Pierre Soulages’s painting *Peinture 200 x 265 cm, 20 Mai 1959* seems to defy explanation beyond mere description of materials and process. This is evident even in the title. In a system used almost exclusively by Soulages throughout his career, the title indicates only the medium, the dimensions of the work, and the day on which it was made. On the surface, this information resists interpretation—it does not suggest an existential or religious position or refer to a historical event, for example. Rather, it is purely factual, emphasizing the conditions of the painting’s making by pointing to its large size, its material qualities, and the sequential nature of the work. The painting consists of a series of black strokes on a blue and white ground. The black paint has been systematically scraped on and then off with a hard flat tool, perhaps a palette knife or a rubber spatula, to create layers that are more or less thick, and reveal blue underpainting.\[1\] The black paint is thick and shiny and forms ridges along the edges of the strokes where the tool has spread the paint. Some of the strokes are long and continuous and appear to extend the length of the large canvas (which is over eight and a half feet long), while others are shorter and approximately twice as wide and move vertically toward the top and bottom of the canvas (which is six and a half feet tall).\[2\] The opposition of long, thin continuous strokes and short, wide, abbreviated strokes set on a slightly off-center axis makes the black strokes appear both to contract and expand across the flat, white field of the canvas.

The resistance to narrative meaning that is inherent to the picture—and is evident in the description of the picture above—is also part of the artist’s own rhetoric. In statements about his practice, the artist consistently eschews any reference to subjective experience outside of the field of the canvas and the materiality of paint itself. By focusing on the internal qualities of the picture in a way that is autonomous and self-reflexive, he limits the work to the pure experience of painting itself. Soulages explained this in an interview late in life:

> What matters to me is what happens on the canvas. No two brushstrokes are ever the same. Every stroke has its own specific and irreducible attributes: shape, length, thickness, consistency, texture, color, and transparency. Any particular brushstroke establishes relationships with other forms on the canvas, with the background and with the surface as a whole. It is these attributes and relationships that concern me and by which I am guided.[3]

Soulages’s desire not to participate in the larger cultural discourse of his day—and in the debates that arose around abstraction in particular—was in fact a way of staking out a space of individual autonomy in the face of the political and commercial realities of postwar France.
Gestural abstraction emerged in the late 1940s and 1950s in America and Europe as a pictorial language that seemed both authentic and liberated from political and economic constraints. The spontaneous gestures visible on the canvas were widely interpreted as the physical traces of the artistic ego, and thus the abstract gesture became a metaphor for the isolated individual searching for meaning in the upheaval of a postwar world.[4] This version of abstraction quickly took hold in America, particularly with the Abstract Expressionists, for whom the concept of subjective free will was easily conflated with the ethos of American democracy. France, which had been occupied by the Germans during World War II and had a strong Communist party affiliation in the immediate postwar period, saw a similar flourishing of abstraction, but instead of coalescing around a single ideology, abstraction had to jockey for position with older styles such as Fauvism and Cubism, as well as the official painting of the Communist regime, Socialist Realism.

By the mid-1950s, French abstraction was clearly divided between two camps: geometric abstraction and lyrical abstraction (the latter variously characterized as gestural abstraction, tachisme, and art informel). When Soulages arrived in Paris in 1947, he had to negotiate the contested postwar art scene. His work was quickly associated with lyrical abstraction by the critic Charles Estienne, who championed a purely abstract but more creative and spontaneous style that could be easily mapped onto a vague universal humanism.[5] This association of artistic autonomy with humanism is apparent in Estienne’s review of Soulage’s first solo show in Paris in 1949, in which he described Soulages’s work as having: “a simple, virile, and almost rough drawing style, with dark, warm harmonies; an innate feeling for the substance of the paint and for the possibilities specific to oil painting; and, most importantly perhaps, a tone that is at once both human and concrete.”[6] Estienne went on to promote lyrical abstraction throughout the 1950s, perhaps because it was the closest French style to American Abstract Expressionism and thus the best able to compete on the strong American market, but Soulages, throughout his life, positioned his own work outside of any artistic style or group. In 1980, when an interviewer suggested that his work could be associated with gestural painting, Soulages replied: “Gestural indeed? I have always been against labels of that kind, but it is not my fault if historians and critics insist on using them. In any case I am not particularly interested in the subject.”[7] For Soulages, when he made a painting, he was merely working through a pictorial problem inherent to the work itself: “The painting poses a question and I seek to answer it by more clearly defining, by intensifying what I feel is there in embryo.”[8]

