

Pierre Soulages,
Peinture, 202
x 202 cm, 13
septembre 2013,
2013. Acrylic on
canvas. 202 x
202 cm. Private
collection.

OUTRENOIR

Pierre Soulages¹

GC I find your pictorial attitude quite architectural, where does it come from?

PS It is something lost in the fog of childhood. Quite simply, I liked to paint, dip my brush in an inkwell and then put it on a school notebook. I certainly felt a certain pleasure. The desire to make it my main activity arose when I was twelve, visiting the Romanesque Abbey of Conques. Faced with the shock and the emotion that space produced on me, I realized that what mattered in life was art.²

In the beginning, I really liked to draw the leafless trees in winter. The way they would write space, so to speak. It all comes from there. From that sort of abstract sculptures. I've always looked for the presence of the works or the objects that were in front me. In my current works, that presence is even more obvious, you see reflections of it. The light changes, at Conques for instance where, from dawn to dusk, the stained glass windows are never the same.³ Same goes for my 'black' paintings. If you move, they're not quite the same anymore. When you look at them, their presence lies in the moment of your contemplation. In that very moment. The relation to space is different. The very space of the canvas is in front of the light that comes towards you from the canvas, and the person who's looking at it is also in that space.⁴

GC So it is a matter of light in space-time...

PS In all my paintings since 1979, the light comes from the painting in front of the observer who is no longer in front but in the space of the canvas. The bigger the format, the more obvious this effect.⁵ In the case of a line that unfolds, there is a beginning and an end – a duration – 'something' that flows. In my work, all the forms, the painted traces organized on the canvas, are delivered at once, the time is not the same, there is no longer a duration. There is a motionless time, there is no more flow, succession;

1. Note of the editor: what follows is a collection of excerpts from some published Pierre Soulages' interviews, which I treated as answers to my retroactive questions. English translations from the French publications are mine. G.C.

2. Pierre Soulages, 'Les couleurs du noir', int. by Olivier Pauli, *Soulages*, exp. catalogue (Lausanne: Galerie Alice Pauli, 1990), in *Soulages XXIe Siècle*, ed. by Éric Chassey and Sylvie Ramond (Hazan: Paris 2012), p. 154.

3. In 1986, Pierre Soulages was commissioned by the French Government to realize 104 stained glass windows for the Conques Abbey. The work was completed in April 1994.

4. Pierre Soulages, 'Pierre Soulages and the Aveyron', *Artdaily* (2014), <<http://artdaily.com/news/70470/Pierre-Soulages-and-the-Aveyron-Interview-with-Pierre-Soulages#.WxjvdyC-lhE>> [accessed 18 May 2018].

it is a completely different attitude towards time; a completely different way of involving time into the pictorial space. I could even say that it is a pictorial time woven with a pictorial space: a problem that was at the heart of my preoccupations – without having knowledge of it. More precisely, this problem is the result of my way of working and of the pictures as they are when I leave them to the viewer.⁶

GC This reminds me of the very different attitude of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, actually produced through the superimposition of many layers of different colours: they become 'visible' after a relatively long time of visual adaptation; let's say ten minutes or more... What is the role of your *outrenoir*, or ultrablack, in the sudden appearance you are looking for?

PS *Outrenoir* means 'beyond the black', light reflected, transmuted by black. *Outrenoir*: black that, ceasing to be as such, becomes transmitter of clarity, secret light. *Outrenoir*: a mental field other than that of simple black. I tried to analyse the poetics specific to my painting practice and its relationship to space and time: there is an instantaneous vision for each point of view. If we change it, there is the dissolution of the first vision, erasure, and appearance of another one. The canvas is present as soon as it is seen. It is not at a distance in time, as the one implied by representative and gestural paintings, which refer to the moment of the gesture or of what they represent. Under a natural light, the clarity coming from black evolves with that which marks, in immobility, the flow of time.⁷

GC You often remembered that this came to you as a sort of epiphany.

PS One day in 1979, I realized that the light reflected by the painting was coming towards me. Therefore, I thought, 'What's going on?' The painting space is no longer behind it, as they wanted to do with perspective. If it is not even on the surface – as conceived by the Byzantines, whom however I prefer to those who followed – it is here now in front of the canvas, since what I see is the light that comes from the painting towards me. The space is in front, and I am inside, in the space of the painting.⁸

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 'outr-Manche', 'beyond the Channel', to mean England or 'outr-Rhin', 'beyond the Rhine', to mean Germany. In other words, 'beyond black' is a different country from black.⁹

GC However, black has been the main colour of your palette since the beginnings.

