

SWORD FIGHTS ON CANVAS: GEORGES MATHIEU AT PERROTIN AND NAHMAD CONTEMPORARY

By David Ebony
Oct 22, 2021



Georges Mathieu painting a large canvas.

PHOTO DMITRI KESSEL/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES/COURTESY THE ESTATE OF GEORGES MATHIEU AND PERROTIN

A precursor to Happenings and performance art, and an intriguing example of asemic writing—which resembles language but does not carry meaning—the work of French painter Georges Mathieu (1921–2012) was both influential and prescient. Yet Mathieu’s achievements have largely faded from view, at least within the United States. This remarkable New York survey, featuring some thirty-six major works filling two venues, marks the artist’s centenary.

During his lifetime, and especially at the height of his career in the 1950s through the mid-’60s, Mathieu was a controversial and polarizing figure. Born into a banking family in a French coastal town, he had a lifelong adherence to an eccentric royalist political stance that often provoked the ire of his avant-garde colleagues in America and Europe. The aristocratic posturing eventually caused him to be sidelined in the annals of recent American art; in an essay for this show’s catalogue, the late art historian and critic Germano Celant refers to Mathieu as “an antagonist who was at one and the same time reactionary and revolutionary.” This last descriptor might refer to Mathieu’s role in championing the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and other American Abstract Expressionists, who, in the late 1940s, were largely unknown in Europe. After visiting New York and seeing these young artists’ work firsthand, Mathieu was inspired to cofound the movement known today as Lyrical Abstraction or Tachisme—considered part of art informel, Europe’s answer to AbEx—with artists

such as Hans Hartung, Wols, Jean Fautrier, and Pierre Soulages. Responding in anguish to the atrocities of World War II, these artists sought an abstract visual language that emphasized fervid gesture and the artwork's raw, material properties. The group opposed the formal constructs and orderliness of geometric abstraction.

In the following years, under the umbrella of Lyrical Abstraction, Mathieu presented a series of live "painting actions" to considerable acclaim all over the world—including in Japan, where Gutai artists wrote in their manifesto that his work "reveals the scream of matter itself." Documentary footage of these events, on view at Perrotin, shows Mathieu violently attacking the canvases with elongated paintbrushes as if engaged in a frantic sword fight. In contrast to this aggressive, macho



Georges Mathieu, *The Victory of Denain*, 1963, oil on canvas, 108 ¼ by 275 ¾ inches.

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delivery, Mathieu would often dress for these events in flamboyant outfits befitting his royalist dandy persona that were smeared with paint by the end. The convulsive, slashing brushstrokes combined with sinuous, richly textured lines made with pigment squeezed directly from the tube produced spontaneous yet elegant configurations resembling calligraphy. These elusive signs, typically centered in the composition and floating in an ethereal space, sometimes recall medieval heraldry.

Mathieu often titled his works after medieval or pre-French Revolution battles, as with *The Victory of Denain* (1963), one of several stunning examples at Perrotin. Here, against a hazy, stained, coffee-hued background—modulated from deep umber on the lower

right to muted beige on the upper left—thick, slashing brushstrokes of red, white, and blue thrust from left to right, traversing the central portion of the twenty-three-foot-wide canvas. In palette and composition, the work recalls Jean Alaux's 1839 painting of the same subject, which depicts a 1712 French victory in the War of the Spanish Succession. In Mathieu's painting, and in many of his other epic-scale compositions, he abstracts and critiques the tradition of grandiose history painting.

The intensity of Mathieu's gestures, and the resultant complex, layered cursive, also evokes wildstyle graffiti and certain works that Futura and Rammellzee produced in the 1980s.

One of the largest and most sumptuous Mathieu works at Perrotin, measuring nearly ten by thirty feet, is *Paris, Capital of the Arts* (1965), where a central configuration of highly textured, gestural markings in red, yellow, and white hover against a glowing cerulean ground. Here and there, Mathieu uses touches of black or other dark hues to underline the bright flourishes, thus creating subtle drop shadows. The illusionist device lends a 3D effect and a sense of solidity to the asemic signage that appears almost as a bas-relief. The technical refinements in this work reappear in some of the best paintings at Nahmad Contemporary, such as *Hommage à Corelli* (*Hommage to Corelli*), 1970, a synesthetic work named after the Italian composer, and *Sounion II* (1976), with more architectural features reminiscent of the titular Greek temple. With their spiky or curlicue embellishments and novel color relationships, these efforts are visually seductive, and verge on the ornamental. (Indeed, Mathieu had great success in later years by lending his signature style to a range of applied arts.) Mathieu is still able to convey a sense of energy in these works, but they cannot match the visceral power of his early efforts related to action painting. In a stark composition like *First Avenue* (1957, at Perrotin), featuring only a few convulsive splashes and drips of white tossed at the center of a pitch-black background, with several poignant red slashing lines at upper right, Mathieu directly responds to the New York School of Pollock and Franz Kline, as a representative of Paris's own brand of testosterone-driven, postwar angst.