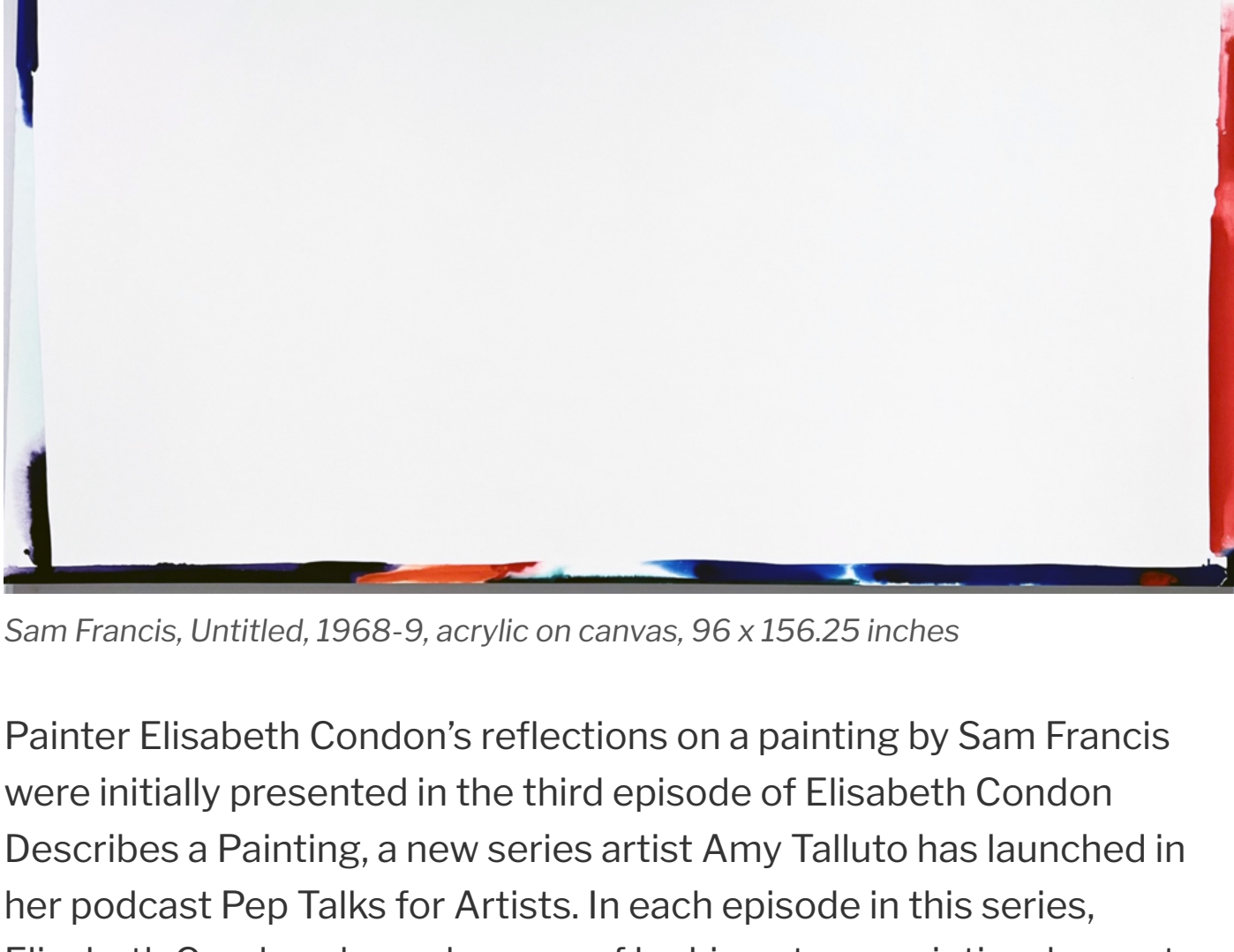


# ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

AUGUST 7, 2023 BY ELISABETH CONDON

## Elisabeth Condon Describes a Painting – Sam Francis, Untitled



Sam Francis, *Untitled, 1968-9*, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 156.25 inches

Painter Elisabeth Condon's reflections on a painting by Sam Francis were initially presented in the third episode of Elisabeth Condon Describes a Painting, a new series artist Amy Talluto has launched in her podcast *Pep Talks for Artists*. In each episode in this series, Elisabeth Condon shares her way of looking at one painting, here, at Sam Francis', *Untitled, 1968-1969*, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 156.25 inches, hails from the series known as *Edge, Sail, or Open Paintings*. *Untitled* is currently on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through July 16 in the exhibition *Sam Francis and Japan: Emptiness Overflowing*.

