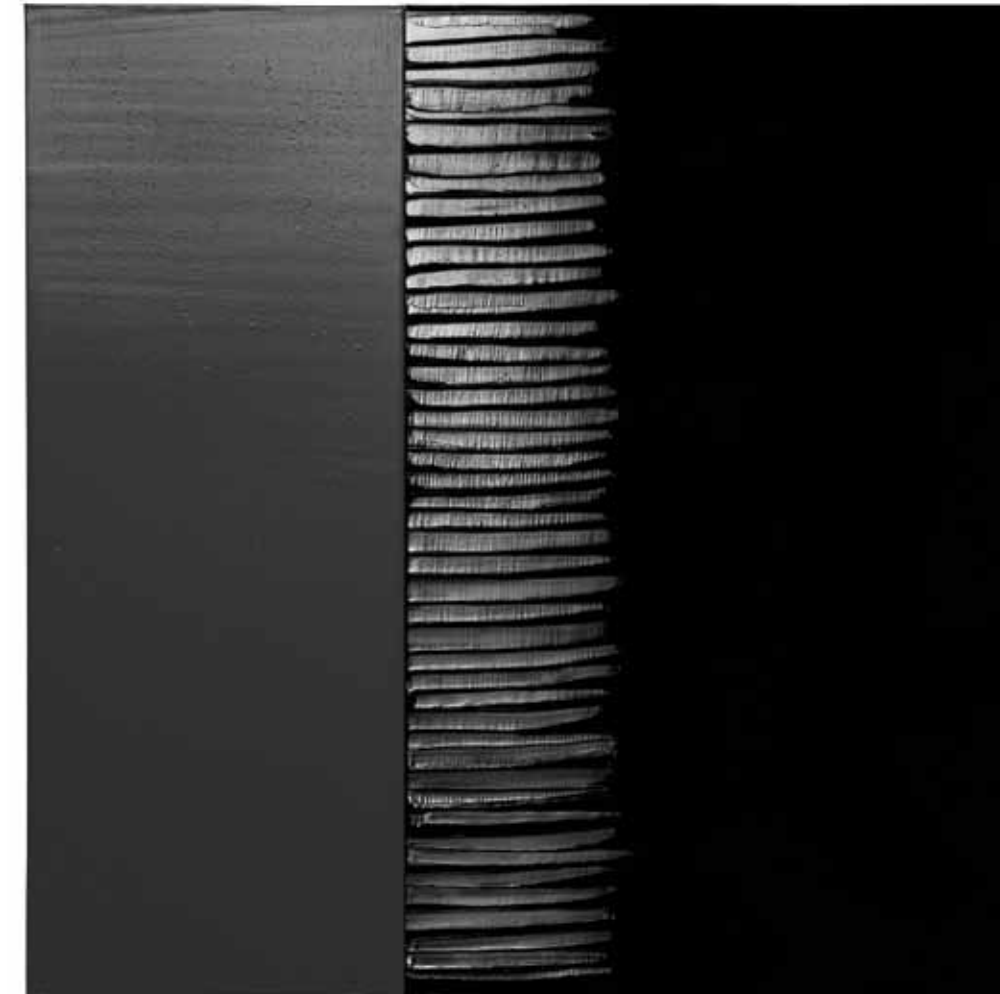


# Pierre SOULAGES

By ZOE STILLPASS  
Photography PATRICK DEMARCHELIER

NOT MANY LIVING ARTISTS CAN CLAIM THEIR OWN MUSEUM. FRANCE'S PREMIER ABSTRACTIONIST HAS SPENT THE PAST SEVEN DECADES MAKING RADICAL WORKS WITH THE COLOR BLACK. FOR HIM, PAINTINGS AREN'T A WINDOW BUT A WALL



"I'VE ALWAYS LOVED BLACK, AND I REALIZED THAT, FROM THE BEGINNING, MAN WENT INTO COMPLETELY DARK CAVES TO PAINT. THEY PAINTED WITH BLACK TOO."

