

# Suspense Artist

*A traveling show highlights painter Suzan Frecon's skillful balance of the rational and the romantic.*

BY DAVID COHEN

In an interview in the catalogue for her exhibition at the Menil Collection of mostly recent oil paintings and watercolors, Suzan Frecon says, "When I looked at good paintings, I noticed that they were always strongly composed so as to be ineluctably suspended. . . . I think one has to see this for oneself by looking at paintings and having the meaning of visual suspension reveal itself little by little."

It is a rare pleasure to find that an artist's articulation of intent accords so strongly with one's own subjective response to her work. In a variety of ways, Frecon's paintings do indeed seem to hover—about, above and between. She often favors forms that seem solid yet disengaged from a supporting structure. For instance, *double red curved* (2003), a vertically stacked diptych of horizontal canvases, deploys in both canvases a curved form reminiscent of Moorish cupolas, either in the positive shape itself or the negative space underneath it. Hues are often very close-knit, as in *embodiment of red, version 1* (2007), where crimsons and vermilions subtly and discreetly distinguish forms from one another while melding into a strong, pulsating whole; the viewer's experience is of a back and forth between a consciousness of shape and the sensation of chromatic alloverness.

These are formal ways in which suspension is brought into play. Various ambitions or esthetic impulses are also, so to speak, suspended within the solution that is Frecon's work—impulses that define its lively dynamic. Her paintings are at once restrained and expressive, reductive and associational, rational and romantic. While the feelings she evokes are unusually warm and quiet for art in our

time, with a stress on humble materials and modest gestures, the determination to accommodate, and maintain the integrity of, such fiercely competing qualities makes for a rich experience.

At the Menil, the installation enforced a sharp division between Frecon's oil paintings on canvas and her watercolors on found papers. Twenty-nine of the latter were displayed together, while 10 canvases were split into two groups; one cluster hung in the entrance lobby and the other in the wide central nave that runs the length of the Menil. The paintings benefited from the even, natural overhead light regulated by architect Renzo Piano's elaborate system of shutters, as variably matte or glossy surfaces are significant to her orchestration of effects. Apart from one canvas from 1997 and a watercolor each from 1996 and 1997-98, all dated from 2002 to '07.

The two bodies of work—paintings and watercolors—represent different attitudes toward time, finish and gesture, although they are equally meditative. The watercolors have a nonchalance, a tentative awkwardness that brings to mind the deliberately fragile, vulnerable look of the sculpture of Richard Tuttle (an artist with whom Frecon exhibited in a five-person show at San Antonio's Lawrence Markey Gallery in 2003) as well as recalling outsider artists like James Castle and Bill Traylor. While they also have the quiet intensity associated with devotional works produced in the Tantric tradition, Frecon's charmingly scruffy watercolors submit to the inevitable contingencies associated with a notoriously unpredictable medium, particularly when worked on aged papers liable to buckle under its weight.

*Opposite, Suzan Frecon: mineral composition, 2004, oil on linen, diptych, 108 by 87½ inches.*

