

# DEAR Big SAM

## *The Letters of Walasse Ting to Sam Francis Tell the Story of Their Friendship Over Time*

JOHN SEED



1 Photograph of Sam Francis and Walasse Ting, Santa Monica, 1989. Photo by Nico Delaive

### Letters to Sam

In the archives of the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in Los Angeles are several folders filled with letters from Walasse Ting (1928–2010), the renowned Chinese-American artist, to his great friend and fellow artist, Sam Francis (1923–1994). It is an engaging and affectionate correspondence that persisted for more than three decades, with Ting's last letter dated just a month before the death of Francis in November 1994. Contained in the GRI's archival folders are paint-spattered letters, colourful drawings, carefully typed poems, sumi-e ink paintings, altered postcards and Chinese calligraphies. The folders also include several responses from Francis and his staff that are friendly but far more conventional. However, Ting's letters, with their eccentric, wide-ranging and sometimes playfully erotic content, are the real treasures in this collection.

Ting and Francis (1) had the requisite mixture of similarity and difference to provide the right chemistry for an enduring friendship. Both were free spirits, who used their art as a record of their inner motivations. Both were artist/poets, who were enchanted by the power of opposites and by the allure of the feminine. As young men, Ting and Francis were each drawn to Paris, a city that provided them with inspiration and camaraderie in the early stages of their careers. There was also a complimentary aspect to their friendship: Francis had a fascination with East while Ting was fascinated by the West.

The earliest letter from Ting to Francis, dated August 1st, 1961, begins assertively with bold, oversized letters scrawled in ballpoint pen, then switches to a typewritten text (2):

“DEAR Big SAM.

MAY I INTRODUCE MR. BIRCH OF THE GALERIE BIRCH COPENHAGUE DANEMARK HE IS THE MOST POWERFUL MAN IN GALERIE OF THE NORTH EUROPE, HE CAN SOLD ALL PAINTINGS IN EXHIBITION, BECAUSE HE KNOW OF THE PEOPLE OF COPENHAGUE, HE SHOWED ASGER JORN IN 1948, HE WILL SHOWING ALECHINSKY AND I THINK WE ARE GOOD FRIEND WE MUST TOGETHER EVERYWHERE

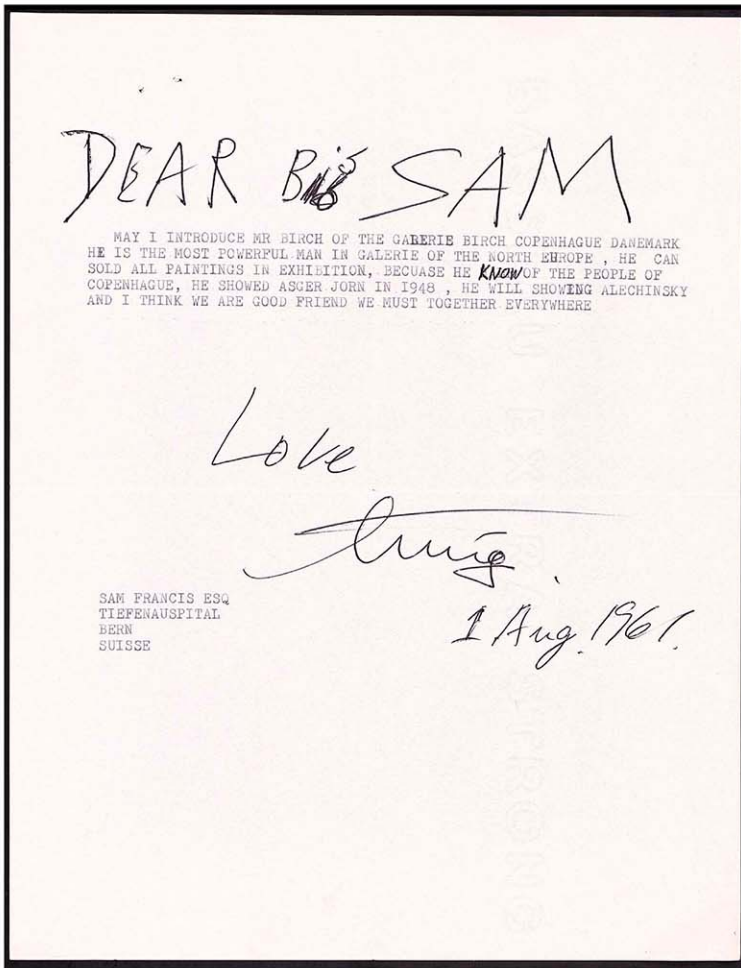
Love ting.”<sup>1</sup>

Signing the letter “ting” was in itself an indication of affection and respect. “My father almost always signed his name Walasse on letters to friends and loved ones”, says the artist's daughter, Mia Ting. “Sam always called my father Ting. I never heard him ever say Walasse.”<sup>2</sup>

### The Roots of a Friendship

The dynamics of their friendship are already apparent in this one short letter. Ting, a native of China who had emigrated to the West, saw Francis as someone to admire and a leading figure in the art world. An outgoing and socially adept man, Ting advanced his career by building and maintaining a network of artist friends around the globe. According to Yang Chihung, a fellow artist, Ting “was fond of befriending painters, rather than critics, historians, theorists and curators”.<sup>3</sup> Through travel, association and friendship Ting had transformed himself from a “Chinese” artist to an international figure whose hybrid style transcended its complex origins. Strongly drawn to the freedom of expression offered by post-war Western culture, Ting was, in the words of art historian Cedric Laurent, “a smuggler between West and East at a time when China was closed”.<sup>4</sup>

Sam Francis, an American-born modernist who had worked and shown internationally—in France, Japan, California and New York—had recently experienced a mete-



2 "DEAR Big SAM" letter from Walasse Ting to Sam Francis, dated August 1st, 1961. Sam Francis Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.M.8). © Estate of Walasse Ting / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

## Walasse Ting's Early Years

Born in 1928, Walasse Ting was the fourth and youngest son in an affluent family; he was also his mother's favourite. After growing up in and around Shanghai—where he remembered first drawing on a pavement at the age of four—Ting was moved around by his parents for his own safety after the Japanese arrived in 1937. Inspired by the images of European avant-garde art he discovered in books and magazines, Ting briefly attended the Shanghai Art Academy and was then sent by his family to Hong Kong in late 1952. After leaving Shanghai, Ting never saw his mother again. He did eventually reconnect with his father—an opium smoker who, according to Ting, "Never did a thing! Never washed a dish in his life!"<sup>6</sup>—in Brazil where he had emigrated.

