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Simon Hantaï: Les blancs de la couleur, la couleur du blanc

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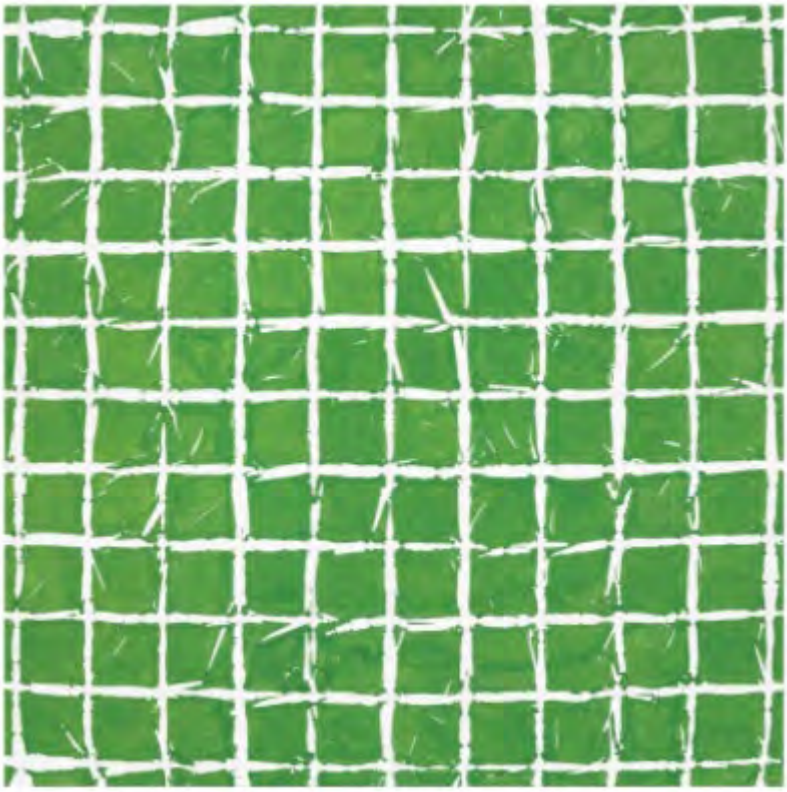

Simon Hantaï, Tabula, 1976. Acrylic on linen, 77 15/16 x 76 3/4 inches.
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Depth in painting has long been achieved by thin layers of oil extending, from the viewer's perspective, into an illusion beyond the canvas. Modernism's flattening of that dimensionality necessarily led to a focus on the painter's actions, as in the swiveling of Cézanne's gaze or the expressive brushstrokes of mid-century Americans. So while the canvases themselves held less

room to fall into, they reflected back the facts of their own making, and of their makers. If it's possible to simplify the trajectory of painting in this way, from a projection of the image through the canvas to a mirroring of the painter's activity, then Simon Hantaï occupies a confusing place. In his mature work, paint is deployed neither as illusion nor as a trace of his hand; rather, it records a dimensionality comprised only of its own materials, a sculptural form that no longer exists.

In the sixties, after a decade of surrealist and gestural experimentation, Hantaï developed a preparatory technique of gathering and creasing unstretched canvases before covering them in a layer of paint. Once opened back up and stretched, the images fractured, sticky oil covering the exposed areas, and canvas spreading like shards in between. He called these "Mariales," perhaps evoking the pleated fabric of Mary's robes in the many frescoes he had sought out in Italy on the way from his native Hungary to Paris. From there, he would refine the pliage technique, isolating and sharpening the ruptures of color against the white of the background. Then, in the late sixties, he abandoned the rounded biomorphic contours for an all-over approach, seeking an increased flatness in the finished paintings, a project that occupied him for the rest of his career. It is this period of intense production, from the late-sixties through the seventies, that the current show surveys.

Simon Hantaï cutting out "Tabulas" works, Meun, France, 1995. Artwork © Archives Simon Hantaï/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Antonio Semeraro. Courtesy Gagosian.

