculpture of their periods. This is true of Frankenthaler's sculpture too, which immediately strikes the viewer as eclectic, derivative and redundant. It is too close to the work of her friends Caro and the late David Smith to be original, a problem not shared by Picasso or de Kooning. Working with the materials of other sculptors seems to have precluded the possibility of making a genuine personal statement. It would have been fascinating to see what she might have said had she chosen her own means of expression from scratch, instead of just exploring various ways to combine pre-existing sculptural units. Nowhere in her vertical open-work figurations, gates, fences, clusters or large table-top does there seem to be a clear core of sculptural thinking. Neither does the work register with the kind of imagistic obsessiveness of her painting. *Yard*, which looks like an oversized helmet or mask, *Envelope Personal* and *David's Chariot* were the three smallest, most compact works in the show, and the most mysteriously idiosyncratic. If the exhibition had been by an unknown young sculptor, instead, we would probably have said that the work was promising, intelligent, and not very original. It suffers, not by the standards of sculptural quality, but by the expectations we bring to it from Frankenthaler's painting.

The 55 Mercer Street Gallery mounted three shows for December instead of their usual two. In the large gallery Shirlann Smith showed six large canvases dating from 1969 to the present, including one unusual corner painting. Each painting is comprised of many parts, either stitched together before being stretched or interlocked afterwards into shaped canvases, or both. Although the canvas parts tend to be modular, they are joined together into centralized, bilaterally symmetrical configurations. And although the paintings appear to be textured with wrinkles and furrows and give the impression (especially in reproduction) of being reliefs, they are actually tautly stretched and flat. The dialogue between this illusionism and the graphic planarity of the geometric imagery provides the focus of interest in her work. It is most clearly conveyed in the paintings of 1970–71 which contain complete circles, outlined as if they cast shadows, along with diagonal linear thrusts and the illusion of textural three-dimensionality. The two most recent paintings in Smith's show stress this latter aspect while their geometry is reduced to meandering ribbons of color which pass off the edges. Color intensity is stepped up in these works but they suffer from the lack of focus.

In the other room at 55 Mercer Street Alan Finkel exhibited three large, similar sculptures made of steel and blue polyvinylchloride. Each was a variation on the same theme—an inverted "Y" of PVC bent over to one side and held in a position of maximum tension by the weight of a long metal rod which rises from the floor at the far end of the room to meet the "Y" at its tip. The work is linear and springy, exploring a variety of graceful arcs, and although it is constructed from the same material (PVC) as the work of Tom Doyle (who recently closed a show in the same gallery) it shares none of Doyle's concerns with plane and contour.

Between these two large exhibitions, Roberta Handler showed a 7 minute film on request in a makeshift drapery enclosure. It is entitled "Ark" and shows a single male tennis player dressed in fancy, non-tennis "whites", with shoulder length hair, bouncing a tennis ball into the air. The arc of the ball is compared to an architectural arch and emulated auditorially (both in and out of sync) by a harsh, plunking sound



Natalie Bieser. *X*, 1972. Wood, thread, beads, 64" × 32". Nancy Hoffman Gallery

gack. The movie was boring, adding nothing to our appreciation of film, dance, or the geometry of circles and arcs. It was an unfortunate idea in any case, since it is visually confusing in the context of the arcs of Finkel's sculpture located just outside the booth.

At least half of the artists showing at 55 Mercer Street seem to be women. It is appropriate, then, that the women's slide registry is now located on its premises. The registry is used by curators, critics, teachers, and writers all over the world, who come to it looking for women's art of every sort from photo-realist to conceptual. If any woman wishes to be included in the registry she need only send four 35 mm slides labeled with her name, address, telephone number and the title, date, dimensions and medium of the work to:

