



Sam Francis

at MANNY SILVERMAN, 21 October–4 December

The 28 paintings on paper and canvas in "Sam Francis: 1964-79" survey a movement away from crisp, edgy emptiness toward a denser, somewhat perfunctory filling-up of the picture plane. Although metaphors of fluidity such as dissolution, absorption, and bleeding are often used to define the 70-year-old painter's five-decade *oeuvre*, a secondary constellation of associations, evoking space and referring to architecture, more fully fleshes out the trajectory Francis' images gracefully trace.

This compact, well-selected overview is illuminating in its unevenness. It reveals that the California-based painter's best works maintain an exquisite tension between the perfect blankness of unmarked surfaces and the randomly scattered, saturated splotches, washes, and droplets of intense color that seem to be spontaneously deposited by swift sweeps of the paintbrush, decisive flicks of the wrist, and random passages of water-soaked rollers. This highly animated exhibition demonstrates that when Francis attempts to build solid, compositional structures out of the precarious balance between pure emptiness and painterly incident—between things as we find them and our desire to shape them—his light-handed abstractions lose their clarity and airiness, becoming muddled, overcrowded echoes of the formal order implied by the edges of any picture.

Francis' edge-hugging images began to appear in 1956, and continued to take shape with increasing frequency and aplomb through his shift from oils to acrylics around 1963. These empty-centered images petered out in the early seventies, when the delicate yet powerful intimation of infinity instantiated by his often electrifying stains and spills of pigment gave way to a soupy, lugubrious and overwrought plotting of the Modernist grid. Titled *Grids*, *Tracks*, and *Mandalas*, these later, more earthbound abstractions feel claustrophobic by comparison, as if they've abandoned the fantasy of catching a glimpse of the cosmos in favor of carefully constructing the illusion of three dimensions architecturally, out of posts and lintels, crossbeams and windows. Over the 15 years surveyed by the show, the exercise of rational planning appears to displace the extreme, often ravishing and breathless opposition between grounds of pure white gesso and their interruption by splashing rivulets of bright pigment. It is as if Francis' art, after dissolving the restrictive, geometric grip that circumscribed even Rothko's densely sensuous spaces of vaporous color, descends from an imaginative trip through liquid space to the gravity-bound reality of ordinary existence. Although inconsistencies abound in the prolific artist's overlapping and intersecting series, the predominant movement of his work is away from soaring freely through an unknowable space toward staring out a nicely framed window.

The extreme restraint that gives Francis' empty-centered works their verve and excitement is paradoxically swamped by his architectural images' overworked thoroughness, belabored "spontaneity," and excessive consistency. Perhaps the best way to clarify this shift—from wild ambition held in check by insurmountable resistance, to the order of the grid—is with the titles of two of his series. *Blue Balls* (1960-63, not included in this show) and *Mandalas* (1971-79) present two conceptually similar yet experientially and emotionally distinct descriptions of the fitful struggle between desire and denial, restraint and release, pent-up energy and relaxed equilibrium. In *Blue Balls*, Francis offers a gorgeous alternative to Jasper Johns' *Painting with Two Balls* (1960), a frozen, tongue-in-cheek counterpoint to the macho bravado of Abstract Expressionism. *Blue Balls* argues that the act of making a painting has less to do with ejaculatory spurts of pigment than sexual frustration and helpless titillation—being held in a state of exquisite suspension by the canvas, a most unwilling or difficult partner. The *Mandalas*, by contrast, recast these sensations as a mystically religious experience, in which the accomplished participant is emptied of all tension, energy, and desire. The discipline of the Zen monk replaces the perverse sensuality of the seasoned libertine.

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Sam Francis
Untitled, 1970
Watercolor on paper
22-1/2" x 35-1/2"