Black suggests darkness and death, but French painter Pierre Soulages uses black as a means to create light. Often called the "Painter of Black," Soulages has obsessively worked with this color (or noncolor) since the start of his career—all the way back in the 1940s. In his early paintings, he used house-paint brushes and palette knives to make broad, dashing strokes, creating nonrepresentational, architectonic forms. These works gained him international recognition as one of the first painters to develop a new style of postwar abstraction, and he was eventually associated—despite his rejection of labels—with such movements as tachisme, art informel, and action painting. At 94, Soulages is still working on his investigations of depth and light. He has just opened a joint exhibition at Dominique Lévy Gallery and Galerie Perrotin in New York. And if that weren't enough, a museum in his honor, Musée Soulages, is opening this month in his home-

town of Rodez, France, with an inaugural exhibit of 24 of the artist's signature black *Outrenoir* paintings, from 1979 through 2011.

I recently visited Soulages at his studio on the Left Bank in the fifth arrondissement, one of the oldest and most charming neighborhoods in Paris. I was nervous to interview a man who is arguably the most famous living artist in France. His assistant of 30 years, Dan McEnroe, greeted me at the door and ushered me into a compact room filled with Soulages's latest large-scale paintings. I was dazzled as much by the materiality of the light reflecting off their textured surfaces as by the radiance emanating from the artist himself, dressed all in black. Soulages asked me if I would join him in partaking of a little whiskey. I declined, saying it's not proper to drink on the job. But after some amiable persistence and not wishing to be an ungracious guest, I relented and we drank as he told me stories about his life.

ZOE STILLPASS: How did you become an artist?  
PIERRE SOULAGES: I always loved to paint. As a kid, I liked to dip my paintbrush in black ink. They gave colors to me to use, but I didn't like them very much.  
STILLPASS: So nothing has changed.

SOULAGES: No, black ink was always my favorite. I loved it. And then one day I realized that the only thing I ever wanted to do was to paint. I realized that most people waste their lives earning a living, and I wanted to live. I love painting, so I keep painting. That's how I became an artist.

STILLPASS: What are your greatest influences?

SOULAGES: When I was 16, I saw a reproduction of a prehistoric cave painting of a bison from the Altamira cave in Spain. I read that this painting dated back 18,000 years; that is 180 centuries. I realized that our entire culture had only existed for 20 centuries, the Christian era for 20 centuries, the Bible for 26 centuries, and Greek art for 26 centuries. So at 16, I decided to do something brave: I went on a prehistoric dig. In fact, I've had my name in a museum since I was 18 years old, not for my painting but for the prehistoric objects I found. That's how I started thinking about art. It's fascinating to think that as soon as man came into existence, he started painting. As I said, I've always loved black, and I realized that, from the beginning, man went into completely dark caves to paint. They painted with black too. They could have painted with white because there were white stones all over the ground, but no, they chose to paint with black in the dark. It's incredible, isn't it?

STILLPASS: Did you see the Werner Herzog documentary about cave art [*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 2010] that came out a few years ago?

SOULAGES: No, what film is that? I'd like to see it.

STILLPASS: Herzog got exclusive access to film some of the oldest known cave paintings. It's beautiful because the movie becomes a reflection on art in general and why humans have made it for so long.

SOULAGES: Yes, it's exactly that! All of my thoughts on painting relate to that question. Prehistoric art came to move me much more than Greek art. Greek art has beautiful women and handsome men, but I don't care. I am against limitations like perspective. Perspective is illusion, it's the opposite of presence, and art is presence. Actually, that's how I met my wife.

STILLPASS: How did you meet her?

SOULAGES: It was love at first sight because we had the same taste. We shared an interest in pre-Renaissance art. I was interested in prehistory, and she was interested in medieval art, which nobody knew about back then. Even today, very few people know about Romanesque painting, for example. I met her on a terrible day. I arrived in Montpellier the same day that Franco and Pétain met there. It was February 13, 1941.