### Sam Francis, *Untitled, 1968-1969*

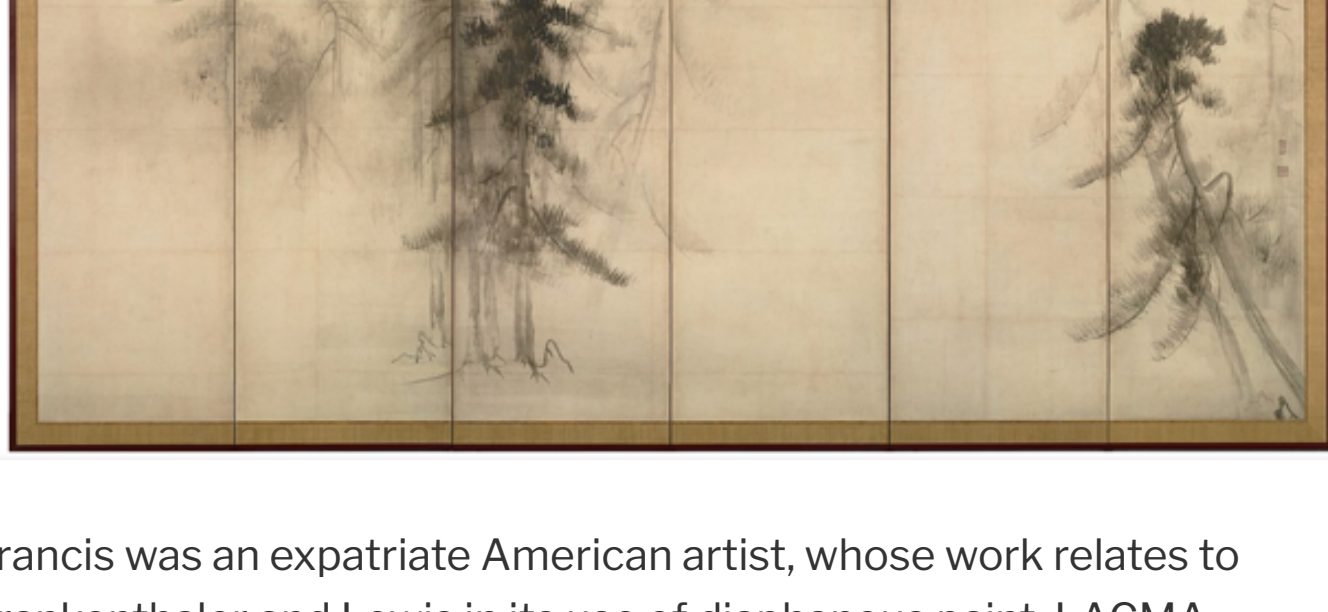
The top of the painting is completely bare, just the canvas edge against the wall. Water is applied to the two sides and bottom edge, forming watery strips sharply edged with a knife. Pure color impregnates the water, spreading along the narrow margins. On the left side, there is violet and blue, with a stained effect from both that is pale aqua. The water stays clear on the bottom and the color moves from darker purple from left to bright red, then a beautiful phthalo green rising from below, culminating in a dark phthalo blue. Turning up the right-hand side, all the color is red.

The vast area of central white is not a blank canvas, as it might be in an ink painting when the mulberry paper is often left blank. It's slightly tinted towards red or blue in three to four coats of assiduously applied gesso. Dan Cytron in California and Keishio Suga in Tokyo, Sam's dedicated studio assistants, performed much of that priming. *Untitled* frames a vast emptiness with sharp edges of color, a tough-minded painting. Francis didn't relate it to Japanese painting because he added layers of gesso before starting to paint. For him, the white was color, while for his Japanese friends, the white was space.

In calligraphy, the first pass is the only pass. If the ink stops short or you lift your hand to where the physical activity of making the painting is left incomplete by Western standards of a complete image, a master extends the image through reverberation. For example, in painting a plum blossom, it's possible to trace over the whiskers of the plum blossom without touching down the brush by re-enacting the stroke eight times with wrist and brush movement. Francis may not have practiced that method, but his paint moves freely. Sherman Lee, the preeminent scholar of Chinese art, described Sam Francis's paintings as flung ink landscapes that hark back to Sesshu, the Sumi-e Master of Japan.