Ting arrived in Hong Kong as an ink painter, who had been painting hand scrolls mainly employing traditional Chinese subjects. Despite his reliance on established themes, Ting's experimental paintings already show the influence of European avant-garde painting. In some of these early scrolls, Ting's figures—derived from Chinese opera—have distorted, stylised bodies that reflect his interest in children's drawings. It was an interest Ting shared with members of the French CoBrA group—including Asger Jorn (1914–1973), Karel Appel (1921–2006) and Pierre Alechinsky (born 1927)—whom he would soon meet in Paris. They would, in turn, be fascinated by Ting's fluid and expressive brushwork and by the Chinese wellspring of his style.

Sometime after Ting's first one-man exhibition—at the Hotel Cecil, where his work was billed as "Modern Paintings of Eastern and Western Styles"—the young artist left for France. Before leaving Hong Kong, Ting had already stopped using his given name (Ding Xiongquan) and had mixed his youthful nickname (Xuailaixi, meaning "spoiled") with Matisse to rechristen himself Walasse Ting. This name change symbolised Ting's desire to be reborn as an artist who was a hybrid of East and West. "It was always his goal to get to Paris and be an artist", says Mia Ting.

Ting—who spoke no French and carried no passport—disembarked from a freighter in Marseilles with a cardboard suitcase, a roll of rice paper and US\$5 in his pocket. He then took up residence in a tiny one-room apartment on Passage Raguinot in the "Chinese District" of Paris. Ting lived there in poverty, sleeping and painting in the same room—where he could barely step back from

oric rise, critical acclaim and considerable financial success. A brilliant, mercurial man, his larger than life personality made him "Big Sam". Francis was an abstract painter, who had first begun painting while recovering from spinal tuberculosis in a military hospital in 1946–1947. When Ting wrote to him in 1961, Francis had again been hospitalised for several months in Bern, Switzerland, and was recovering from a recurrence of the same ailment.

In a second letter, dated August 7th, 1961, Ting expresses his concern in all capital letters, writing in the fragmented, near-pidgin English that he had picked up as a refugee from China travelling to Europe in fourth class on a freighter:

"HOW ARE YOU???????????????? I HAVE NOT SEE YOU SINCE LAST TIME IN RUE DE SEINE LAST SUMMER, HOW ARE YOU REALY HOW LONG DO YOU STAY IN HOSPITAL IS NICE BEAUTIFUL GARDEN OUTSIDE OF HOSPITAL, SOMETIME I DREAM OF YOU THAT YOU STAY ON BED OR WHAT YOU DOING? I ALWAYS THINK YOU MUST HAVE A GREAT HIGH SPIRIT AND ALIVE IN YOUR DEEP HEART. TO EXPRESS YOU UP THE CLOUD DOWN THE SUN WITH ALL FRESH COLOR FRESH AIR AND FRESH LIFE."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ting, Walasse. Letter to Sam Francis. August 1st, 1961. Box 7, Sam Francis papers. The Getty Research Institute, Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA. Reviewed February 7th, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>Ting, Mia. Email, "Re: Draft of Article". Received by John Seed, May 20th, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Lefebvre, Éric (editor). *Walasse Ting: The Flower Thief*, Musée Cernuschi, 2017, p. 180.

<sup>4</sup>Lefebvre, Éric (editor). *Walasse Ting: The Flower Thief*, Musée Cernuschi, 2017, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup>Ting, Walasse. Letter to Sam Francis. August 7th, 1961. Box 7, Sam Francis papers. The Getty Research Institute, Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA. Reviewed February 7th, 2018.

<sup>6</sup>McHugh, Fionnuala. "The Interview", *South China Morning Post*, May 6th, 2001, <http://www.scmp.com/article/346129/interview>. Accessed March 4th, 2018.

his work—often subsisting on scraps of bread retrieved from nearby gutters.

### Post-war Paris: A Magnet for Young Artists

Although it is generally agreed that New York, the centre of Abstract Expressionism, had replaced Paris as the capital of the art world after the Second World War, Paris—with its deep cultural roots and incomparable museums—still had considerable magnetism for young artists, including several hundred from the United States. “The American painters, who came to Paris after the war with their famous G.I. bills”, recounted dealer Paul Facchetti (1912–2010), “they were impressed by European culture”.<sup>7</sup> One such artist was Sam Francis, who arrived on a steamer in 1950 and began taking classes one day per week at a school run by Fernand Léger (1881–1955) in order to collect his weekly US\$75 military stipend. Francis—who had seen vanguard American abstract paintings on both coasts of the U.S.—was not initially impressed by what he saw, writing to a friend:

“The painters over here mostly stink to hell! Very derivative and no originality. My impression of American painting has skyrocketed on seeing what is done in Europe today.”<sup>8</sup>

Although initially dismissive of the current art scene, Francis quickly fell in love with Parisian culture and soon made friends with many artists whom he found of interest. Among them were the Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle (1923–2002) and Karel Appel, both former members of the influential postwar CoBrA movement: artists who emulated the vigorous and intuitive art of children and the mentally ill. They had since gravitated to another approach that the critic Michel Tapié (1909–1987) had christened “Informel” (Informal), which loosely grouped artists who tended to avoid traditional notions of order and organisation, generally through abstraction.

In the early 1950s, both Riopelle and Francis were included in shows of the “Informel” tendency organised by Tapié. They took place in the converted studio of the photographer, Paul Facchetti, who showed abstract paintings in a space that still had a Hollywood-style photo set. Francis saw the first Paris exhibition of Jackson Pollock there—featuring fifteen paintings from 1948 to 1951, including *One: Number 31, 1950* (1950)—in March 1952. By the time of Walasse Ting’s arrival in Paris in 1953, Francis, already well connected in Paris, had been the subject of a one-man show and had established himself as an emerging abstract painter. In a 1955 issue of *Life* magazine, a photo of Francis would appear in a feature, titled “The Most Talked About Painters in the World”.

