

Art at Vassar

Fall / Winter 2017/18



The Second Staff

By almost any standard the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center is a small museum whether it be staff size (12.5), square footage (36,000) or operating budget (\$1.4 million). Yet we accomplish as much as many larger museums thanks to shared administrative functions with Vassar College, such as development, financial management, public relations, and buildings and grounds maintenance. Sharing such services with other departments on campus teaches you the power of patience, diplomacy, and teamwork. It is a curious ecosystem that municipal art museums around the country never experience. One of its benefits is that the museum staff can keep more attention focused on the educational mission of the institution and the creative pursuit of it. Yet, between September and May of each year when we are the busiest and have more demands placed on the staff, we are buoyed by a small army of student assistants, most on some form of financial aid, who help us with a multitude of tasks, from the twelve docents who lead tours for groups of all ages, to curatorial assistants who help with our exhibition development and research on the collection, to registrarial and preparation assistants who help us keep track of our collection of 20,000+ objects and assist in putting them on view in the galleries.

In all we have at any given time between twenty-five and thirty students working ten hours per week to help us achieve our ambitious schedule during the nine months each year when the college is in full operation. They truly are a “second staff.” With the benefit of special funding resources, we are even able to keep a handful of them employed during the summer months so that we can continue to offer tours of the collection and keep exhibition research moving forward.



These days many college and university campuses are keen on offering more opportunities for what has been termed “experiential learning” as a means of tempering perhaps some of the skepticism of those who are vocally questioning the relevance of higher education where theoretical studies are not balanced by some effort to learn by means of participation in task or career. While I do not think that we are in danger of becoming a vocational or trade school, our students who troubleshoot the campus computers or learn the rudiments of matting and framing drawings are having their intelligence tested in refreshing ways that require problem solving, ingenuity, and resourcefulness. This can serve as a terrific complement to extensive learning from texts that occupies so many more of our students’ waking hours.

In addition to the paid student workers at the Art Center, we also have a small but dedicated group of volunteers who form the Student Committee. This group helps us develop programs and events that have a more youthful and experimental cast to them.

What have our students done with the training they have received in art museum tasks, both mental and physical? For some, it has been a gateway to a related profession. For others, it has provided or enhanced a life skill applicable in many contexts where, for example, poised public speaking or logical understanding of complex problems is valued. Whatever the case, we are always happy to welcome our new group of student colleagues in the autumn and equally happy to see them move on to new successes when their time at Vassar is concluded.

James Mundy
The Anne Hendricks Bass Director

Collaborating with Chance

Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler

October 6–December 10, 2017

EXHIBITION FEATURE

Widely known for her iconic “soak-stain” canvases, acclaimed artist Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) was an equally inventive printmaker who took risks in a medium not frequently explored by abstract expressionists. *Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen Frankenthaler, from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation* highlights Frankenthaler’s often-overlooked, yet highly original print production.

Frankenthaler became well known through her large, almost 10-foot-wide oil painting, *Mountains and Sea*, made in 1952. In a breakthrough development, she poured thinned oil paints onto raw, unprimed canvas to suggest the Nova Scotia landscape. With an element of chance, the inks bled into the bare cloth in a dramatic play of watercolor-like washes, instinctual shapes, and receding space. Her pioneering, immediate approach widened the practices of abstract expressionists and went on to inspire Color Field abstract painters such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland and generations of future artists.

Frankenthaler made over 200 prints, and the earliest one in the exhibition is from 1968, executed during a printmaking revival in the U.S. that is still going strong. The exhibition includes almost 30 prints made from a diverse range of techniques, including lithography, etching, aquatint, screenprinting, pochoir, Mixografia, and woodcut. As an abstract expressionist, Frankenthaler championed a type of image that “looks as if it were born in a minute”—expressive, effortless, unstudied. However, printmaking presented technical and aesthetic challenges for the artist because it is an inherently controlled practice. The process can require many assistants, calculated chemical reactions, and long proofing processes that hinder artistic spontaneity. The artist’s adaptation of her “soak-stain” aesthetic for the graphic medium offers a stunning look at how printmaking—notorious for being a slow process—can exude a sense of immediacy.