Left



Francis was an expatriate American artist, whose work relates to Frankenthaler and Lewis in its use of diaphanous paint. LACMA focuses on Francis' ties to Japan. Not only did he, a restless traveler, have a studio in Tokyo and studios in Paris, Switzerland, New York, and California, but he was profoundly engaged with Japanese culture. Born in San Mateo, northern California, in 1923, Francis' dad was a mathematician, and his mother a pianist. In 1935 when he was twelve, his mother passed away from a stroke and his father remarried shortly thereafter. There is much theory about the voids of the *Edge/Sail/Open* paintings as an emptiness that needs to be filled, but whether or not that's true, his mother's death was a great loss, followed by the accidental death of a friend. Before attending UC Berkeley to study medicine, Francis encountered Asian philosophy. He interrupted his studies and joined the Air Corps as a pilot in 1944. Soon after, he contracted spinal tuberculosis and was bedridden with a full-body cast, which is when he started to paint.

Post-convalescence he studied art at UC Berkeley, graduating 1950. Paintings by Gorky, Pollock, and Rothko were acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art while he was a student there. In 1950, on the GI bill, he moved to Paris and studied with Leger, befriending Shirley Jaffe, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and George Duthait, Matisse's son-in-law. He started painting crepuscular, cellular, white paintings inspired by the Paris sky. Light for him was always the subject.

Sam used acrylic, emulsion, flashe, magna, dyes, sometimes a PVA polyvinyl acetate-based acrylic, sometimes the emulsion we use now, plus tinted white gesso. Dan Cytron made paint recipes for Sam. Lucius Hudson stretched his ten-ounce cotton duck canvases. He also used dispersions by Hoesch from Tokyo and would mix the materials together. For those who don't know, dispersion is a pure liquid pigment that can be mixed with a binder, from egg tempera to watercolor to an emulsion like Liquitex, which is what Sam used. Guerra Paint sells dispersions. The way the paint sits on the edges of the *Edge Paintings* and the way it moves into watercolor is somewhere between ink and acrylic. He also mixed inks, dyes, and even fluorescent colors. He was an experimenter. He set up his studios so that he could just walk in. Canvases lay on the floor in studios as big as airline hangars. Sam, in bare feet or socks, sponged and mopped or swept color across them. He rubbed away or added, like a sumi-e painter, scraping only to articulate the forms in his *Blue Balls* series of 1960, when hospitalized in Geneva, he drew in blue and transformed the drawings into large-scale paintings.

For Francis, as with all Abstract Expressionists, painting represented personal transformation; as an American in Paris, he was linked to tachisme, a postwar reinvigoration of the impressionist touch. Tachisme practitioners Nicolas DeStael and especially Wols (Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze), established abstraction minus the American scale. In Paris, Francis filled his apartment from floor to ceiling with canvases with crepuscular paintings from 1952 onward, which over time shifted from white to black with hot color underneath. They reveal his definition of color as light on fire.

By his mid-30s Francis exhibited at MoMA and in European galleries and museums. In 1956 he joined Martha Jackson Gallery for three shows, then Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1959. In 1957 he took his first world trip to New York, Mexico, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and India. He received his first mural commission in Tokyo for the Flower Arranging Society, which was 8 by 39 feet, at this time.

My understanding of emptiness is through Chinese scroll painting, though I'm sure that concepts of Japanese and Chinese emptiness are not far apart. *Yohaku* and *Ma* are interchangeable terms for emptiness used in this exhibition, but interate in the sense that yohaku is a whole emptiness while ma is an interval of emptiness. One might consider Francis's *Untitled* a space where emptiness becomes the dominant aspect and activates reciprocal response in the viewer. Emptiness for Asian culture is almost sacred, an essential form of interaction. Buddhist thought, whether Zen or Tibetan, considers emptiness rife with potential, the ground under which the seeds of growth are percolating. It's where change happens.

In traditional sumi-e painting, hand and eye move from shoulder through arm to paper in a forward spatial rotation. As brush hits paper, intention manifests. One does not paint to fill space. (Painting plum blossom, one paints the first petal one way and the next petal the opposite, mindfully.) Paper is potential waiting to receive ink's inhalation. As a gesture completes it exhales the ink. In viewing Sesshū Tōyō's multi-panel screen, we might perceive the entire screen as Yohaku, large emptiness, and the intervals between trees a pause, a gap of emptiness: Ma. As the eye travels across the screen the fixed mind releases and the body begins to breathe in the intervals of emptiness contained within the vaster emptiness of paper. It's akin to the Western concept of negative space that envelops every form, but negative space is seen as not-object in the west, whereas in the east emptiness and full are interchangeable. Sam Francis' *Untitled* transforms negative space into emptiness.