Of course, art history does not stand upon an artist’s own words of explanation, but there is something to be said for the difficulty that one has in reading the materials of Peinture 200 x 265 cm, 20 Mai 1959 semantically. The painting cannot be explained by the usual references to spontaneous gesture, and in fact when one looks for traces of artistic ego or psyche in the marks on the canvas, one is constantly returned to the material as a kind of hermetic, controlled, systematic production that is antithetical to the liberatory quality of most gestural abstraction. All of this specific attention to form, both in the artist’s rhetoric and in the work itself, claims a kind of ahistorical and apolitical autonomy, but one which cannot be separated from the historical and social conditions of culture at the time. During the German Occupation, to avoid affiliation with the politics of the occupier, some artists made a conscious choice not to create, which was conceived as an act of resistance in itself. In France, particularly in the postwar period, the act of creation was, as a result, charged with national and political import. Abstraction then, for Soulages, was less a symbol of political democracy than it was a sign of individual autonomy. Like other artists of his time, Soulages’s defiance of symbolic or even subjective meaning was
indeed an attempt to carve out a space of intellectual freedom in the years after World War II and during the rise of the Cold War, when cultural propaganda was at its height. He may have been successful, for the paintings do indeed resist external reference. Historical context, such as the changing social conditions of postwar France that were the result of rapid commodification and economic development—that would be left to the next generation.

1 Beginning in 1946, Soulages replaced the refined artist’s paintbrush with a plaster knife and the broad, utilitarian brush of the housepainter, and by the early 1950s he was fabricating his own tools that resembled long spatulas, using blades made first of leather and then rubber held by two pieces of plywood and mounted on handles of different length. See Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages: L’Oeuvre complet, peintures*, vol. 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1994–1998), 167.

2 When Soulages first began to use such large format canvases in 1950, they were “hors dimension” or larger than most readily available commercially prepared canvases, and he had to special order canvases to meet his needs.


4 One example of this secular humanist position can be found in James Fitzsimmons’s review of a group show called *Younger European Painters* at the Guggenheim Museum in 1953, an exhibition that included the work of Soulages: “They have … the power to command, to transport us out of our daily lives with a glimpse of a larger reality, to make a bit of the Unknown real to us.” Fitzsimmons, “New York: A Glittering Constellation,” *Art Digest*, 28 no. 5 (December 1, 1953): 8, 25.

5 The fact that early on Soulages exhibited with both camps may be indicative of a kind of ambiguity that arises from the semantic neutrality of his pictures. He exhibited at the Salon des Surindépendants in 1947, a large annual group show that was dominated by gestural abstraction but was also a locus for painters influenced by Surrealism. The following year he exhibited at the third Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, where the abstraction was of a more geometric, rational, and constructivist type that had been influenced by the prewar Abstraction-Création movement. The fact that early on Soulages exhibited with both camps may be indicative of a kind of ambiguity that arises from the semantic neutrality of his pictures. He exhibited at the Salon des Surindépendants in 1947, a large annual group show that was dominated by gestural abstraction but was also a locus for painters influenced by Surrealism. The following year he exhibited at the third Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, where the abstraction was of a more geometric, rational, and constructivist type that had been influenced by the prewar Abstraction-Création movement.


7 Soulages, “Interview with Pierre Soulages,” 74. This did not prevent critics from trying to assign meaning to the paintings, as is the case with James Johnson Sweeney, one of Soulages’s earliest American supporters, who conceived of the alternating patterns of luminosity and darkness in his pictures as abstract but elemental representations of the space of a Romanesque cathedral. See James Johnson Sweeney, *Soulages* (Neuchâtel: Editions Ides et Calendes, 1972). Even more recent scholarship interprets the paintings as metaphors for the human condition after the destruction of World War II, as is the case with Donald Kuspit, who describes Soulages’s works as “negatively sublime,” an illustration of Theodore Adorno’s suggestion that there is no longer a possibility for representation after the Holocaust of World War II. See Donald Kuspit, *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).