I went to the art school in Montpellier because you could study to become a drawing teacher there, and that's where I met Colette. I saw her saying to three boys: "Are you crazy? Picasso is a great artist!" I said to her, "You're never going to convince those idiots. I am going to the Musée Fabre—why don't you come with me." She came with me, and we haven't been apart since. We've been together for 73 years, and we never run out of things to say, we never get bored. It's worked for 73 years, but we will see if it lasts. [*laughs*]

STILLPASS: What a great story. That gives me hope!

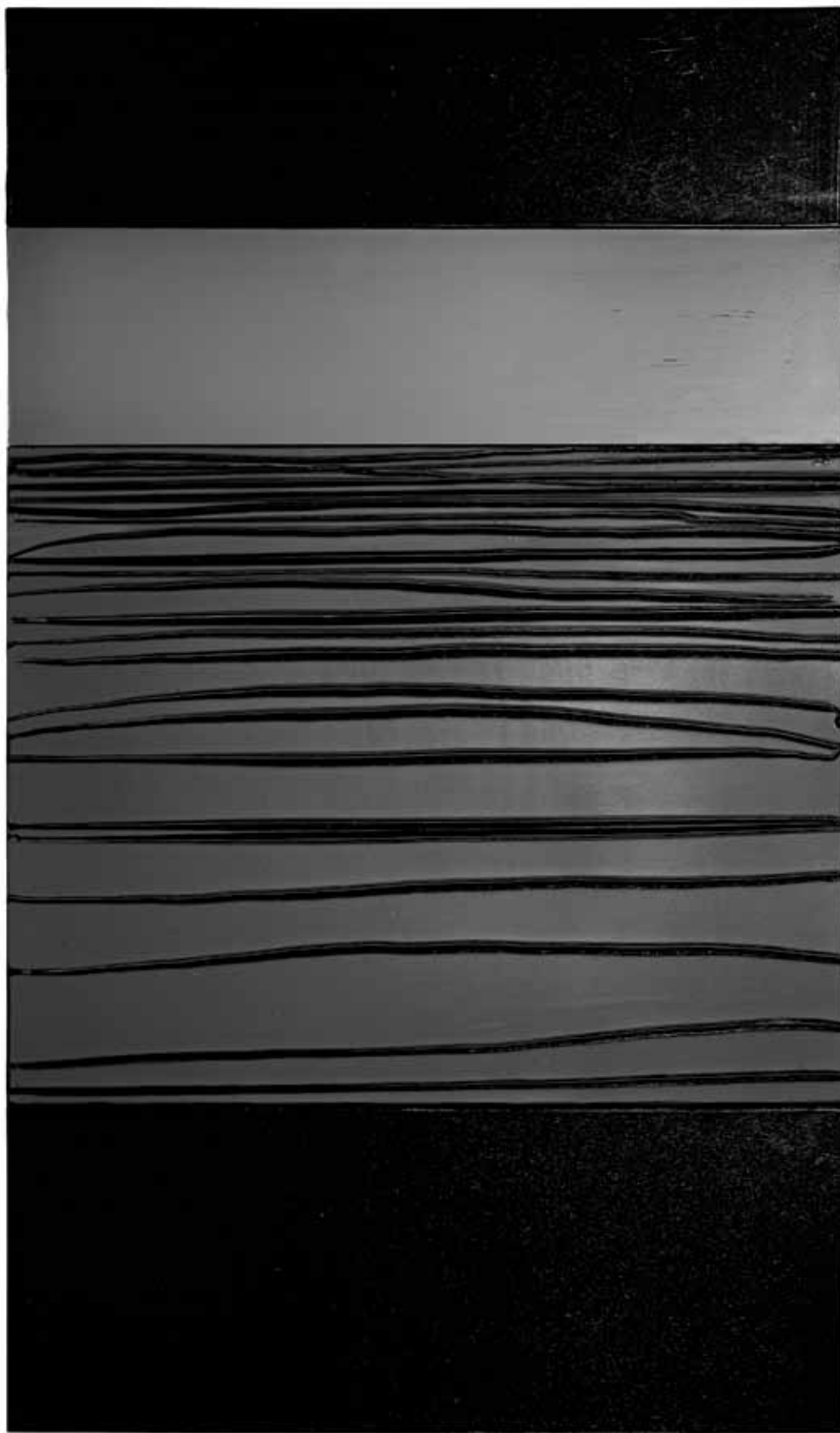
SOULAGES: You will find it one day.

