



The Painter Sam Francis

a film by **JEFFREY PERKINS**

CONTACT INFORMATION

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CAPSULE SYNOPSIS

Forty years in the making, *The Painter Sam Francis* is artist Jeffrey Perkins' lyrical and intimate portrait of a friend, mentor, and leading light of American abstract art. The film retraces Francis' life and career from his childhood in California to his artistic maturation in post-war Paris, his time in Japan, and his preeminence in the United States. Hinging on an interview that Perkins conducted with Francis in 1973, as well as extended scenes of the artist at work in the studio, the film provides deep insight into a man for whom creativity was a powerful life-sustaining force.

SYNOPSIS

Sam Francis's life as an artist began in a hospital bed. While training to be an Air Force pilot in the early stages of WWII, he sustained an injury that perplexed doctors and kept him in a full-body cast for months. Doctors later discovered spinal tuberculosis, and Francis spent the next two years of his life convalescing in a California hospital. With nothing but time on his hands, he took up painting, encouraged by Bay Area painter David Park. A new medical treatment eradicated his TB, but Francis believed otherwise. The healing power of art had saved him. An artist was born.

After receiving his master's in painting from Berkeley, Francis and wife Muriel Goodwin went to Paris and became involved in a small but flourishing group of American expatriate artists who were inspired by the work of Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Money was scarce but creativity plentiful, and Francis's atmospheric 'white paintings' began to attract attention. A savvy businessman, he quickly parlayed his talent into financial success, and his work expanded in both size and expressive power.

In 1957, Francis was invited to visit Japan to create a large mural for Hiroshi Teshigahara's school for flower arrangement, jumpstarting a lifelong involvement with Japanese culture and Zen thought. The web of colorful interlocking forms that had dominated his style began to break apart, allowing the white background of the canvas to become a compositional element. Francis understood the nature of the void in an intuitively Japanese way, and they embraced his work. The Idemitsu Museum in Tokyo now contains the largest collection of Francis's work in the world.

While in Tokyo, tuberculosis struck again, this time in Francis's urogenital tract. He traveled to Switzerland for treatment, and once again his hospital room became a painting studio. According to his son Osamu, the 'Blue Ball' paintings that emerged during this period were Francis's envisionment of his disease, and he believed it was through painting them that he was able to recover from his illness once more.

Returning to California in 1965, Francis entered an idyllic period in his life. With fourth wife Mako Idemitsu, he raised two sons and reached the pinnacle of his financial success. His generous spirit brought many younger artists to his door, including members of the Single Wing Turquoise Bird, a psychedelic light show group that had been performing at L.A.'s Shrine Auditorium. Among these was Jeffrey Perkins, and the two artists became friends. In 1968, Francis

allowed Perkins to film the creation of the large painting *Berlin Red*. It was the first time anyone had been granted access to film Francis at work in the studio.

In 1973, Perkins conducted a unique interview with Francis at his Santa Monica home. The casual nature of this encounter led to a conversation that was both spontaneous and difficult. Although Francis refused to speak about painting, his insights into the nature of dreams and his interactions with his children show both a philosophical and human side to the enigmatic artist.

Two years later, Francis split up with wife Mako, and she and the children moved to Japan. His work turned dark, resulting in a series of paintings in which black grids interacted with chaotic splashes of color. Again Perkins was allowed to film Francis in the studio, this time with much different results. The bold, sweeping gestures of *Berlin Red* were replaced by much smaller, subtler applications of color, and the works *Easter* and *Joyous Lake* show a more contained effort while retaining Francis's trademark lyricism.

Francis's success and gregarious nature began to burden him as external demands on his time increased. He married for the fifth time and began to create raw and difficult work, pouring, splashing, and rolling paint in bold, violent ways. At age 70 he had another son and began working with renewed vigor. Prostate cancer struck, and Francis's absolute belief in the healing power of the mind led him to choose a non-traditional approach to medicine. Despite his past experience of overcoming illness through art, Francis succumbed to the disease on November 4, 1994.

In 2000, Perkins began to collect interviews with the people closest to Francis, and over the next several years this process took him around the world – to Japan, Europe, and across the United States. Intimate conversations with friends, family members, and fellow artists – including Ed Ruscha, Bruce Conner, and James Turrell – illuminate a mysterious and complex personality, and its reflection in a body of work that is simultaneously diverse and singular. For Francis, art was a path to transcendence; for Perkins, Francis was art. *The Painter Sam Francis* is a labor of love, a moving portrait of a friend, and tribute to the power of art.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When Sam Francis said, “I paint time,” this concept could very well have been the primary template for the making of this film. When one considers that I started filming Sam Francis in his studio in Santa Monica in 1968, and that the film was completed in 2008—a forty year life span—“time” must be seen as the best possible metaphor to describe it.

