

MATRIX/BERKELEY 121

Suzan Frecon

University Art Museum
mid January - early March
1989

The artist in her studio, 1988



Suzan Frecon is an artist devoted to a slow process of mastering the medium of paint. Frecon grinds her own pigments and hand mixes them with oils or, to produce encaustic, with melted beeswax. Her large oil paintings on canvas and small encaustic studies on wood record a painstaking exploration of color, texture, transparency, and gesture. While much significant work in contemporary painting has taken an ironic approach to this traditional practice, Frecon's work proceeds with unabashed sincerity. In Denys Zacharapolous's words, for Suzan Frecon art continues "to be part of a world in which individuals as well as objects, encounters as well as conflicts, distances as well as proximities remain real."¹

Frecon developed her aesthetic with close attention to the works of artists such as Brice Marden, Robert Ryman, and Cy Twombly. The abstract art created by Frecon and these others achieves its potency from a handling of paint that rewards our gaze with sensual brilliance while teasing us to look beyond the limits of our senses. In such work, transcendence is rooted, paradoxically, in an emphatic physical ground.

One of Frecon's recent goals has been "to create paintings without boundaries," a notion alluding to their visual expansiveness as well as to the conceptual framework--"an underlying rational order"--within which the images are seen to reside. What distinguishes her art from more Utopian attempts to articulate an underlying reality is Frecon's

detachment from abstract schemas. Rather than beginning with pre-established forms, Frecon creates structures as she goes, working more with than on the painting. In her words, "the work comes from the work." The sense of "universal intelligibility" Frecon seeks is approached by working outward from the smallest details, the bare facts of painting itself. A single mark, for example, suggests a composition, a composition a structure, and a structure a rationale.

The gestural armatures that serve as structures for Frecon's images are most apparent in the encaustic studies. These marks, however, are less forms of being than becoming, not ordered by strict geometry but reminiscent of the edginess of bones, nerves, and lightning. While providing a kind of formal skeleton for the images, these marks also participate in an overall play of color tonalities. The extraordinary closeness of tone between figure and ground endows her marks with a ghostly presence: they seem to have been coaxed into existence or, conversely, to be on the verge of disappearing. The subtlety of such contrasts creates a virtually palpable, magnetic tension. In the larger paintings, Light under Two Blue Earth with Catapult and Blues 2 Untitled, this phenomenon, which Frecon describes as "a tension of double blues," substitutes almost entirely for the presence of structurally differentiated forms. In such works, Frecon provokes an unusual awareness of color as form.

Frecon's paintings suggest that any articulation of our place in a rationally ordered universe will be fugitive at best. Yet they impart this perception without regret, as if our transient awareness were not only without tragedy, but constituted the very essence of aesthetic experience.

Suzan Frecon was born in Mexico, Pennsylvania, in 1941. She received a BFA from Pennsylvania State University and subsequently studied painting at the University of Strasbourg and L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris. She taught a course in materials and techniques for many years at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Frecon currently lives in the Tribeca area of Manhattan.

Lawrence Rinder

¹ Zacharopolous, Denys. Suzan Frecon. (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 4 August 14 September 1986)

All other quotes are from the artist's unpublished notes.

Works in MATRIX (all works are lent by the artist unless otherwise indicated):

1. Extinct Form and Color Painting, 1986, oil on linen, 70 x 93".
2. Blues 2 Untitled, 1988, oil on linen, 70 x 93". Lent by Rudy Molacek, New York.
3. Light under Two Blue Earth with Catapult, 1988, oil on linen, 70 x 93".
4. Untitled (Deep Red), 1988, encaustic on wood, 11 x 16".
5. Untitled (Minium), 1988, encaustic on wood, 12 x 15".
6. Untitled (Olive Violet), 1988, encaustic on wood, 11-1/2 x 14".

Selected one-person exhibitions:

82 Duane Street, NYC '78;
Jack Tilton Gallery, NYC '84;
Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland '86 (catalog); Julian Pretto Gallery, NYC '88.

Selected group exhibitions:

Worcester Art Museum, MA '73;
112 Green Street, NYC '78;
Grace Borgenicht Gallery, NYC '79; Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC, Invitational Benefit Drawing Show '80; The Drawing Center, NYC '82; Julian Pretto Gallery, NYC '88; Lorence Monk Gallery, NYC '89; Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Prospect '89 (catalog).

Selected bibliography:

- Kramer, Hilton. "Art: 18 in the Constructivist Tradition," The New York Times, Dec. 14 '79.
- Shinn, Dorothy. "Artist Has Her Own Minimal Style," The Akron Beacon-Journal, Dec. 17 '81.
- Yau, John. "Suzan Frecon at Jack Tilton," Art in America, Nov. '84.
- Zimmerman, Marie-Louise. "Ich uberlege sehr viel und zeige sehr wenig," Bern Zeitung, Aug. 4 '86.
- Schneider, Christian. "Die Moderne--das unabgeschlossen Programm," Basler Zeitung, Aug. 20 '86.
- Decter, Joshua. Review in Arts Magazine, Dec. '88.

MATRIX is supported in part by grants from the Paul L. and Phyllis Wattis Foundation, the California Tamarack Foundation, Art Matters, Inc., and the Alameda County Art Commission County Supervisors' Arts Support Program.