

Nichte

JEAN MIOTTE : THE GESTURE FROM WITHIN

„The Triumph of American Painting,” as Irving Sandler titled the first survey of post-war Abstract Expressionism in New York, was a phenomenon so intense, it blinded Americans to everything else, especially anything from France.¹ The most difficult work to accept was what was closest to us: abstract expression by a French painter. Rumor had it that one of the guards at The Museum of Modern Art hated a mid-century abstraction by a then-famous French artist so much that he stuck a pin into it each time he passed on his rounds. He was not alone in his feelings. For many growing up in the New York art world of the 1950s and 1960s, the group of contemporary French paintings that MOMA perpetually had on view were symbols of the past, of dead French art that had held sway too long.² As a result of this thinking, we missed out on a great deal of excellent French painting over the years, but the artist we shouldn't have overlooked, the one who most perfectly epitomized the „action painter” is Jean Miotte, and he is still painting.

Miotte describes his work in words very much like those of Harold Rosenberg, the critic who coined the term action painting: „Arising from interior conflicts, my painting is a projection, a succession of acute and intense moments realized in full spiritual tension. Painting is not a speculation of the mind or the intellect, it is a gesture which comes from within.”³ And Miotte sees the canvas the way Harold Rosenberg described it in 1952, as an „arena in which to act” where the artist creates an „event” instead of a picture:

The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.⁴

Though Miotte has been painting for half a century, the work looks extraordinarily fresh. As his friend, the poet Fernando Arrabal wrote, „Time does not wither, nor custom stale these works.” Each painting is painted as though it was his first – all thoughts of other approaches made to the canvas in the past, whether by others or himself, are banished. He literally attacks the canvas with his brushes – running

across the room to stab or slash at it, then leaping back to scan for the next vulnerable spot to hit, and dashing forward again. Totally focused, he looks like a karate master or a fencer in motion. „It is in the doing that everything is invented,” Miotte says. „There can be no question of looking for support in references to other works or acquired techniques. Discovery comes with action.”⁵ Rosenberg described the canvas as „itself the 'mind' through which the painter thinks by changing a surface with paint,” not a place where the contents of the artist's mind are recorded. „What matters always,” Rosenberg said, „is the revelation contained in the act. It is to be taken for granted that the final effect will be a tension.”⁷ Seeing the artist's psychic state (or tension) as the primary subject matter of all art, Rosenberg credited the action painter with physically acting out that psychic state on the canvas rather than representing it, saying that „The action on the canvas became its own representation.”⁸

BEGINNINGS

Existentialism hovers in the background of Rosenberg's construction of action painting as self-creation, selfdefinition, or self-transcendence, but not selfexpression. The latter implies a preset, a priori ego, while existentialist action painting concerns discovering and defining the self in the process or act of painting. Being French, and being young and in Paris after the war, aware of Jean-Paul Sartre's writings⁹ and finding chords in them that struck his soul as they did so many others in Paris during those desperate years, Jean Miotte came to an existentialist basis for his creative process directly and naturally. No translation was needed. In the United States Existentialism was a foreign idea which happened to fit nicely into our concept of the hero; in Miotte's country, Existentialism was taken for granted as the moral basis for living in a terrible time of physical, spiritual, and intellectual exhaustion.

Jean Miotte was twenty years old in 1946. He had lived a childhood of poverty, was sent away to a Jesuit school after the invasion of France, narrowly escaped arrest by the Germans and bombings by the Americans, and survived military service during which he contracted tuberculosis but finally also discovered his talent for art.

1. Jonathan Fineberg's recent revisionist survey, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), interweaves some of the major developments in England, France, Italy, and Germany with those in America in an attempt to adjust the balance while retaining the heavier weight on the U.S. side of the scale.

2. The American mind also closed, at least partially, to expatriate painters like Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis, and Cy Twombly who lived or spent large blocks of time overseas.

3. Jean Miotte, biographical notes in *Miotte* (La Différence, 1988), 229.

4. Harold Rosenberg, „The American Action Painters”, *Art News* (December 1952) reprinted in *The Tradition of the New* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), 25.

5. Fernando Arrabal, „Miotte Hiiter and Yon”, trans. Felicie Londré in *Miotte* (La Différence), 102.

He was living in Meudon, a suburb of Paris which was full of Russian immigrants, and studying philosophy at a college in Versailles. Endless discussions of politics, philosophy, and the meaning of life were interspersed with listening to the jazz music of Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, and Lester Young, and drinking homemade vodka with the Russians while they told wild tales of their youthful adventures. Beginning life on the other side of despair, to paraphrase Sartre, a young postwar existentialist like Miotte was aware of the accidental nature of existence, of life being controlled by chance. He or she understood that reality is only what is experienced, and that one must confront nothingness, the void, inside of the self, and outside, in history and in the future, in order to understand the necessity of taking action. The archetypal hero of the day, Antoine Roquentin, finds respite from nausea (in Sartre's novel of that name) in art, in this instance a popular jazz tune on a record player in a cafe. The record is wearing out, the singer may be dead: ...but behind the existence which falls from one present to the other, without a past, without a future, behind these sounds which decompose from day to day, peel off and slip towards death, the melody stays the same, young and firm, like a pitiless witness.¹⁰ Roquentin realizes that the singer and the composer „have washed themselves of the sin of existing“¹¹ through their art and determines to try to do something comparable with his own life.

Still, for Miotte, a career in art after the war seemed not only obsolete but financially unpromising, and he didn't set out to be a painter. He just happened to find himself gravitating to his brushes and oils whenever he had spare time, „I believed – I saw – I tried to live,“ he said. „Why should one paint? For whom? To bear witness about a world which does not want to accept itself – in the paroxysm of unleashed furies, there is only one way to tell about it: the absurd. And yet that way was what I chose: to paint ... But all the same I remained very skeptical about the future.“¹²

In post-war Paris, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, and Raoul Dufy were still the stars taking all the prizes and honors. André Marchand, and Bernard Buffet with his *misérabiliste* figuration, were expected to be their successors.

Surrealism was essentially out of favor (partly because Sartre rejected it for ignoring man's totality), and so the choice was largely between the camps of Socialist Realism and Geometric Abstraction. But an existentialist alternative was beginning to present itself in the form of authentic, highly distinctive, informal, gestural work that was starting to come out of studios in which artists were working in relative isolation. Alberto Giacometti and Jean Dubuffet were the paradigm existential artists of this non-movement, born in antagonism to the School of Paris and without interest in or connection with contemporary developments in the United States. Wolfgang Schultze (Wols), Henri Michaux, Germaine Richier, Antonin Artaud, and especially Jean Fautrier were among the others. Definitely something was in the air on both sides of the Atlantic.

These visual artists came to exemplify „authentic existence“¹³ in the public's mind. An experimental attitude open to chance, an obsession with materials and with bodily gesture was the core of the proliferating tendencies which came to be called Tachism, Matière Painting, Art Autre, and Art Informel. Whether it had the hallucinatory intensity of Wols' tiny boxed paintings and Michaux's obsessive, post-mortem drawings of his wife, or the raw power of Fautrier's thickly impastoed, mutilated physiognomies and torsos, the work provided „a rich range of visual metaphors: of engulfing space, of the abyss, of viscosity; of human frailty, isolation, fear; of freedom, action and bodily engagement.“¹⁴ As Sartre declared, the artist's actions were taken as „a register of authority and his marks as an affirmation of essence. Art was an activity performed by the whole man.“¹⁵

While many of these existentialist artists were tragic-heroic figures, in the next decade, Nicholas de Staël, Pierre Soulages, Hans Hartung, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Georges Mathieu would be making success stories out of lives devoted to „open“, antiformalist painting. To simplify a complex art scene drastically, the Sartrean emphasis on the physical encounter with materials that characterized Fautrier's „Otages“ (Hostages) of the early 1940s gave way to an emphasis on the physical gesture in the 1950s. Merleau-Ponty's writings, particularly *The Phenomenology of Perception* published in 1945, „radically redefined the role of the body and bodily action for contempo-

6. Jean Miotte, „Conversation with Chester Himes“, in Chester Himes, Miotte (Paris: SML, 1977), 10.

7. Ibid. 26-27.

8. Harold Rosenberg, „Hans Hofmann: Nature into Action“, *Art News* 56 (May 1957): 34-36.

9. Sartre himself was very much of a presence in the Saint-Germain-des-Près area where inexpensive housing drew artists, where publishing houses and schools abounded, and the younger set came to dance and to hear Boris Vian play jazz and Juliette Greco sing. Sartre and his partner in life, Simone de Beauvoir, were celebrities there on an intellectual, social, and popular level.

rary art practice."¹⁶ Also, in the early 1950s, Michel Tapié, a jazz musician, sculptor, and art gallery entrepreneur, introduced the Americans Sam Francis, Jackson Pollock, and Hans Hofmann into the mix. His 1952 manifesto for the exhibition which included them, *Un Art Autre* (An Other Art), used existentialist ideas to justify „individualism, authenticity, aggression, violence, and transgression“¹⁷ in gestural art.