PS I've always been interested in what I didn't know. I still am. This is what led me to the *outrenoir*, a light reflected by different layers or black. Black is the original colour of painting. For centuries, the cavemen, in their black pitch caves, would paint with black. Black is also the colour of our origin. Before we were born, weren't we plunged in darkness? I was once told that, as a child, I would plunge my brush in the inkwell to draw long black lines on white paper. 'What are you doing?', they would ask. I would answer: 'Snow'. That didn't go unnoticed. Perhaps I was trying, by contrast, to make the paper whiter than it really was by confronting it to black colour. My taste for black dates back to my childhood. Contrary to most people, I could not see any particular symbolism to it. Black is often the colour of mourning. It is a shortsighted and codified way to consider it. Black was also the colour of the gowns and religious habits of Benedictine nuns. All at once austerity, feast, anarchy, rebellion and authority. Whenever I had the chance, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, I would dress in black. My mother was absolutely shocked. She said to me: 'You're mourning me already!'¹⁰

GC Getting rid of symbols is part of our being modern but it requires an open attitude.

5. Pierre Soulages, 'A propos de la Peinture 293 x 324 cm, 19 décembre 1995, polyptyque, collection de l'artiste', 'Les éclats du noir', int. by Pierre Encrevé, *Beaux Arts Magazine* (March 1996), in *Soulages XXIe Siècle*, p. 160.

6. Pierre Soulages, 'L'aventure de l'art moderne', int. by André Parinaud (Paris: Galerie Jardin des Arts, 1975), in *Soulages XXIe Siècle*, p. 143.

7. Pierre Soulages, 'Les éclats du noir', p. 159.

8. Pierre Soulages, 'Soulages le réfractaire', int. by Jacques-Alain Miller, with Pierre Encrevé and Nathalie Georges-Lambrichs, *La Cause freudienne*, 75 (2010), in *Soulages XXIe Siècle*, p. 167.

9. Pierre Soulages, int. by Zoe Stillpass, *Interview Magazine* (7 May 2014), <<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/pierre-soulages>> [accessed 18 May 2018].

10. 'Pierre Soulages and the Aveyron'.



PS If one finds that these paintings are just black, it is because one does not look at them with the eyes, but with what one has in the head.¹¹ We keep on calling it black; in fact, something else is in action, to the point that I could say that my tool is not black, but light. Thus employed, black is not just monochrome, it is also the opposite. The words that designate colours are limiting – they are abstractions, in the true sense of the word. In painting, colour, whether it is yellow, red, blue, or black, is something that concretely relates not just to its shape and size, but also to a set that constitutes the qualities of that colour. It is transparent or opaque, or both according to its position; it is bright or matt; smooth or granular; fibrous, etc. And it appears to us at the same time only as black. It looks abstracted from all its physiognomic qualities, which are inseparable in the perception one has and in the emotion it triggers.¹²

GC Your attention to the painting materiality, to its actual ‘thingness’, sounds pretty architectural.

PS My aesthetic choices have ethical equivalents, interacting with the world and things. I feel closer to stone, wood and rust than nickel or lacquer. I’m more into clay than chrome.

When I did my etchings, corroding copper, I was thinking that, in the end, corrosion is time trapped by matter. When you erode copper with acid, you do, in ten minutes, what would take centuries for Nature to do.¹³

When I make a painting, I give it a title: a date, a list of the materials, and the dimensions. The young artists of the 1960s – when they saw the titles of my paintings – felt they were very literal and therefore different from those of other American or French artists. These 1960s young intellectual artists were Maoists. They wanted to embrace me as their friend. So I met them, and said: ‘You confuse materiality and reality.’ I am a realist, but my reality is not only a material one. Reality is the triple relationship between the perceiver, the painting, and the artist.¹⁴

GC The ‘truth’ of materials is something architects often deal with, both from a Loosian point of view, concerning a sort of ethics of the object, and as a search for an interactive connection with a wider reality. Does black display any particular potential in this sense?