### From Paris to New York

During the early years of Francis’ ascent, Ting was struggling just to survive:

“Working all kinds of job to making a very simple living. Living in a six inches window room. Paint there, eat there.”<sup>9</sup>

Sometime in late 1954, Ting caught the interest of Pierre



3 Walasse Ting painting on the roof of his studio, New York, late 1950s. © The Estate of Walasse Ting

Alechinsky, who observed Ting at work in his tiny apartment:

“He was squatting before his paper. I followed the movements of his brush, his speed. Very important the variations in the speed of a stroke...Ting hesitates and then the solution...The final figure graceful beyond the paper.”<sup>10</sup>

When Ting’s first Paris exhibition opened at “Studio Paul Facchetti” in October 1954, the works on view—which included blocky geometric abstractions and stylised ink paintings that carried echoes of Chinese culture—showed that Ting had arrived at a personal and artistic crossroads: he was testing the waters of abstraction. It is entirely possible that Francis, who was in Paris that autumn, saw Ting’s show, as he frequented the Facchetti Studio. However, it seems that Ting and Francis did not actually meet until Ting moved to New York after his first US exhibition at Galerie Chalette in March 1957.

In “Walasse Ting by Walasse Ting”, an autobiographical poem published in 1971, Ting mentions meeting Francis after coming to New York, but uses poetic licence when claiming that it happened in 1963:

“...In 1963, arrived in New York  
Six months later meet Sam Francis  
Six months later meet Tom Wesselman  
Six months later meet Claes Oldenberg  
Eat hot and sour soup with them in  
Chinese restaurant...”

In truth, Ting most likely met Francis in the summer of 1958 when Francis was sharing a studio with Al Held (1928–2005)—procured for them by dealer Martha Jackson—at 60 East 66th Street: Francis painted there, but slept at Jackson’s gallery. Whatever the actual date of their first meeting, Ting’s letters make it clear that during the summer of 1959 they reconnected in Paris. Ting and Francis had numerous friends in common from their Paris days, one of whom might have introduced them in New York: these included Karel Appel, who had painted in Francis’ expansive Chelsea apartment in 1957 while Francis was travelling.

It was an era of conviviality and sharing among artists. During his years in New York, Ting—like Francis—also shared his workspace with friends. Pierre Alechinsky recalled in 1967 that the nameplate on the door of Ting’s studio included “the name of the main occupant plus those of many painter friends: Karel Appel, Alechinsky and so on...”

### A Shift in Taste

Ting arrived in New York at a time when public interest in abstract painting was peaking, driving prices higher and higher. Just two years earlier, following the death of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), a show by Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) at the Sidney Janis Gallery had raised eyebrows by selling out immediately and netting over US\$1 million. Many other artists were prospering, including Sam Francis. According to Pontus Hultén (1924–2006), the Swedish museum director and art collector, Sam Francis was for an extended period, beginning in the mid-1950s, “the most expensive artist in the world”. Buoyed by international sales to American, Swiss and Japanese collectors, “Big Sam”, who now kept studios on three continents, had a healthy bank account that allowed him to live and work wherever he wanted.

Walasse Ting, whose work had not sold well in Paris, moved to New York in the hope of advancing his career. As soon as he arrived, Ting began developing abstract paintings that blended the assurance of Chinese calligraphy with the energy and spontaneity of Abstract Expressionism (3). Working both with ink on paper and oil on canvas, Ting created a body of work that earned him his first US solo exhibition at the esteemed Martha Jackson Gallery in April 1960.

Later that same year, the Martha Jackson Gallery held a sequence of group exhibitions, “New Media–New Forms I and II”, that included works by Jasper Johns (born 1930), Claes Oldenburg (born 1929) and Jim Dine (born 1935), artists who, within a few years, would be part of the Pop Art movement that was about to supersede Abstract Expressionism. The shift in taste was so profound that when the Sidney Janis Gallery mounted a Pop Art exhibition in 1962, its leading abstract artists, including Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Philip Guston (1913–1980) and Robert Motherwell (1915–1991), left the gallery in protest. Ting, who saw Western art and artists as unified by their freedom, would soon develop a project that represented his personal attempt to bring together artists he had befriended, and whose works represented strikingly different stylistic interests. Where others saw difference, Ting saw the possibility of community.

### Poetry and Community

As the 1960s unfolded, Ting became increasingly active as a poet:

“I wrote 61 poems in ’61 in a small room like black coffin, inside room only salami, whiskey, sexy photographs from Times Square. No Bible, no cookbook, no telephone book, no checkbook.”<sup>11</sup>

Ting’s first book, “My Shit and My Love”, named for a series of unpublished love poems dedicated to his friend Nela Arias, was published in Brussels in 1961. Its title poem, in which Ting describes himself as “30 year in face 800 year in heart”, positions Ting as a romantic, interested in bridging time and culture. Featuring ten poems framed by both abstract and representational imagery, its erotic appetites—“I love girl more than any painting, Prostitute more interesting than Renoir”—and thematic juxtapositions show how the young artist had been opened up by the sense of sexual and cultural ferment that characterised Western culture in the 1960s.

Eberhard “Ebi” Kornfeld (born 1923), the Swiss art dealer and collector—a friend, dealer and patron of Sam Francis—was first introduced to Ting by Francis in New York in the late 1950s. “For a long time the three of us had a very good friendship”, Kornfeld recounts. “Each time when I was in New York we had the traditional Sunday morning breakfast in Chinatown. We were all young and had crazy ideas.”<sup>12</sup> Ting, who was shuttling between Europe and New York, taking care to meet the requirements of his US residency visa, probably first broached the idea for an illustrated book, to be called “One Cent Life”, to his friends Sam and Ebi in the summer of 1961. They soon agreed to cover the “rather expensive” publication costs involved and that Sam Francis would serve as its editor.

### “One Cent Life”

What Ting proposed—to publish a book for an international readership to which a group of artists would contribute prints illustrating his poems—was ambitious and risky. Since the book would include artists associated with Tachisme, Neo-Dadaism, Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, it linked artists across styles and cultures. There were works by rising stars of Pop Art, including Andy Warhol

<sup>7</sup>Burchett-Lere, Debra (editor). *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946–1994*, University of California Press/The Sam Francis Foundation, 2011.