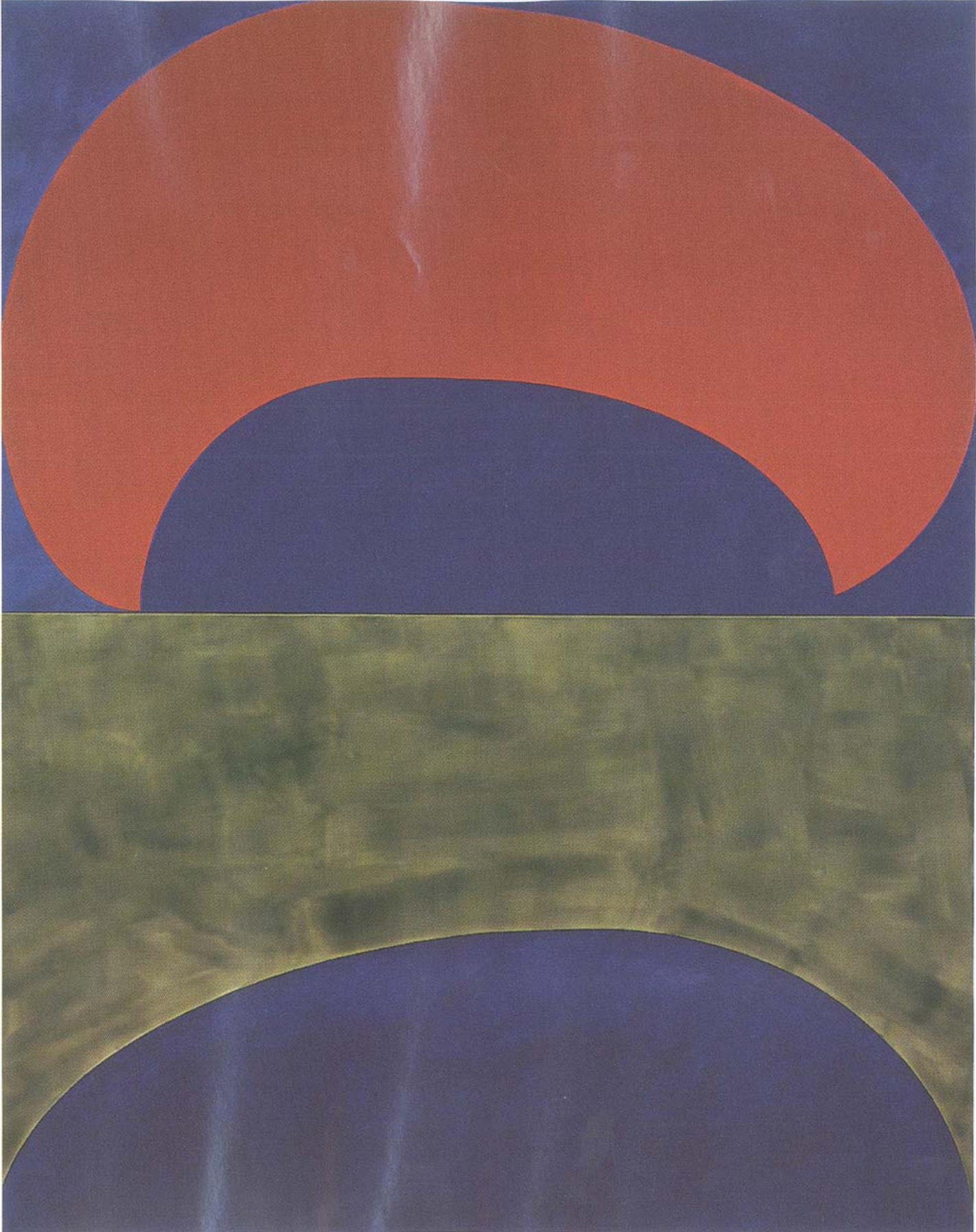
*orange e, 2007, watercolor on vintage Indian ledger paper, 9½ by 23½ inches. Courtesy Lawrence Markey Gallery, San Antonio.*



