

Vulnerability and Generosity

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measured by
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what I've taken*

A conversation between
Manuel Mathieu and Denise Helene Sumi

During the seven months that the painter Manuel Mathieu was at the Akademie Schloss Solitude, his studio was often my fallback place. In times that have been stressful for me (and others around me), I have been taught to engage in friendship and to find rest in it, as well as to find peace in the surroundings of Mathieu's paintings. We talked a lot about madcap places in our mind, vulnerability, and deliberation. Above all, we spoke about the new body of work he created for the show *Survivance*, which was supposed to open in May in the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal, and what strength we can draw from the concept of flexibility and the ability to create spaces to imagine alternative future(s). He says that many of us are vulnerable beings in an uncomfortable world, and sharing these states generously with each other is an act of caring for each other and the future. Trying to liberate himself from certain expectations from the art world, he prefers to talk about generosity rather than catastrophe. This written exchange manifests a series of get-togethers and phone calls, in which a relationship was formed between us as colleagues and friends.



Manuel Mathieu, *The Entrance*, 90×90 cm,
2019, courtesy the artist

*Denise Helene Sumi: Manuel, how do you feel today? How do you perceive the world around you lately?*¹

Manuel Mathieu: I mean, the world is the same as it ever was but the kind of »solitude« is different. Suddenly, many are isolated from projecting a future. All the actions you are putting forward, you don't know if they will happen, if they will be birthed, if they will be experienced or shared in the world. To be honest, I don't know how I feel about that. On the other hand, our gestures are the archeology of our times so at the end of the day it is important to do and to act with sincerity without expectations. This is something I am trying to cultivate these days.

This state of not being able to project a future existed for many people and generations, but now due to global protests and media coverage becomes increasingly visible. How do you feel about this?

It is not only visible, but it is being recorded; there is a face to it and it is outside of circumstances. What they sold us through capitalism is that the erasure of futures is systematic and necessary for its own survival. I don't want to get into the power structures that are benefiting from this, but I hate to believe that the future of certainty depends on the erasure of others. It can't be the only way.

Sometimes, I had a distinctive liberating or progressive feeling when looking at some of your paintings. Why do you think that is?

I don't intend to alter or liberate people through my work. It would be a lot to put on someone's shoulder to change society. But I am aware that it can have that power. Change is certainly ignited by people and their contribution to society. The work carries something that can be seen, that can be addressed with certain things happening



Manuel Mathieu, Untitled, 40 × 40 cm,
2019, courtesy the artist

in the world. We are in the state in which we reinvent the world. While I am aware of that, and the label that is put on me, I am still trying to find answers about the future, about my future, about our future. And I think it is very important to create a space for people to imagine it. Channeling this space of possible future(s) is exactly what I do. Creating is having a foot in the past and a foot in the future; it is an exercise like dancing. Will you dance with me? Sometimes I feel it's the question I am asking ... I find myself in a space where it is impossible to define what I am in relation to what surrounds me. And this is the case for many people right now, being strangers in their own habitats. Can we be vulnerable? It is not easy, because the world becomes an uncomfortable place to be.

Yes, and it is unsettling to be reminded of that. And this is, why one maybe is unpleasantly touched by the exposed vulnerability and disappearance of the figure in your painting St. Jacques III.

There is a sense of fragility in the painting. The source image sets the tone. You saw the photography, right?

The black-and-white photography showing a woman standing in the mud, yes. Why did you decide to use a certain image source in the first place?

The reason I choose that image is because of the position of that woman; the emotional weight I can see in that image, and where the image was coming from. The original photography of the women standing in the mud was taken during a ceremony in St. Jacques, an area in Haiti where these ceremonies happen every year. The mud bath is something very symbolic and cleansing, in several cultures. I wanted to talk about that because I feel it is a good excuse to explore certain spiritual

backgrounds and surroundings of visual and spatial understanding of my culture. I am very careful of what I choose and how I choose it. Even as someone who is from that culture, there are certain permissions that I don't give to myself. Not everything is meant to be revealed. This was an image I felt comfortable with. I felt something dignifying to be in a place where you are so aligned with your emotions that you can be openly vulnerable. That makes this image very rich for me, not in what I see, but how it affects me. Back in 2018 I painted a piece called *Study on Vulnerability* because my understanding on vulnerability changed and it became important for me to address that. The woman in *St. Jaques III* is in a different state of vulnerability and this was very rich to me. How to add and connect different elements to what I am already exploring in my work?

