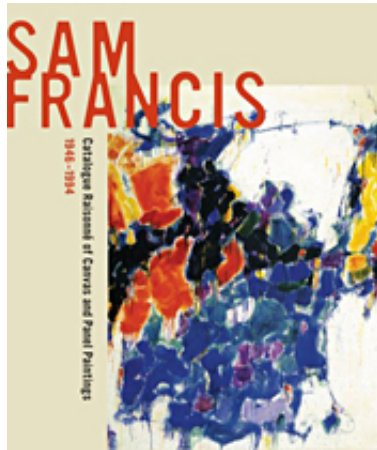


## Print Article



Debra Burchett-Lere, ed., *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946-1994, 2011*, University of California



Sam Francis in his Santa Monica Studio, 1979, photo by Meibao D. Nee

## Summer Reading OF ARTISTS, CURATORS AND CRITICS by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Debra Burchett-Lere, ed., **Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946-1994, 2011**, University of California, 320 pp., \$495.

Though **Sam Francis** developed paintings of monumental scale with all-over patterns of monochrome color just a few years after the initial triumph of the Abstract-Expressionists, he did so in Paris. During his eight years there, he evolved as one of the most masterful painters of the 20th century, but being away from New York undermined the critical reception for his work. In the years since, the writing and scholarship has rarely measured up to his stature. That begins to change with the recent University of California Press publication of *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946-1994*.

The richly illustrated volume features a meticulous timeline biography by Debra Burchett-Lere, who began working for Francis in 1992 and is now director of the Sam Francis Foundation. Dozens of color plates and personal photographs illustrate the texts, while the complete paintings are on two CDs included within the elegant beige linen box. The first contains 1,910 entries for 1,855 paintings, as some works are two-sided or multi-panels. The second relates to the biographical chronology with letters, writings, photographs of Francis with friends and family, and a couple of films of him at work. Here is a singular advantage of the CD format, perhaps offsetting the cumbersome business of inserting discs into a computer. (For another intimate view, I suggest the delightful film *The Painter Sam Francis* by Jeffrey Perkins, his friend and founder of the 1960s light-show collaborative Single Wing Turquoise Bird, which was supported by the artist.)

As the art scholar and curator William C. Agee states in the preface, "An early and indelible lesson for any art historian is, or should be, that there is no such thing as definitive." Agee wrote a catalogue essay for Francis's 1999 retrospective organized by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. (Francis, a founding board member, did much to help establish the museum.) In this essay, Agee has expanded his evaluation of the artist. As Agee makes clear, this is crucial since Francis worked more in Europe and Japan than in New York, though his work was represented during key early years by Martha Jackson Gallery.

In 1962, Francis settled in Santa Monica. By then, he was an established, wealthy, highly regarded artist, but the art world itself had changed. Despite his many exhibitions and sales, and generosity to younger L.A. artists, his work did not receive the serious consideration it was due.



Sam Francis in his Santa Monica Studio, 1979, photo by Meibao D. Nee



Debra Burchett-Lere, ed., *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonne of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946-1994*, 2011, University of California

It was misread, as Agee says, dismissed as “decorative,” the same critique hurled at painters that Francis admired: **Henri Matisse**, **Pierre Bonnard**, **Claude Monet**.

Yet, Francis had pursued such painting from the outset of his career. He began during the two years that he lay prone in a body cast after his spine was damaged in a World War II plane crash. Painting became a reason to live. A native of Northern California, Francis responded to the work of **Clyfford Still** and **Mark Rothko**, who both taught then in the Bay Area. The will to survive and to paint were so intertwined for Francis, he seemed to float above the concerns of mere mortals. This quality permeates his painting, which was intentionally driven by intuition rather than calculation.

With clarity and insight, Agee evaluates the various stages of Francis’s considerable output over four decades and provides insightful historical context. Surprisingly, Agee is not so taken with the Edge or Open paintings done by Francis in the 1960s: vast white canvases with splatters of primary and tertiary colors around the margins. Developing as they were around the same time that his younger friends **James Turrell** and **Robert Irwin** were experimenting with the effects of light, they seem to be evidence of Francis’s perpetual willingness to pursue a fresh direction in his work.

Burchette-Lere, editor of the book, has been compiling documentation since Francis’s death in 1994. She says that this volume of extensive research is not definitive. Francis gave away quite a lot of work, kept numerous studios, enjoyed a chaotic work environment and did not record the dates, titles or details of his paintings. More work is bound to emerge and the foundation intends to add it to an ever-changing website of all the known paintings. A catalogue raisonné of works on paper (a catalogue of prints was published in 1992) is also planned for the future.

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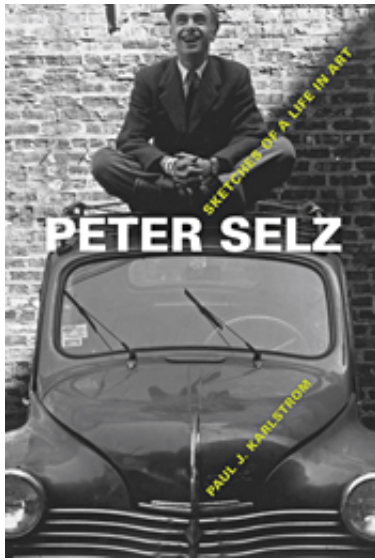
Paul J. Karlstrom, **Peter Selz: Sketches of a Life in Art**, 2012, University of California, 321 pp., \$34.95.

Coincidentally, U.C. Press also is the publisher of a biography of one of Francis’ great supporters: *Peter Selz: Sketches of a Life in Art* by Paul J. Karlstrom. It is an enjoyable account of a man who seemed always to be in the right place at the right time with the right passions. Born in 1919 in Munich, Selz was introduced to art and antiques by his art-dealer grandfather, Julius Drey. As Hitler came to power, Selz’s Jewish parents sent him to New York City, where he was further encouraged by a distant cousin, **Alfred Stieglitz**.

