

The revival of painting in the contemporary era

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The Pierre and Colette Soulages Donation

Pierre Soulages has often talked about his works. In writings and interviews, he has provided precise responses to the questions raised by his work.

Titles

The titles of Pierre Soulages's paintings reassert the work's material qualities, by indicating its dimensions followed by a date that refers to no particular event, whether private or collective. "For me, the title is the object's dimension. And I always add a date as a way of situating it. Almost always it is the date I finished them, or more precisely the date I abandoned them, when I decided I wouldn't touch them again, which is not always the same as the day that I stopped painting. I stop painting when the work reaches the stage where I don't want to touch it anymore. Then I turn it to face the wall. A few days or weeks later I look at it again. And I say to myself "it's OK, it can live as it is"."

In Françoise Armengaud, *Titres*, Paris, Méridiens Klincksieck, 1988, p.192 (our translation).

Cables

Faced with a particularly difficult building during his retrospective exhibition at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts in 1966, Pierre Soulages decided to suspend his works in the gallery using nylon threads. He was to repeat this process in many exhibitions up until the retrospective at the Musée National d'art Moderne in Paris in 1980, where he adopted a new system using steel cables anchored to the floor and ceiling, and fixed onto the edges of the stretcher by means of small cylindrical fittings. He uses the same device in the great hall of the Musée Fabre. "When the works are displayed on cables, the viewer has more freedom to come face to face with them (...). When you walk past the front row, you see other paintings appear in turn behind it, followed by the second row, in an order that is not fixed and thus gives you more liberty to confront them than if they were arranged in succession on the walls."

Britina Alvarado and Tatiana Autajon, "Le cadre dans l'abstraction lyrique", in *Le cadre et le socle dans l'art du xx^e siècle*, Dijon,

University of Burgundy, p.143-144 (our translation).

Polyptychs

The polyptych, a work made up of several panels fastened together, is a medieval invention. Despite some initial scorn, it has now been used by many contemporary artists. Pierre Soulages has employed this form on several occasions from 1967 and more frequently in the 1980s. These polyptychs may be laid out vertically or horizontally ; the panels are usually placed side by side, but are sometimes separated. "I painted two long canvasses, four times as long as they were high, as I wanted to take the eye on a horizontal journey (from right to left or left to right), as opposed to the view prompted by a more compact format, closer to the square. Out of curiosity and almost by chance I placed one above the other and this gave rise to new complex relationships. I then added a third panel ; by



fig - Hanging of
Pierre Soulages's work in
the new museum,
Decembre 2006
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Room Soulages

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favouring the central canvas, this odd number created a sense of symmetry and closure that was incompatible with the paintings being organised serially. The addition of a fourth panel allowed the ensemble to work once more, opening other fields of vision. This became the series of superposed polyptychs that was started in 1985.”

“For me, the polyptych was a way of introducing a break in a surface’s continuity – just as, from 1947 onwards, the grouping together of interrupted marks into a form that was immediately evident meant a break with all that was implied by a continuous line, mark and trace of a movement. It was the choice of simultaneity over continuity. These decisions resulted in a fundamentally different time-sense relationship.”

Chronologie des différentes conceptions des polyptyques, “Soulages, polyptyques 1979-1992” catalogue, Maison des Arts Georges Pompidou, Cajarc, June 1992 (our translation).

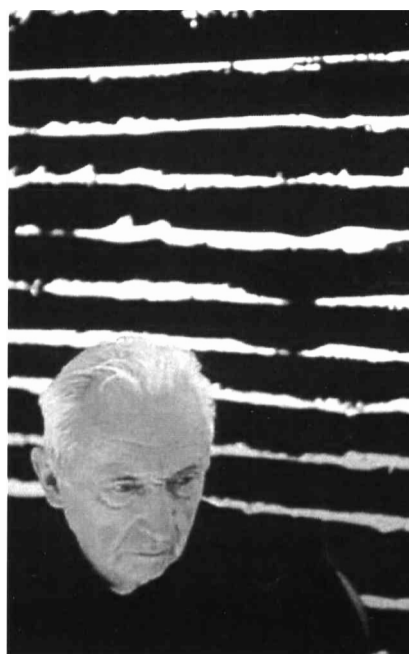


fig. - Pierre Soulages en 1999
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Monochromes

You need only look at the rooms in the Musée Fabre to realize that the palette of Pierre Soulages is far from being limited to black. Blue, red, walnut stain and the white of the canvas or preparation play an essential role beside the black, which acts as a foil to their luminous power. The works fully covered in black are fundamentally different from the monochromes used in modern art since Malevich.

“My paintings have nothing to do with the monochrome. Since 1979, as I have often said, my instrument is not black but the light reflected off black – which leads to a mass of consequences in the viewer’s mental field. If you think these paintings are only black, then you are not looking with your eyes, but with what is inside your head.”

Pierre Encrevé, “Les éclats du noir”, interview with Pierre Soulages, Soulages, Beaux-Arts Magazine, Hors Série, 1996 (our translation).

Outrenoir (“beyond black”)

Since 1979, Pierre Soulages has taken a radically different approach, using black no longer as a colour, but as a material that reveals light.

“One day I was painting and black had invaded the whole surface of the canvas, devoid of form, contrast or transparency. This extreme was for me in a sense the negation of black. The differences in texture reflected light in varying degrees of dimness, and from the darkness came forth brightness, a pictorial light whose particular emotional strength gave life to my desire to paint. (...) My instrument was no longer black, but this secret light born of black. And its effects are all the more intense as it emanates from the greatest absence of light. I have embarked upon this path and continue to find new openings there.”

Pierre Soulages, “Le noir, la lumière, la peinture” in *Le Noir. Dictionnaire des mots et expressions de couleur xx^e - XXI^e siècle*, Annie Mollard-Desfour, CNRS Éditions, 2005 (our translation).

This pictorial invention was followed by another in the lexical field : “Outrenoir or beyond black, a light that is reflected and transmuted by black. Outrenoir – a black that is no longer black, becoming a transmitter of brightness, of secret light. Outrenoir – a mental field that goes beyond mere black. I have attempted to analyse the poetics – or perhaps I should say the pictique – inherent in my own practice of this painting and its relationship to time and space: the light coming from the canvas towards the viewer creates a space before the canvas and the viewer finds himself in this space ; there is an instantaneity of vision for each viewpoint. If these are changed the first vision will disappear, be obliterated and another will appear ; the canvas is present at the very moment it is viewed.”

Pierre Encrevé, “Les éclats du noir”, interview with Pierre Soulages, Soulages, Beaux-Arts Magazine, Hors Série, 1996, p.2 (our translation).