From splattered pigments to translucent layers of colorful ink, the radiant prints brought together in *Fluid Expressions* pulse with creative energy. An innovator, Frankenthaler was interested in colors and the independent paths they took in both her paintings and prints. A collaborator with chance, she was intrigued with prints, and borrowed aspects of her painting technique to achieve her fluid style in the print medium. Just as she placed canvas on the floor in her studio, Frankenthaler sometimes installed the print matrix on the floor in order to work directly over its surface. She poured pools of greasy ink onto the heavy Bavarian stone in making her lithographs, going with the flow of the ink itself.



Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011)
The Red Sea, 1978–82
Lithograph
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer
1999.15

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Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Tyler
Graphics Ltd., Bedford Village, New York

For instance, in a nod to her Jewish faith and the iconic biblical scene, Frankenthaler used tusche wash and crayon to create the sheer layers of ink in *The Red Sea*, a lithograph from 1978–82. Her choice to print the edition on pale pink paper creates a visual play between the vibrant colors of the image and that of the paper support. Frankenthaler worked tirelessly to achieve this desired translucency and layering of color. The print went through twenty trial proofs, many with detailed annotations and drawings by the artist, before arriving at its final composition. The extensive proofs allowed Frankenthaler, a colorist at heart, to experiment with the subtle tonal variations from overprinting different color washes in different orders.



Unlike many print artists, Frankenthaler remained intimately involved throughout the print process: she chose the paper, mixed ink, approved registration, and even cut rigid woodblocks herself. Often made with dozens of colors, her woodcuts revived the medium in the 1970s. In the ukiyo-e style woodcut *Snow Pines*, from 2004, Frankenthaler evokes the snowy greenery and verticality of a pine forest. The grain of the woodblock reinforces this woodland subject, and its vertical striations add to the towering sense of height. Yet while Frankenthaler's energetic strokes of green and white color suggest a landscape of snow-dusted pines, there is ultimately nothing representational about her image. Indeed, many of Frankenthaler's works recall the natural world through their abstracted forms and color palettes. The titles of her prints often reference the environments they conjure, yet her images are never explicit in their specific scenery. Frankenthaler preferred "to use nature but then dismiss it" as her creative source.

The artist's unconventional methods and close collaborations with printers allowed her to create prints with the same dynamism and sophistication as her gestural paintings. Prints in the exhibition were made with several print workshops, including Universal Limited Art Editions, Tyler Graphics, and Pace Editions.

Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011)
Snow Pines, 2004
 Woodcut
 Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer
 2004.330
 © 2017 Helen Frankenthaler
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The exhibition is organized by the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation. The presentation at the Art Center is funded by the Friends of the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center Exhibition Fund. A 16-page full-color pamphlet, with an essay by Michaela R. Haffner of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art and a collector's statement by Jordan D. Schnitzer, accompanies the exhibition. The publication is made possible through the generosity of Jordan D. Schnitzer and his Family Foundation.

Patricia Phagan
The Philip and Lynn Straus Curator of Prints and Drawings

Sharing the Enchantment: Reflections from a Former Student Docent

IN THE FIELD

The first work of art I ever fell in love with lives in the eighteenth century gallery at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center. I was a freshman at Vassar, enrolled in Art 105 and also taking Susan Kuretsky's museum class as a freshman writing seminar. In Professor Kuretsky's class we were required to prepare a research paper and a guided "tour" of a single work of art in the galleries, which is how I found myself spending hours in the company of Hubert Robert's *The Octavian Gate and Fish Market* (1784). The painting is literally a world—a one point perspective view of a street where ancient Rome and Robert's contemporary Rome came together in a clash of styles and ideologies. I was entranced by the painting, and having an opportunity to share my fascination with others was like learning a magic trick. Suddenly the sky and people and architecture depicted took on added layers of meaning and I became the magician pulling back the curtain of the mundane, revealing the painting's secrets to my audience.

