

# CURATOR'S CHOICE <sup>SM</sup>

Exhibition Reviews

## PIERRE SOULAGES

By Claire Taddei



Pierre Soulages in his studio. Photo by Vincent Cunillère.

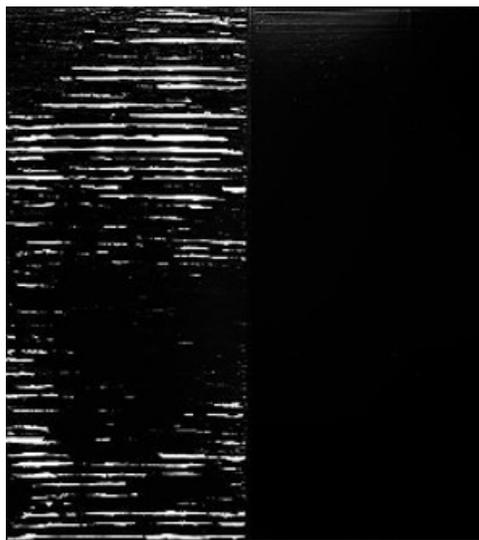
From April 24 to June 27, 2014, Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin are jointly presenting "Pierre Soulages," the first American exhibition in ten years devoted to the most significant and internationally recognized living artist of France. By juxtaposing Soulages' revelatory recent paintings with a group of his important postwar works, "Pierre Soulages" highlights profound interconnections between Europe and America in modern and contemporary art while challenging certainties on the subject. This exhibition also coincides with the release of the first major book devoted to the artist's years of intense engagement with the United States, distributed by D.A.P., "Soulages in America." During the years following World War II, Soulages exhibited extensively in America, establishing close ties with New York peers Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler and many others. Indeed, during time of war, America has been a land of refuge for many European artists; we remember the exile of the Surrealists in New York during World War I.

A major representative of French abstractionism, Pierre Soulages is distinguished by his use of black. It is both aesthetic and philosophical; it has always been part of his work. He made his first non-figurative works in 1947 with black signs in heavy brushstrokes on a light background. Growing from small marks, the blackness overwhelmed his canvases as a flood; black became omnipotent in an almost inexplicable self-obliteration. In January 1979, Soulages worked on a canvas adding and removing black for hours. Not knowing what to do, he left the workshop, distraught. When he returned two hours later, "The black had invaded everything, so much so that it was as if it no longer existed." This experience was a turning point in his work. The same year he exhibited at the Pompidou Centre his first "monochromes" paintings, based on the reflection of light on the surface states of black, later called "outrenoir" (the word "outrenoir" can be translated loosely from French as "beyond black"). Now, we can see the semantic and intellectual connection between his "outrenoir" and his bond to the "Outre-Atlantic" (Across the Atlantic).

As a virtuoso, Pierre Soulages paints black as he could paint the light. Despite a lack of perspective and an afocal image, the artist creates an "outré-tombe" (beyond the grave) black, with an abyssal depth and intensity, breaking positivist rules. With his monochromatic or rather his "achromatic" work, Soulages creates a pictorial and physical feat. Indeed, black, which is supposed to neither reflect nor emit any part of the visible light spectrum, is more luminous than ever. Games of substance enable games of light. The substance is brutalized, stretched on canvas, snatched, brushed with more or less intensity, flattened, smoothed or put in relief; matte or shiny, the light reflection gives it life.



Peinture, 99 x 159 cm, 2013. Oil on canvas. Photo by Claire Taddei.



Peinture 181 x 162 cm, 11 janvier 2014. Acrylic on canvas. Soulages Archives, 2014. Photo by © Vincent Cunillère.

Between its sobriety, strength and mystery, Soulages' black is an almost authoritarian style. A color symbol of both anarchy and the occult, black and his black in particular seem to possess an almost rebellious presence. This impression is magnified by the format of the works, which gain in monumentality. Most of the time they are polyptychs.

In this exhibition, the paintings are hung like openings on immaculate white walls. Like a metaphor of doors of darkness, the canvas becomes the object of perspective of the wall, giving rise to a perfect symbiosis between the work and its installation. The painting becomes guts in the wall. Depending on the viewer, it can seem to be an opening to the world, an opening on death, an abstract and modern version of the "Gates of Hell" by Rodin, an otherworldliness liberating for some or anxious for someone else. The black is sometimes scarred or striated, letting through the white in the background, as a kind of mise en abyme of the opening. There are multiple "wounds" as if to emphasize the wrenching experience of real life.



Peinture, polyptych, 2013. Oil on canvas. Photo by Claire Taddei.



Peinture, 2013. Oil on canvas. Photo by Claire Taddei.

able to internalize. Radiant in his ideas, radiant in his aura, Soulages presents a blackness of contemplation and works of spatiality, which are magnificently put into perspective by Dominique Lévy and Galerie Perrotin.

A contemplative state is conducive to perceiving a more sensitive and deep reality. In Plato, contemplation is a path to the symbolism of light, both visual and philosophical light, light meaning knowledge. This conceptual statement about light appears, for this exhibition, to have a specific resonance, as seeing because Soulages works with light and gives it the same double meanings.

Pierre Soulages stated, "'Outrenoir' also means a country other than black, a mental field all its own."

The antichronological order of this exhibition immerses us into the world of this singular and prominent artist. In the progression of the exhibit, the black is stripped away, guiding us to see the evolution of his work.

Forsaking figures and devoting himself to gesture and movement, the artist invokes a metaphysical world that everyone is



Peinture 195 x 130 cm, 1955. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Burto. First Exhibited in North America at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, Hartford. Photo by © National Gallery of Art, Washington.

*Claire Taddei is an independent art critic from France.*

*If you go:  
"Pierr's Soulages"  
Dominique Lévy Gallery  
909 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10021  
T: 212 772 2004  
www.dominique-levy.com  
April 24 - June 27, 2014  
Tuesday - Saturday 10 am - 6 pm  
Free admission*