

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Henri Michaux's Disintegrating Selves

- by [John Yau](#) on February 10, 2013



Henri Michaux, "Untitled" (1959) (all images courtesy of Edward Thorp Gallery)

The small selection of paintings and drawings currently at [Edward Thorp Gallery](#) serves as an introduction to Henri Michaux (1899 – 1984), one of the most original artists and writers of the 20th century. There are writers who made art — e.e. cummings, D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller come to mind — but none of them achieved what Michaux could accomplish in his modest-sized works in India ink, watercolor, oil and acrylic. And there are artists who wrote beautifully and brilliantly — Marsden Hartley and Ann Truitt — but none of them worked in as many distinct forms as Michaux, who wrote poetry, prose poems, travelogues, art criticism and unclassifiable essays.

As Michaux tells it in his not completely reliable poem-cum-autobiography, "Some Information About Fifty-Nine Years of Existence," he "[b]egins to draw more than from time to time" in 1937. At that time, nearly forty and already a respected writer, Michaux also began exhibiting his paintings and works on paper — publicly disclosing a practice he started in 1925, after seeing the works of Paul Klee, Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico in a surrealist exhibition. As with his writing, his art has little in common with the main currents of surrealism.



Henri Michaux, "Untitled" (1953)

And, as if two completely distinct Michauxs weren't enough, in 1954 he experimented with mescaline, which resulted in the landmark book, *Miserable Miracle*, and would go on to write other books on the subject of hallucinations. So there are at least three Michauxs, all of which manage to elude us. John Ashbery characterized him as "the most sensitive substance yet discovered for registering the fluctuating anguish of day-to-day, minute-to-minute living."

Michaux is nothing less than an island unto himself, complete with a multitude of life forms, flora and fauna. In his prose poems we encounter the survivor, "Plume," who is (and isn't) Michaux's alter-ego.

Plume can't say he is treated with excessive consideration when he travels.

Some people walk right over him without a word of warning, others matter-of-factly wipe their hands on his jacket. He has ended up getting used to it. He would rather travel inconspicuously. As long as he can, that's what he will do.

We also meet creatures such as the "Giant Barabbo" and a "monster on the stairs." His worlds are populated with different peoples — the Hacs, Emangloms and Cordobese.

The Murs: pretentious, gobblish, goborious crabbots, known far and wide for their stuffed, hermetically sealed stupidity, as the Agres and the Cordobese for their jealousy, the Orbis for their slowness, the Smilinettes and Ribobelles for their easy virtue, the Arpedars for their hardness of heart, the Tacodions for their thrift, the Eglarmbs for their musical talent.

Michaux's influence is widespread and largely unacknowledged. No one mentions Michaux when writing about Ben Marcus, for example, and yet the precedents are obvious.

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In his work, Michaux traveled, as he wrote of Plume, "inconspicuously." He hated being photographed because it had little to do with his work. In both his writing and his art he did not believe big is better. At the same time, he didn't become a miniaturist and make an obvious if charming eccentric gesture that might have gained him a loyal audience. Such pandering was beneath him. For all sorts of reasons — ranging from the aesthetic and personal to the ethical and moral — Michaux needed neither a lot of space nor expensive materials to make his work. Some paper, a pen and ink were enough. In a world increasingly obsessed with excess and glamour — which are nothing more than the exhibitionism of waste and how much wastefulness can be tastefully displayed in a day — Michaux's art is radical. All the more so because it doesn't align with any of the received radical gestures that had become accepted.



Henri Michaux, "Untitled" (1982)

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There are 17 works in the exhibition, with the earliest dated 1946 and the latest dated 1982, shortly before his death. Each requires slow looking, as they elicit a meditative response. By bringing together works from before and after his first use of mescaline, which exposed the horrors of infinity and the overwhelmed self, the exhibition documents both the changes and continuities occurring in Michaux's work. He was not — to be clear — someone who took drugs recreationally. It is unlikely that he took it more than a handful of times in his life. In each case, it led to a body of work, both in writing and art.

In Michaux's art we are apt to see ink bleeding into the paper, forms hovering between emergence and dissipation. The forms evoke heads, hands, and bodies — they are figurative without ever becoming fixed. They are phantoms undergoing disintegration, existing somewhere between the amoeba and the human. Michaux's forms are quietly alarming, as they evoke a state of inevitable loss and surrender. They are at once human and subhuman, the memory of a jellyfish. These lines of Michaux came to mind: Slowly the shapes of the population of the Beyond are arriving. It looks like a drift. Coming death has set them in motion.

In Michaux's art, nothing is fixed; everything is active, even if the movement is subatomic and largely invisible. He accepts the inevitability of anguish without averting his eyes. He writes directly about the lower depths of human behavior:

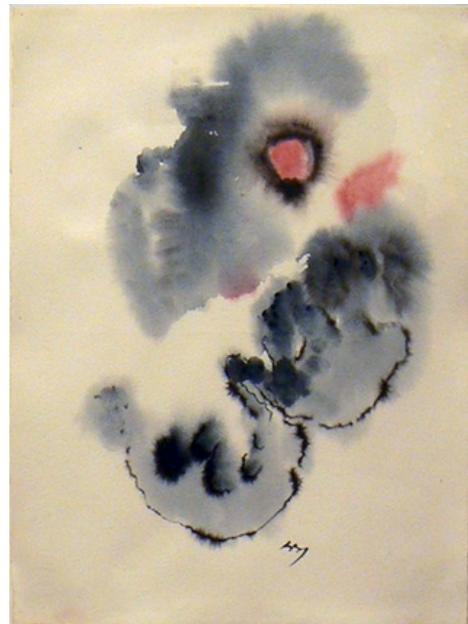
The Nonese have been slaves of the Olibrarians for an eternity.

After Michaux takes mescaline all-over composition becomes a possibility. It isn't Greenberg's sense of all-overness, a non-repeating pattern in which there is nothing to focus on. In an untitled work on paper dated 1959, small figurative black forms are densely scattered across the horizontally aligned sheet of paper. Each shape is simultaneously distinct and on the point of being absorbed into the field of seemingly abstract marks. The tension between the one and the many is unrelieved. The loss of control and identity (which are fictions to begin with) are registered in the material itself, the black ink absorbed into the paper, which the artist knows sets the process of disintegration into motion. Michaux is preoccupied with infinity:

Under the low ceiling of my little bedroom is my night, a deep abyss.

(The translations I have used are taken from *DARKNESS MOVES: An Henri Michaux Anthology, 1927–1984: Selected, translated, and presented by David Ball* [University of California Press, 1994]. If you haven't read Michaux, this is the essential omnibus, the place to start. Ball's translations are among the very best.)

[Henri Michaux: Selected Works](#) continues at the Edward Thorp Gallery (210 Eleventh Avenue, Sixth Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 2.



Henri Michaux, "Untitled" (1979)