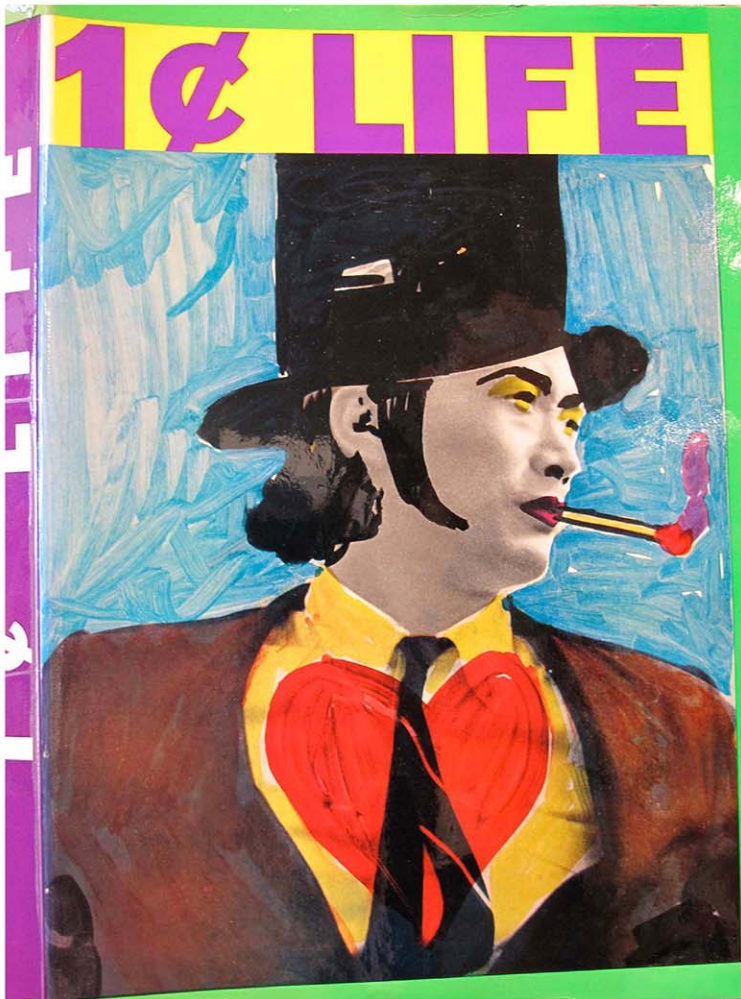
<sup>8</sup>Burchett-Lere, Debra (editor). *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings, 1946–1994*, University of California Press/The Sam Francis Foundation, 2011.

<sup>9</sup>Anonymous. “Remembering Walasse Ting”, *Beyond Print: The Kenneth Tyler Collection at the National Gallery of Australia*, August 28th, 2013, <https://tylerblogs.com/2013/08/28/remembering-walasse-ting>. Accessed May 15th, 2018.

<sup>10</sup>Lefebvre, Éric (editor). *Walasse Ting: The Flower Thief*, Musée Cernuschi, 2017, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup>Ting, Walasse. “Near 1¢ Life”, *Artnews*, May 1966.

<sup>12</sup>Stauffer, Christine. Email, “Interview with Ebi Kornfeld”. Received by John Seed, May 11th, 2018.



4 Cover image of the “One Cent Life” portfolio with a collage of Walasse Ting by Machteld Appel, colour offset print, 64.1 x 41.3 cm

(1928–1987) and Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997), works by friends from Ting’s days in Paris, such as Pierre Alechinsky and Karel Appel, and six lithographs each by Ting and Francis. Riva Castelman, MoMA’s curator of books and prints, later commented: “This undertaking (One Cent Life) is the simple instance in which artists of two essentially contradictory philosophies of art were brought together in one unexpectedly cohesive book.”<sup>13</sup>

The book’s title, “One Cent Life”, most likely referred to Ting’s early years of Bohemian poverty, emphasising that all of the artists involved—friends from both Paris and New York—could form a collective on the basis of their shared struggles and idealism, irrespective of their financial situation or social status. Ting, who insisted that he was an individual artist—“Not belong to any group”—felt an instinctive kinship with other artists, whom he also saw as individuals joined by their dedication to art. “The idea (for One Cent Life) was born from global experience, close contact with culture, pseudo-culture, primitive existential worries, urban erotic and eastern wisdom”, commented Ebi Kornfeld some years later. “It was a Herculean task, for which only a Chinese would have been able to muster the perseverance.” Kornfeld and Francis were among the “angels” (patrons) who would support Ting’s expansive vision.

The finished project, which appeared in June 1964, took the form of a 4 kg unbound elephant folio, containing sixty-two original lithographs by twenty-eight artists ac-

companying twenty-eight poems by Ting. The 172-page portfolio, of which 2000 unsigned and 100 signed, specially boxed copies were produced—was such a big project that it revived the declining business of Maurice Beaudet, the French lithographic printer, for three years: he went out of business in 1965 after “One Cent Life” had been completed. All of this would have been impossible without Sam Francis: “Sam Francis take his money from Swiss bank to buy 17 ton white paper like white snow”, wrote Ting.<sup>14</sup> There is also speculation that Florence Barron, a Detroit-based decorator and collector, helped underwrite the project.

On the cover of the folio, Ting appears in a collage image created by Karel Appel’s wife, Machteld, a colourful portrait that shows the influence of Andy Warhol. Ting is portrayed as a kind of large-hearted impresario of Pop culture, which is precisely what he had become (4). “One Cent Life” would boost Ting’s career and elevate his status. The publication—and the connections it fostered—transformed Ting into art world nobility, and sales from his 30% share of the edition would provide a much-needed source of income.