This was the Parisian art scene Miotte broke into in 1953 when he decided to show his work for the first time. He spent a great deal of time in Paris, but because he was living in the suburb of Meudon during the 1940s, he had developed somewhat outside of the usual influences and with a different array of sources of inspiration. (Miotte had no formal art training and, while he was in the service his painting experience had been limited to mess hall murals and set decorations, followed by still lifes and works from the imagination). Interestingly, motifs from two very early works *Les Amours Télégraphiques* (Telegraphic Lovers) and *La Femme au Platane* (Woman under a Plane Tree), both of 1945 – reappear often in later works: entwined verticals like the telegraph poles in the former painting and the swirling activity around an empty center in the latter.

Once released from the hospital and from further military service in 1947, Miotte began to draw from the model at the Grande Chaumière and other academies and to visit the Montparnasse studios of Othon Friesz and Ossip Zadkine for informal instruction and criticism. His first influences were Georges Rouault, Jacques Villon, and Matisse: a little later Robert Delaunay and Léger would be more important to him. He was learning to construct with color, and by 1949 he was creating abstractions such as *Espace Insolite* (Unusual Space) in which orange, red and green planes cohere within light blue-gray space.

Figural drawings of 1949 in which the nexus of energy is centered in the swelling curves of buttock and thigh, with a few sweeping lines creating the image, are a premonition of future abstractions. This is also true of the abstract inks on paper of the same year in which a central axis is spun into space on curving and triangular

trajectories like a ballet dancer on her toe. He became a passionate follower of the ballet at this time, and the dance has probably been the single most important influence on his work ever since.

Invited by his Russian friends to stay in London to see the last performances of Serge Diaghilev's ballets with the original sets designed by Picasso, Derain, and Rouault and the music of De Falla and Mussorgsky, he was overwhelmed by the experience. „I savored the first marvels and discoveries of the world of choreography,“ he remembered, „of the arabesque, of scenically organizing the rhythmic line to fit the music, and all of the actors.“¹⁸ Later he followed the Marquis de Cuevas' Monte Carlo Company on tour and designed sets for Rosella Hightower, the star ballerina and other great dancers, but it was the effect of dance on his gestural style overall, rather than specific work for the dance, that gives his paintings their consistent distinctive quality.

Franz Kline, with whom Miotte bears an obvious comparison due to the prevalence of black and white in the work of both, also was intensely affected by dance, and this is one area where a comparison might be genuinely worth making. Kline's wife was a ballet dancer who studied ballet in England with Enrico Cecchetti, Nijinsky's teacher. In addition to numerous portraits of Nijinsky as Petrouchka¹⁹ Kline painted one major abstraction titled after the dancer in 1950. The curves that occur in *Nijinsky* and *Figure Eight*, 1951, feel very dance-related and share something with Miotte's gestures. Although Kline phased curves out after 1952, one shows up in *Merce C*, 1961, his homage to the dancer Merce Cunningham. But overall, Miotte's gesturalism is consistently balletic, while Kline's gestures relate more often to things, architectonic or constructed. Their approaches to color and to space are also completely different, so that despite Miotte's probable awareness of Kline's work and the effect it might have had, one rarely sees anything by Miotte that actually resembles a Kline – only an occasional ink on paper – and that is surely pure coincidence.²⁰

Miotte's gestural eruptions are more lyrical than those of either Kline or Robert Motherwell, an even better known American working largely in black and white, whom Miotte met and admired.

10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Paperback, 1964), 176. The book was first published in Paris in 1938, widely read during the war, and by 1946, it and the existentialist concepts it embodies were the most talked about things in France besides food shortages.

11. *Ibid.*, 177.

12. Jean Miotte, „My Memory...“, Jean Miotte (Poggibonsi, Italy: Nuovastampa, 1975), quoted in Marcelin Pleynet Miotte: *Works on Paper 1950-1965* (New York: Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer Gallery, 1988), 11, 13.

13. Frances Morris, *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945-1955* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1993), 18.

Motherwell's flung-paint *Beside the Sea* oils on paper of the early 1960s and his *Samurai* series of acrylics on board of the 1970s, in which the mediums hit the surfaces with explosive force, he definitely shares a Zen attitude and an Asian-related approach with Miotte. If they had discussed their work in terms of écriture, Miotte would have been referring to calligraphy and handwriting and Motherwell to nodules, but they would have been on parallel wavelengths here too. Curiously, in conversation during Miotte's visit to America in 1962, Motherwell stressed his ties to France:

During a lunch at his home, Motherwell gave voice to strange ideas at least to me – claiming that his painting stemmed in direct line from Cézanne's and thus from the French tradition.²¹ That kind of mid background was not what interested Miotte, or other artists on her side of the Atlantic, about Motherwell's work, but rather its raw spontaneity. But in his formative years, direct influence was not coming to Miotte, except tangentially, from either Americans or his own French painters. Instead it resulted from his first trip to Italy in 1948 where he fell in love with Florence and with Quattrocento painting. He became friends with a group of young artists who gathered at a book shop called the „Age d'Or“, which included Piero Dorazio, Lorenzo Guerrini, Achille Perilli, and the architects Franco Albini and Riccardo Bontade. Afro, an artist over twice their age, was the respected elder in the group. Though Miotte didn't share their interest in the gold backgrounds of the 14th Century paintings, he enjoyed the group's discussions, raging about figuration versus abstraction, politics, and philosophy. Bike trips to Fiesole were another enjoyable activity which brought him back to Italy to visit these friends year after year. They in turn visited him in Paris, where the Italian Futurist Gino Severini, a neighbor in Meudon, joined them and Miotte in passionate discussions of Futurism and other art movements with political aspects. One painting previously dated 1945 but probably painted in response to his first Italian experience is *Isabelle aux Deux Fenêtres* (Isabel Between Two Windows) in which the heavy Rouault-inspired impasto of *La Femme au Platane*, 1945, is gone but the Delaunay- and Léger-inspired light construction of *Espace Insolite*, 1949, is not yet in evidence. Rather it reflects the strange airlessness and even stranger geometries found in Italian

painting after Giorgio di Chirico.

The turning point to full abstraction came in 1950 for Miotte.²² This abstraction was gestural, not constructed as before. The pictorial elements in *Signe Abstrait* (Abstract Sign) and *Signe Lumière* (Light Sign), both of 1950, are interactive: Vee shapes and clustered verticals invade soft crescents, amorphous forms jostle one another in color/space. No outlines demark one plane from the next; everything brusquely interpenetrates. There is a sense of writing to these „signs“ but no readability. The abstraction is the gestures that comprise it.

As Miotte has often put it: „'Doing' is situated between the desire for action and the contents of the gesture which bears it.“²³

For the next three years Miotte worked with passionate intensity in his Meudon studio on thirty some paintings, painting them, then painting over them again and again. He was trying to „materialize his sensations of light“, according to critic Francis Spar, „and make the colors he chooses, traces, and sweeps across his canvas coincide with that 'sacred something in the life force'“. ²⁴ In his own index of his works, Miotte labels the paintings of this time „tension aiming at form – the sign.“ He had „this bizarre feeling inside“, he remembers, „of urgency to do something strong that had never been done before.“²⁵ He feels that the first time he created a sign as a „presence with color conveying an undeniable emotion“²⁶ was in the lightfilled *Espace Lyrique* (Lyrical space), 1953. The sign, a circle penetrated by a single vertical which crosses a horizontal near the canvas bottom can stand in for a human, a crucifixion, and a version of a gender symbol. The planes in the luminous corridor of colored light with which this form is interlocked share something with the work of Afro at this time, a textural transparency that is not heavy-handedly expressionistic.²⁷ Transparency is to become one of the hallmarks of Miotte's mature style.