STILLPASS: So you studied to be a drawing teacher first?

SOULAGES: Yes, but after I did my first drawing assignment, I got the highest grade, and my teacher said I shouldn't be there. He said I should study to be

OPPOSITE: PIERRE SOULAGES IN PARIS, FEBRUARY 2014. ALL CLOTHING: SOULAGES'S OWN. THIS PAGE: PIERRE SOULAGES'S PAINTURE 202 x 202 cm, 13 SEPTEMBRE 2013, OIL ON CANVAS. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SOULAGES ARCHIVES, 2014. © VINCENT CUNILLERE.

“PICABIA SAID TO ME, ‘I’LL TELL YOU THE SAME THING THAT PISSARRO SAID TO ME ABOUT MY PAINTING: AT YOUR YOUNG AGE AND WITH WHAT YOU’RE DOING, IT WON’T BE LONG BEFORE YOU MAKE A LOT OF ENEMIES!’”



STILLPASS: Didn't you make wine?

SOULAGES: That was just to get false papers during the war. I would have had to do forced labor in Germany, so I went into hiding by becoming a wine-maker. One day in the vineyards, I met a novelist named Joseph Delteil. It was unusual because he knew all about painting, and he was friends with Picasso, Delaunay, Chagall, all the contemporary painters. He came to see my paintings, which were black and white, and he said, “Black and white! You’re taking painting by its horns.” That, he said, was the magic of painting. When you’re in your twenties and you don’t know anything and someone says something like that to you, it helps. He told me I needed to move to Paris, and after the war, I did.

STILLPASS: What was the artistic scene like in Paris after the war?

SOULAGES: I loved it. I was surrounded by foreigners—Spaniards, Eastern Europeans, the Jewish people who had come out of hiding ... We had everything in Paris. There were the Communist painters, figurative painting, traditional French painting, which was ridiculous, and the surrealists who had come back from America. There were many different types of people and styles, and I felt free to do what I wanted. It was wonderful. It’s actually still like that in Paris.

STILLPASS: Did you start showing your work immediately?

SOULAGES: When I first got to Paris, I tried to show at the Salon d’Automne, but they didn’t accept me. A friend told me about the Salon des Surindépendants, which didn’t have a jury, so I showed my work there for the first time. My painting was very dark, while all the other paintings were red or yellow. Next to the other works, it looked like a fly in a glass of milk. Everyone was saying, “Who is this country boy making black paintings?” Then I heard that Picabia said my painting was the best in the show. I couldn’t believe it. A few days later, I met him. He asked my age, and I replied 27. He said, “I’ll tell you the same thing that Pissarro said to me about my painting: ‘At your young age and with what you’re doing, it won’t be long before you make a lot of enemies!’” I thanked him, but I said that the critics hadn’t taken much notice. He said, “Oh, it doesn’t matter what the critics say. I’ve seen it all—impressionism, fauvism, dadaism, surrealism, abstract art—and if I tell you that your work is good, it means a lot more than what any critic tells you.” He encouraged me. I did go through three or four very difficult years, but soon people started to notice my work, and I haven’t had a problem ever since.

STILLPASS: What was your first big break?

SOULAGES: In 1948 I was invited to participate in an abstract painting exhibition in Germany. The other artists included Kupka, Herbin, Hartung, Schneider, people who would be in their hundreds today. I was the baby of the group. I couldn’t believe it, because they picked one of my paintings to put on the poster for the show!

