

Manuel Mathieu: A Black Interior Artist

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In Ladi'Sasha Jones 'A Grammar for Black Interior Art' (2019) – a series of 26 statements inspired by Elizabeth Alexander's book *The Black Interior: Essays* (2004) – the writer defines the Black interior as the liminal space between the imaginary and the real: a spiritual and political zone. '[It] does not exist behind the veil; it is the veil,' Jones states. 'It is a rigorous and intentional practice of opacity.' Black interior art is therefore, according to Jones, 'improvisational', 'malleable', 'generative' – 'the work of the seer and the seen.'

These words and ideas invaded my thoughts when I recently spoke to the Haitian-Canadian artist Manuel Mathieu, who, unfamiliar with Jones's text and perhaps Alexander's book too, uncannily had a similar vocabulary to describe his own practice. "I want to embody Black interiority through spirituality and agency," he tells me about his practice, as if it were his *raison d'être*. I found this objective to be irresistibly profound and was fascinated by his enthusiasm and, more importantly, his uncompromising resolve. Mathieu's tableaux and ceramic sculptures are slippery, often vacillating beautifully between abstraction and figuration. But the artist resists any interpretations of his work that try to fit it neatly into a language of aesthetic binaries; nor is he interested in its slippage. Rather, Mathieu gives himself fully to the unbridled, creative journey of his own Black consciousness, picturing his own imagination, trauma and aura. His work is equivocal, non-binary and non-representational. As he states in our conversation, his artmaking is an attempt at "embracing the part of me that cannot be seen [...] It is the study of the apparition."

Mathieu's latest exhibition *Keeping things whole* at Pilar Corrias Eastcastle Street, London is a testament to this idea of the Black interior. Much like his entire body of work, the paintings and stoneware objects in this exhibition speak to Mathieu's predilection towards an elasticity between form and concept, medium and genre. This is not to say that the artist is not interested in ideas of modernism, the history of painting, Black subjectivity, and so on – but rather that these concerns are funnelled through the exercise of living in the opacity of the Black interior. As the show's title suggests, there is an effort to maintain a kind of wholeness of spirit or togetherness within the artist's own psyche or, more ambitiously, within a Black ontology. Moreover, the title implies a kind of difficulty in performing the act, sifting through an endless pool of fractured bodies or elements in the attempt to bring them into unison – a Sisyphean act.

In the eponymous painting *Keeping Things Whole* (2021), featured in the exhibition, two amorphous shapes – almost identical to each other as if they were divided cells – float aimlessly on the picture plane. Both are marked by nebula-like swirls – a balance of rust browns, navy blues, dark purples and magentas – that sit on the surface of these oblong disks like aqueous corrosions. The bottom tips of these forms are painted black, rendered to give the appearance of a sparkling sheen, as if they were dipped in a dark enamel, while waves of turquoise brushstrokes radiate from the ends of both central figures – frozen in an otherwise grey, lifeless background. It's impossible not to delve into metaphor in viewing and experiencing Mathieu's work: sinister and sublime abstractions that feel deeply personal and, of course, gloriously mystifying. But there's a legibility to them as well, as if we are quite literally invited to swim in the sea of Mathieu's subconscious, as though his paintings were portals through which we may see a certain vision of his own Blackness and culture that is not fixed but nebulous.

The blueish, undulating patterns in *Keeping Things Whole* – like that of a moving stream – also recall, for me, Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), and, as Sharpe writes, 'the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery.' This imagery of a Black ontology living the wake of a trailing slave ship, seems tantamount to Mathieu's vision of a Black interiority – one that is not only fluid, but dark and murky.

In 1945, André Breton visited Haiti and was immediately struck by the surrealist tendencies that he saw in the work of many Haitian artists and how Vodou, as a syncretic religion, was a way of understanding the world through a surrealist lens. As recounted by Haitian author René Depestre, Breton stated that in France, 'we launched surrealism as a movement based on intellectual foundations; you in Haiti learned all about it in the cradle.' I'm reminded of this quote when Mathieu tells me that as a Haitian artist, being creative for him is form of survival, it is an inherent mode of being. Much of Mathieu's oeuvre is inspired by Haiti and his relationship to it: whether it be from his own trauma experienced in his youth, following decades of violent dictatorships under both Duvalier regimes (Bay Doc and Papa Doc); or from the outside looking in, as an émigré to Montreal, navigating the racial politics of North America while witnessing the increasing devastations that continue to plague his native country.

Mathieu's work, however, is obstinately non-literal. Instead, he wrestles with the opaqueness and complexity of his subconscious as person of Haitian descent; as a Black man in a world that calls into question his own humanity. As Jones puts it succinctly, 'opacity is the reckoning between the interior and public life.' In *Autoportrait-0322* (2022), also featured in the exhibition, wash brushstrokes of pale purples and greys,

with blue-green swatches fill the canvas. In this muted colour field, there are two small ovals that resemble eyes: the left is slanted, in almost fine detail, while the right is scuffed, covered in grey markings. It is difficult not to see a face emerge, not least because of the painting's title. Mathieu's face, though shrouded, absorbed by a surrounding void, offers us different ways of understanding Blackness, one that perhaps goes beyond figuration and abstraction.

Mathieu's attempt to paint and sculpt his own subconscious also evokes Adam Pendleton's work and his concept of Black Dada – a speculative understanding of Dadaist interventions through the lens of the Black Arts Movement. But while both artists are concerned with issues of language and the untranslatable, Mathieu's work – more so than Pendleton's – is fully engrossed in the transformative capabilities of spirituality. Influenced by Igbo and Haitian Vodou traditions of creating sacred objects, Mathieu is interested in making in visual form, the unknowable, the unseeable; the abstract and the spiritual. In essence, the artist's works are simply reifications of his own subconscious: sacred objects of his Black interior. In *Portal* (2021), for instance, a canvas stained with red ink and marked with numerous burnt holes sits on the floor of the gallery like a distressed garment. The threadbare sheet is also accompanied by a set of small ceramic spiral balls of various sizes, strewn across the floor. For Mathieu, the action of placing these “infinity rocks” creates a shared spiritual value that calls on society to “acknowledge my humanity”.

Spirituality as a form of political agency, as a way of articulating your own humanity, through the creation of art, is an exceptional idea – one that feels genuinely fresh and innovative. *Portal*, much like Mathieu's other pieces, are small acts of transcendence, going outside physical experiences to witness something language cannot name or explain. There is perhaps a certain irresolution to his approach of artmaking, but it is also what makes Mathieu's oeuvre so surprising, exciting, uninhibited, loose, strange, stimulating. His vision is unique – formal gestures that concretize the spectral entities, both past and present, that continue to haunt and inform his being. In the end, there is something quite radical about his practice, leaving room for discovery but also advocating (while also revealing) a pluralism to Blackness that is boundless – a vast sea of endless possibilities.