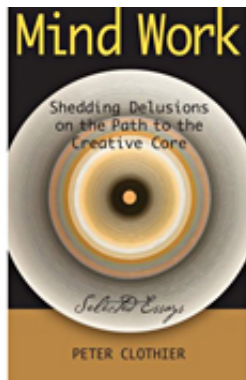
Selz worked at a brewery to support himself and his parents, who had also come to New York, but spent all his free time at An American Place. He also helped the artist and scholar **Kate Steinitz** (1889-1965) mount an exhibition of refugee painters for the 1939 World’s Fair in Queens. When the United States entered the war in 1942, he was drafted and in 1943 became a naturalized citizen.

He worked in communications during the war and after attended the University of Chicago on the G.I. Bill. Pursuing a degree in art history, he specialized in German Expressionism, an area less understood than the popular School of Paris. His dissertation advisor was Joshua Taylor. Selz eventually turned his study into a book on German Expressionism, also published by UC Press, that remained the principal resource on the subject for decades.

That was one qualification that caught the attention of Alfred Barr, who suggested Selz for the



Paul J. Karlstrom, *Peter Selz: Sketches of a Life in Art*, 2012, University of California



Peter Clothier, *Mind Work: Shedding Delusions on the Path to the Creative Core*, 2012

post of curator of modern painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. Selz accepted a position as chair of the art department and the gallery at Pomona College in 1955. He had married the art historian Thalia Cheronis and they had two daughters. Selz was organizing exhibitions of American modern art, including the geometric abstract painting of an artist teaching at Pomona, **Karl Benjamin**, along with **Frederick Hammersley**, **John McLaughlin** and **Lorser Feitelson**.

Before he could mount that show, however, he was given the job in New York. He handed it over to Jules Langsner and went to MoMA in 1958 where he made his mark with the controversial **Jean Tinguely's Homage to New York** and a show of **Peter Voulkos'** ceramic sculpture. There followed shows of **Alberto Giacometti**, **Mark Rothko**, **Jean Dubuffet**, **Max Beckmann** and the "Art of Assemblage," which included a number of California artists. These shows were not the party line in New York and despite his affection for MoMA, it seems that his taste was not universally admired. His irrepressible personality also seems to have gone against the status quo.

His character was, however, enticing to the president of the University of California, Clark Kerr, who hired him as director of the University Art Museum, Berkeley in 1965. Selz oversaw the construction of a new museum building and added works to the museum's collection including the valuable Pacific Film Archive. He did shows on kinetic art and funk and participated eagerly in the counterculture of San Francisco in the '60s. His disdain for monogamy had brought an end to his first marriage but he found support for this choice among the free-spirits of the Bay Area.

By 1972, however, Selz was at odds with the administration and left the museum to teach modern art history at the university, a tenured full-time position. Around the same time, he accepted \$20,000 from Marlborough Gallery to testify on its behalf in the scandalous trial over Mark Rothko's estate. Selz had all of the Rothko appraisals from doing the show at MoMA and apparently did not see that involvement with Marlborough would tarnish his reputation as it did.

In 1983, Selz married his fifth wife, Carole, and despite retirement from teaching in 1988, has remained a force. He continues to write catalogue essays, organize exhibitions and lecture. He willingly participated in this biography and did not protest when the author included the stories that cast shadows. Selz comes off as rather proud of his maverick reputation.

Karlstrom, former west coast director of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, has written or edited a number of other books, but this is his first biography. He does a fine job of exploring the shifting nature of art history as a discipline that develops over the course of Selz's career and the relationships between important characters of the '50s and '60s in New York and San Francisco. He is kind but not fawning in his treatment of Selz and rightly uses his life as a vehicle for recreating some of the more dynamic moments in 20th century cultural history. In addition, he includes any number of interesting tidbits about museum and university politics on both coasts that illuminate Selz's wide-ranging career and clarify the history of the period.

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Peter Clothier, **Mind Work: Shedding Delusions on the Path to the Creative Core**, 2012, Parami Press, 192 pp., \$18.

Peter Clothier, an art critic and author based in Los Angeles, has dedicated himself to blogging and essays, most often in **The Buddha Diaries** and in the Huffington Post. His most recent book *Mind Work: Shedding Delusions on the Path to the Creative Core*, published by Parami Press, is a collection of writings that simulate time spent in lively conversation.



Peter Clothier

Nominally essays, Clothier's writing is done, he says, with an awareness of his age, of his spiritual inclinations. He writes about letting go of one distraction after another to get closer to something that even he does not know. Some texts are musings on the violence of video games or television shows, but at their most interesting, the pieces are a frank stock-taking of his very self.

In emulation of a painter, Clothier writes a self-portrait in the nude, noting the areas that are holding up and others that are going down. He begins with his feet and continues the appraisal moving upwards, bit by bit, describing in unsparing detail how he looks in the mirror. "Arms. I have always been self-conscious about my arms. They seem to me skinny, unmuscular -- no matter that I have been working out in my latter years, and have succeeded in strengthening them."

Clothier's writing is intensely and increasingly personal, a position that he defends not only in his own work but in that of others. This position could be seen in the very title of his last book of essays collected over 30 years, *Persist: In Praise of the Creative Spirit in a World Gone Mad with Commerce*.

Inspired by Buddhism, his writing often manifests his belief that artists must create for themselves, even without approval from others or financial reward. That is a message we can hear again and again.

**HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP** is the author of *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s* (Henry Holt, 2011).