

Manuel Mathieu

Built within you

August 21–September 25, 2021

More effective at setting each twig aquiver in the passing of waves than a pebble dropped into a pool of water, Spiralism defines life at the level of relations (colors, odors, sounds, signs, words) and historical connections ...

Re-creating wholes from mere details and secondary materials, the practice of Spiralism reconciles Art and Life through literature, and necessarily breaks with the hypocrisy of the Word ... Spiralism uses the Complete Genre, in which novelistic description, poetic breath, theatrical effect, narratives, stories, autobiographical sketches, and fiction all coexist harmoniously...

– Franketienne, *Ready to Burst* (1968), translated by Kaiama Glover (2014)

Built Within You by Manuel Mathieu presents paintings alongside ceramic, silicone and dust works which straddle the line between painting and sculpture. Just as the works on canvas reject neat categorization into figuration or abstraction, the three-dimensional works tap into a liminal poetic language which nevertheless remains rooted or grounded.

One ceramic series takes the shape of eggshell-colored rocks with seemingly painted black spiral designs on their faces. The gesture is redolent of a scene in the brilliant *Ouvertures* (2019), a film by Haiti's Living and the Dead Ensemble which depicts the collective translating of Edouard Glissant's play *Monsieur Toussaint* into Kreyol and rehearsing it. In a reference to Franketienne's fourth wall-breaking gestures (such as when he defines spiralism in *Ready to Burst*), in one scene collective members draw spirals on the beach and present their definitions of this foundational Haitian aesthetic-political movement.

My work, *An Alternative History of Abstraction* (digital video, 1'58", 2020) rejects the European origin myth of abstraction located in the functionless, autonomous objet d'art. Instead, I pursue non-autonomous functional lineages of abstraction located in African and Black asemic writing, Abrahamic aniconisms, Eastern calligraphy, the complex mathematics of Indian raag, African fractal design and polyrhythm, and religious aesthetics. These older, more established lineages center the functionality of abstract or spiritual activity, in contrast to European modernist objets d'art.

Haitian artist Manuel Mathieu finds resonance between these older functional lineages and the contours of his practice, and takes up what I propose to call a **spiralist** aesthetic project. This project hearkens to the particular modes of literary cannibalism, ritual alchemical consumption, and iterative revision embodied in Suzanne Césaire (Martinique), Franketienne (Haiti), Wilson Harris (Guyana), and others. Mathieu's recent public exhibitions have offered gestures that yearn for expansion past the painterly, into a choreography of space that stages a cosmic drama or dialogue within the scope of form, scale, color, and line.



Still from Overtures (2019). Image courtesy the Living and the Dead Ensemble.



Works by Manuel Mathieu. Image courtesy the artist and Matthew Brown.

If the post-US occupation Haitian Endijen movement unintentionally laid the groundwork for Endijenist Duvalier to complete his US Marine-aided rise to dictatorial power, and if the Duvalier dynasty embodies a horrific state appropriation of popular faith and aesthetics, then Spiralism as a movement, since the 1960s, has presented the ground for post-Duvalier Haitian recovery

of the Vodun, Indigenous, and folk aesthetics appropriated by the state. Spiralism taps into African, Amerindigenous, and European spiritual function demonized by the west since the Haitian Revolution (a cultural punishment paired with the French debt imposition). Spiralist ritual assemblage and performative rewriting / rehearsal / reiteration project the whole out from the fragment, like the way one hears the ocean in the conch.

The island of Ayiti has struggled greatly against Christian dualisms, but there is some conceptual overlap in the ontologies: in the beginning was the Word. The idea of a world-creating utterance nourishes material practice where we are from. A great many displaced tribal people found themselves in forced proximity, and the very first project was to build a ground for relating to each other. People developed a pidgin from their various mother tongues to talk with each other, and their children turned the pidgin into a full language, Haitian Kreyol. Spiritually and aesthetically, in Ayiti the cosmologies of the indigenous Caribbean, the Kongo Kingdom, and the Dahomey Kingdom forged such a ground of relation, using Catholic drag whenever necessary (due to the illegality of African religion). This cultural and spiritual milieu eventually led to the Haitian Revolution— a successful revolt by enslaved people to expel their colonizers— as well as a unification of the island (1822-1844) under Jean-Pierre Boyer that freed the enslaved people in modern-day Dominican Republic. Haiti continues to be punished for this gesture by France, the United States, and its neighboring DR.

For an artist from such a place, the question of form is a spiritual trial that inherits its force from this revolutionary lineage. Wilson Harris says the artist is nothing but a debt to (1) formative adversarial contexts and (2) communities of origin or practice. Relation is a kind of unpayable debt— not fiscal or moral, but rather, tied to this question of form which seeks to reject dualisms. A figurative abstract painting; a sculptural assemblage of ceramic objects installed on a wall like pictorial surfaces; a conversation whose form or resonant frequencies is the same as the first two types of objects. These types of objects and processes are neither complete forms nor liminal, incomplete sketches; they're milestones in the ongoing spiritual trial, that is, the question of finding a formal language commensurate to the singular task of soul's purpose. Like Mathieu, Harris felt realism (in the literary space) largely failed at describing reality. Harris argued that "there was a more complex and intuitive approach to language in which one suffers and through which one perceives the peculiar ecstasies of dimensionality." And elsewhere, Harris says that a non-linear philosophy of history "lies buried" in the "Caribbean arts of the imagination."

Mathieu's process-based abstraction resonates with Harris' ideas for me, as well as what the brilliant Black American writer Paule Marshall called the poetics of the kitchen—for her, writers like Glissant, Maryse Condé, and Suzanne Césaire embodied this space. The philosophy of history here, "in the kitchen" or the site of ritual consumption is iterative— since the necessary language/gesture to access a certain mental or conceptual context is singular, the artist seeking such access must infinitely rehearse a conscious process of surrendering to something greater than rational understanding— something of which reason is but a handmaiden, we could say. Yet this iteration is yoked to a non-linear impetus which may take on tones of excavation of something not of us which is built within us.

"I believe in the action of time, the power of time... Maybe I had to shed blood for something to happen," the artist says, evoking the Canaanite contract with time: sacrifice something of great value now for the possibility of reward later. Taken to its logical conclusion, this thinking leads us to wonder what we might receive if we sacrifice that which is of utmost value. We owe an infinite

debt to the principles of mediation and their uncreated creatrix, and we do not pay the debt back; rather, we formally gesture toward this debt in the continued nourishment of altar zones which ground the human and material in deepest unknowable alien immaterial force. "For my recovery, I had to trust the unknown," the artist says.

*Text by manuel arturo abreu
Portland, Oregon
25 Aug 2021*

manuel arturo abreu (b. 1991, Santo Domingo) is a non-disciplinary artist. They work with what is at hand in a process of magical thinking, with attention to ritual aspects of aesthetics.

Manuel Mathieu (b. Haiti, 1986) is a Montreal-based multidisciplinary artist, known for his paintings, which investigate themes of historical violence, erasure, as well as Haitian visual cultures of physicality, nature, and religious symbolism. Marrying abstract and figurative techniques, his compositions carve out space for us to reflect on Haiti's transformative history while inviting us to consider the different futures the act of remembering creates. Drawing from a wide-range of subjects, Manuel's practice combines his Haitian heritage and his formal arts education, which culminated in an MFA Degree from Goldsmiths, University of London.