



Untitled, 1980, from an exhibition of the works of Sam Francis at the Smith Andersen Gallery through Feb. 25.

Chance paintings with Zen control

by Valerie Patten

Sam Francis was an injured pilot who began painting as occupational therapy and became a world-renowned artist. The Smith Andersen Gallery is showing some of his recent paintings, gouache and prints through February.

Francis is an abstract expressionist. His work is characterized by islands of transparent color that float across open areas of white canvas. The concentrations of color spreading out on the surface of each piece embody the subtle physical essence of light itself.

His pieces do not contain the "crisis content" typical of early abstract expressionists, nor the vigorous movement associated with Jackson Pollock and action painting.

However, his work is not static, but vibrant, suggesting the impermanence of phenomena involving light, air and fire. Francis' art expresses spontaneous, quiet motion — the substance of meditative perception.

Never crowded nor worked over, Francis' paintings are vital and fresh in their use of overlays of color. Included in this exhibit are several paintings that make use of more opaqueness than usual. This darkness creates a richness in the deeper colors that does not adversely affect the open, breathing space in the work.

Also in the exhibit are a few small, tighter compositions. There is an intended awareness of center in these pieces. This concern with centering may relate to Francis' life-long interest in metaphysical self-centering.

Francis was born in San Mateo in 1923 (his mother now lives in Palo Alto). He studied botany and psychology at UC Berkeley and became an army pilot during World War II. By 1945 he was in a Denver hospital, recovering from a flight injury. During his rehabilitation, he began to paint and take painting seriously. At a San Francisco VA hospital, he worked with an occupational therapist and became immersed in art.

David Parks, an important San Francisco artist at the time, saw some of Francis' work and introduced him to the San Francisco art scene of the 1940's, which included such people as Diebenkorn, Bischoff and Clifford Still.

Still was an important influence on Francis. He had created a position for his own painting that was mid-way between action painting, represented by the radically innovative Pollock, and the more meditative

concerns of color field painting.

Pollock, whose compositions consisted of dripped paint applied while in motion over the canvas, showed that drawing and painting could become the same activity. Francis makes use of this attitude in his work, but has managed to steer a course between the freedom of action painting and the perceptual concerns of exploring the essence of light. Doing this, he achieves a personal compromise between major artistic currents of his time, much like his teacher Still.

Francis received his B.A. in art from Berkeley in 1950, then went to Paris, where he found that he had little use for cubism and the more structured approaches to treating space. But the works of such French artists as Monet, Bonnard and Matisse inspired him with their use of pure color and the beauty of the light contained in this color.

Francis was also influenced in his painting by the cool, gray light of Paris. Wherever Francis has set up his studio, in Japan or New York, for example, he has responded to the character of that region's light.

Francis' painting always embodies an element of chance and instability. However, this accidental element is always closely observed in process and philosophically controlled by the artist.

While painting, Francis controls his movement on the paper or canvas from within, similar in approach to a Zen master. The gesture is present within the artist before it finds its manifestation physically, and yet it is not consciously planned.

The gesture appears to be a totally spontaneous expression when it appears in time and space, and it is the opposite of "nervous." In this sense, Francis does not express his personal feelings or his personality. Yet his gestures, his experiments with color, always bear his own characteristic mark.

The small group of etchings on exhibit are an interesting contrast to his main body of work, of which the paintings are indicative. Each etching is tightly structured compositionally, with a Japanese look in the overlaid planes, consisting of calligraphic gestures. Central motifs are often present, in the form of a central spiral or a small vacant square. □

Valerie Patten is a Menlo Park artist who also works at Children's Hospital.