

<p>Helen Frankenthaler, <i>Essence Mulberry,</i> 1977, woodcut from four blocks, one each of oak, birch, walnut, and lauan, printed in a range of blends and colours. 64 x 48 cm (25 x 19") on sheet 101 x 47 cm (40 x 19")</p>	<p>Initial analysis</p>	<p>Referentially the title can lead viewers to consider the colour of mulberry juice. Red mulberry juice can often be reddish purple. The colour in the print proposes a very particular variety or alludes to an essence of the juice colour not apparent in a glass of the juice. This was later clarified by a note on the work in her prints catalogue. (Note 1) See overleaf, page 2.</p>
<p>The woodcut print marks less than two-thirds of the paper. The remaining one third has been left without printed mark. Most of the upper area has been printed with the exception of part of the lefthand upper edge and along part of the top edge. All paper edges are untrimmed and have a deckle consistent with hand-made paper. (See page 2, paragraph 4 overleaf regarding the paper used.)</p> <p>Vertically down each side of the paper the woodblock has printed a wide red strip which in each case blurs into the centre giving the effect of one colour changing into another. The central printed area is in grey ink. In places, part of the grey area is replaced with an orange hue and a graphic mark facture indicative of drawn lines and, in the lower part, spillage. Also in the lower part of the printing the mark facture is pink. In a brief series of mainly vertical marks on the left hand side as if over the red strip are blue and the same blue repeats as a smudge to the left of the small pink area.</p> <p>The signature at the bottom on the right and numbering on the left confirms the intension to include the lower unprinted section as part of the artefact.</p>		<p>The initial response to the work can be at least two-fold. It was initially presented as one of many printed works on paper by Frankenthaler in her exhibitions in Williamstown and elsewhere in 1980. (Note 2) Viewed on its own the work encourages attention to the forthrightness of the red and grey expanses and their contrast to the buff unprinted section of the work. The work also encourages attention to the modest variety of mark facture, on the one hand the allusion to a sweep of colour as if from wide brushes or squeegees, on the other hand light trails of drawn line and wiped facture.</p> <p>Rhetorically the work is a philosophical statement about certainty or confidence contrasted with lesser or less certain interruptions and hesitations. Areas of planned order and areas of aleatoria, planned but not determined. The work also conveys the recognition of an unvisited area or area not yet considered, a sense of history in contrast to a future.</p> <p>The abrupt transition from the printed area to the unprinted area suggests a narrative in progress.</p>

Note 1. *Helen Frankenthaler. Prints: 1961-1979.* New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

Note 2. The exhibition toured after its start in the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown to Washington D.C.; Birmingham, Alabama; Toledo, Ohio; Boston, Massachusetts.

Extract from *Helen Frankenthaler. Prints: 1961-1979*.¹

'Essence Mulberry 1977 Woodcut from four blocks, one each of oak, birch, walnut, and lauan.²

Printed in yellow and brown blend, mulberry and transparent base blend, blue and transparent base blend, and dark blue and pink on a sheet of 100.3 x 47.0 (39 1/2 x 18 1/2 in) buff Maniai handmade Gampi paper

Edition record: 46, 10 Artist's Proofs, 13 Trial Proofs, 2 Working Proofs.

Published in 1977 by Tyler Graphics, Ltd., Bedford Village, New York; printed by John Hutcheson and Kenneth Tyler. Publisher's chopmark lower right corner. Signed and dated lower right corner. Numbered lower left corner.

Frankenthaler has stated that she first began to think about a woodcut with the characteristics of *Essence Mulberry* after seeing an exhibition of fifteenth-century woodcuts at the Metropolitan Museum.³ She was particularly struck by the faded transparency of the inks of the woodcuts, and decided she wanted this quality of colour in one of her own prints. During a subsequent workshop session at Tyler Graphics, she was reminded of the prints she had seen at the Met by the colour of a small mulberry tree growing outside Tyler's house. With juice from the berries of the tree, Frankenthaler made several drawings.

To begin the print that was ultimately to become *Essence Mulberry*, the artist used laminated blocks of oak, lauan, birch, and walnut. In woodcuts before *Essence Mulberry*, Frankenthaler relied heavily on the printed texture of the wood grain and on shapes jigsawed from a single plank. She inked these shapes in different colours and reassembled and printed them in puzzle fashion, with a minimum of overprinting or layering of the colours. In *Essence Mulberry*, however, the artist emphasised a smooth surface subtly built up by the layering and overprinting of four successive blocks with both transparent and opaque inks. The build-up of colour layers began to replace juxtaposed shapes as the dominant compositional element in Frankenthaler's *painting* as early as 1974.

Essence Mulberry also shows an explicit Oriental influence. The blended inking of the main surface block in *Essence Mulberry* recalls the Hiroshige woodcut *Horse Market* that hangs in the artist's New York City home. The delicacy of Oriental calligraphy is more strongly suggested in *Essence Mulberry* than in any of her previous work. The proportions of the print, the scroll-like quality of the Maniai handmade Gampi paper, and the large unprinted empty space at the bottom of the sheet, all underscore the artist's attempt to realise her sense of Oriental colour and form.

The trial proofs and related archival material show that *Essence Mulberry* was the fruit of a long and complex collaboration between the artist and Tyler Graphics. In addition to the four blocks used for the final edition, two others were prepared, proofed, and then rejected. Numerous experiments preceded final decisions about the colour and opacity of the inks and the surface and dimensions of the paper.⁷

¹ Helen Frankenthaler. *Helen Frankenthaler. Prints: 1961-1979*, New York, London &c.: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 114.

² The wood name Lauan is a loose term that applies to a number of wood species coming from southeast Asia. The name Lauan is commonly used when referring to plywood made of this type of wood.

³ It is worth noting Odilon Redon's lithography from his series *Dreams (Songes)*, 1891, which was also on exhibition in the Metropolitan New York.