PS When you remove yourself from the blackness, you see the light from it.¹⁵

11. Pierre Soulages, ‘Les éclats du noir’, p. 159.

12. Pierre Soulages, ‘Les couleurs du noir’, p. 154.

13. ‘Pierre Soulages and the Aveyron’.

14. Pierre Soulages, int. by Robert C. Morgan, *The Brooklyn Rail* (10 December 2005), <<https://brooklynrail.org/2005/12/art/n-conversation-pierre-soulages-with-robe>> [accessed 18 May 2018].

15. Ibid.

←
Pierre Soulages,
Peinture,
184 x 130 cm, 15
mai 2016, 2016.
Acrylic on canvas.
184 x 130 cm.
Courtesy Perrotin.

All colours belong to this practice of black. Take my *Peinture 222 x 157 cm, 15 janvier 1990*: at this moment, I see it gilded with warm sparkles. On the right, it becomes blue, because it captures a certain light in a certain way. The paintings I make this way with black only live through the light they receive.

I have a studio in the South attached to my house. From time to time, we take a canvas and hang it where we live. For a long time, there was an ochre, yellow, black, grey and white painting on the wall. Whatever the light of day, we could always say that it was an ochre, a grey, a white and a black. Now, there is one of these 'black' canvases. Some mornings it is grey, silver. At other times, capturing the reflections of the sea, it is blue. At other times, it takes coppery brown tones; in fact, it is always in tune with the light it receives.¹⁶

GC In a way, your work thrives upon contextual relations. It is no more a matter of getting one to the right interpretation, but of taking advantage of the unpredictable interaction in time between the work, the observer and the environment. Even if your paintings look great on the pages of books or on the screen, nothing can replace the experience of being in front of one of them.

PS Photography reduces the multiplicity of time to the unity of the instant. It 'flattens' on the canvas the space that light creates in front of the painting and, not being able to restore the brightness or the fluidity of the light reflected by black, it translates the reflections by different greys. This is how the reproduction of these paintings sadly cast back them to a classical conception of painting.¹⁷

In the classic conception of painting, reflections are considered parasitic to the vision, so that usual presentations strive to eliminate them. Here, on the contrary, not only is the reflection taken into account, but it is an integral part of the work: it incorporates the light the painting receives – a changing light if it is natural – and restores it with its colour transmuted by black.¹⁸

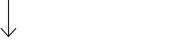
GC This takes us to the issue of control. Do you 'design' your paintings?