STILLPASS: When did the Americans start to take an interest in your work?

SOULAGES: That same year I received an unexpected visit at my studio in Paris from an American man who had heard about my work. It was James Johnson Sweeney, who was the painting curator at MoMA and later became the director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. He said he liked everything and bought one of my paintings. The next year I participated in my first show in the United States at Betty Parsons Gallery. It was a group show of five painters called “Painted in 1949.” It was a complete flop. [laughs] After that, I participated in a series of shows that traveled around

THIS PAGE: PEINTURE 309 x 181 cm, 12 DÉCEMBRE 2013. OIL ON CANVAS. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SOULAGES ARCHIVES, 2014. © VINCENT CUNILLERE.

an artist at the prestigious École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. I went to the school in Paris to take the entrance exam, and I saw what they were teaching. It was everything I hated. I took the exam anyway, and when I found out I’d been accepted, I left and never stepped foot in there again.

STILLPASS: It’s interesting that you rejected formal training because certain art critics at the time argued that abstract expressionism came out of America, where artists could fully escape the preconceived

notions of the European tradition. You did this too, but in Europe.

SOULAGES: Well, all those terms—*abstract, nonfigurative*, et cetera—they’re just words, they’re labels, and labels are meant to be destroyed.

STILLPASS: Were you aware of the painters developing a similar style in America?

SOULAGES: No, not at all. I lived in the countryside in the south of France. It was very remote, cut off from many things.

the U.S. The first one was called “Advancing French Art.” The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., bought one of my paintings from the show. Duncan Phillips picked it out himself. Then in 1954 an American gallery began to represent my painting.

STILLPASS: Sam Kootz?

SOULAGES: Yes, Kootz. He sold many of my paintings in America.

STILLPASS: Did you spend time in New York? What was your relationship with the American painters?

SOULAGES: I didn’t actually visit the United States for the first time until 1957, by which time I had already shown in several exhibitions in America. When my wife and I arrived in New York, Sam Hunter, a curator at MoMA, had a dinner at his house. That’s when I met Rothko, Stamos, and most of the other American painters. The American artists knew my work well because I had already exhibited there.

STILLPASS: Were you familiar with their work?

SOULAGES: No, only afterwards. In France we learned

about Pollock’s work in the 1950s, but we didn’t know about the others; we couldn’t have known about them because they weren’t around yet. Rothko wasn’t Rothko yet. Rothko became Rothko in 1949. Kline became Kline in 1951. I met Kline later in New York.

STILLPASS: What was your relationship like with Kline? Many people compare your work to his.

SOULAGES: Kline was very nice. When I met him, he said I look like my paintings! He was already very familiar with my work. Kline’s early paintings are very different from the paintings he became known for. People said my work resembled Kline’s, but he started painting in that style long after I did.

STILLPASS: What other painters did you meet in New York?

SOULAGES: Oh, all of them. I became friends with Kline, Motherwell, Rothko, de Kooning. On that first trip, my wife and I visited the Whitney Museum, and when we walked in, a man came up to me and said, “Aren’t you Soulages?” I said: “Yes, that’s me.” He said,

“It’s so nice of you to come to see what the American artists are doing!” It turns out it was Milton Resnick. He said, “I am going to throw a party for you.” But I didn’t know him, so I replied, “No, I’m busy every night.” He said, “Are you free for lunch? I’ll throw a lunch party for you.” So I went to his house on 10th Street, and he had invited everyone, many sculptors, Stankiewicz, de Kooning, and others. De Kooning’s studio was on the floor above, so he invited me to come up and see his work. De Kooning knew my work already, but that was how I was introduced to his.

STILLPASS: After the war, many artists and critics felt that the cultural center had moved from Paris to New York and were critical of European art. Did you ever get a sense of this rift?