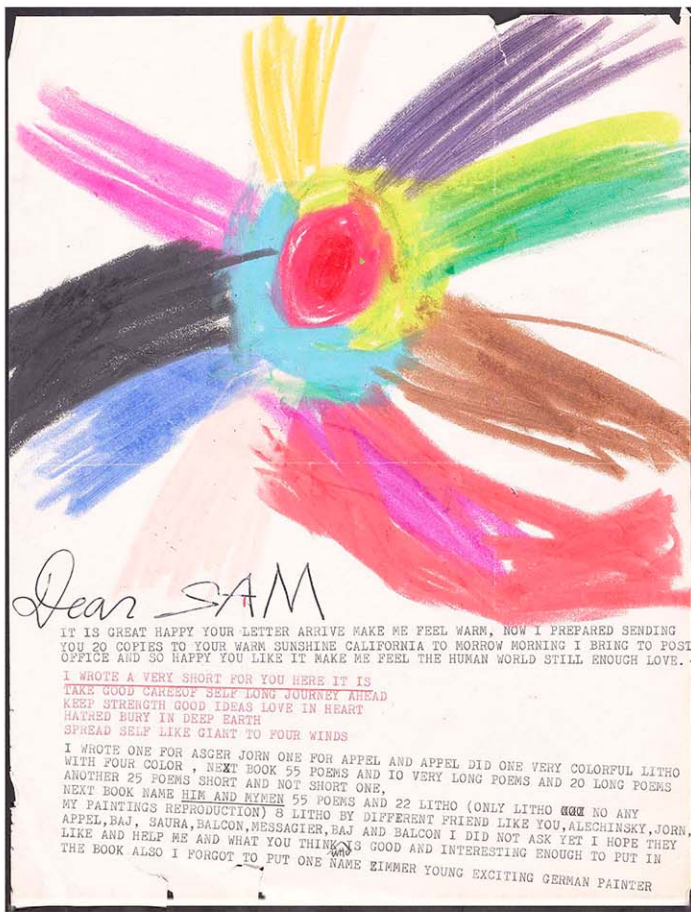
Throughout the remainder of his life, Ting would find ways to express his gratitude to Francis for his support. In a letter sent to Francis in California, after the publication of “One Cent Life”, Ting included a radiant, multicoloured drawing of a sun and a promise to send twenty copies. He also lets Francis know how he feels about Francis’ approval of the finished book (5):

“NOW I PREPARED SENDING YOU 20 COPIES TO YOUR WARM SUNSHINE CALIFORNIA TOMORROW MORNING I BRING POST OFFICE AND SO HAPPY YOU LIKE IT MAKE ME FEEL LIKE THE HUMAN WORLD STILL ENOUGH LOVE”<sup>15</sup>

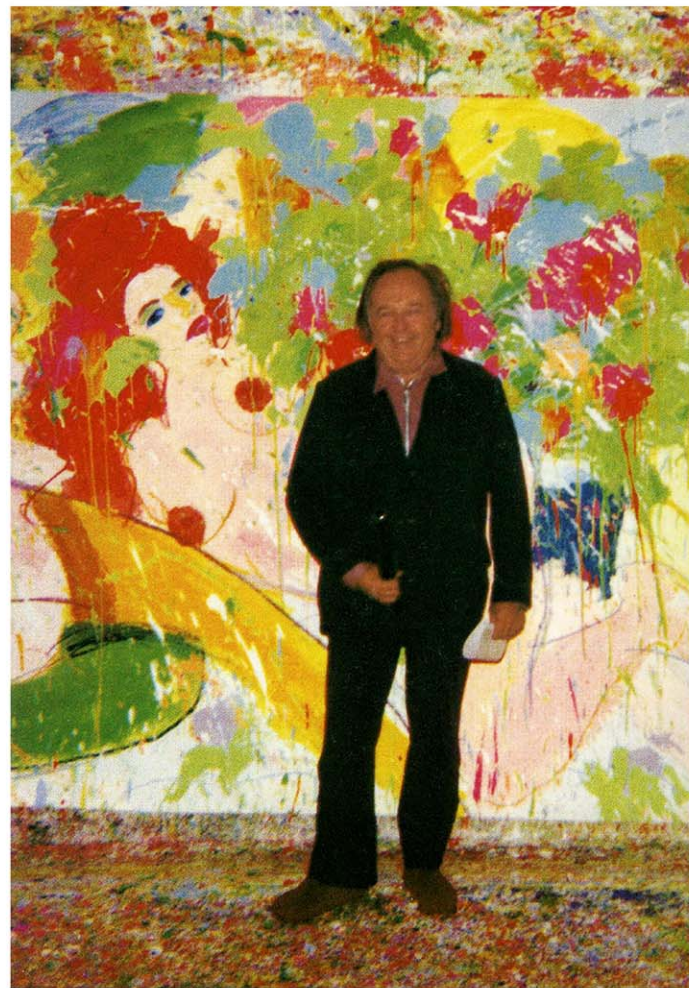
### Prints and Obsessions

Making and curating lithographic prints for “One Cent Life” reignited Ting’s interest in printmaking. After a referral from Sam Francis, Ting went to California in September 1964 where he worked as an artist-fellow at Tamarind Lithography workshop in Los Angeles, where Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991), the Mexican artist, was also making prints. During his two months at Tamarind, Ting produced two sets of prints: “Fortune Kookie”, which consisted of Chinese calligraphies accompanied by texts and poems in English, and “Hollywood Honeymoon”, a suite of bold, semi-abstract lithographs that make cosmic references in a colourful, splashy style, close to that of Sam Francis. Ting made a strong impression on Kenneth Tyler (born 1931), who later said that Ting “gave me a verbal window to Paris printmaking”.<sup>16</sup> Tyler, a key figure in the revival of American printmaking, went on to found Gemini G.E.L., the renowned print atelier, in 1965.

In 1969, when the “Sam Francis Foundation” published Ting’s “Hot and Sour Soup”, the book’s sensational eroticism may have been intended as a distraction from the political turmoil that increasingly gripped the United States as it waged war in Vietnam. Ting, like Matisse, the artist he so admired, painted personal subjects even when politics loomed large. Featuring a floating green phallus as its fron-



5 Decorated "Sunburst" letter from Walasse Ting to Sam Francis, undated. Sam Francis Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.M.8). © Estate of Walasse Ting / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



7 Sam Francis in the Studio of Walasse Ting, New York, 1973



6 Sam Francis and Walasse Ting enjoying oysters and champagne, New York, 1968

tispiece, teasing images of women performing fellatio and a poem titled, "Venus Meet Penis", the collection of twenty-two lithographs and texts represented an airing of Ting's personal sexual fixations and reveries. "Walasse was a young man with an erotic obsession",<sup>17</sup> said Ebi Kornfeld, who later exhibited a group of "Ting Girl" paintings from 1973–1974 at his Bern gallery.