The works on paper from these years have a marvelous spontaneity that will soon begin to characterize the oils as well. Clearly the lack of preciousness of the materials in them freed him to indulge in gestural give and take at will. In *Texas*, 1951, a sunny yellow field plays host to looping arcs of brown and black interspersed with blue lines and passages of red and white all seemingly jumbled together, ... (Page 63)

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

19. Miotte painted only one work with that title.

20. Miotte's *Dessin* 1955 reproduced on page 19 in Miotte (*La Différence*) is one such work. Its rectilinear vocabulary creates the sense of similarity, and of course Kline worked in ink on paper like this very often, though Miotte would not have been likely to have seen any by the time he made this work.

21. Jean Miotte in Himes, Miotte, 36.

yet ordered in a movement from left to right. Shapes playfully echo each other and swoop in and out of the picture space with the kind of confidence one associates more with American painting than French. Indeed, he was told that he painted *like an American* even before he traveled to the U.S. in 1961. He took that to mean that his work lacked the niceties of „French cuisine“ painting: smoothness of finish and deliberately beautiful brushwork. Then too, from Cubist vignetting to that of Soulages, the French tendency had been to approach the edges with caution. Miotte throws caution to the winds.

Ecstatic and paroxysmal are two words that apply to much of Miotte's oeuvre, and they begin their applicability here in the works he did on paper in this 1950-1953 period. *Silence*, 1952, a 26 by 20 inch ink and gouache on paper, is a distillation of the feeling of ecstasy into a sign. The upthrusting form speeding toward the upper left encounters an ess-curving shape pulling powerfully to the right. The tension is tremendous, as is the feeling of release. And the word paroxysmal would effectively describe *Composition*, 1951, a smoke-filled channel house of writhing, backlit black forms transversing the picture space in both directions along central axes, with some massing at the center. One thinks of Goya, or maybe a detail of a Delacroix battlescene.

ESTABLISHING A REPUTATION IN PARIS

In 1953 Miotte finally emerged from the studio to show his new work at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles where it was well received.²⁸ He established a new studio in Boulogne Billancourt, outside Paris, in two rooms on the second floor of a formerly grand estate that belonged to Prince Yourievitch, a Russian nobleman then living in England. Gouaches like *Yin Yang* and *Vertige* (Vertiginous), both of 1954, do not yet have their equals in euphoric gesturing in Miotte's oils, but he was beginning to develop new, freer ways of applying paint using palette knives and scrapers which would lead him there. The basic image in both is now familiar – arcs or circles penetrated by phallic forms in an eruption of linear activity – and the neutral grounds are brought into the action through spottings of intense color. Zigzagging lines, minor arcs, a circle, a square, and flying squiggles further

activate the space, creating incidents that take time to enjoy. The distribution of darks and lights is not equalized over the surface, one side often being much lighter than the other.

The planes of brilliant color in *Carré D'Or* (Golden Square), 1954, were lushly knifed onto the canvas. Edge lines were left, and colors were picked up and partially blended into one another as the palette knife made its passage across sections of the canvas both wet and dry. He seems to have gotten past the „puritanism“ he had been „struggling to escape“²⁹ through this technique. Miotte's „lyric style formed an exception to the general coldness,“ critic Alain Jouffroy noted in his review of Miotte's representation in the 1954 Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, adding that his „luminous and free painting communicates an undeniable emotion.“³⁰

The al fresco technique employed in *Carré D'Or*, was an international phenomenon of the period. It was made a hallmark of New York Abstract Expressionism by Willem de Kooning, and by the middle of the 1950s it was in common use by the Tenth Street, Greenwich Village artists he influenced. One artist showing there, Edward Clark,³¹ even devised a way of using a pushbroom to pick up a whole rainbow of colors and sweep them across the canvas together. Miotte's short, wide chunks of swept-up color have a great deal in common with the very choppy use Jean-Paul Riopelle made of the palette knife all over his canvases by 1949. In that year Riopelle showed with Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Mark Tobey in the exhibition, „Art brut préféré aux arts culturels“ at Galerie René Drouin in Paris.

Sam Francis, and Norman Bluhm were also in Paris for long stretches in the 1950s and there were numerous international exhibitions of contemporary art on both sides of the Atlantic. John Russell noted in his review of Riopelle's 1989 New York show of paintings from the 1950's that: „The Parisian art world was small in those days, and Franco-American Camaraderie was in its heyday.“³²

Riopelle and Joan Mitchell were Miotte's gallery mates for many years, and he had gotten to know Sam Francis in 1952 while he was still in his Meudon studio. He visited Francis's studio in Ville-

22. 1950 was the critical year in American painting as well, the year in which all of the Abstract Expressionists found their signature styles or established themselves with important exhibitions as I bring out in my book *The Turning Point: The Abstract Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

23. Pleynet, *Miotte Works on Paper*, 13.

24. Francis Spar, „Jean Miotte at age 37, action painting,“ *Connaissance des Arts* 141 (November 1963).

25. Jean Miotte, interview by author, tape recording, January 23, 1998.

26. Ibid.

d'Avray and saw him in both America and France on and off over the years. While there is no stylistic linkage between the two, they seem to share an understanding of „the void” in relation to pictorial space. This is more obvious in succeeding decades when both artists gave precedence to the white ground, than here at the beginning of Miotte's maturity as a painter, but it can be discerned at this point. Michael Waldberg describes Francis' „*Metaphysics of the Void*” (and by extension, Miotte's) quite beautifully in this way: Man can live as a poet only in the construction of this open wall through which he looks and thus plunges into the outside of the construction, into the chasm where he knows himself to be a chasm, too, into the void where he becomes a void. The canvas is the tangible form of the embrace of two chasms. It is the structure in which a living place becomes possible within the void.³³ A sense of the void is conveyed in a group of Miotte's chiaroscuro paintings of the middle 1950s that are dark and atmospheric. *Emporté au Loin* (Carried Away), 1956, *Au-Delà* (Beyond), 1956, *Galactique* (Galactic), 1955, and *Essor* (Soaring), 1956, are dark paintings, each with one white passage, and all, as their titles indicate, convey a sense of deep space. This happens despite the brushstrokes and impasto on their surfaces, perhaps because the light areas are so compelling. Which is the void? – the darkness or the light? – isn't clear, but in *Essor* the dazzling white physically protrudes from the canvas as though making the void an object. The matière of this painting is especially rich, one might even say luscious.

The full color and painterly orchestration of *Carré d'Or* wasn't often realized on canvas the way it so readily was on paper until the end of the 1950s. A potential factor in his expanded realization of his powers with the brush after 1955 may have been the impact of his new friends, the Russian painters Serge Poliakoff and André Lansky. Lansky in turn was close to Nicholas de Staël whose handling of thick blocks of subtly colored pigment was generally admired in the post-war Paris artworld. Miotte probably shared Lansky's belief in the value of „the barbarian blood of his country”³⁴ that he carried with him to France. The emotional extremes of his Russian friends, their violent embrace of life, had long held a strong appeal for Miotte. Then too, both Lansky and Poliakoff were committed, highly

resonant colorists, employing a range of rich hues in each painting. Lansky's thick paint was often applied in patches, not too differently than Miotte's paint, while Poliakoff's was thinner, his space shallow and flat. He made his own pigments, and devised his own color system of complementaries.

Whereas Miotte's paintings of the mid-1950s tended, like *Essor*, to have a single dominant movement, overall facture, and tonal contrast, the gouaches fairly burst with the diversity of hyperactive squiggles and swoops of black, white and other colors. Sometimes black erupts within a field of fiery reds, as in *Embrasement* (Conflagration), 1955, sometimes it overwhelms areas of blue or green, as in *Osmose* (Osmosis), 1956, or *Ondée* (Shower), 1955, but the more common situation is that of *Labyrinthe* (Labyrinth) or *Parodie* (Parody), both of 1955, where a snarl of colorful linear activity takes place against a white ground. Clarity is customary in these works on paper, *Au-delà*, 1957, being the exception that proves with rule with its incendiary atmospherics enveloping the pyrotechnic trajectories. In the 1980s he will return to painting like this, though in acrylics and on a much grander scale.