It wasn't until I started working at the Art Center that I understood the true power of using that moment to connect to and affirm anyone who walked through the museum's doors. The summer after my sophomore year I was the Art Center's Summer Docent and I would not be the person I am today if it weren't for that summer! Because the Art Center is such a small museum, throughout the course of the summer I learned how to hang a painting straight, schedule tours, roll a poster neatly in the gift shop, and most importantly lead tours under the guidance of Margaret Vetare and the entire staff. Summers at the Art Center bring visitors of all ages from across the world. By shaping discussions around details that visitors noticed about the artworks I spent so much time with, I learned how to share facts that confirmed or challenged or expanded upon their understanding. Therefore I was able to validate people's perspectives by helping them feel confident in their inherent abilities to see and understand a work, even those who came in saying that they knew nothing about art, while also being a guide to new information.

I continued to work as a docent for the next two years at Vassar, building skills and knowledge of how museums work and, particularly, how to create meaningful art education programs. Thanks to my time at the Art Center I had enough experience to get a job as a museum educator right after graduating from Vassar. Today, I work at three very different museums. I primarily work at the Museum of the City of New York where I teach K-12 programs about the history of the city and its people and run a weekend program for middle and high school students called Saturday Academy. I also have the privilege to have two afternoons a week where I can teach in two of my favorite art museums, training teens to lead tours at the American Folk Art Museum and leading workshops for adults with Alzheimer's and dementia through the organization Arts and Minds at The Studio Museum in Harlem. In all of my work I am guided by the underlying truth I learned that summer and throughout my time as a Student Docent: that everyone can and should have the opportunity to talk about art because art can change lives.

Pilar Jefferson

Class of 2015, Art History Major and Native American Studies Minor



Pilar Jefferson '15



Hubert Robert (French, 1733-1808)
The Octavian Gate and Fish Market, 1784
Oil on canvas
Bequest of Henderson Green, 1880.1

The Eucharistic Dove: Suspended between Heaven and Earth

Allow me to transport you back to a thirteenth-century European cathedral: music fills the space, the scent of burning incense tickles your nose as you behold the altar from your place among the congregation. The priest lowers a small, sparkling form during the liturgy of the Eucharist and then returns it to its place suspended over the altar, as if caught in flight between heaven and earth. Upon closer observation, you see that this container for God is far from ordinary: curiously taking the form of a dove and appropriately crafted with fine, radiant materials—gilding and highly polished Limoges enamel on a copper base.



Margaret Foster '18

A thirteenth-century Eucharistic dove, one of few left in existence, is among the Loeb Art Center's most recent and intriguing acquisitions. Although we don't yet know precisely how the Eucharistic dove was used, the form was popular for a short period of time and may have played a significant role in the liturgy. During the liturgy of the Eucharist, the bread (the host) and wine are brought to the altar to be transubstantiated through prayer into the body and blood of Christ. The gift of the consecrated hosts is then received by the celebrant or the congregation or put aside for future use or veneration. The Eucharistic dove would most likely have stored the reserved consecrated hosts.

As a container for the Body of Christ, the importance of the Eucharistic dove cannot be undervalued. Due to debates regarding the nature of the Holy Trinity and the well-established prohibition of idolatry at the time, the representation of a godhead was particularly difficult. Everything from the dove's material to its shape to any spiritual connotation it may convey would have been carefully considered and selected in order to best communicate the significance of the object's heavenly contents.

In the Vassar Eucharistic dove, the host would have been stored within the small compartment on the bird's back. A set of chains, connected to a common point from which a single chain was strung over a pulley and attached to a wall, would have been hooked to the facets on the ends of the branch-like arms extending from the dove's base, allowing the object to be raised and lowered over the altar. It is also possible that the dove was only taken out and placed on a special stand on the altar for special occasions.