As his career advanced, Ting developed into a hedonist, who appreciated lavish meals and sexy girls. Sam Francis—

with whom Ting often related his erotic complaints and fantasies in correspondence—shared Ting's Dionysian inclinations (6, 7). He also enjoyed the notion that sexual appetite and the drive to make art were one and the same. On the bottom edge of a 1972 postcard to Bob Buck, the Assistant Director of the Albright Knox Gallery, thanking him for sending a Francis exhibition catalogue, Ting typed this inscription in blue:

SAM FRANCIS

the greatest artist in the world  
love sasimi and many, many pretty  
girls and many, many canvas<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Loren, Cary. "Walasse Ting: 1 Cent Life", *Book Beat*, February 9th, 2014, <http://www.thebookbeat.com/backroom/2014/02/09/walasse-ting-one-cent-life-2/>. Accessed April 7th, 2018.

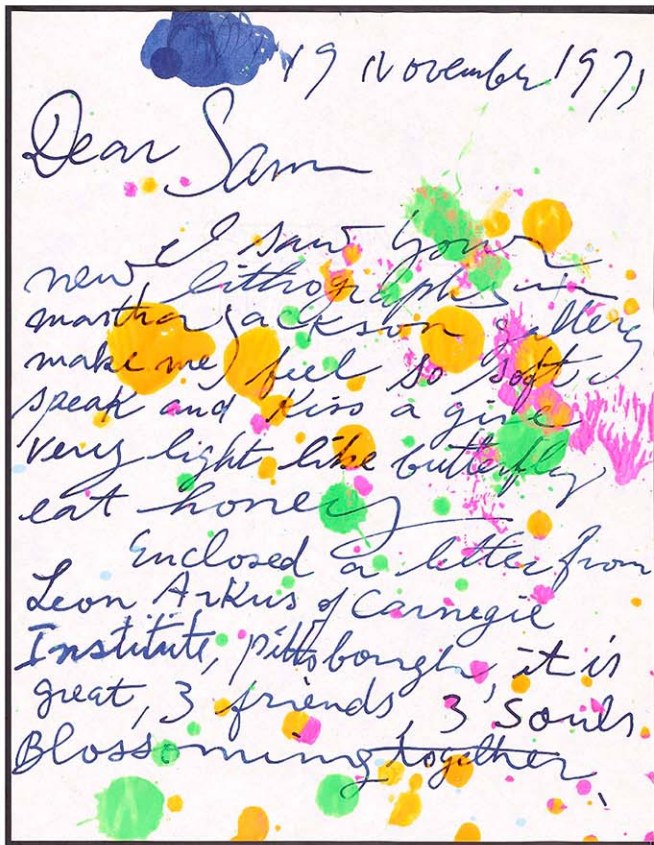
<sup>14</sup> Ting, Walasse. "Near 1¢ Life", *Artnews*, May 1966.

<sup>15</sup> Ting, Walasse. Letter to Sam Francis. Undated (1964?). Box 7, Sam Francis papers. The Getty Research Institute, Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA. Reviewed February 7th, 2018.

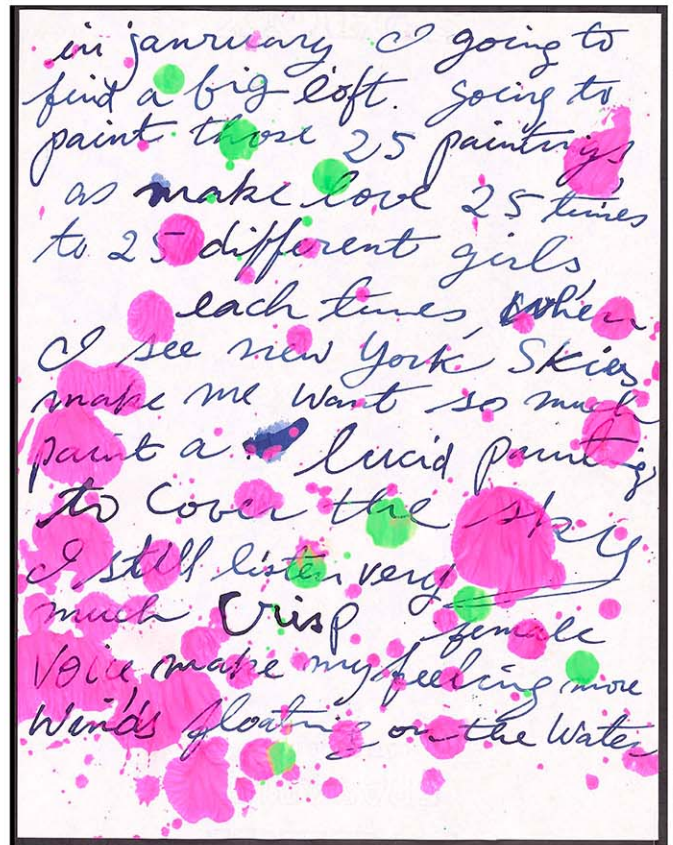
<sup>16</sup> Anonymous. "Remembering Walasse Ting", *Beyond Print: The Kenneth Tyler Collection at the National Gallery of Australia*, August 28th, 2013, <https://tylerblogs.com/2013/08/28/remembering-walasse-ting>. Accessed May 15th, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Stauffer, Christine. Email, "Interview with Ebi Kornfeld". Received by John Seed, May 11th, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Ting, Walasse. Postcard to Robert Buck. November 6th, 1972. Archive: The Sam Francis Foundation, Pasadena.