Women's Art Registry
55 Mercer Street
New York, New York 10012

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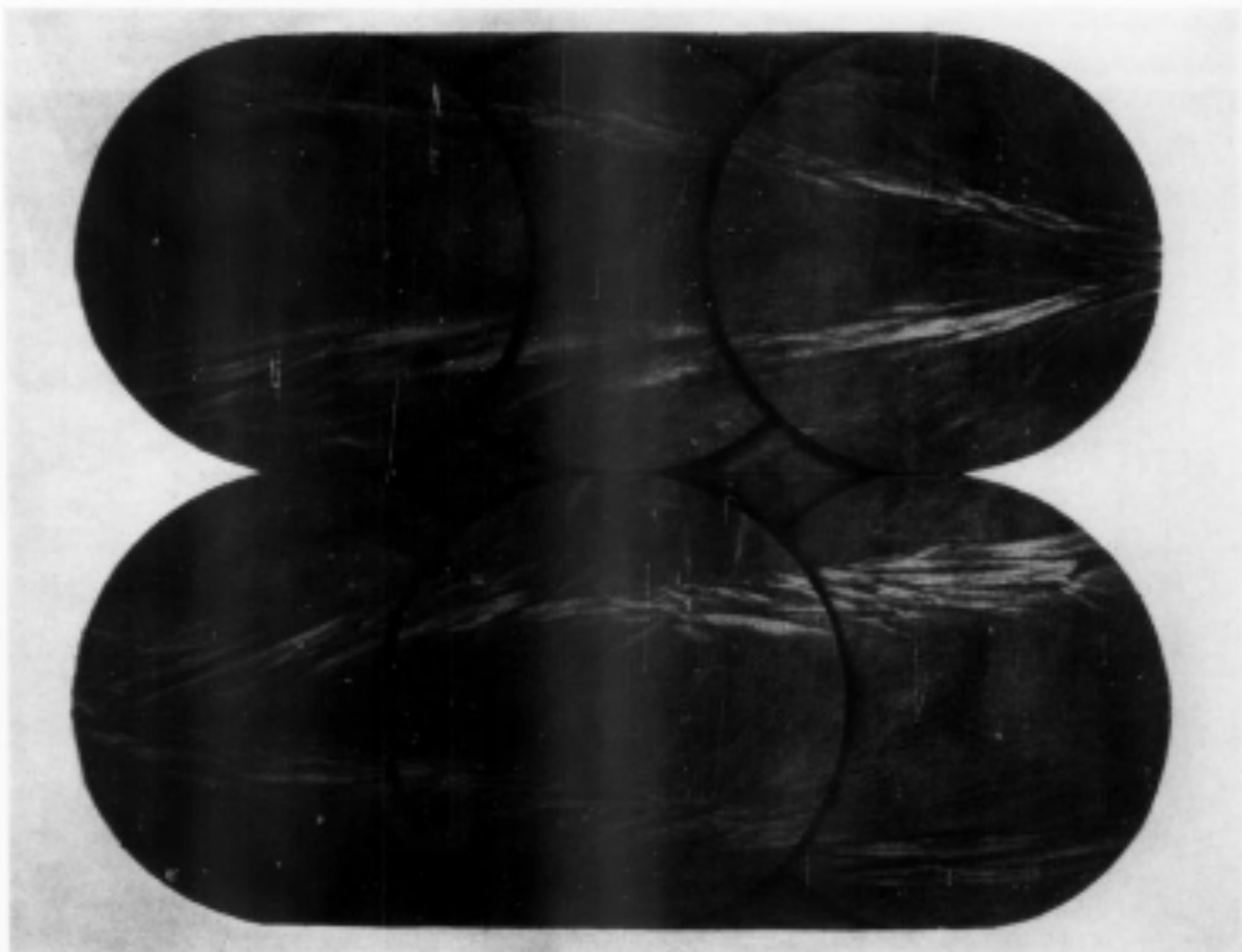
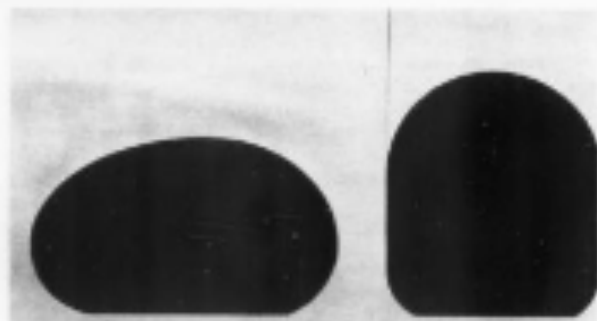
For her first solo exhibition anywhere, Natalie Bieser showed six threaded-bead wall hangings at the Nancy Hoffman gallery in Soho. Many other young western American artists have picked up aspects of the native crafts of their region for incorporation into their art. Some of them have done so less obviously than Miss Bieser, who simply glues tiny colored beads onto colored threads at specific intervals so that their weight operates gravitationally to shape the lines. With one exception the pieces each consist of three overlapping beaded threads strung out horizontally between a pair of thin painted wooden supports; in the exception two threads hung down vertically from a cross of colored wood strips. The largest piece in the show was the least effective. It consisted of white threads, pale wooden strips, and widely scattered beading, making it difficult to read. The others, in pink, green, or blue, were prettier and more decisively articulated, though to use the word "decisive" in connection with Miss Bieser's delicate spidery traceries is to speak too strongly perhaps, about such finely insubstantial work.