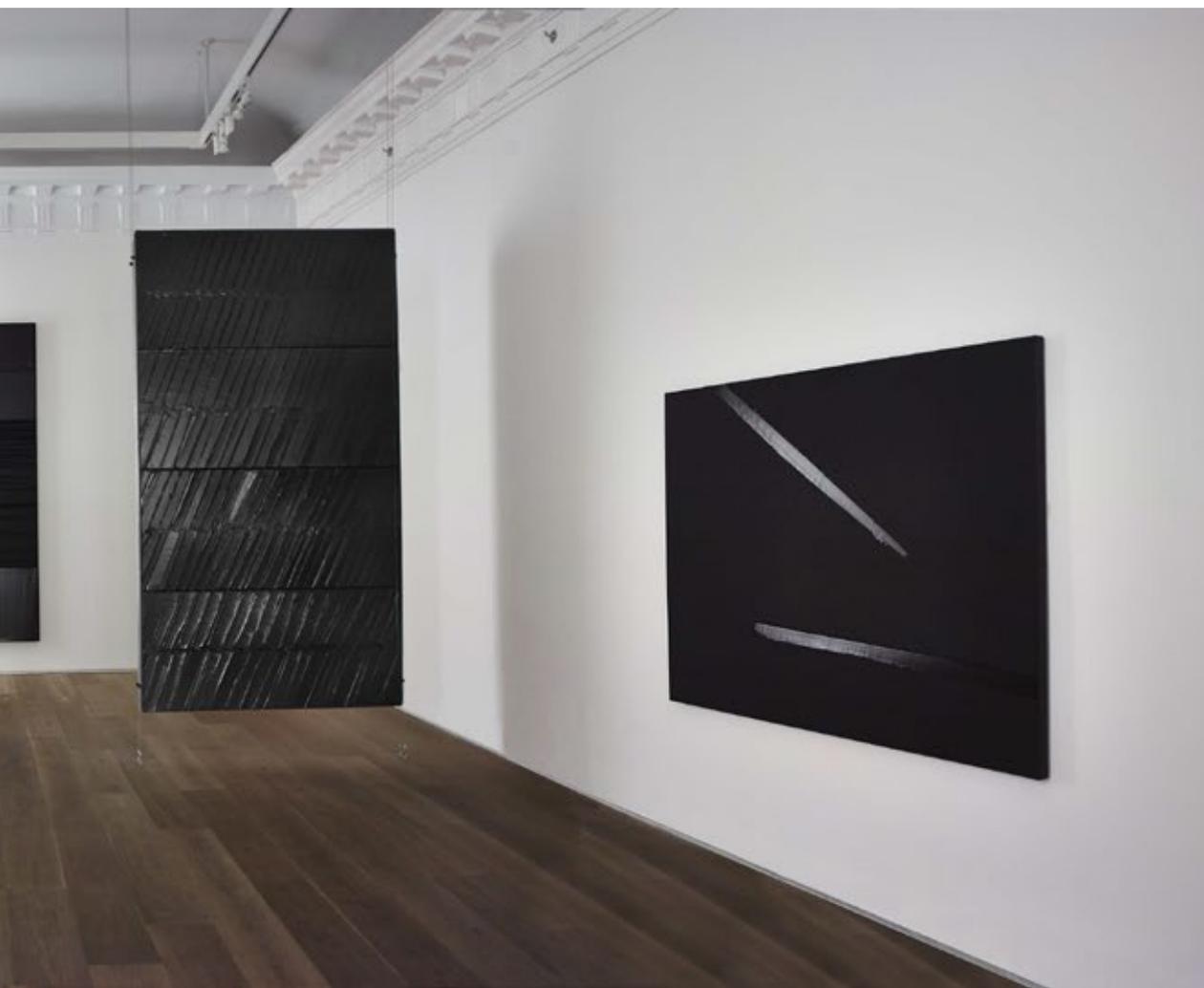
PS What I'm doing teaches me what I'm looking for, but at the moment I only discover it vaguely or in part.¹⁹ Chance and accidental occurrences, if we pay attention, conceal, propose, suggest what we would never have imagined. They intervene in the gen-

Pierre Soulages,
Peinture 324 x
362 cm, 1986,
Polyptyque H,
1986. Oil on
canvas. 324 x 362
cm (324 x 90.5 cm
(x4)). Courtesy
Perrotin.



Exhibition at the
Perrotin Gallery,
New York, 2014.





esis of paintings as I conceive it. They make us act differently, organize, gather, as Nietzsche says, ‘fragment, enigma, horrible chance.’²⁰

GC And when it comes to displaying your works in a gallery or for an exhibition, how do you decide their position and relationship with the space?

PS 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.²¹

GC It seems to me you are looking for a sort of ground/ground ratio, even though you explored and still explore blackness versus white both in your paintings and in some settings of the *outrenoir* series.

PS Sometimes I come back to black and white and use light as a contrast. My painting rests on the light that stems either from the contrast or from its reflection, but not from anything: the light coming from black – the colour that is the greatest absence of light.²²

I choose neither black nor white but two types of pictorial light pushed to the extreme: that arising from the black-white contrast and the more secret one emanating from the different surface states of black.²³

GC The *Outrenoir* paintings in your museum in Rodez – designed by RCR Architectes, Aranda Pigem Villalta, 2014 – are displayed in pretty dark rooms made of black steel. I remember a total black room that made a deep impression on me the first time I came across your work in the exhibition at the Beaubourg in 2009.

PS The idea of the black room is mine. The first time, it was a comical moment indeed: the Museum of Münster, in Germany, purchased a large painting of mine. They told me: ‘Usually, when we buy a big painting, we show it to the public because it is an expense for the city. We put the painting we just bought in a room with nothing else in it. Anyone who passes by can see it.