SOULAGES: When I first met Rothko, we got off on the wrong foot. At Sam Hunter’s dinner that I mentioned, Rothko said to me, “Soulages is Europe, and I’m familiar with European museums. European museums have men with their arms out, with nails in their hands and blood flowing. They have men with thorns in their foreheads and blood flowing. They have men shot with arrows and blood flowing. They have women carrying heads on platters and blood flowing.” Then he added, “Europe! Concentration camps, gas chambers, crematoriums. Me, I prefer bird songs.” He completely attacked me!

STILLPASS: He was seriously angry?

SOULAGES: I was shaking! At that point, the room had gone silent, and everyone was listening. They were all waiting to hear how I would respond. So I said, “I’m not that familiar with American museums, but yesterday I went to the Met, and I saw men with their arms out, with nails in their hands and with blood flowing. I saw men with thorns in their foreheads and blood flowing . . .” I repeated everything he said. I even said I saw heads on platters, which was a lie, but it doesn’t matter. [laughs] I added, “I have yet to see the American Indian museums.”

STILLPASS: How did he respond?

SOULAGES: People started to smile. Then he replied, “Come over for lunch tomorrow,” and that’s how we became close friends.

STILLPASS: You’ve painted with black from the beginning, but how did you get “beyond black” for in your *Outrenoir* series?

SOULAGES: One day in 1979, I was here in this studio working on a painting for hours and there was black paint everywhere. I was exhausted, and I couldn’t understand why I had worked for so long on something I didn’t like. I thought it must be a bad painting because it wasn’t turning out like the others. I went to sleep for an hour, and when I woke up and looked at it again, I thought, “I don’t paint with black anymore. I paint with the light reflected off the black surface.” This realization touched me, so I continued to make more of these paintings. The Centre Pompidou invited me to do an exhibition of this new series, which people started calling *noir lumière*, or “black light.” I didn’t like this name because it suggests an optical effect. I made these because I found that the light reflected by the black surface elicits certain emotions in me. These aren’t monochromes. The fact that light can come from the color which is supposedly the absence of light is already quite moving, and it is interesting to see how this happens. I realized I needed to find a word that could convey the mental field opened up by these paintings. That is when I invented the word *outrenoir*. *Outrenoir* doesn’t exist in English; the closest is “beyond black.” In French, you say “*outré-Manche*,” (CONTINUED ON PAGE 133)



“ALL THOSE TERMS—ABSTRACT, NONFIGURATIVE, ET CETERA—THEY’RE JUST WORDS, THEY’RE LABELS, AND LABELS ARE MEANT TO BE DESTROYED.”

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“beyond the Channel,” to mean England or “*outré-Rhin*,” “beyond the Rhine,” to mean Germany. In other words, “beyond black” is a different country from black.

STILLPASS: It’s somewhere else.

SOULAGES: Yes.

STILLPASS: You call this space opened up by the canvas a mental field, but it seems to me that your paintings invite a physical relationship as much as a mental one, especially the paintings you place in the middle of the room.

SOULAGES: Those paintings are different. I always liked paintings to be walls rather than windows. When we see a painting on a wall, it’s a window, so I often put my paintings in the middle of the space to make a wall. A window looks outside, but a painting should do the opposite—it should look inside of us. When I put them in the middle of the room, I attach the paintings at the top to the ceiling and on the bottom to the floor. I prefer this to just hanging them from the ceiling because it creates a place in a space, like a wall.

STILLPASS: Why do we need painting, especially today?

SOULAGES: Painting allows us to live in a more interesting way than we live our everyday lives. If painting doesn’t offer a way to dream and create emotions, then it’s not worth it. Painting isn’t just pretty or pleasant; it is something that helps you to stand alone and face yourself. For me, it’s important to experience this aesthetic shock, which sets in motion our imagination, our emotions, our feelings, and our thoughts. That’s the purpose of a painting and of art in general. I’ve pursued this for the past 68 years that I’ve been an artist, and I will keep pursuing it. I never want to stop painting. I’m 94 now. What’s my secret? I just keep thinking about the painting I’m going to do tomorrow.