The brushy painterliness of *Au-delà*, also characteristic of *Meditation* and *Ouverture*, both 1956, and *D'un Jour Nouveau* (Of a New Day) 1957, climaxes in 1958 with *L'Oiseau de Feu* (Firebird). As in *Au-delà*, two form clusters oppose each other across the picture space, here a burning red. The dark, bristling-feathered contenders leap like fighting cocks – you can almost hear Stravinsky's music and see the dancers amid the flames. After this, palette knife gestures edge out the brushy passages. *Broadway*, 1957-58, and a few 1956-1958 works demonstrate the shift in technique, which by 1958 produced canvases covered with chunks of color interspersed with some painterly passages, such as *Vivre* (Life) and *Cité Imprenable* (Impregnable City).

But the „formal researches [that] yield to a dashing graphism,”³⁵ of which Miotte speaks in regard to his 1957 work, still remains more apparent in the gouaches than in his oils. *Voir, a 24 by 20 inch* gouache, exemplifies what he meant by saying, „Everything becomes

27. He met Afro in Italy in 1948. The fact that some of Afro's 1952 paintings have a good deal in common with this particular Miotte may be coincidental. Afro spent most of 1950 in the United States, in part because he was having an exhibition at New York's Catherine Viviano Gallery. He visited here often and the effects of his admiration for Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning are readily visible in his work. Miotte has had a studio here on and off

since 1962, and permanently since 1979. They are among the most Americanized of the European Abstract Expressionists.

28. This important salon and a few others were considered better gauges of an artist's quality than most gallery affiliations at that time. Miotte was invited to show regularly after this, and later became a member of the Committee of the Réalités Nouvelles exhibitions.

motion in order to attain the 'sign' in monochrome."³⁶ Clarity is the hallmark of Miotte's graphism which is curvilinear and calligraphic, but not discursive. It is taut and springy, and quite inward-turning despite the frequent engagement of the edges. It very much relies on black, but can work in terms of dark and light when colors predominate. The presence of black and white and color in Miotte's abstractions is one of their salient characteristics. Even when the ground color is monochrome it is modulated, and it interacts with varying amounts of other hues. Unlike Mathieu, who essentially draws with paint on unarticulated monochrome fields of color, Miotte integrates the linear with the painterly activity. His color works as hue and as tone in the foreground as well as the background.

THE FIRST WAVE OF SUCCESS: EUROPE

Jean Miotte had his first one person exhibition in 1957 at the prestigious Lucien Durand Gallery and poet-critic Michel Seuphor included him in his *Dictionnaire de la Peinture Abstraite* the same year, finding his „compositions high in color, finely articulated and integrated.“ He was beginning to be included in group exhibitions of the new „informel“ abstract painting in France and other European countries. The following year the influential dealer Jacques Dubourg became his European representative. Black was the dominant color in his first show, and it remains a critical element in his work all of his life. Vigorously worked with a palette knife, it covers more than half of the surface of *Aube Grise* (Gray Dawn), 1958, but the painting seems vibrant and alive, not at all gloomy. Its mauve grays are spiked by a shot of red which flies out from a small yellow hot spot in a nexus of warm hues at center right. The red line recalls the emphatic contours of buttocks and thigh in his early figure drawings in the way it focuses the energy in the picture. Very often there is a vital center that seems to concentrate or to generate the potent forces in Miotte's paintings.

The wetness of the paint when it was worked by the artist is retained when he wants it to be, as in the seemingly rainslicked surface of *Broadway*, 1957-58, evoking night on New York's famous street. Though resolutely abstract, his paintings with location titles invariably

recreate the feeling of being in those places. In 1959 he was included in the „Informel“ section of the first Biennale de Paris. The „freshness“ of his work was noted by at least one critic, H. Galy-Carles, along with its „delicacy and sensitivity.“³⁷ The critic was probably reacting against the heaviness of late Tachism, and the formulaic predictability of some of its stars by decade's end.

His 1959 paintings show Miotte having come fully into his own expressiveness. Exuberant, rich with color, they are full of linear elan – especially of arcs and curls of pigment – in generous profusion. These are not paintings made from anguish, but rather from the joy of painting for its own sake. In this respect, he is a lot like Hans Hofmann, who never seemed to have a bad day.³⁸ Miotte's titles reinforce the effect of the imagery: *Exuberance*, *Midi*, *Rythme Bleu*, *Imprécation* (Curse), and *Cuivres* (Coppers). In some the dark units or passages dominate the lights; in others the situation is reversed. One is aware of the sanctity of each individual stroke even though it may be transparent or crossed by another. Each has its own identity, as though it is carrying a slightly different set of genes than any other stroke. In general the movement is upward, and the feeling upbeat, and when a large form presses down, as happens in *Midi*, it is met by strong enough counterforces, such as curving light arcs, that an equilibrium is established. It is a very vibrant, singing equilibrium, however. At no time do Miotte's paintings feel becalmed or balanced into stasis.

Nineteen fifty-nine was a great year for Miotte. In addition to producing terrific paintings, he moved into Paris proper, and he was included in an exhibition of „Fifteen Painters from Paris“ held at the Cologne Kunstverein. Michel Tapié wrote the catalogue and the Cologne art critics made Miotte the primary subject of their attentions. This was the beginning of a careerlong positive reception for his work in Germany. The following year the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne acquired Miotte's painting *Délivrance*, 1960. In it a central upright divided at the bottom into two „legs“ is poised between a curl of white on the left and a powerful rectangle of red pulling to the right. This takes place against a „wall“ of different hues beneath a deep brown „sky.“ Despite the four-square planar elements and an obdurate block of black filling the lower left, a sense of speed is

29. Miotte's biographical notes in Miotte (*La Différence*), 229.

30. Alain Jouffroy, „Salon des Realités Nouvelles,“ *Arts* (July 1954).

31. Clark has been a friend of Miotte's since his first trip to Paris in 1952, to work at the Grande Chaumière on the G.I. Bill.

32. John Russell, „Jean-Paul Riopelle, Paintings from the 50's,“ *The New York Times* (April 28, 1989): C26.

33. Michael Waldberg, *Sam Francis: Metaphysics of the Void* (London: Moos Publishing Ltd., 1992), 63.

34. Andre Lansky quoted in Roger Van Gindertael, *Lansky*, trans. Sheila Weston (New York: M. Knoedler & Co., 1965), n.p.

conveyed by the urgent brushwork, particularly in the lower right. A wonderful contrariness results in which stability and drama co-exist.

Miotte's palette-knife/brush/scrapeout technique creates a welter of marvelous effects in which speed is foremost, illusion secondary. The ridge or line of white that edges the colored bands urges them on their way, as does the satiny sheen of their tool-smoothed surfaces. Blending colors within the band does this as well, but as Miotte bends and twists these bands into curling ribbons of color he also gives them an illusion of three dimensionality. This is very evident in *Mouvement Bleu* (Blue Movement), 1960, but is a hallmark of his work from this time forward. The abrupt cessation of a line or swath of intermixed paint is like a vehicle screeching to a halt or like a jump cut in film. Kline, de Kooning, and a host of their Tenth Street acolytes used similar techniques, but the results were quite different. With Miotte there is always an incendiary, even pyrotechnical flare of lights within darks that augments the spatial illusionism. It is as if he is defying the viewer to remember that all that is there is paint on a flat canvas.³⁹