Study on Vulnerability refers to autobiographical vulnerable and even destructive moments in your life – physically and mentally. Can you elaborate a bit on your history on deconstructing your figures and the figures' heads in particular?

I was introduced to art by a mentor who was schizophrenic and maniac. His work was always showing figures that were mainly destroyed. He has a lot of demons. I was attached to this residue, and it took me time to move away from it and I understood my path wasn't a search for destruction. To play with fragmentation was a search for my capacity to do and undo, reveal and take away – a search for the possibility to recreate myself. This could be physically, through my identity, or my place in the world. This force made its way into the work. In the portraits it might look like destruction, but it is more an expression of incapacity. I was confronted with and working with these incapacities to recreate a part of myself in the world. By embracing this incapacity, I evacuate the absolute. With that out of the picture, I am in a space of equal possibilities and it is in that space that I feel comfortable with possible realities and futures. It also creates a space of infinity, which I believe is the definition of abstraction. The figure is not destroyed; it is simply present in a different dimension.

So, it is more about revealing mental states and emotions, and the complexity of feelings, and fragmented identities ... and about (failed) attempts of restoring our identities at any time and at any place being.

Exactly, and again how this mental architecture became present in the work. Because if the work is an extension of myself, there is a moment when it is so close that I become the work. There is an elasticity in the work and if it appears intense, it is because I myself am struggling with the work. Lately, I have this sentiment of denial because the world – especially the art world – is expecting certain things from my work. In the States, for example, the reception is very much about what it is to be a Black body, what it is to be a Black Haitian man. Is my abstraction always pointing toward spirituality? If I am allowed to leave that space and when I fall into a space of self-actualization where I can talk about what I want to talk about, it is empowering. When an external object enters a new space, it is perceived through the gaze of the spectator; it is permanently hitting it with his/her* sensibility, just like waves. In a spectacle in which two futures are competing for a better present, you can see how the perception of each other becomes primordial for the survival of one another. There is an intersection where the spectator and the spectacle hold the same future.

It sounds like you feel trapped in a certain discourse and expectations that you try to strip off from time to time.

What you focus on owns you. I think it can be a distraction to talk about a work in



Manuel Mathieu, *St. Jaques III*, 200 × 190 cm, 2020, courtesy the artist



Manuel Mathieu, *The Stretch*, 180 × 170 cm, 2020, courtesy the artist



Manuel Mathieu, *Study on a Disappearance*, 230 × 190 cm,
2019, courtesy the artist

relation to the gaze applied to it. I didn't grow up in a world where I needed to paint Black people for them to exist in art, which is the case in the States, for example. When you look at Haitian painting, we've been painting Black people. We found through a dreaming state of painting. This is the kind of legacy I am looking back upon. But I don't feel the need to address it. I grew up in a house where you could see many Black bodies, if not only Black bodies in a painting. It is just the way it is. Among nature and cities, there were people in the painting. And as I started putting my work out there, I started being defined as a Haitian artist, as a Caribbean artist, as Black artist, as an International artist, and now I am understanding that the narrative is well and strong and present and there is no room for me to get lost. The place where anything starts is when you really feel lost or helpless, and this is it what I want to seek. I have to define what being lost in that context means. For me it is a state I surrender to my intuition and not my head. A state in which reality actually talks to you. From the perspective of control, we use the word »lost« but actually maybe the right word is »grounded.« A friend of mine used to say you honor yourself when it comes from source. It somehow makes sense to me. James Baldwin said »The place in which I'll fit will not exist until I make it.«

Is this search for getting »lost« the reason why the elements fire, air, and dust have become an integral part of your paintings? I imagine that including these elementary forces into the process of creating a painting offers a particular mode of getting »lost,« and that in comparison with using paint, the burning is no longer controllable at one point.