The great filmmaker Maya Deren once said that when one takes on a subject in making a film, one must assume the full responsibility for the life of the subject itself. Sam Francis was an abstract painter, and therefore the dimensions of the subject do not follow the preconceptions that form our lives, but rather, spread across space and time in certain ways that are not spelled out for us in logic. The very idea of abstract painting was not about logic; there was an individual anarchy about making truly abstract paintings, and of course Sam Francis was about that. All I could do in making a film about him was to facilitate the mechanical witness to the act of painting, and to attempt to “interview” him.

Our relationship began as that of one artist to another, and remained that way throughout the filmmaking process and in our friendship, so the course of the film was informed by the dictates of intuition and a respect for the enterprise of making abstract paintings.

It was many years after he died that I returned to him. It was through the mouths of many people, and through the enthusiasm of those people who were also deeply affected by him, that he stepped forward. I discovered that in his personal life he was both mercurial and mischievous, often setting complex things in motion with those who knew him. The character “The Trickster” was a mask that he often wore with a kind of wicked enjoyment. But he gave a lot to me, and I learned great things through him, mostly how to act in time. It could be said that in the making of this film, I have simply served as a shepherd. Really, Sam Francis is the author of this film. Yet I too have been brought to bear, and take my part of the responsibility.



Sam Francis, “Why Then Opened II,” 1962.

FEATURING (in order of appearance)

Sam Francis
Osamu Francis
George Francis
Alfred Leslie
Peter Selz
Muriel Goodwin
Al Held
Pontus Hulten
Walter Hopps
Paul Shimmel
Masato Naito
Arata Izozaki
Eberhard Kornfeld
Elaine Anderson
Shingo Francis

Paula Kirkeby
Dan Cytron
Ed Ruscha
Ed Moses
Bruce Conner
James Turrell
Laddie Dill
Nancy Mozur
George Page
Jacob Samuel
Tom Kirsch
Gordon Onslow-Ford
Krauth Brand
Kayo Francis
Margaret Francis
Betty Freeman

THE FILMMAKERS:

Producer/Director: Jeffrey Perkins
Editor: Marc Vives
Videographer: Samantha Bertolotto
Music: Charles Curtis
16mm Cinematographer: Jeffrey Perkins, Larry Janss
80s/90s Video: Jerry Sohn
Sound Mixer: Tom Erbe

The Painter Sam Francis

85 minutes

Shot on 16mm, Super 8, Hi-8, DV

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JEFFREY PERKINS

Producer/Director

Jeffrey Perkins is an artist and filmmaker living in New York City. In 1963, while stationed by the US Air Force in Japan, he struck up a chance friendship with Yoko Ono, which led to an association over the ensuing decades with John Lennon, George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, and the Fluxus Art Movement. After moving to Los Angeles in the late 1960s, Perkins worked for the Fox Venice Theater, managed Cinematheque 16, and co-founded the psychedelic light show group Single Wing Turquoise Bird, which performed with the Velvet Underground, Yardbirds, Cream, Sly and the Family Stone, and others. It was in Los Angeles that he developed a creative relationship with abstract expressionist painter Sam Francis. Making film and audio recordings that date from 1968 to 1977, Perkins created an expansive collection of footage of the artist, both at work in the studio and in intimate conversation.

In 1981, Perkins returned to New York, where for the next twenty years he drove a taxi to support his artistic endeavors. On the occasion of Francis's death in 1994, Perkins screened his footage at a memorial program hosted at Anthology Film Archives in New York. It was then that he returned to the project with the support of Jonas Mekas, who challenged Perkins to revisit and give shape to the remarkable footage that had lain idle for many years.

In the last decade, Perkins has traveled worldwide to present his visual, audio, and conceptual works, as well as to film interviews with friends, family, and professional associates of Francis, gathering material for the now completed documentary *The Painter Sam Francis*.





CHARLES CURTIS

Composer

Charles Curtis is an internationally renowned cellist and composer of a wide variety of music, with particular emphasis on the avant-garde. A graduate of the prestigious Julliard School, Curtis has studied under such masters as vocalist Pandit Pran Nath and composer La Monte Young. He has released critically acclaimed albums under his own name, with the Charles Curtis Trio, and for John Zorn's Tzadik label. Since 2000, Curtis has been a professor of Contemporary Music Performance at the University of California, San Diego.



MARC VIVES

Editor

Marc Vives is a filmmaker, editor, and video artist living in Brooklyn, NY. vivescommamarc.com