Speed was one of the most talked about elements of the new American painting, and of the new French painting as well. It was a profound idea, in tune with the tempo of the times, it was felt, times which seemed to be steadily accelerating, not only in terms of travel but of communication and thought. Jackson Pollock's need for speed seemed palpably painful before he discovered the non-brush methods of applying paint that enabled his hand to keep up with his mind. In France Georges Mathieu was applying lines of pigment directly from the tube to monochrome canvases faster and faster. By 1958 he painted a large (6 by 12 feet) canvas in four seconds. For him the introduction of speed was an „historic fatality inherent in the influence of Japanese or Chinese art.“ He explained: „And when I wonder today why I was given the rather empty title of 'the world's fastest painter', I see merely an inevitable element in the evolution of painting. I have not painted quickly because I hadn't the time or in order to set records, but simply because I needed no more time to do what I had to do. A longer period of time would have slowed my movements, introduced doubt, and weakened the purity of my lines, the

cruelty of my forms, and the unity of my work.“⁴⁰ For most abstract expressionists on either side of the Atlantic, however, rapidity of execution was far less important than conveying a sense of speed. Jean Miotte's work had both, but without the theatrical showmanship of Mathieu. He painted in quick bursts, each one followed by moments of standing back and looking, as did most of the Americans. Even Pollock, who painted with the canvas on the floor, would get up on a ladder to look over what he had done periodically. But for all these artists, a sense of continuous mental contact with the painting was essential. Pollock spoke of being „in“ the painting. Miotte says: „In my pictorial researches I tend toward two extremes, one is the Zen presence, the graphic expression of the paroxysm of thought and sensation, the other is an exuberant and generous spontaneity, a multitude of rich accentuated colors, vibrating and decided, an abandonment to the infinite. In both cases there is a wish to lose oneself completely in order to be able to give oneself completely.“⁴¹

Among the wonderful paintings of 1960, such as *Attente* (Waiting), *Rumeur* (Rumor), and *Rhythmes* is one simply titled *Jazz*. In 1977 Miotte told his friend Chester Himes, an African American writer living in Europe, that he always felt very close to jazz, to improvisational music as well as to dance. „These two artistic expressions are essential parts of my basic education and are certainly very much reflected in my work today.“⁴² The curves, the repeats, the staccato linear progressions, but most of all the way the forms move in and out of space in Miotte's paintings feel decidedly musical. His method is pure improvisation. Whatever transpires in the first unplanned pass at the canvas, calls up a response, to which he then responds again and again, until a rhythm is established or an area jells into coherence and demands to be left alone. You might say he goes back behind the syncopations of early jazz to its roots in Negro spirituals and the call-and-response musical forms of Africa. That would seem to stretch credulity, if it weren't for the fact that the swing bands which were his introduction to jazz in his teens used the same call-and-response structure. For Miotte everything happens automatically, and yet it's never the same twice, because each gesture has welled up at the moment of its making; none are decided upon ahead of time. And at that moment he is different than he was at

35. Jean Miotte, biographical notes, *Miotte (La Difference)*, 230.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Henri Galy-Carles, „Premier Biennale de Paris,“ *Journal de l'amateur d'art* (October 10, 1959).

38. Hofmann was not unfamiliar to Parisians, having had a major exhibition at the Gallery Maeght in 1949, and being included in various surveys of American painting shown there in the

1950s. He was the master of myriad paint application techniques which might have seeped into the repertoire of any number of French painters, including Miotte, but which they may have discovered for themselves. His influence is very difficult to trace. Hofmann's painting styles were so various from canvas to canvas that a one man show of his worked usually looked like a group show.

the last moment or will be the next hour or day because a river of changing sensations and thoughts constantly runs through his mind, as it does anyone's.

All through these years Miotte was continually making gouaches that were independent works in their own right, never to be used as studies for oils. One of them, *Staccato*, 1960, has the same kind of talismanic quality as two untitled inks on paper from 1955 and another from 1951,⁴³ and *Silence*, 1952. None are used in any particular painting, but they are the essence of Miotte. Looking at them is like seeing through the skin of his paintings to their skeletal structure. Toward the end of the 1950s he also began to make collages, often incorporating pieces of newsprint, a practice he has continued over the decades. One from 1961 with a headline reading „La Porte Etr  te du Loyalisme” harks back to the pivotal canvas of 1953, *Espace Lyrique*, in its vertical insertion through a circular form. Interestingly, here he allows the forms to extend past the edge, which he never does with the other works on paper that are not collages.

Two Paris galleries, Karl Flinker and Iris Clert, showed his paintings in their opening exhibitions in 1960; in Germany his work is shown in galleries in D  sseldorf and Frankfurt. His success doesn't translate into tranquility in the studio where every new painting is a fresh challenge. He worked on one painting, *Jaillir* (Spouting), for two years, not declaring it finished until 1962. The title means „to shoot forth,” and it does so in a way that, compared to his usual work, seems raw and roughly painted. On the left are jerky ovals, topped by streaks of black, supported from below by a rising blue-black form. A red vertical brightens like a faint beacon on the right, but the painting remains uningratiating, harsh, jagged, and decidedly American in feeling. After he began work on the canvas and before he completed it, Miotte spent six months travelling in the United States on a Ford Foundation grant.

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Miotte was very excited by the prospect of time in America. He was tired of the Parisian art scene where his work was confused with that

of artists, working from nature, but disguising it as abstraction. He was unhappy being overshadowed by some of the more flamboyant abstract painters and he felt disillusioned about the artist's role in French life: „France had become a consumer society. More and more people seemed to crave comfort. The consequence was that whatever intellectual, literary or pictorial predilections they might have had vanished. And there we were the painters, like a bunch of savages or outlaws.”⁴⁴ Miotte fell in love with New York, as one can sense in *Manhattan*, a gouache from 1961. Colored light glows through the interstices of looming black forms, like the warm lights in Miotte's many photographs of the city. He painted in New York for a few months before taking a trip south to New Orleans, through Texas to California, stopping in Colorado to lecture at Colorado Springs University, and returning via Chicago and Pittsburgh to New York where, early in 1962, he had his first New York exhibition at the Iolas Gallery. Ten of the paintings in that show were actually painted in New York and he has maintained studios in the U.S., off and on, ever since. His current New York studio is a large Broome Street loft he bought in 1978.⁴⁵ Experiencing the Grand Canyon and the great sense of open space in America caused him to increase the size and the expansiveness of the space in his paintings. Through Americans he had known in Paris, like Ed Clark and Sam Francis, he met numerous artists, dealers, and critics on his visit. Among the Abstract Expressionists, he only met Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko. (Franz Kline, ill at that point, died in May 1962.) Motherwell, as was noted earlier, seemed mainly interested in convincing Miotte of how French a painter he thought he, Motherwell, was. About Rothko, who also invited Miotte to his studio, he remarked: „In his painting I discovered the great American spaces which had been fascinating me all those months.”⁴⁶

In 1963 Miotte had two major exhibitions: a ten-year survey of his work in two Dutch museums and a one-person „debut” exhibition at the Jacques Dubourg Gallery, considered the essential rite of passage for every important artist in France. Fourteen paintings from 1958-63 were shown, consolidating his position in the Parisian art world. *Mouvante Destination* (Moving Target), 1962, and *Insolite and Ombres* (Shadows), both of 1963, are dense with incident, using

39. In America Clement Greenberg and his followers tried to eradicate illusionism from painting, stressing the flatness of the canvas etc. Often, however, as with Frank Stella's stripes which snapped in and out of space, they were denying the presence of what was obviously there.

40. Georges Mathieu, excerpts from *Au-del   du Tachisme* (Paris: Julliard) in „The Gospel According to Mathieu.”

41. Jean Miotte, biographical notes, *Miotte (La diff  rence)*, 229.

42. Jean Miotte in Himes, *Miotte*, 17.

43. Reproduced on pages 19, 60, and 103 respectively in *Miotte (La Diff  rence)*.

44. Jean Miotte, quoted in Michel Sicard, „Spontaneous Abstraction: Whispers and Silence,” trans. Ernest Sturm, *Miotte (La Diff  rence)*, 211.

black-and-white and radiant color in approximately equal amounts. The bravura palette knife gestures, curtailed in these canvases, break out in full brilliance the following year in *Composition* and *Peinture* (Painting). Sharp focus characterizes his work until now. A turning point is discernible in *Altercation Enjouée* (Playful Altercation), 1965, where feathery brushiness is beginning to take over.