8 Paint spattered "Fresh Air" letter from Walasse Ting to Sam Francis (Page One), dated November 19th, 1971. Sam Francis Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.M.8). © Estate of Walasse Ting / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



9 Paint spattered "Fresh Air" letter from Walasse Ting to Sam Francis (Page Two), dated November 19th, 1971. Sam Francis Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.M.8). © Estate of Walasse Ting / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

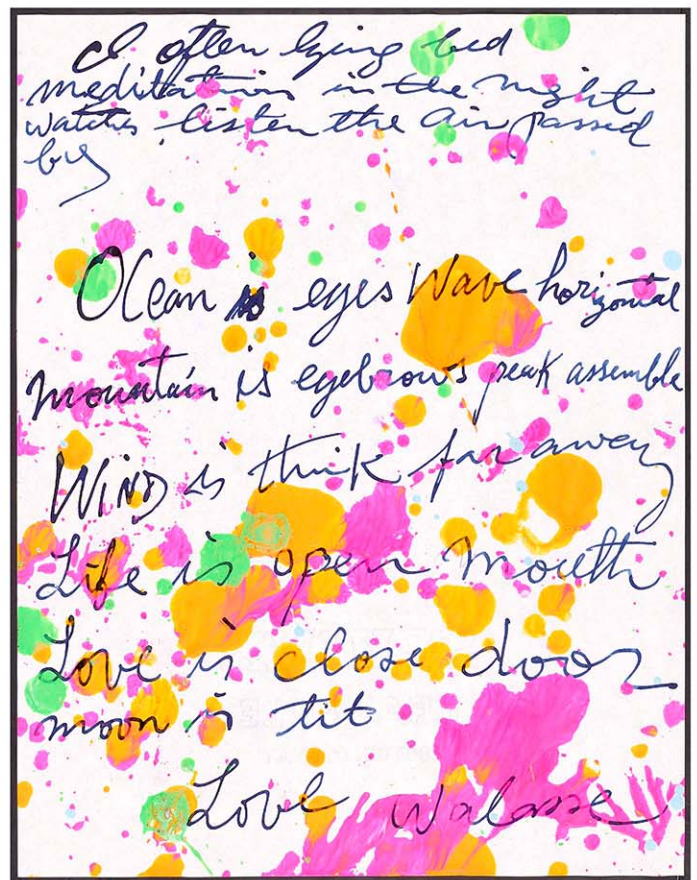
### The Fresh Air School

In 1971, Leon Arkus, the Director of the Museum of Art at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, wrote to Joan Mitchell (1925–1992), the painter, with an exhibition proposal: a travelling three-person show featuring recent paintings by Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis and Walasse Ting. Arkus wrote: "Ting came up with an idea for the title of the show: The Fresh Air School. The more I think about it the more fabulous it becomes." Anchored by the idea that the three artists took inspiration from the natural world, the grouping also reflected their connections to French art, as well as their friendship. In his catalogue essay, Arkus explained: "Among the three there is friendship and strong mutual esteem". There was also a shared interest in abstraction which, in Ting's case, would prove temporary.

After receiving news from Arkus that the show was moving ahead, Ting wrote an exuberant, paint-spattered letter to Francis (8, 9, 10):

"I going to find a big loft. going to paint those 25 paintings as make love 25 times to 25 different girls.<sup>19</sup>

The show opened in late 1972, the same year that Ting became a U.S. citizen. Ting was represented by twenty-five large acrylic on canvas abstractions, with titles that suggested ecstatic communion with nature, such as *Raining Poppies*, *Morning Star*, and *It's a beautiful day, lets take a walk* (11). Featuring brushy monochromatic fields spattered with bright dots, drips and dabs of paint, Ting's semi-abstract landscape paintings emanated exuberance and fecundity.



10 Paint spattered "Fresh Air" letter from Walasse Ting to Sam Francis (Page Three), dated November 19th, 1971. Sam Francis Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.M.8). © Estate of Walasse Ting / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



11 Walasse Ting, *It's a beautiful day, let's take a walk*, 1972, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 228.6 cm.  
© 2018 Estate of Walasse Ting / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Private Collection, USA

John Lefebre, Ting's New York dealer, wrote of this series: "They burst with enchantment without sentimentality". Interestingly, Lefebre saw a cultural distance between Ting's fresh air paintings and the Impressionist works that had once captivated Sam Francis. "His pictures do not owe anything to Monet... these are pictures in the oldest Chinese tradition, translated into color. When the (Chinese) masters painted leaves and grass, they made us feel, (and nearly see) the air between them."<sup>20</sup>

The Francis paintings in the exhibition also had strong ties to Asian art. Francis' considerable fascination with Japan—where he had maintained a studio since the mid-1960s—had reshaped his aesthetic vision, moving it towards greater openness and serenity. Francis' recent paintings, also acrylic on canvas, were filled with soft floating forms set against large white spaces that conjure up the Japanese concept of "*ma*", a difficult to translate term that can stand for empty space or Buddhist awareness. It is interesting to note that in the early 1970s, both Ting and Francis were making abstract paintings emphasising consciousness of space and place. "The Fresh Air School" represents a moment when the art and styles of the two friends briefly overlapped before Ting returned to figuration to develop the sensual and brilliantly hued paintings of women and animals that would occupy him until the end of his career (12).

### Reunion and Collaboration

In April 1974, Ting travelled to Tokyo to attend a preview of a documentary film by Michael Blackwood about Sam

Francis. He also took his family to visit Francis in Santa Monica in 1979. Visits from Ting were precious to Francis: "Whenever he visited Sam in LA, Sam wouldn't let him leave the house", says Mia Ting. In the early 1980s, Ting's career was thriving, as he took part in up to nine exhibitions per year in Asia, Europe and the United States. It was an extremely difficult period, as he endured the four-year struggle with cancer of his beloved wife, Nathalie. Before she died in 1983, Francis went to New York to see her. Mia Ting recalls: "Sam really loved my mom".<sup>21</sup>

Francis, whose divorce from his fourth wife, Mako, was finalised in 1982, was living a life of prosperity and achievement, mixed with a busy, sometimes chaotic, schedule. After marrying his fifth wife, Margaret, in 1985—and fathering a fourth child, his son Augustus—Francis was extremely busy, as an artist and as a father. Martin Sosin, a friend who served as Francis' attorney and accountant, noticed that: "Francis liked to keep things stirred up",<sup>22</sup> often generating competition and drama between his friends, col-

<sup>19</sup> Ting, Walasse. Letter to Sam Francis. November 19th, 1971. Box 7, Sam Francis papers. The Getty Research Institute, Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA. February 7th, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Arkus, Leon Anthony. *Fresh Air School: Sam Francis Joan Mitchell Walasse Ting*, Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute Pittsburgh, 1972.