Joseph Raffael's paintings are also precious and jewel-like. They take the lion's share of Nancy Hoffman's posh new gallery on West Broadway (replete with shapely receptionist in a semicircular booth) even though he is only showing one large, one medium-sized, and a few small paintings. The large one, *Landscape*, has the main room to itself. Such "iconic" presentation, which implies that an adulatory attitude on the part of the viewer would be appropriate, seems out of keeping with the work in question. It is a fantastic landscape picturing gelid mountains in crystalline blue through a frame of leaves, ferns, and semiprecious gem-encrusted rocks. The huge leaves are porous, as though they had managed to survive an attack of monster insects. Although the lush foreground flora and fauna is out of focus, the distant mountains are sharply outlined against the cloud-filled sky. This photographic device is employed along with traditional atmospheric perspective to render the illusion of maximum depth in the painting. A similar hole-into-space device was one of Caspar David Friedrich's hallmarks. In fact, there are a number of parallels between Raffael's work and the heavily romanticized landscapes of early 19th-century German, Swiss and Austrian painters working in the rhetorical manner. Like their's, Raffael's work seems stagily claustrophobic, rather than grandly filled with light and air like the best paintings of Church or Bierstadt, among the American later 19th-century practitioners of the genre. Raffael's minutely dabbed garish color, which conveys the impression of being sticky to the touch, has more in common with the jungle-scapes and frottages of Max Ernst, or the painstaking obsessiveness of Gustav Moreau or Pavel Tchelitchew. Its iridescence, on the other hand, has little in common with the precise and banal transcriptions of reality made by most of the photo-realists with whom he is customarily grouped.

Gary Kuehn, better known for his sculptures than for his recent essays in painting, exhibited a group of large, black and white, unitary and bi-partite canvases at Paley & Lowe Inc. It is difficult for an artist not as well known as, say, Helen Frankenthaler to carry off a serious media switch (like that of

Shirlann Smith. *Circles*, 1973. Acrylic/canvas, 115" × 140". 55 Mercer Street Gallery





Gary Kuehn. Untitled, acrylic/canvas, 1972. 72" × 144". Paley & Lowe

Meadmore. *Trans*, 1972. Cor-ten steel. Max Hutchinson Gallery

painting to sculpture or vice-versa) without damaging or at least confusing his image in the public eye. Most art viewers, both here and in Europe where he exhibited frequently, probably recall Kuehn's pinned and clamped foam sculptures and the others included in his 1969 show at the Fischbach Gallery (in my opinion, his best work to date), provided they have managed to separate his work in their minds from that of his younger brother who shows at Paula Cooper. Few members of the art audience, had probably ever recognized that remembered sculptural image in the new paintings, though there are some subtle carry-overs from the one media to the other. Each of the new paintings contains at least two rounded black forms lodged toward the lower edge of the canvas. These forms look as though they arrived there through their own weight in conjunction with the forces of gravity, and their lower edges are flattened against their resting places. The smooth surface of these black forms contrasts with the brushed-on snowy whiteness of the field on which they are isolated by uneven, protruding rims of pigment. These rims are the residue of Kuehn's method of pouring the black acrylic onto the canvas inside a form. At first he used a paper form which he then cut back to within about ¼ of an inch from the canvas surface; now he uses a wire retaining form which he removes after the paint is dry. Kuehn's flat, non-painterly, uninflected configurations relate to the paintings of Ellsworth Kelly, but lack Kelly's structural colorism. What Kuehn's work has is a sculptural weightiness and volumetricity which marks it as the product of predominantly sculptural rather than pictorial thinking. He frequently contrasts the shape and apparent area of two or three forms while maintaining equalized perimeters. Thus, two forms of equal circumference may be squashed into a narrow vertical shape in one place and blown out to a wide horizontal balloon elsewhere in the same painting. This play of volumes, especially the compression of them, links the new work to the earlier sculptures, though the ties are far from obvious. The paintings are charming, simple and witty. The dialogue between shape, weight and volume conducted by the forms approaches the humorous anthropomorphism of certain abstract cartoon characters.

(Continued on page 74)

Joseph Raffael. *Landscape*, 1972. Oil/canvas, 92" × 132". Nancy Hoffman