

DOMINIQUE LÉVY

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Pierre Soulages: Master of Black, Still Going Strong

By **STEPHEN HEYMAN** MAY 20, 2014

PARIS — Pierre Soulages, 94, still paints every day on the floor of his atelier in the Latin Quarter here, raking heavy black pigment across large canvases in search of a particular onyx gleam that he has termed “outrenoir,” or beyond black. This color is his abstract art signature, similar to what blue was for Yves Klein or white for Robert Ryman.

“Black has been fundamental for me since childhood,” said Mr. Soulages, who, in an interview at his studio, shared a story from when he was a boy of 6 and his older sister found him drawing thick black lines in ink with a brush.

“What are you making, my little Pierre?” she asked. His reply: Snow.

Today Mr. Soulages is, at least in financial terms, the most successful living artist in France. His average auction price has increased by more than 500 percent since 2003, and the paintings he made in the 1950s and '60s routinely fetch between \$1 million and \$4 million, according to artprice.com. His 2009 retrospective at the Pompidou Center, which attracted over 500,000 visitors, was the largest show the museum has ever devoted to a living artist.

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Pierre Soulages looks to create an effect of “outrenoir,” or beyond-black, in his paintings.
Credit: Johann Rousselot for The New York Times

Mr. Soulages’s work can be found in museums around the world, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Tate Gallery in London. In 2001, he became the first contemporary artist to be exhibited at the Hermitage, in St. Petersburg. “When the curator told me I was the only living artist in the collection, I said, ‘Thank you, I will try to stay that way,’” Mr. Soulages said.

In December, Mr. Soulages will be 95, but he says he is not considering retirement, much less his legacy. “I only think about what I am going to do tomorrow,” he said in French. “And tomorrow, I want to paint.”

In the United States, where he is relatively little-known, his first exhibition in 10 years is now on view in a double show at the

galleries of Dominique Lévy and Emmanuel Perrotin, which occupy the same building at 909 Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street.

Later this month, in his birthplace of Rodez, in the south of France, the Musée Soulages will open with a collection of 500 works donated by the artist, which are valued at 40 million euros, or \$54.7 million. The museum, housed in a series of rusty black steel cubes, was designed by the Catalan architects RCR and contains a cafe by the Michelin three-star chef Michel Bras. Mr. Soulages insisted that Mr. Bras design a menu that art students could afford, and he also set aside a 5,000-square-foot space in the museum to exhibit work by a diverse range of artists.

A former rugby player, Mr. Soulages stands well over 6 feet tall and dresses only in black. His body language is often described in the same terms as his paintings: strong, vital, powerful. “I’ve decided to lose count of his age,” Ms. Lévy said. “I

always feel he's challenging me and pushing me and such a force of nature."



Tools in Mr. Soulages's Paris studio.

Credit Johann Rousselot for The New York Times

The New York show, on view through June, brings together postwar paintings on loan from museums and collectors and 14 "outrenoir" paintings made between 2012 and 2013. It coincides with a book, "Soulages in America," published by Ms. Lévy and distributed by D.A.P., that explores Mr. Soulages's rich, but mostly forgotten, legacy in the United States.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when he was represented by the legendary New York dealer Samuel M. Kootz, Mr. Soulages's work was seen as a kind of French analog to the Abstract Expressionism of New York School artists like Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Milton Resnick and Robert Motherwell. Mr. Soulages knew and remembers most of them fondly, especially Rothko, whom he once threw a party for at his studio in Paris.

Long before Mr. Soulages made a name for himself in France, American museums were purchasing his paintings, beginning with the Phillips Collection, in 1951, and then the Museum of Modern Art, in 1952. During the 1950s and '60s, when he was connected to the American modern art world via Mr. Kootz, half of Mr. Soulages's works were purchased by institutions or collectors in the United States, including Nelson A. Rockefeller and a number of filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder and Otto Preminger.

But when Mr. Kootz's gallery closed, in 1966, Mr. Soulages abruptly exited the American art scene.

“Fashions were changing just around that time with the rise of Pop and Op and Minimalism,” said Harry Cooper, the curator and head of modern art at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., who worked on Mr. Soulages’s catalogue raisonné when he was a graduate student at Harvard, in the 1990s. “I think that probably made it a lot harder, at least for an artist who was roughly in the Abstract Expressionist vein who was not an American.”



The floor where Mr. Soulages paints his canvases.
Credit: Johann Rousselot for The New York Times

Mr. Cooper has hung paintings by Mr. Soulages next to works by Dubuffet and Giacometti at the National Gallery, and said he believed Mr. Soulages’s oeuvre merits a fresh look from American curators.

“The old comparison to Franz Kline is misplaced. His work is very different, much more elegant, in some ways less gritty and muscular,” he said. “The paintings are in museum storage all over the country. It’s just a matter of curators going down there.”

As a teenager, Mr. Soulages was fascinated by prehistoric art, particularly the 3,000-year-old monoliths scattered near his home in the Aveyron region. (Their low-relief carvings have echoes in many of his *outrenoir* paintings.) Later he discovered reproductions of the cave paintings at places like Lascaux, Altamira or Chauvet, where some charcoal animal paintings were made 30,000 years ago. “These caves were total darkness. People painted in the dark, they painted with the dark,” Mr. Soulages said. (In French, *noir* can be used to mean both “dark” and “black.”)

Mr. Soulages has kept close to his provincial roots. He and his wife of more than 70 years, Colette, divide their time between Paris and a house overlooking the Mediterranean, in Sète, near Montpellier. In a corner of the garden he rolls up canvases that don’t excite him and burns them. “I paint by crisis,” Mr. Soulages said. “Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. If we know exactly what we are going to do before we do it we are not artists but artisans.”

Mr. Soulages dates the discovery of “outrenoir” to 1979. Before, black was a constant presence in his paintings as an “element of contrast” with other colors. The compositions, sometimes made with walnut stain, often featured thick, calligraphic strokes against lighter backgrounds. Then, one day, he was furiously working on a painting, and “everything became black.”

“I thought it was bad. But I continued working on it for two or three hours because, I felt that it would become somehow stronger if I kept working on it. Eventually I went to sleep, and a few hours later I looked at what I had done,” he said. “I was no longer working in black but working with the light reflected by the surface of the black. The light was dynamized by the strokes of paint. It was another world.”

Brooks Adams, an art critic and contributing editor at *Art in America* who has written about Mr. Soulages, said the paintings he was now making in his 90s are remarkable because they don’t smack of a late style. “It doesn’t have some new sweetness, some faintly gaga quality, some memory of childhood coming in,” Mr. Adams said. “They’re still very hip.”

Mr. Soulages said he sometimes struggled to account for his popularity. “It stupefies me — some people have cried when they see my paintings,” he said. He can only explain it by saying the color taps into something basic, human and timeless. “Black is the color of the origin of painting — and our own origin. In French, we say the baby ‘sees the day,’ to mean he was born. Before that, of course, we were in the dark.”

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