Lee Ufan assesses emptiness and the role it played in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century culture:

"I think that in the US at the time, there was an affinity between the desire to critique capitalism, mass production, and consumer society, and a notion of East Asian sensibility or philosophy. Artists tend to be very sensitive. My observation was that in the West, artists were already noticing that this focus on the mass production of objects, the accumulation of material wealth, and the gross national product, et cetera, resulted only in the proliferation of junk, which was ultimately unfulfilling. And so, artists were interested in considering what would happen if we eliminated these things, what would happen if we cleared the ground of this material stuff, what would be left afterward, what kind of in-between space, that space of nothingness would result?"

This kind of drive, in my opinion, didn't quite yet exist in Japan because we were still so focused here on growth, production, and catching up post-war. Of course, I'm saying that. So, this important notion of emptiness had been latent or unconscious within Japanese people. It took the influence of Western artists to activate it and bring it to the surface. I think it's very significant that Sam Francis was from California and lived in LA. He was distanced from New York, a city that was still focused on the mode of mass production, and that allowed Sam Francis to have this desire to create color, to be one of the artists who worked towards eliminating this culture of the production of stuff and create a tabula rasa. Though Francis was initially uncomfortable with the parallel that was drawn between his practice and Japanese aesthetics, still, I think people are motivated unconsciously. And I believe that Sam Francis, whether willingly or unconsciously, was influenced by or made connections to Japanese aesthetics."<sup>12</sup>

Sam in Tokyo was collected by his eventual father-in-law, an oil magnate. Sam was also involved with Gutai and Mono-ha, both post-war Japanese groups who worked collaboratively with materials to counterbalance spiritual philosophies that erupted in the war. With studios around the world, he was constantly traveling, a restless person. In both work and lifestyle, he was very alive, in the present.

Sam's work was misunderstood in New York. Hilton Kramer wrote of the "lack of struggle" that rendered his painting "emotionally thin". There's a grit in New York painting not found in Sam Francis. His light and bright paint relates to ink and watercolor in a way that seems deceptively simple outside of Eastern philosophy. Lee Ufan called Sam's work sweet in the way Asian culture can be sweet, as in Hello Kitty or soothing restaurant music that calms rather than challenges. But such sweetness disarms by camouflaging the horror of nuclear annihilation, according to Takashi Murakami's Big Boy theory. It becomes a shock defense against trauma.

Sam Francis' work has that feeling as well. The buoyancy of color, the vast empty spaces, and cleanliness of his work is at odds with the sensibility of search so primary to New York painters. Asian culture would eschew an aesthetic of struggle, and Sam Francis achieved a similar light.

Painting represents cultural beliefs and philosophies; against the backdrop of struggle Francis' *Edge* paintings question how painting can be defined.

Sam Francis eventually returned to Northern California. Diagnosed with prostate cancer in the 1990s, Francis had a final burst of energy, producing 150 small grid-like paintings with his left hand when he couldn't use his right. Every critic mentions his love of light and water. He didn't need image, he just needed to move the paint. When I started painting lattice, I encountered a photograph of his studio and immediately felt the joy of his unfettered paint. Sam Francis travels culture through the liquid vehicle of paint. His paintings have life force.

I'll sum up with Yoshiyaki Tono, framing the emptiness in Sam's painting:

"Samuel Lewis Francis saw white when he was born. It was an eternally fresh death. All the frustrated dreams were concealed secrets as negatives behind that white perfection. You could have dreamed of any image looking over this pond of possibilities and a kind of white eroticism with floating white revived as the blank arena for the dialogue in colors. Beautiful dialogue between Aristotle and Plato on the white as a stream of consciousness. Japanese tribute to one friend to another."<sup>12</sup>

**About the writer** Elisabeth Condon is a painter, who recently completed the Sam and Adele Golden Foundation Artist Residency in New Berlin, NY. Her free-flowing, synthetic landscapes compress time and place within multiple painting applications and references. You can view her work in Brooklyn at Highland Park, in a mural produced by Norte Maar, Miami at Emerson Dorsch, and @elisabethcondon on Instagram.

**About Pep Talks for Artists** Amy Talluto is a multimedia artist working in painting, sculpture, and collage who lives in Upstate NY and hosts a podcast called "[Pep Talks for Artists](#)." This written piece has been excerpted from a much longer and more in-depth discussion that can be listened to in podcast form, as well as many others on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or anywhere you get your podcasts.

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