Critics writing about Miotte's work in 1963 stressed its lively unification of body and soul. In his biographical notes, Miotte speaks of a „halt in time.“ He elaborates:

„Painting receives its life at a precise moment in graphism (which seems to mean drawing with the body, gesture). Movement is seized at the most intensive moment. If action is stopped short too early, the work does not come into being, if continued beyond the painting suffers and becomes confused.“⁴⁷ The problem of when to stop preoccupied abstract expressionists everywhere. Franz Kline used to say it was like stuffing a mattress, you just keep putting more in here, taking some out there, until suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, it seems to be just right, and then you tiptoe away. After the middle of the 1960s, Miotte himself underwent a kind of a halt in time or hiatus as well. Years went by before he went back to his Boulogne studio outside Paris where he had stored hundreds of paintings. He was showing more often in other European cities than in Paris, even working for a time in Belgium on a mural. He had begun building a studio in Pignans in the South of France in 1963, and spent much of his time there. Back in 1950, he had married Shirley Ovenden, and a son, Luke, was born in 1965, but their marital difficulties led to a breakup in 1966 which was devastating to him. He was essentially unable to paint for two or three years, though he did try his hand at lithography and had an exhibition of this work at the Corcoran *Gallery of Art* in Washington, D.C. He was divorced in 1967, and then got caught up in the student rebellion of 1968 the political upheaval somehow paralleling that in his personal life. It felt good to be in the streets with the students, doing something to help to change the educational system in France. When he did go back to his Boulogne studio at the end of the decade, he found that the entire building had been demolished, and no one had notified him to

remove his work in time. He found ten unstretched canvases in a miraculously intact cupboard, but the bulk of the work, it turned out, had been put in storage sixty miles from Paris, and dampness had all but destroyed them.

THE SECOND WAVE OF SUCCESS: INTERNATIONAL

In 1970 Miotte returned to painting like a man reborn. White predominates, like a tabula rasa on which he writes the first words. The new importance of white probably resulted from his doing a great deal of lithography in the late 1960s and his experience with mural painting, both of which were white ground activities. Actually, he often covers the raw canvas incompletely with white, making its beige another color element participating in the pictorial interaction. Black and other colors are brushed sparingly onto the surface, lifting illusions here, pushing them back there, bridging space, opening it up, puncturing it, and capturing it. Such action occurs in *Ecrit sur le Mur* (Written on the Wall) and *Funambule* (Rope Dancer). Circular forms like enormous soap bubbles occur in two of the three panels of *Triptyque*: 1. *Dialogue* 2. *Abime* 3. *L'Air et les Songes* (Triptych: Dialogue, Abyss, the Wind and the Dreams).⁴⁸ Their fragility, and that of other thin linear elements, reads sharply and poignantly against the massings of blue-black and red, the whole seeming like a living entity unified across the three fields. The dynamism in these paintings is so light and airy one is constantly put in mind of the dance, a source of inspiration which continues its importance for him.

Miotte gave up using oil paint in favor of acrylics in 1971 which only augmented the clean, bracing aura of the work. *Aigle au futur* (Eagle of the future), 1971, is the standard bearer for the new Miotte with its dazzling white surface barely, but decisively, articulated by color only in the lower corners. One tentative line extending downward from the upper right to meet a sharp corner pulled forward by yellows, lifts the entire white plane of the canvas forward, relegating the blues, reds and blacks to a distant place behind the white. This is confronting the abyss, and going through it to the other side, which may well be the way Miotte was feeling after all the turmoil of the late 1960s, both personally and politically.

45. Though he occasionally used English language titles for work, the practice becomes noticeably more common after this trip. Over the years he has naturally become more comfortable with English.

46. Jean Miotte in Himes, Miotte, 36.

47. Jean Miotte, biographical notes, Miotte (La Différence), 230.

48. The overall composition of this triptych is reminiscent of Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. But where drumroll heaviness characterizes the black-dominated Motherwells, white and a sense of lightness suffuse Miotte's painting.

„The survival of a work, the fresh life it contains,“ according to Miotte, „comes from the risk bound up with action, a vertigo in front of the unknown, a confrontation with life.“⁴⁹ In a 1971 painting simply titled *Why?* there is a decidedly vertiginous sense of standing on the edge of that unknown, while in another of the following year he answers the question: *For No Reason*. To throw oneself into the arena, to make the gesture that must be made at the time, and then to question yourself, question the action – that is the way Miotte responds to the call for action that rose out of Existentialism. He told Chester Himes: The true adventure of every creator is a debate between the experience and what he estimates worth retaining of the gesture which overtakes him... [T]he risk and the action. I am aware of this daily in my painting experiments, or, even more so, in the subsequent examination of my so-called finished paintings. I continually interrogate myself... My entire production is directed by this sole principle of the discovery of form by calling back everything into question and by the risk of the undertaking.⁵⁰ This anguish over his paintings is very real for Miotte. It was also real for his friends and other like-minded Abstract Expressionists. The struggle never ended either for Sam Francis or for Joan Mitchell, the two Americans closest to him, or Robert Motherwell, with whose work his sometimes has an affinity.

Motherwell was constantly taking out much older pictures and questioning his identity as a painter by analyzing them in the context of recent work. The Abstract Expressionists were and still are serious artists, sharing a profound belief in the act of painting. It forms the basis for a way of life. Without imitating each other, because one can't and be truly oneself, they affected each other, despite the sometimes vast geographical distances between them. Miotte explained to Chester Himes: „I have been close friends with artists both in America and Paris, for much of my inspiration comes from artists whom I know. We often live the same kind of life and are moved by the same kind of emotions, and often we eat the same kind of food, live in the same places, suffer the same kinds of depressions, laugh at the same kind of humor. We are brothers and sisters... because we suffer the same kind of misfortunes. And quite often the artist is the central motivation of my work.“⁵¹ Like Motherwell, Francis, and

Mitchell, Miotte has been able to evolve stylistically over the years, and thus keep from going stale, without changing his painting identity.

The Zen presence in Miotte's work seems to body forth with the increasing amount of raw canvas he exposed as the 1970s went on. When only the brushstrokes of the „sign,“ as he called his image, interrupts the expanse of raw canvas, Miotte is at his most Zen. Very little is left uncovered with white in *Ides de Mars* (Ides of March), 1972, but it is full of dripped paint and accidental effects. White is brushed over blues and blacks, submerging them like rocks and water under a blanket of snow.

Incendiaire (Conflagration), also from this banner year, is an exciting painting in which all the action takes place on raw canvas, heralding the dominant manner of the end of the decade. Though only covering half the canvas, the heavy wedge of white seems to bear down on the colors below. The transparency of the blacks dryly brushed or scraped onto the raw canvas is both a reminder of his earlier facility with superimposed, semi-opaque layers of color, and a harbinger of the gestural veilings that he will paint on raw canvas later in the decade.

In his collages and gouaches of this time black and other colors often continue to dominate the whites. *Vivre*, 1974, is a particularly fine example. Its title, and others such as *Etreinte* (Embrace), *Conjointment*, and *Forever* speak to a new happiness in his personal life. He met Dorothea Keeser, a German physician and art collector in 1971, and set up a studio in Hamburg the following year. His career was going well. In 1972 he was given a major exhibition at the International Monetary Fund in Washington D.C. and a one-man exhibition in Lisbon. Editions of lithographs for the prestigious Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover and Associated American Artists in New York were also major successes.

About a quarter to one third of the raw canvas is exposed within the white in *Covalence*, *Ronde Cosmique* (Cosmic Circle), *Envoi* (Send Off), and *Cible* (Target), all of 1972, a banner year for Miotte, as 1959 had been. The whites seem to be covering something that does

49. Jean Miotte in Himes, Miotte, 10.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid, 12-13.

52. One could argue that Pollock or Mathieu were equally „up to speed“ and that many others, including Miotte, worked fast and expressively.

53. Meaning „soaring“ or „flight,“ *Essor* is a title Miotte liked so well he used many times.

54. Jean Miotte, quoted in Sicard, „Spontaneous Abstraction,“

not materialize as a discreet, gesture cluster. *Envoi*, for instance has a marvelous, explosive dynamism that is like the deafening roar of a rocket taking off, but the gestures and color patches are spread out and don't coalesce into an object. In such 1975 paintings as *Partage* (Divide), *L'Ame* (The Soul), *Interdit D'Atterrir* (Forbidden Landing) and *Tendrement* (Tenderly) the forms coalesce, seeming to have emerged from a chrysalis of white.

Zen painting is described by Daisetz T. Suzuki,⁵⁵ Japan's foremost authority on Zen Buddhism, as being characterized by drastic asymmetry to the point of being called „one corner style;“ a „thrifty brush“ wielded seemingly without effort, and unexpected elements or imperfections.⁵⁶ All of these qualities can readily be found in 1977-79 Miotte's, and in those of 1983 with musical titles: *Andante*, *Vivace*, *Staccato*, and *Adagio*. A series of untitled gouaches from 1982 on white paper carry the Zen style over to white grounds where it is easy to see, but it is also prominent in *Adage*, 1980, *Cieux Incertains* (Uncertain Skies), 1981, *Traces* and *Le Secret* of 1983, *Pourquoi La Terre* (Why the Earth?) and *Replique* (Retort) of 1988, and in certain paintings of the 1990s.

