

August 25, 2017

Pierre Soulages and Rodez



Interior, *Musée Soulages*



Two prints by Pierre Soulages

When not thinking abstractly about “there” and “not there” (blog Aug 21) I have also been exploring technical problems and challenges. I am working with a darker palette. James Fox's excellent TV series on Japan that ran earlier in the summer on the BBC hit a deep nerve with me. Already reeling from the Hokusai show at the British Museum (blog May 26) I was amazed by a reinvention of Japanese calligraphy, known as Shodō, that Dr. Fox admired in the frenetic work of Tomoko Kawao. Her “dance” on a huge sheet of paper, moving as if in a Tai Chi form, with gargantuan paintbrush in hand dipped in black ink, inspired me to work with Indian Ink too.

Then, a trip to Rodez, in the wild Aveyron, the birthplace of Pierre Soulages, and home to an extraordinary newish museum dedicated to his work, introduced me to another deep dark colour. My latest paintings are imbued with this new range of lights and darks. My most recent painting is called Shodō and is a tribute to Soulages.

Brou de Noix, made from the green outer casings of local walnut shells, is used for staining furniture and comes out of the bottle a rich, saturated brown. It is entirely natural. Soulages uses it in great expressionist sweeps, veils and swathes. His gestural, calligraphic work looks simultaneously as ancient as archaic text and as modern as New York colour field painting. Morris Louis, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman come to mind as well as the scrolls of the anonymous creators of Egyptian papyri. I am using this new colour now.

The museum that houses this work, by the Catalan firm of RCR (Rafael Aranda, Carme Pigem, and Ramón Vilalta) is also a major work of art. A minimalist three-

dimensional interpretation of his paintings, its acid-burned copper cladding, tenebrous dark walls, and shards of daylight inside are a moving experience of everything architecture should be. It feels at times almost like a church with tall long windows cut into the walls. What shouldn't work architecturally (at first glance dour and severe) serves this artist and his work well. It is a modest yet beautiful building. Neither Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao, nor his more recent Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris serve their artists at all well, for all that they are gorgeous buildings. An art gallery should work for its public and its art, not for the ego of its architect.

So go to Rodez. It's an unremarkable county town on the way to Toulouse, not far from the towns of Toulouse Lautrec and Albi, home to Ingres. It's probably off most people's radar. In the words of the Green Michelin guide, a familiar Bible to those who travel in France which likes to use its own brand of Gallic understatement: “Ça vaut le detour”.

Oh yes.

Robin Richmond

Pierre Soulages, born Rodez, 1919