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ART & DESIGN 2015

Pierre Soulages: Outrenoir

The French artist reflects on love and light at his Paris studio

"I don't work with black," says Pierre Soulages, who, for over 60 years, has injected poetry into radical abstraction with paintings comprised of a single material, black paint. "I work with the light that reflects it."

Liberating his style from centuries of Western decorative painting traditions and drawing from prehistoric cave art, Soulages' work is a pure celebration of the very essence of painting: the primal instinct to create, and the spiritual power of lines and movement. "Outrenoir is not an optical phenomenon," says the 95-year-old French artist captured here at his Paris studio of the gleaming, luminescent quality of the work. "It's a mental state that you reach when you look deep into it, it's beyond black."

“I have never believed that painting is over. It belongs to human nature”



Last summer a museum dedicated to the paintings of Soulages opened in his birth-town of Rodez, a rusted steel shrine designed by Catalan architects RCR. The space houses 500 paintings donated from the archive of the artist and his wife Colette, the most complete display from his body of work to date, alongside a space open for up-and-coming artists to exhibit. Below, the abstract master reflects on the origins of painting and the source of his inspiration:

How did you reach this mental state you describe, *outrenoir*?

Pierre Soulages: When I was a teenager I realized that we are only taught the history of art of the last five or six centuries and that painting had existed for hundreds of centuries. I went with an archeologist to research and dig and found ancient artifacts. That is the source of my art and thought, I realized that, despite being marked by a certain culture, I am totally free.

The Museum in Rodez is an homage to your vision and work, how did you help shape it?

PS: A while ago the Mayor of Montpellier wanted to build a museum for me, but I refused as I didn't want a museum that carried my name—and many of my works were already part of the great collection of the Fabre Museum. More recently the mayor of Rodez came to talk to me. He loved my work and asked me if he could build a museum bearing my name: I accepted only if the museum dedicated 500m of space to young artists' works.

Right now it feels like more artists are returning to painting.

PS: It always amuses me when people say that painting is over; I have never believed this. Prehistoric men went deep into the darkest caves and painted in total obscurity. Painting belongs to human nature. It is instinctive. But if it doesn't happen within ourselves then it's only decorative art. It is like love, something that belongs to our soul.

Shirine Saad is an editor and writer based in Brooklyn.