

Georges MATHIEU

*White Hot Magazine,
Georges Mathieu at Nahmad Contemporary and Perrotin Gallery*

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Installation view, Georges Mathieu at Nahmad Contemporary. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary.

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By ROBERT C. MORGAN, September 2021

The current exhibition of paintings by the late French painter Georges Mathieu (1921 – 2012) re-opens the door to the history of abstract painting in the post-War period beginning in the late 1940s. Mathieu worked more or less at the same time as the abstract expressionists in New York, but from his own highly original point of view. Rather than following the abstract trajectory of Cubism and De Stijl, as so often discussed in American art history classes, Mathieu chose to instigate his own history and method that ironically rejected these European antecedents in favor of

his own concept of an uninhibited expressivity. Being a professor concomitant with his fundamental identity as a painter, Mathieu sought to relinquish issues of content and intention in favor of form and gesture. His idea was to go directly to the expressive potential within painting.



Georges Mathieu, Tombes abusives (Abusive Tombs), 1991. Oil on canvas, 51.18 x 38.19 inches. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary.

The opportunity to see this retrospective glance of Mathieu's paintings in two New York Galleries – the Perrotin and Nahmad Contemporary – offers an extraordinary moment to re-think the more standard history of abstract painting that evolved through the New York School during the 1950s and 1960s. This two-part

exhibition, celebrated on the occasion of the artist's 100th birthday, represents the contribution of a major European artist who worked for the most part independently. This was expressed largely in his performances in which he painted large-scale abstract murals for audiences throughout Europe and occasionally in the United States. Over the years he would have a substantial influence on the Lyrical Abstraction movement in France as well as the Happenings movement in New York and the Gutai movement in Japan.



Installation view, Georges Mathieu at Nahmad Contemporary. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary.

Having seen the paintings on display in these two venues, it is difficult to find any direct connection between the work of Mathieu and that of the abstract expressionists. In past years, historians have tried to compare the paintings of Pollock and DeKooning with those of Mathieu, but with little success. The painterly surfaces of the American and the Dutchman do not correspond to the intense ultra-formality visible in the paintings of Mathieu.



Georges Mathieu, Occision du duc Jehan de Bourgogne (Slaughter of the Duke Jehan de Bourgogne), 1957. Oil on canvas, 38.19 x 76.77 inches. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary.

In the exhibition at Nahmad, paintings such as *Pauxi* (1979), *Montfleury* (1970), and *Dismayed Immensity* (1989), among others, reveal unprescribed geometric markings within the (de)construction of Mathieu's surfaces. These markings are unlike anything found in the work of the New York painters. In the large-scale paintings at Perrotin, such as *Hugues de Payens fonde l'ordre du Temple* (1958), there is a certain credibility that extends beyond the spectacle. These are vibrant paintings that appear to extend painterly space into an outer dimension – not literally, of course, but in accordance with the logic of the painting where the elements suggest a possible continuation beyond their formal containment.

Mathieu's instinct as a painter was remarkable. His work exceeded other forms of painting contingent on abstract methodologies from the past. His instinct was to escape the frame, and thereby, to move towards a territory unknown, a territory

previously unseen in painting. It would appear that Mathieu was in search of the impossible. The strength of his painting is what makes this clear. The painting, *Souvenir de la maison d'Autriche*, is an example of a performance work in which the construct within the pictorial space appears open. The density of the aleatory brushwork is to the right of the horizontal space from which a singular stroke of dry-brush paint sweeps across to the left where a scattering of marks are made visible. The impossibility of this painting is what makes it work despite the absence of a clearly recognizable form. It is a painting reaching toward the future, nearly on its own terms. **WM**