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Manuel Mathieu Finds His Way Through Haitian History, on Canvas

The young artist interweaves the personal and the political, asking such questions as, “How can we build when we are inhabited by rage?”

By Pierre-Antoine Louis



The artist Manuel Mathieu at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami. Credit... Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/24/arts/design/manuel-mathieu-haiti.html>

Before this month, Manuel Mathieu had not had a solo show at a major institution in the United States. Now, Mathieu, a 37-year-old born in Haiti, has not one, but two, exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami (MOCA North Miami): “World Discovered Under Other Skies” and “Dwelling on the Invisible.”

Mathieu explores Haiti’s complex history and global influence through 48 works across the two shows: 14 in “Dwelling on the Invisible” and 34 in “World Discovered Under Other Skies.” They are primarily paintings, ceramics and works on paper, along with four new pieces: a mosaic, an installation, a video and a photograph. Through these works, he invites viewers to examine the intertwining threads of the personal and the political.

“I was born in ’86, right after the end of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s dictatorship in Haiti,” Mathieu said in a video interview. “I was exposed to a lot of instability and violence.” So, in his work, he explained, “I connected my personal story with the historical.”



Mathieu’s work “Jardin de la furie” (2021) deals with powerlessness and the rage that experiencing or viewing a crisis can generate. Credit... Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

As a teenager, Mathieu often spent time with his cousin, the artist Mario Benjamin, who is well known for his portraits depicting Black faces emerging from the shadows. Benjamin’s home was filled with art catalogs and past editions of *Art in America*, where Mathieu was introduced to his earliest artistic inspirations, including de Kooning, Luc Tuymans and Francis Bacon.

Around that time, Mathieu found himself spending time at Grand Rue studios in downtown Port-au-Prince, and started making sculptures from discarded pieces found around the city that explored the spiritual essence of Haitian life.

“It was around that time in Haiti that I also started painting, photography and installation,” Mathieu said. “It was the genesis for the artist that I am today, an overlap of many dimensions continuously affecting each other.”



Mathieu said his video “DIFE” (2024) circles a needling question: “How can we build when we are inhabited by rage?” Credit... Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

In 2015, after surviving a near-fatal hit-and-run accident while studying for his M.F.A. at Goldsmiths, University of London, Mathieu’s art took on greater significance in his life.

“I lost my short-term memory, and I had a big concussion,” he said. “I couldn’t function for a while and I had a lot of time to think.” He noted that his recovery, both physical and emotional, became largely interconnected with his exploration of Haiti’s history.

One such example is a haunting painting he created of one of Haiti’s former first ladies, Michèle Bennett, from her extravagant wedding to Duvalier, then the president, in 1980. Mathieu was inspired by the original photo of Bennett captured on her wedding day. For him, she symbolizes excess and lavishness in general. “The wedding was an example of those practices,” he said.



Founded in 1981, the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami is the only major cultural art institution in the city. Credit... Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

MOCA North Miami, which started as an artist-run space in 1981, remains the only major cultural art institution in North Miami.

“The museum has always been devoted to the South Florida artists’ community but was also a huge part of the art cultural landscape that we know in Miami today,” Chana Budgazad Sheldon, executive director of MOCA North Miami, said in a video interview.

With a commitment to showcasing not only underrepresented artists, but also those who are relatable to other artists, MOCA North Miami is excited to be highlighting Mathieu’s work.

“We believe, as an institution, that it’s going to provide a deeply meaningful experience for the community to learn about those complex histories and engage with them in whatever way is comfortable for them,” Budgazad Sheldon added.

“World Discovered Under Other Skies,” which debuted in 2020 in Toronto, curated by Amin Alsaden, delves into Haiti’s continuing pursuit of complete liberty. The show highlights how, since the country first gained independence in 1804, when it became the world’s first independent Black republic, it has remained steadfast in its pursuit of autonomy.



Mathieu photographed through his piece “Les désenchantés” (2024) at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami. Credit... Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

As visitors progress through the gallery, they move from that exhibition into “Dwelling on the Invisible,” a fresh array of Mathieu’s work curated by MOCA’s Adeze Wilford. The transition from the first show to the next is marked by a distinct change in the heaviness and darker color scheme on the exhibition’s title wall.

As a curator, Wilford feels that part of her work is making sure people feel comfortable in these spaces because they are public places meant for learning, enrichment and, as she put it, “feeling something.”

Another part of that work for Wilford is bringing artists who are relevant to the community into the museum and having visitors feel as if they were being represented on the walls — with the hope that the work will inspire visitors’ curiosity.

“And so, it just felt right to have Manuel be a part of our exhibition program for a number of reasons,” Wilford said.

Haiti has endured over a month of extensive violence, characterized by frequent attacks by armed gangs targeting police stations, hospitals, prisons, the main airport, the seaport and other state institutions — all of which has shut down much of Port-au-Prince. As the current humanitarian crisis unfolds, Mathieu reflected on how the showing of his work at MOCA North Miami ties into it. For him, it begins with what art is and can do.

“Art is a precious tool to nurture and reflect the complexities of our humanity, to create space for us to sit with it, deepening the understanding that we have of ourselves and the many connections that we have with each other,” Mathieu said.

He believes that in this show, there are many moments infused with rage, compassion, love, despair, powerlessness and dealing with the unknown, which can serve as a sort of mirror to accompany viewers, either in their own similar feelings or perspectives on what it means to both carry and live those feelings. The hope is also that these works can serve as a form of emotional release for visitors.



Mathieu's painting "Nan Lanmou" (2024). Credit... Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

For instance, Mathieu said that his painting "Nan Lanmou" (2024) deals with what it means to be in love in situations of precarity, lack of intimacy and vulnerability. Through this work, he is trying to hold space for those types of emotions.

"The image for me not only evokes emotions in that particular political context, but also invites ideas," he said, about "abandoning ourselves and/or feeling abandoned."

Mathieu explained that “Amnesia” (2018) reveals how, through traumatic moments, our memories are trying to erase reality, therefore erasing parts of ourselves.

His chilling video “DIFE” (2024) and image “Le jardin de la furie” (2021) are both trying to deal with powerlessness and the rage that experiencing or viewing a crisis can generate. Those pieces, Mathieu said, also circle a needling question: “How can we build when we are inhabited by rage?”

Wilford, the curator, explained: “If you don’t know exactly what his work is talking about, at first glance, when you look at his work, especially in person, it feels very alive. You can see him being present in the work. You can see in the gestures, in the decisions that he’s making and the edits that he’s made. You also can see it on the canvas.”

She continued: “And so, for me, that’s something I’m hoping people come to the exhibition and feel. That you feel some of the turmoil in some of the works. You feel the exuberance of it.”

Mathieu said that the work served as both a place to escape and a place for all of us to face crises on “our own terms.”

He explained, “Our own terms is important because I’m not trying to convince the viewer of how they are supposed to feel with the work.”