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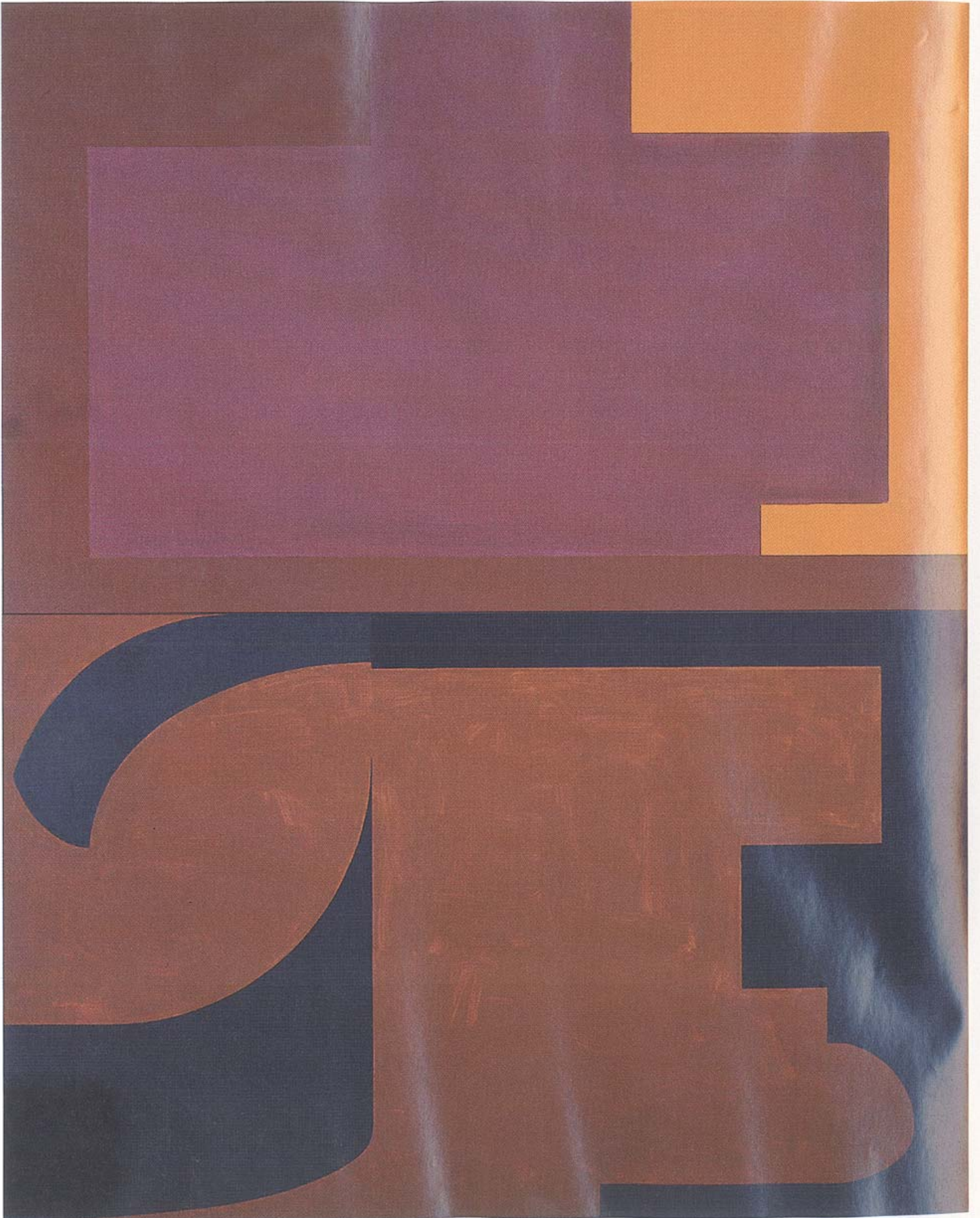
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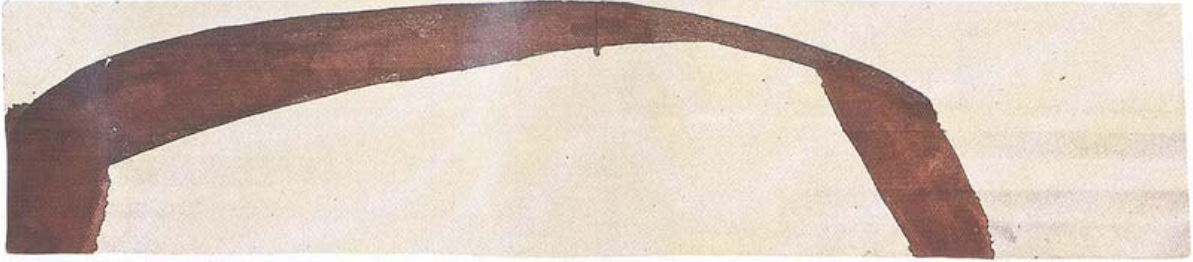
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long red span, ca. 1997-98, watercolor on vintage Indian ledger paper, 5½ by 12½ inches. Collection R. Netzer, New York.

Opposite, purple forbidden enclosure, 2005, oil on linen, 108 by 87½ inches. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Menil Collection, Houston.

### A tendency toward hard edges is mitigated by irregular geometry and richly associative colors, which save the work from minimalist solemnity.