<sup>21</sup> Ting, Mia. Email, "Re: Draft of Article". Received by John Seed, May 20th, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Burchett-Lere, Debra (editor). *Sam Francis: Catalogue Raisonné of Canvas and Panel Paintings*, University of California Press/The Sam Francis Foundation, 2011.





12 Walasse Ting, *Two Oriental Ladies with a Purple Horse*, circa 1980, Chinese ink and acrylic on rice paper, triptych, each panel 180.3 x 97.8 cm. © 2018 Estate of Walasse Ting / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Alisan Fine Arts Ltd

leagues and employees. Still, Francis was an intensely loyal man, who kept a close circle of friends throughout his life: Ting was always very much part of that inner circle.

In 1987, after moving to Amsterdam, Ting contributed calligraphy to *Steles*, a book of poetry published by The Lapis Press, which Francis founded (13). Around the same time, Ting introduced Francis to his Amsterdam-based dealer, Nico Delaive, who then made a series of visits to California, sometimes accompanied by Ting. “My father was in a lot of emotional pain after my mom died”, says Mia Ting. “He was traveling a lot.” While in California, Ting painted in Francis’ studios. On at least one occasion, they painted together on the same canvas, just as Ting had done with Pierre Alechinsky in the 1960s. Working on the floor using Francis’ seemingly endless supply of buckets of acrylic paint and long-handled brushes, their differences as artists disappeared (14, 15). Delaive, who observed the two painting, noted: “It was like two small boys painting again, like the old times”.<sup>23</sup> When they weren’t painting, Ting and Francis dined in the best restaurants, held long conversations, gossiped about the art world and shared ideas about art. “In one of the last visits to California”, recalls Mia Ting, “I remember Sam telling my father that he should paint a big wave. When he came back to New York he kept pondering this and often wrote the Chinese character for water in ink in varying scales, randomly hanging them in the studio. I don’t know if he ever solved this conundrum.”<sup>24</sup>

Ting also continued to write to Francis as he travelled. In an August 1991 letter to Francis—sent on hotel stationery from India—Ting speaks of the “beautiful feeling” that comes from travel and offers the following metaphorical self-portrait: “Sometime I feel myself as the sunset fantastic red yellow pink violet but so closed the deep blue skies”.



13 Walasse Ting, after moving to Amsterdam, 1987. Photo by Nico Delaive

### A Final Meeting

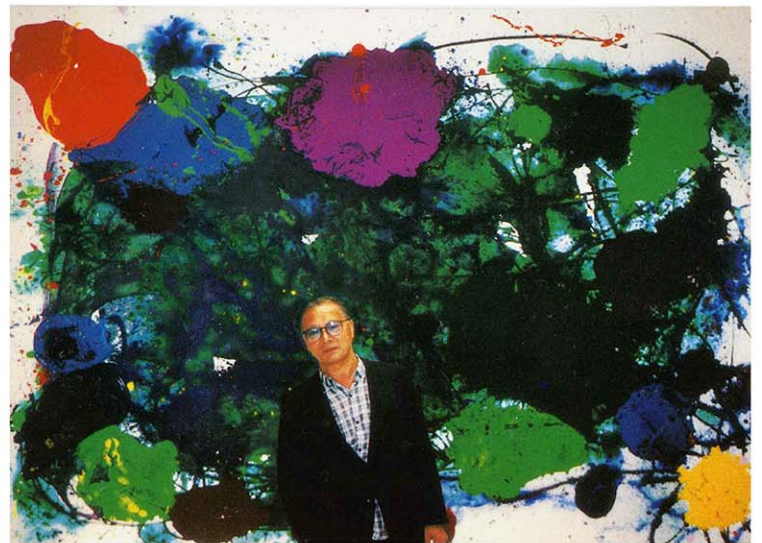
In February 1993, Sam Francis was honoured by the opening of a massive retrospective of his work held at the Kunst und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn, Germany (16). Francis, who was in severe pain due a broken right arm caused by advancing bone cancer, travelled to the opening accompanied by an entourage that included his family, assistants and doctors. Stefan Kirkeby, a friend of Francis who attended the opening, says that after Francis arrived wearing a tuxedo and ultramarine blue bowtie, he sat down next to Ting.<sup>25</sup> A photographer later captured a photo of Ting kissing Sam on the cheek—the way a son might kiss his



14 Walasse Ting painting in Sam Francis' Venice Studio, California, 1989. Photo by Nico Delaive



15 Sam Francis, Nico Delaive and Walasse Ting in Sam Francis' Venice Studio, California, 1989



16 Walasse Ting standing front of Sam Francis *Untitled*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 365.8 x 487.7 cm, Bonn, Germany. Photo by Nico Delaive

father—with Ebi Kornfeld looking on (17). It was their final visit, as Francis would pass away the following year after using his left arm to complete a dazzling group of 150 abstract paintings.

“Sam really loved Ting”, says Debra Burchett-Lere, the Director of the Sam Francis Foundation. Ting also loved and deeply respected Francis, and the bond between the two men facilitated a lifelong exchange of artistic ideas and processes. Ting was clearly inspired by Francis’ ability to energise an entire canvas with colour, and Francis was influenced by Ting’s engagement with poetry and total immersion in art-making. Ting also played a key role in involving Francis in publishing. At the heart of their friendship was a synergy, perhaps similar to the dynamic that Christian Dotremont (1922–1979), the CoBrA co-founder, had once noted between Pierre Alechinsky and Ting:

“The westerner brought to this combination the art of filling the canvas. The oriental brought the art of making time stand still.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Oral History Interview with Nico Delaive (video), The Sam Francis Foundation Archive, viewed May 10th, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Ting, Mia. Email, “Re: Draft of Article”. Received by John Seed, May 20th, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Kirkeby, Stefan. Phone Interview. April 27th, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Lefebvre, Éric (editor). *Walasse Ting: The Flower Thief*, Musée Cernuschi, 2017.



17 Sam Francis, Walasse Ting and Eberhard Kornfeld at the February 1993 opening of a Sam Francis exhibition held at the Kunst und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn, Germany. Photo by Nico Delaive