A small group of sfumato canvases painted in 1979-80 herald a return to fully color-orchestrated painting in general, and to the particular brushy kind of painterliness of the mid-1950s, but on an increasingly ambitious scale. *Instant Ebloui* (Momentary Dazzle) is like looking into the crater of a volcano; *Manhattan* like a flash of headlights and a streak of moving light on a foggy night in the city, and *Alchimie* like being in the midst of an explosion, debris flying all around. Their incendiary quality (which the artist terms „spontaneous flashing expression“) is highlighted by the „smokey“ brushwork. *Galaxi*, two years later, is about seven by twelve feet of dramatic *sturm und drang* in this new vein, which he continues to mine, often on huge, 7 by 16 feet canvases. By this point in the early 1980s, Miotte is the master of a bewildering host of means which he puts to use in paintings both vast and modest, on raw canvas, with white grounds, or fully covered in color, as well as in collages, commissioned prints, and other works on paper.

In 1980 Miotte was the first Western artist to be given an exhibition

in China since the reign of Communism. This was the first of many exhibitions and trips in the Far East where his work was warmly received. One would be tempted to view his large production of calligraphic works on paper and raw canvas in 1982 and 1983 as a sudden influence from Asian art if it weren't for the very calligraphic, Zen works of 1977-79. In fact, it was works such as the lyrical *(En) Fugue*, and an untitled 1979 acrylic on raw canvas in the collection of the Münchener Staatsgalerie Moderner Kunst that initially prompted the invitation from China. One can count the number of brushstrokes that activate the latter, nearly seven foot high canvas on two hands, a classic demonstration of „thrifty brush technique.“ And, as so often happens in Asian brushed ink characters, the turnings and twists of the line create a pictorial space, and the mind tends to turn the abstract image into a figure in action. This occurs most readily with curved units, which are Miotte's stock in trade.

Unlike the New York artists, who enjoyed learning about Asian techniques and Zen at the Club, but move away from having their art considered calligraphic,⁵⁷ Miotte and other European artists seemed to embrace calligraphy. Miotte speaks often of „écriture,“ or hand-writing, in terms of his work's calligraphic aspects. Zen was truly international. The Cobra artist Pierre Alechinsky even made a film in 1956 with the famed Japanese calligrapher Morita Shiryu⁵⁸: *Calligraphie japonaise*, which explored the relationship they saw between Art Informel and calligraphy. Interestingly, it is with Morita's work and with some of the performance/action calligraphers in the Gutai group that Miotte's work has the most in common rather than with gesture painters, like Kline or Mathieu, on either side of the Atlantic. Neither does his work coincide with that of the many Asian Americans who were creating hybrids of their traditions and Abstract Expressionism during the post-war years. Miotte wasn't sending messages with his calligraphy in the traditional Asian manner, as Tan Swie Hian, curator at the National Museum of Singapore, where Miotte had a major, prizewinning exhibition in 1983, noted: „Miotte's art has been related to 'abstract expressionism' and it is in its essence abstract. It is distinctly original, full of force and vitality. Critics have linked his art to classical dance. But it is also related to Chinese calligraphy in the sense that it does not aim at the repro-

55. Suzuki's lectures in America in the late Forties, were attended by Philip Guston and John Cage who spread the word about Zen in the art and music worlds of New York. Zen painting performances took place at the artist's Club, and there were numerous formal and informal discussions of Zen in relation to Abstract Expressionism in New York throughout the Fifties.

56. Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 22-27.

57. Franz Kline suffered the most over being accused of making „laundry ticket art“ and was adamant that his work was not Asian derived or influenced, and that he was dealing with space in a very different manner than that of calligraphy.

duction of nature, but to seize the movement of life as it appears."⁵⁹ To Miotte, it is the existential moment that is being captured. The writer Michel Sicard described it another way: „One gets the distinct impression that Miotte has learned to bring the canvas to extase."⁶⁰ Certainly one painting after another seems ecstatic. Sparks fly, fanfares sound, especially in the 1977-84 works on raw canvas. The gestures are smooth, delicate, almost satiny in feel, yet they result in an explosive image. In *Ever Blue*, 1978, a straight linear thrust goes into a circular form (a gestural habit that goes back to his beginnings, as has been noted). Often a shape appears, as it does here, that could be read as penis-like, though one needn't become so specific. Our common unconscious simply seems to derive pleasure from the paintings.

This sensuality is one of the primary distinguishing characteristics of Miotte's art. It separates him from Franz Kline, even when Miotte's work would seem most Kline-like, as it does in a group of early-to-mid-1980s paintings in which black is the dominant color: *Deep Black*, *Isis*, *Sentence*, *Magie Noire* (Black Magic), *Combat*, and *Mercenaires*. Large gestures have been inscribed, without hesitation, from what seems an upbeat impulse. The lines arc upward and continually curl back in toward the canvas center. Klines look equally impulsive, but far more raw, jagged, and messy. They contain hesitations, changes. Kline's swaths of black seem less satisfied with being confined within the edges of the canvas than Miotte's; Kline attacks the edges with a vengeance. Sometimes Kline worked from studies, but when he took a study to the canvas, he was somehow able to translate his small gestures into large ones with apparent ease, unlike Motherwell, who labored over the scale transformation. Kline and Motherwell demanded of themselves the same kind of complete concentration of the mind and body on the moment of the gesture that Miotte practices. It has kinship with the martial arts.

Robert Motherwell often stressed the importance of the point of attack citing an ancient Chinese treatise on painting he had found called „The Battle Formations of the Brush". For all three artists, the act of painting was what counted – no model, no subject matter, no plan, no symbolic, hidden meaning, and no morality – just the void of the

empty canvas that must be filled. Everything happened in the doing, as Miotte says.

In the middle of the Eighties, Miotte began to explore the possibilities of collaborating with poets on various kinds of „four-handed works" usually involving some kind of printmaking process. Fernando Arrabal and Eugene Guillevic are among the first of the famous poets with whom he will work over the next decade, either responding to their words, or by their responding in words to his paintings. In his works on canvas, Miotte reverts to the smoldering painterliness that characterized the paintings of the mid-1950s. Discrete brushmarks, sharp lines, passages of bravura scraping are eschewed in favor of a softer, feathery, air-filled stroking on of paint. *Paris Feelings* and *East River*, (each equally evocative of those very different cities), *Zenith*, 1985, *Cistercien*, 1984-86, *Terre Neuve* and *Oracle*, both of 1986 and *Fantasme* and *Elseneur*, both of 1989, all share a calm tenderness, a loveliness that is not typical of his agitated, restless imagery, however ravishing this spirit is.

THE THIRD WAVE: RETROSPECTIVE

Nineteen ninety-one, another of Miotte's banner years, was filled with important exhibitions, filmed portraits of himself, a film by Arrabal in which he acted, a public commission for a mural in the avenue Emile Zola in Paris, and another to paint a racing car. This year, perhaps in an unconscious forecast of future difficulties, he painted a group of the largest and most ambitious paintings of his career. His fears were justified. The following year, a terrible one, was filled with severe illness, a serious operation, and a long recovery. Appropriately, after such a crisis, Miotte entered into the retrospective phase of his career: one curator, critic, lecturer, or filmmaker, after another, began to review his life's work. The first large retrospective exhibition of his work was held in the Museum of Modern Art in Dunkerque in 1993. A new studio/museum was built for Miotte in Pignans in 1995; the following year 135 of his works were exhibited in a major retrospective in Budapest on the occasion of the October 56 revolution's commemoration. His Pignans studio became the site for organizing these international retrospectives; in 1997 a

58. Morita Shiryu published the journal *Bokubi* which featured the paintings of Franz Kline in its first and fifth issues in 1951 and 1952, respectively, Shiryu analyzed Kline's work in depth and recommended its new spirit to his fellow traditional calligraphers.