In contrast, the paintings have a tight formality. There is a tendency toward hard edges, although this is mitigated by irregular geometry and a discriminating use of colors that are rich in associations, achieved with paints the artist mixes herself. These all save the works—in another form of suspension—from what might otherwise have been a minimalist solemnity. Frecon is alert to the lessons of radical reduction and strives to retain all the advantages of economy that come with it. But, subtly and in ways that relate to personal ambitions and emotions, she sees how much can be put back while retaining a sense of restraint. That putting in and scaling back is, one feels, part of what gives the work its traction.

Frecon shares this stylistic position with various artists of her generation. Tuttle has already been mentioned; James Bishop was also a co-exhibitor at Markey in 2003. In a 2004 group show at Gorney, Bravin and Lee in New York, Frecon was joined by Raoul de Keyser and Thomas Nozkowski, among others, who are similarly convinced of the possibility of depiction *within* abstraction. There is, however, a distinction between, say, Frecon and Nozkowski. Where Nozkowski makes marks and gestures *as if* he were depicting some a priori image, Frecon is loyal to a formalism that is anti-descriptive; in her case, depiction arises incidentally from shape consciousness, in a process closer to the abstraction of Ellsworth Kelly.

Two motifs dominate her paintings, and except for an encounter in *purple forbidden enclosure* (2005), they are generally kept apart: the rectangular and the curved. Her rectangular shapes offer themselves as cross sections or ground plans, whereas the curves seem exclusively to ask to be read in profile. Both, however, have strongly architectural (or at least architectonic) connotations. The sharp verticals in *Tunc* (2002) feel like a cityscape, as of skyscrapers viewed down a narrow street. The curves, as suggested already, have associations with mosques, or turbans, and Islamic art is indeed a touchstone for Frecon, along with Western medieval architecture and illuminated manuscripts—and modernist abstract painting. In the diptych *mineral composition* (2004), a brown curve floats on a blue ground in the upper half and is seen virtually intact, with just

a bit shaved off its top; the green form dominating the lower half, in contrast, reads as radically cropped, such that the blue ground underneath becomes more figure than ground—unless the viewer submits to an idea of the green as the underbelly of an arch, as for instance in a bridge, in which case the blue becomes water.

Frecon views her paintings on canvas as her primary activity, but considers the works on paper autonomous, not preparatory. (She does make preliminary sketches, to scale, for her paintings, but these functional drawings are distinct from her watercolors and were not on view.) The watercolors often follow from canvases, offering, as it were, distillations of esthetic discoveries made in the slower, more ambitious works. The works on paper do, however, reveal more clearly a side of the artist's sensibility sublimated in the canvases: her interest in exoticism.

Many of the watercolors are painted on old Indian ledger paper. The artist explains her attraction to this support in terms of how the rag paper responds to the medium, neither blotting it up excessively nor repelling it. Other papers she uses veer toward these extremes, and suit specific images. But her general preference, in keeping with her inclination toward suspension, is for a balance of acceptance and resistance. Consequently, the watercolors are visceral objects, buckling, rough at the edges. The romantic associations, however, of used papers that had a former life in India are not entirely obviated.

Similarly, thematic associations prompted by color are more blatant in the watercolors than in the canvases. This might have to do with the way, in the works on paper, the color is demonstrably brushed or poured, whereas in the oil paintings there is some coyness as to how the expanses of color got there. The sense of pigment suspended in a liquid medium is more tangible—and the earth and blood associations of her reds and browns more overt—in watercolor than they are in oil paint.

While it is not unusual for European institutions like the Kunstmuseum Bern to mount exhibitions of lesser-known artists when curators believe in the quality of the work, it feels brave and unusual for an institution with the profile of the Menil to exhibit a “sleeper” like Frecon, an artist working within a trajectory of personal-poetic modernist abstraction who has a reputation as understated as the work itself. That said, the ability of her work to reflect and absorb various sources and ambitions suits perfectly a collection, like the Menil's, that is characterized by a mix of refinement and diversity. □

*“form, color, illumination: Suzan Frecon painting”* opened at the Menil Collection, Houston [Mar. 6-May 11], and is currently on view at the Kunstmuseum Bern [June 11-Sept. 28].

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