On view are two examples from Hantaï's "Étude" series, monochrome compositions where the painted sections outweigh the white so that negative reads as positive, and one canvas from his "Blancs" series, a dispersal of multicolored shards against a bright white field, as if he had captured the moment that stained glass shattered. But the focus of the show, and much of Hantaï's late career, are the "Tabula" paintings, where the painter finally submits to the grid, creasing his canvases into neat rows and columns. It's worth noting that Hantaï gained prominence in the fifties for his monumental canvases filled with handwriting, so the reference to tablets in this culminating series brings his career full circle. This is also a period marked by Hantaï's transition from oil to acrylic; in his words, the "pliages were destined to be smoothed out, as much smoothing as possible," and acrylic helped him realize that goal, its slight elasticity allowing for a tauter surface. With acrylic, the skeins of color thinned out, so it's possible to see where the liquid pooled as it dried, a detail that only adds to the dissonant effect of the paintings. Here are crumpled, fractured things that the mind wants to assemble back into three dimensions. We are forced to contend with the crooked negative space that surrounds those pools of pigment, gutters that negate and contain the paintings' forms. It's almost photographic, the way that the paintings seem to rest in a state of limbo before sharp tugs reveal their final image.

There are cracks and creases between bursts of color, their lines expanding outward from each intersection of the grid. Where the paint has infiltrated that knotted place, it's subject to a number of chaotic phenomena. Hantaï called it étoilement, literally a starburst, but also a term that inevitably conjures the French toile for canvas, and if we follow a kind of vulgar etymology that ignores the Latin stella, we can imagine the term as describing a kind of removal relating to the canvas, or even a description of the exact moment that the canvas expands, the painted sections unfolding, accordion like, to describe that unruly grid. Up close, there are indeed moments worthy of comparison with nebulae, but there are also those that are more sharply defined like a Rorschach inkblot extending in four directions. What those smears and drips summon in the viewer's mind must be highly subjective. That the pictorial field is created through such a rupture, a literal pulling of form into two dimensions, speaks to Hantaï's influence on later artists. We can look to Hantaï as a precursor to all sorts of trends in painting, solely for the fact that he enlisted other strategies and outlooks—those of photography, printmaking, ceramics—into the medium; these paintings were not built, but uncovered, developed. It is also unsurprising that the Supports/Surfaces group viewed Hantaï as a precedent, as his foregrounding of the canvas's malleability presented painting as a fundamentally textile art.

Simon Hantaï Laissée, 1981–95. Acrylic on canvas, 69 5/16 x 43 11/16 inches.
© Archives Simon Hantaï/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: David Bordes. Courtesy Gagosian.

The latest works here, from the series titled “Laissée” (Leftover), date from the period after 1982 when Hantaï withdrew from the public art world. These canvases are selected portions of monumental “Tabula” compositions that had frustrated the painter. By cutting and restretching fragments of the mural-like compositions, he was able to reclaim pictorial agency on a process that had become increasingly automatic. There is a purple streak cropped so that the majority of the stretched canvas is white space, which seems, for once, to properly evoke the shard, the found image. It is like a cast-off panel in a stone cutter’s workshop: too much grain to incorporate seamlessly with other pieces, yet too enigmatic of a pattern to toss out. I would like to see it next to Helen Frankenthaler’s monumental orange Stride (1969) at the Met, as its chromatic opposite but also as an example of painted expression in two modes: the heroic and the resurrected.

Again and again, I am drawn back to a reproduction of Hantaï’s early masterpiece from Paris, predating his Surrealist phase, Peinture (Les Baigneuses) (1949), a Matissean scene of nudes at the water’s edge. At the left, a woman holds out a towel toward a void, brushstrokes suggesting a former figure in what is now a grassy hill. The entire painting narrows in on that outstretched towel, an impossibly flat collection of stripes, blue, green, white, black against the landscape. In this frescolike composition, that towel seems a portal. It’s almost a precursor for what fabric will become in Hantaï’s hands.