Well, I wouldn't see the process of painting and burning as two opposite approaches. Because of the way I use paint, I am constantly in a moment where I am playing with losing control and regaining it. But, I am slowly shifting toward the idea of finding

art and not creating it, working with these new materials gets me closer to that idea. Painting somehow still feels orchestrated.

The difference with the process of burning is that it is a definite act. In that sense the act of destruction or disappearance is closer to drawing than to painting. With drawing there is something much more assertive in the way of working than in painting. With Sol LeWitt, we can argue that he finds the drawings because he is not totally in control. With the act of burning I am playing with something that is final or radical in a sense. There is a level of radicality in the burning that is not the same with painting.

Do the burnings offer another space; a space behind representation?

I think it is a moving away from what I usually do in the studio. In the burned fabric there is not a symbolic or figurative representation anymore. There is something unifying in the material itself. When I refer to the paintings that only consist of burnings, ink, and mud, they are all using the same elements within one language – pigments, dust, fire. But if I add the fabric to the painting that already has a different symbolic meaning, because it carries a figurative image. Suddenly you can talk about revealing something that is behind.

Like in the work St. Jaques III, hiding in this sense is revealing. What you are hiding is what you are actually pointing to. Using this mechanism, I am showing you something you don't usually see in the open – in this case, a person that is fragile and vulnerable. That's why people might be uncomfortable in front of the painting of the woman revealing her vulnerability. She will be seen. And it is not easy to talk about this. What is the difference between my vulnerability and hers? Yes, it is the vulnerability. But mine, and hers, reflect your own vulnerability. The painting is trying to tell us we are equal.

For sure, you and I can talk about shared concepts, moments in our lives, or basic emotions we both experience and are unifying. We were given birth to, we have fears, desires, positive and negative emotions. And we'll both disappear. I am still very touched by the photograph you showed me one night. A woman in a bathtub who had just given birth. She holds the newborn while she is being held by a man, and all the figures are exposed to life ... it has manifested in my mind, and creates a basic sense of trust.

Equality creates an atmosphere in which people can share or reflect their individual emotions. I kind of like the idea of the cycle – like being given birth to – and that everybody is able to relive and recreate emotions through painting. How can you decide to talk about our vulnerability or loyalty and use the painting to navigate visually through these complex states? Using painting as the architecture of building up key emotions and values I believe in.

It is very generous of you to address these key emotions. Do you know that you are the first person who taught me the concept of generosity? It hasn't played that big role for me yet. Sharing, yes, but I guess I always held on to the idea that I wanted something in return. Lately I've been trying to give, to be generous, to let go; without any expectation. It's quite a learning experience.

For me, it started inward the movement, in the sense that I had to understand how generous I had to be with myself in order to keep going. Because a lot of the act of making art is giving to the world whatever you have. When I leave, I will be measured by what I gave, and not what I've taken. The act of sharing is an act of generosity in itself. That is not even part of my discussion.

Understand the connection that we have with each other makes me realize that my heart doesn't only beat for me ... just like yours doesn't only beat for you.



Manuel Mathieu, *Study on Souso*, 60×60 cm, 2020, courtesy the artist



Manuel Mathieu, *The Remarkable Entrance*, 180 × 160 cm, 2019

Manuel Mathieu, born in Haiti, studied at UQAM and at Goldsmiths, University of London. The multidisciplinary artist and painter delves into subjects that investigate themes of subjectivity/collectivity, erasure, as well as Haitian visual cultures of physicality, and nature. Mathieu is currently living and working in Montreal. He was a fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in the discipline of Visual Arts.

Denise Helene Sumi is a curator and editor based in Vienna and Stuttgart. She is a founding member of the art association Kevin Space, Vienna, and editor-in-chief of this issue.

¹ The conversations took place between early April and early July 2020, in a climate of global lockdown, followed by a wave of worldwide demonstrations for Black Lives Matter.