59. Tan Swie Hian, *China Times*, 1983.

60. Michel Sicard, „Spontaneous Abstraction," 213.

61. In one recent photograph, Miotte is shown in the studio with a scroll approximately twenty feet long and about a foot high on his wall. Though the imagery is vaguely reminiscent of Kandinsky, it has the rhythmic ebb and flow of a Chinese storytelling scroll.

62. Jean-Paul Sartre, „Le Peintre sans Privilèges," *Lapoujade*, March 10 - April 15, 1961.

Miotte Foundation was formed in Fribourg, Switzerland, where he had established a studio in 1994. More films were made of him at work during the 1990s, and he was honored with exhibitions and commissions for numerous international events and causes.

Despite this activity, including work on a book of his own thoughts about art, „*Abstraction, the language of the Twentieth Century*,“ which was published under the title „*La rage de peindre, le geste qu'on porte en soi*“ (the fury to paint, the gesture which comes from within), Miotte still found time to paint. Among the black and whites are *Propos Sur...* (Discourse Upon), 1991, with its spurt of spattered pigment, the grand *A hue et à dia* (Hither and Yon), and the sumptuous *L'Espace et le Temps* (Time and Space), both of 1994. Two unusually structured paintings, *Rythmes* and *Tendances Normatives* (Normative Tendencies), both of 1991, use black with a new elasticity. Three huge (76 by 203 inch) canvases that are either exclusively or predominately black and white were painted as well: *Illusion*, 1991, *Nowhere*, 1995, and the magnificent *Wells Fargo*, 1991. The epic sweep of *Wells Fargo* is on a par with Franz Kline's *Shenandoah Wall*, one of Kline's finest. The roisterous energy in Miotte's painting conjures up all the excitement of the wild west, still in our minds. Thin scratches into the white give the large forms a sense of enormity and power through their comparative fragility, and passages of blurring brushstrokes denote great velocity. The rush of movement crashing toward the right is abruptly halted there by a large red shape. Looking at the picture one can readily imagine Miotte lunging at the canvas, swiping, darting, to and fro, back and forward again, changing brushes from hand to hand in a stop and go dance involving every part of his body, with his eyes focused exclusively on the canvas.

Black and white, which Miotte is identified with in many minds, has also become an equal presence with strong color, and this tendency will produce some of his great works of the '90s. The colors – invariably based in the primaries, red, yellow, and blue – are subject to change of intensity and amount. Sometimes the nuances of color and the simplifications of black and white seemed to be battling for control of the picture. In *Antagonisme*, 1989-1990, a powerful color cluster clashes with a black mass along the centerline, while white

impinges on all sides. The battle rages for all 16 feet of *Veillez Croire* (Need To Believe), 1989, with black seeming to win right of center as it towers to the top, but then fizzles off in a cloud of golden gray at the right. The feeling of the whole picture is scroll-like, despite its enormous size, because of its tumultuous forward movement, left to right. That is the way you read Asian handscrolls, unrolling them a section at a time, as Miotte surely knew, having traveled and informally studied in the Far East a great deal since his first visit to China in 1980.⁶¹

A series of equally large, 6 by 16 feet, canvases that came after *Veillez Croire* followed its lead in terms of this connection with filmic grandeur and with the storyboard style movement in the Asian scrolls, particularly those depicting turbulent battle scenes. (In 1986 he had painted a four panel painting which even seems to pick up on the moviemaker Akira Kurasawa's epic enlargement of the ancient Asian artform to filmic scale, replete with clashing lances.) Miotte's 1991 canvases are both epic and filmic: *The Days After*, 1991, with its flying sprays of pigment and snorting rearing forms, seems like a battle scene in any painting from Eastern or Western art. The action seems to shift from the earth to the sky in two other canvases in this splendid series. *Sud* (South), later acquired by the Opéra National Paris-Bastille, is rife with flashing light and dark alternations amid scudding, thundering, operatic forms. One feels the world-shaking scale of Milton's *Paradise Lost* God's glowing seraphim and archangels against Satan's angels of darkness. *Remanence*, 1991, a resplendent sweep of fiery forms, seems celestial as the space opens out into blue at the center where a diagonal black form pierces the circle of sky. One is put in mind of dramatic Baroque ceilings, Ascensions with figures tumbling out of skies filled with heavenly glories awaiting the resurrected Christ. Sartre could have been writing about Jean Miotte and these paintings when he stated: „In order to maintain the rhythm of explosive space, to prolong the vibration of colors, to exploit in depth the strange and terrifying disintegration of being and its whirling movement, it is absolutely necessary for the brush to impose a meaning on the picture and on us.“⁶² Sartre intended the artist to project the self onto the canvas without the intervention of representation, signs, or symbols. Rather it was the

63. Ibid.

64. Meyer Schapiro, „The Liberating Quality of Avant Garde Art“, *Art News* 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957), 36-42. Reprinted in Clifford Ross, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1990), 265.

65. Ibid., 264.

66. Ibid., 263.

67. Francois de Villandry, excerpt from „The Stroke,“ trans. Gordon Finley, Miotte (*La Différence*), 183.

68. Schapiro, 262

ambiguous handling of light and space, „a unity of diversity through rigorous imprecision“⁶³ that produced meaning.

In New York left wing intellectual critics like Harold Rosenberg and Meyer Schapiro saw the post-war situation of the artist along similar lines. Writing in 1957 about „The Liberating Quality of Avant Garde Art,” Schapiro said that „the reduction or fragility of the self within a culture that becomes increasingly organized through industry, economy, and the state intensifies the desire of the artist to create forms that will manifest his liberty.”⁶⁴ „Those forms are marked by great spontaneity, randomness, variability, and disorder”, Schapiro suggests, „because they correspond to a feeling of freedom”. „Modern painting is the first complex style in history which proceeds from elements that are not pre-ordered as closed articulated shapes,” he wrote. „The artist today creates an order out of unordered variable elements to a greater degree than the artist of the past.”⁶⁵ Schapiro might have been discussing Miotte's work instead of American painting when he described the forms in the new work as „open, fluid or mobile; they are directed strokes or they are endless tangles and irregular curves, self-involved lines which impress us as possessing the qualities not so much of things as of impulses, of excited movements emerging and changing before our eyes. We see, as it were, the track of emotion, its obstruction, persistence or extinction.”⁶⁶

The artist, in this case a Frenchman named Jean Miotte, keeps changing, and therefore, if the work is a true reflection of the self, so will the work. It has. But its core concerns will, or should, remain unchanged. They do. Perhaps, too, we will see the older work differently through the lens of the new. Two recent developments demonstrate this: A 1997 series of smallish black and white verticals harks back to the sparse Zen paintings on raw canvas of 1977-84. Instead of the balletic lightness of the earlier series, now there is fury, bombast, humor, and a theatrical sound. A related work, in tondo

format, has such a figural presence – like a Samurai warrior – that it reinforces a similar reading for earlier work.

The other new development is quite startling, an exception that proves the rule. Facing *Burst Triptych*, 1997, in which three large (approximately 9 by 7 feet each), irregularly shaped panels are arranged near each other on the wall, one becomes aware, perhaps for the first time, that holistic coherence has always been a hallmark of Miotte's work. They seem like fragments; the eye wants to see where they were dismembered and reattach them. Yet each part has the circular units we have come to expect from Miotte, interrupted by straight lines, as we expect, with the brushwork various and exciting as is usual with him. What is different is how much of the black is going off the canvas. One begins to realize how safely Miotte usually makes it for us to face the void with him by curving forms back in, weighting them, centering them in themselves, if not on the canvas. „Disturbance to walled ideas,” the poet Francois de Villandry wrote about Miotte's painting, „loathing the anarchy of the void, you restore my childhood giddiness.”⁶⁷

After the war, on both sides of the Atlantic, an abstract form of expression spoke to people who were listening. It wasn't art for everybody, and it still isn't. We don't have very many painters still working in the idiom, still believing in it, the way Jean Miotte does. Abstract Expressionism answered a need then, and it has the potential to continue doing so. Certainly, in this time of computerized control over our lives, the emotional pitch of Miotte's painting strikes the right note. So do Meyer Schapiro's words, written over forty years ago: „The object of art is, therefore, more passionately than ever before, the occasion of spontaneity or intense feeling. The painting symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and deep engagement of the self within his work.”⁶⁸

April Kingsley
New York, July 1998