

Light_{on} Fire

**The Art and Life of
Sam Francis**

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9 A Homecoming of Joy and Anguish

Tiphaine was an actual atelier, a professional space opening onto a courtyard full of bustling shops. The room had a high ceiling, a wall of large windows, a private toilet, and a minuscule kitchen. A small, coal-burning heating stove sat in the corner. After years of struggling to paint in tiny rooms, Sam had a real studio, only a block away from his shared apartment with Muriel. At 14, rue Tiphaine, he'd finally found space that could accommodate his vision of creating large canvases.

He pushed his wrought-iron bed up against the wall and began the mural that would eventually be titled *In Lovely Blueness* (1955–57). Begun in 1955, it would take him two years to complete. He sized the linen first, applying rabbit-hide glue to tighten the ten-by-twenty-three-foot stretch of canvas. Then he began layering on white gesso tinted with red so that the surface would retain a pinkish warmth. Preparing a canvas could take days or weeks to get just right. During that time, he wrestled with his desire to immerse himself in color, to bathe in it as he had in his hospital bed, and his fear of approaching the white void. Gessoing was his first step into this arena. It laid the groundwork not just for the painting but for Sam himself.

By now, Sam knew the grammar of white, its serenity but also the fear that it engendered. How to hint at infinity without letting the painting

descend into an impossible void: that was the predicament he faced. White was the color that looked like nothing but was everything. It contained all colors of the spectrum, all positives and all negatives, within it. Sam referred to the surface of his early White series as “beautiful white dirt.” This time, he was working toward an entirely different dimension of white. He didn’t want it to whisper of liminal space: he wanted it to shatter color, to suggest the approach and the conquest of what he called “white’s ringing silence.”¹

Blue came next. A bold, keyed-up sapphire speckled with dabs of golden yellow like he’d seen two years before in Ravenna. Standing beside Muriel, he had lifted his eyes and gazed upon the vaulted ceiling of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. It had stayed with him, that feeling of hurtling upward while the arc of the sky was brought down to earth. Flying had felt like that too—lifting off into the black night with only the headlights of his biplane and the stars for light. Until Ravenna, Sam hadn’t comprehended the possibility of capturing that feeling on canvas.

He stepped back, holding his brush cocked at an angle in his right hand, and watched as the liquid blue spread across the canvas. His body was as still and concentrated as it had been when he was a boy fishing beside his father on the shores of Green Lake, scanning the water for the first ripple of a trout’s bite. Muriel called this stance of Sam’s a form of meditative thinking. Patient and exacting, halted midmotion in a dance with the elements. Where along the surface of this painting was the tension, the pop and crack of life? When the moment finally came for him to act, Muriel said she could see the energy coursing straight out of him and onto the painting.

Sometimes Muriel worked beside Sam on her black-and-white brushed ink drawings. But in March 1955, while Sam painted feverishly in Paris, preparing his upcoming show, Muriel, his new bride and second wife, was stuck in California, sketching and writing poems in a shed in her sister’s yard. He missed her round face, her dark, doe-eyed gaze following him around the room as he worked. He missed lying in bed beside her, both of them with wool socks pulled on for warmth, reading Rilke aloud. With this painting—its vast and enveloping blueness—he felt he was on the cusp of creating a pictorial space so immense that it might evoke both fear and pleasure, what Rilke had called “a beauty that marked the beginning of

terror.”² Muriel, his poet, would appreciate this idea, his venture into sublime territory. But Muriel was trapped on the other side of the world, having stayed behind to take care of family affairs after their recent US visit.

Inside the stone walls of his studio, Sam put his brush down and, in a sloping scrawl, dashed off an aerogram to his father. He was worried about Muriel’s infrequent and unhappy letters. He needed to drum up funds for her transatlantic crossing. *Consequently*, as Sam wrote, *Muriel must wait until I can raise some dollars here—might take a month before I can get the money for a boat ticket for her*. The weather was still freezing in Paris. At least Muriel was warm in Southern California. How he longed for central heating! *France and my way of living seems here (after America) real poverty.*

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