In the Middle Ages, the Eucharist had been more commonly stored in pyxes (small box-like containers), patens (small plates), ciboria (covered receptacles, often chalice-shaped), and monstrances (receptacles with a transparent space to exhibit the consecrated host for veneration). The earlier, more common forms (i.e. pyxes, patens, and ciboria) primarily served as repositories while the monstrance form, popularized somewhat later, also served to display the host. The dove form, however, which symbolizes the Holy Spirit, invites speculation into why a shape already laden with meaning was used for Eucharistic purposes. It is also of interest that the Eucharistic dove was not crafted from traditional silver or gold but instead Limoges enamel, a luxurious material at the height of fashion at the time.

The Eucharistic dove's form, material, and short-lived popularity in Europe present a mystery yet to be researched and resolved. How exactly was the dove used? Why was it used for such a short time? Why was it acceptable to store the host, the Body of Christ, within a representation of the Holy Spirit? During the Middle Ages, such details would have been gravely considered and scrutinized; thus these questions merit investigation.

Currently, I am continuing to research the history behind the Vassar Eucharistic dove with Professor Andrew Tallon, who will also conduct the seminar ART 318 in museum studies in the spring. These efforts will contribute to a future exhibition at the Loeb Art Center that will illuminate aspects of the dove's history and meaning that at present are still uncertain and bring life to the object for wider audiences to learn, experience, and enjoy.

Margaret Foster
Class of 2018



The gilded compartment on the back of the Limoges Eucharistic dove

Learning the Curatorial Process

When I enrolled in Professor Kuretsky’s course *ART 218: The Museum in History, Theory, and Practice* last spring, I assumed that with five humanities-heavy semesters behind me, the lesson to *edit, edit, edit* when writing had already been learned. However, this proved hardly to be the case when my classmates and I, under Professor Kuretsky and curator Elizabeth Nogrady’s leadership—and with the invaluable assistance of other members of the Art Center’s staff—collaborated to create the exhibition *Menagerie in the Museum: Highlights from the Permanent Collection* (April–August 2017). To develop the contents of this exhibition, which focused on animal imagery, everyone in the course selected an object from a checklist assembled by Professor Kuretsky to analyze carefully in order to produce a didactic, 150-word wall label. While an assignment of this length sounded like a breeze to complete, we found that presenting a balance of the object’s formal elements and historical context in such a concise body of text proved to be a challenge. The surprising amount of work that went into crafting this seemingly simple, focused paragraph turned out to be emblematic of all the care and effort that mounting an exhibition at the Art Center demands from all involved—from the preparator to the security guards and everyone in between.

The object I selected was a small, primavera wood sculpture, *Rabbit* (1932), by Elizabeth Morris Poucher (American, 1895–1988). The billows of soft, perfectly smoothed contours immediately caught my attention, while the furrowed, individualistically modeled face drew me in even closer. A vibrancy radiated from the stiff material, making me eager to learn more about the talented artist’s body of work. When examining archival documents associated with *Rabbit*, I found a letter that Poucher wrote in 1959 to Agnes Rindge Claflin, Professor of Art and Director



Hannah Nice '18 with Elizabeth Morris Poucher’s *Rabbit*

of the Loeb's predecessor, the Vassar College Art Gallery. In her note, the artist remarked: "Vassar has always had a special place in our family history," explaining that she was both the grandniece of Matthew Vassar and a member of the Class of 1918. I paused upon discovering that the artist graduated exactly a century prior to when I will; as I reflected on our shared Vassar pride and the college's rich history, my engagement with the artist's creation instantly heightened.

As my classmates and I stepped into the Focus and Project galleries after the show's opening, we experienced a feeling of exhilaration. That our many voices fluidly blended into a single show was an impressive feat. We felt a collective sense of pride that came from being involved in the project from its earliest stages, from helping to edit the initial checklist to giving input in terms of the objects' display, once they had emerged from storage and been installed in the galleries. Professor Kuretsky's critical eye kept our focus engaged throughout the process, while Ms. Nogrady helped us to keep the larger picture of creating a cohesive, engaging show in mind. She also reminded us of crucial details that most of us as museum goers, not museum professionals, were unaware of. This included giving care to the objects' physical display and gallery sightlines, which are crucial to engaging wandering visitors. As museum lovers, everyone in the class recognized the personal accomplishments that came from creating this exhibition, but ultimately, it reminded us of what an incredible resource the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center is not only for art history students, but also for anyone who takes the time to walk through its vibrant galleries.