We are going to hang it there, how do you want to hang it?' I said, 'First of all, where are the doors? – They are along a wall. – So not on that wall: in front of it. – That's what we usually do. Then, where do you want to hang it? – In the middle. I would like anyway, given what I do, to feel that it is a thing.' I tell them that you should therefore detach the painting from the wall. 'But how? – Well, either on cables or on gallews! Whatever is easier for you. – The simplest way would be cables. What colour do you want the walls? – Paint them black. – Yes, ok, but the walls? – The ceiling and the floor too, and the two side walls too. – Oh! The two side walls too? – Yes, yes, black. – Very good, and what about the lighting? – No lighting. – No lighting?! – No lighting, but I did not tell you to paint black the wall along which the people pass, this one, leave it clear. Leave it blank and light this wall only.' It was a try, an attempt, but I knew it had to work. It was very good, so good that the people passing by said, 'Of course, it's not about black, it is about light.'²⁴

16. Pierre Soulages, 'Les couleurs du noir', p. 154.

17. Pierre Soulages, 'Les éclats du noir', p. 159.

18. Pierre Soulages, 'A propos de la Peinture 162 x 127 cm, 14 avril 1979, huile sur toile, collection particulière', 'Les éclats du noir', p. 160.

19. Pierre Soulages, 'Les éclats du noir', p. 158.

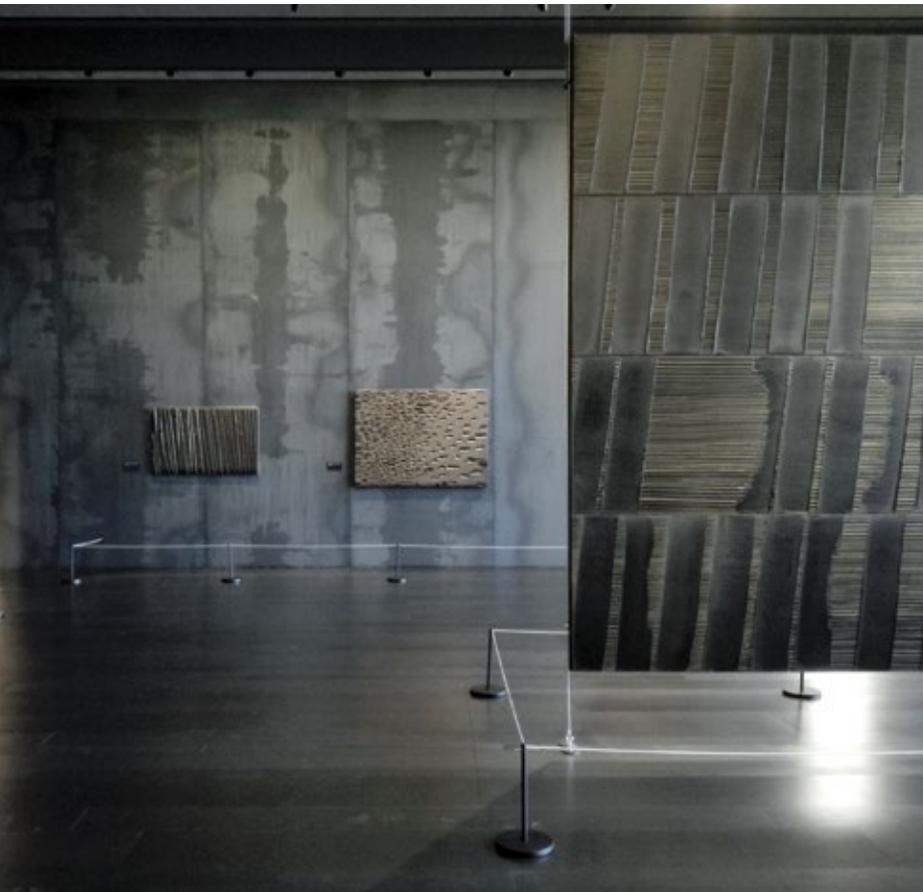
20. Pierre Soulages, 'Les couleurs du noir', p. 156.

21. Pierre Soulages, int. by Zoe Stillpass.

22. Pierre Soulages, 'Soulages le réfractaire', p. 173.

23. Pierre Soulages, 'Les éclats du noir', p. 158.

24. Pierre Soulages, 'Soulages le réfractaire', p. 179.



←
RCR Architectes,
Museum Soulages,
Rodez, 2014,
interior view.

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Panagia Asinou
Church, Nikitary,
Cyprus, 11th-12th
century.