Hannah Nice
Class of 2018



Students in Art 218 gather in front of a seventeenth-century Japanese folding screen in the *Menagerie in the Museum* exhibition.

Students as Educators in the Museum

As the director's message in this issue of *Art at Vassar* makes clear, the work of the Art Center is continually enhanced by the students who join our ranks during the school year. While much of the work they do is behind the scenes, there is one area where their presence is in plain view: public education.

The Art Center hosts more 30,000 visitors each year who come singly, in pairs, in bus groups, or on class trips. They come for a casual stroll, a docent-led highlights tour or curriculum-driven school program, or one of the many public programs and events held throughout the fall and spring semesters. The docent staff consists entirely of the twelve students hired each year to learn the collection intimately and share its history and artistic riches with museum visitors using current strategies in museum education. The docents, as well as additional students who are art majors, present the great majority of these public tours and programs, and are in a sense the face of the Art Center.

The docents all share a love of art and a willingness to go deep into the history of the Art Center's collection. But what really unites an otherwise disparate group (often hailing from disciplines and programs as



Young students discuss a painting by Miró with docent Alex Raz '16.

diverse as urban studies, political science, chemistry, English, and, of course, art) is that docents go beyond the desire to learn: they desire to teach and inspire. We rely on them for everything from designing and leading art-themed story hours for preschoolers, to deciding which objects would be best to include on a tour for high school students in a Global Studies class, to quickly coming up to speed on the content of our temporary exhibitions, or even occasionally giving tours in a foreign language. Docents welcome the large groups of regional tourists unloading in a seemingly endless stream from motor coaches during autumn foliage season who always have a strong interest in seeing our Hudson River School collection. They help Girl Scouts earn their Art Badge by exploring a 17th-century still life by Pieter Claesz, a 19th-century landscape by Frederick Church, or one of our 20th-century works by modernists like Picasso or abstract expressionists like Rothko or Pollock. Along the way, they learn what methods work best in different types of tour situations and with different types of visitors. They witness first-hand the practical considerations that contribute to a successful—that is, both happy and educational—visitor experience.

Two years ago we wanted to find a means for art majors who were not docents to share their advanced studies with their peers and with the public. Curator of Academic Programs Elizabeth Nogrady and I initiated a spring series of Art Majors Talks, harnessing the depth of knowledge and the research specialties of juniors and seniors in the Department of Art for public programs that take place during “Late Night at the Lehman Loeb” on Thursday evenings. Majors choose one work of art keyed to their thesis topic or other area of special interest to discuss in a fifteen-minute format. They draw from objects already on view in the galleries or from the vast collection of works in storage. The beauty of the series is threefold: first, the students gain experience translating their research into a format that is accessible to the public, and they get real-world practice with public speaking in front of an audience that extends



Docent Isa Pengskul '19 shares a picture book with preschoolers during “Storytime at the Museum.”



Delphine Douglas '18 discusses Picasso and Léger with a group of students in a French class.

beyond the so-called Vassar bubble; second, the museum collection is illuminated in new and different ways; and third, we enhance the cultural life of the community by offering these focused talks.

To date, eleven students have participated in the series including, in 2016, Sophie Asakura '16 (Naum Gabo, *Construction in Space*), Angela Brown '16 (Marisol, *Untitled*), Ginny Duncan '16 (Ben Shahn, *Puddler's Sunday*), Martin Man '16 (Hubert Robert, *The Octavian Gate and Fish Market*), Morgan Williams (two woodblock prints by Utagawa Hiroshige), and Olivia Zisman '16 (Henri Matisse, *Roses de Noel et Saxifrage*). In 2017 the series featured talks by Rosa Bozhkov '17 (Philip Guston, *The Actors I and Inside Out*), Ryan Holguin '17 (Baron François Gérard, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*), Zoe Lemelson '17 (Doug Rickard, #40.805716, *New York City, NY [2009]*), Nikki Lohr '17 (Mark Rothko, *No. 1 [No. 18, 1948]*), and Matthew McCardwell '17 (Jacob Lawrence, *Memorabilia*).

Many students involved in public education at the Art Center go on to work in the field after graduation, landing very competitive internships or staff positions at large, well-known museums and arts organizations in part because they already have an impressive store of experience from their time at Vassar. And though four years is the most we ever get to work with any given student, the permanent staff members at the Art Center never cease to appreciate the increased institutional capacity and the critical contributions made by the student staff.

Margaret Vetare
Curator of Public Education



Ginny Duncan '16 discusses the social realism of painter Ben Shahn during an Art Majors Talk.



Nikki Lohr '17 presents an Art Majors Talk about Cold War politics and Abstract Expressionism.

Membership

July 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017

The following list represents members who joined the Art Center or renewed their membership between July 1, 2016 and June 30, 2017.

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 Bryna Horuvitz Sweedler '61
 Artur Walther

Gifts from Organizations

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 Mr. Winslow Ames P '69*
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 Joan Joffe Hall '56 P '90*
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Volunteers

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 Kaye Bannon
 Nancy Bernstein
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 Verna Carr
 Pat Clark
 Jean Cobb
 Mary Coiteux
 Madaleine Cole
 Theoni Constantine
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 Reese Das
 Mary Lou Davis
 Karleen Dorn
 Polly Ellman
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Julian Ireland
Betty Lane
Jill A. Loeb
Anthony Prizzia
Stephanie Pyrek
Phyllis Rosenfield
Peggy Sofokles
Christine L. Stammer
Susan Tousley Shaw '69
Angela Stultz

Staff
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The Anne Hendricks Bass Director

Mary-Kay Lombino
*The Emily Hargroves Fisher
Curator and Assistant Director for
Strategic Planning*

Patricia Phagan
*The Philip and Lynn Straus
Curator of Prints and Drawings*

Elizabeth Nogrady '99
*The Andrew W. Mellon Curator of
Academic Programs*

Margaret Vetare
Curator of Public Education

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Registrar/Collections Manager

Karen Casey Hines
Associate Registrar

Eleanor White
Assistant Collections Manager

Bruce Bundock
Preparator

Francine Brown
*Coordinator of Membership,
Events and Volunteer Services*

Matthew Woodard
Museum Guard

Dominick Canino '95
Museum Guard

Peter Daniel
Museum Guard



Hallie Ayres '18 at work in the Art Center's records room

**CURRENT AND UPCOMING
EXHIBITIONS**

*Fluid Expressions: The Prints of Helen
Frankenthaler, from the Collections of
Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation*
October 6–December 10, 2017

*A Neoclassical Portrait of a Classicist:
Houdon's Bust of Jean-Jacques Barthélemy*
August 18–December 21, 2017

*People Are Beautiful: Photographs, Prints,
and Films by Andy Warhol*
January 26–April 15, 2018

*Master Class: Northern European Art
1500–1700 from the Permanent Collection*
April 27–September 2, 2018

Art at Vassar

A publication for the members of
The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

Fall/Winter 2017/18



The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center
Vassar College
124 Raymond Avenue
Poughkeepsie, New York 12604
<http://fllac.vassar.edu>



Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987)
Marilyn, 1967
Screenprint on paper
Gift from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander E. Racolin,
1995.13.49

On the front cover:

French, Limoges
13th century
Eucharistic Dove, 1215–1235
Champlevé enamel, parcel gilt
and engraved copper, circular
base and hinged lid later
Gift of Mrs. Frederick Ferris Thompson
by exchange, 2017.4
Photo courtesy of Sotheby's