



Louis Soutter (1871-1942)

The tremor of modernity

Curator: Julie Borgeaud

Seventy years after Louis Soutter's death, the French public is still largely unfamiliar with his work; an exceptional oeuvre, for many years associated with art brut that is now presented at la maison rouge. The exhibition traces the stages in Soutter's artistic practice from the early pieces to the "finger drawings" of his later years. Anyone viewing Soutter's work for the first time is struck by how original and modern it is.

Why recognition has been so slow in coming becomes clearer in the light of certain aspects of Soutter's life. He produced most of his work away from artistic circles, in an old people's hospice in Ballaigues, a municipality in the Swiss canton of Vaud, where he was forced to spend the last twenty years of his life. Cut off from critics and art institutions,

almost two decades went by before Soutter's work was shown in a museum setting. The first retrospective was held at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne, in 1961. Such a complex oeuvre has defied art historians, being so far removed from the usual interpretations and schemas of artistic development. Yet the work of Louis Soutter deserves to feature prominently in the history of modernity and its forms.

Modernity built on academic art: the early works (1895-1915)

The inventory of Soutter's work cites no more than fifty produced prior to his internment in Ballaigues. Most of these are meticulously executed India ink drawings, generally conventional in style, such as the *Portrait of Beethoven* which Soutter intended as a tribute to his friend and master, the musician and conductor Eugène Ysaÿe with whom he studied violin for three years. Soutter did other paintings and ink drawings, in a freer style, such as the *Vegetable Seller* which postdates his return from the United States. Unlike his later drawings in exercise books, many of these early works are signed and dated. They correspond to a period when Soutter was considered a professional artist.

Tradition revisited

In 1915, alarmed by his spending, Soutter's family had him placed under tutelage. From then until 1923, when he was interned in the hospice in Ballaigues, he gave up drawing almost completely, earning a living as best he could as a violinist. It was in Ballaigues that his art would truly flourish. While still playing music, Soutter began to draw again, for himself. Having no art supplies, and no money to buy any, he drew on whatever he could salvage: envelopes, food wrappers, the back of letters, but mainly on the blank, lined or squared pages of exercise books. Much as a musician might practice his scales, Soutter filled these books with drawings on a theme, forcing himself to use his left hand so as to keep the wrist supple.

Soutter is believed to have filled over fifty such exercise books between 1923 and 1930. Today, their pages are presented as individual works, easily distinguished from earlier drawings by their small size. Most have drawings and inscriptions on the back. The pages were detached from the books shortly after Soutter's death.

Julie Borgeaud has put certain of them back in their original order, a time-consuming task which is reproduced on-screen.

Soutter had always moved in educated circles. In Ballaigues, he produced works informed by the great masters of art history, drawing inspiration from books and illustrated magazines. His oeuvre is filled with references to Greek and Roman mythology, the frescoes in Pompeii, classical painting or the Italian Renaissance. Most of his models are clearly identified (Carpaccio, Cimabue, Botticelli, Raphael, Tiepolo, Watteau). Others are more general, and refer back to important themes in the history of art such as the life of Christ and the Madonna, or portraits with mirrors.

These subjects dominate Soutter's "exercise book" period as well as the so-called mannerist period, which is recognisable for its larger formats and a profusion of details borrowed from Italian Renaissance painting, such as the omnipresent pearl necklaces. We can see how Soutter's style evolves from one period to another. The exercise books contain rough sketches, more accomplished pencil drawings, India ink drawings whose flowing lines suggest Art Nouveau, and others that resemble engravings with their fine cross-hatching. Importantly, every centimetre of the page is filled whereas the background of Soutter's later drawings is less dense. Figures are more clearly discernible against the page; their contours are more marked. While classically-trained artists have always studied and copied the ancient masters, Soutter interprets, frames, transforms, even distorts their work in what was then an unconventional approach.

The "mannerist" period (1930-1937)

During these seven years, Soutter worked with larger formats and limited himself to fewer themes. Faces are an important subject, particularly portraits of women, either alone or in a group. They both threaten and entice, recalling the symbolist iconography that was popular in the late 1800s. Their eyes, hair and smile are exaggerated. In certain portraits, tendrils of hair disappear into the swirling background.

A series of drawings from the mid-1930s, representing groups of naked men and women, bears the title *Sans Dieu* (Godforsaken) or *SD*. In a letter Soutter wrote to his cousin, Le Corbusier, in 1935, he explains that "*the Sans Dieu are painful beings, a pure caste, raised by the tortuous pain of isolation*". In this light, we can legitimately wonder whether the male figure is not a self-portrait of the artist, abandoned by God and men.

Bridging these two sections, *Fragrance of a Rose* illustrates a dream-like logic in Soutter's creative process. It seems the artist has let his hand work unbidden, allowing the coagulations of ink to open up new perspectives for the drawing. The black figures, similar to those in the finger drawings, suggest a merging of human and vegetable.

Pages from the unfinished

Aside from the differences in technique mentioned earlier, the exercise-book drawings share formal properties which are specific to Soutter. Firstly, the emphatic execution. Soutter's drawings convey the to-and-fro movement of the hand, the frenzied accumulation of lines, a sort of continuous trembling across the entire surface of the page.

A second feature is the linear density of the drawings which fill the page from edge to edge. Subjects are rarely isolated in the middle of a blank page. Rather they emerge from the textured surface of the drawing. Many of the forms have no contours, no encircling line. Instead, that part of the page left blank is given shape by the surrounding texture. Soutter constructs "active voids" at the heart of a reticulated matter.

Several of the recurrent themes in the exercise-book drawings are proposed below.

A first group of works explores chaos and disorder. Earthquakes, storms, revolution and the guillotine... Soutter conveys the unleashed elements and human madness with agitated, at times indiscernible, pencil strokes. *The Citadel of the Insane* brings to mind the drawings of Victor Hugo who allowed his hand to be guided by accidental effects so as to "make the whirling world stand still." Interestingly, Soutter read Hugo and quotes him in several of his titles.

Representations of nature are, in contrast, some of Soutter's most peaceful works. Leaves, blossom, trees, branches, fruit and bouquets of flowers stave off his private demons and form a welcoming environment. Colour introduces a joyful mood that is largely absent from the other themes. Nature is the subject of the drawings as well as the model for how they spread organically across the page.

Architecture is another prominent theme. Soutter depicted picturesque and exotic sites, views of actual cities (New York, Venice) or imaginary ones, types

of building (ancient temples, churches, castles, mosques) and architectural features (domes, colonnades, beams). Once again, Soutter's treatment of his subjects displays astonishing variety, from dense, vertical and horizontal lines that allow the white of the paper to filter through, creating shadow and light (*City and Domes*), to the flowing, agitated whorls of cathedral facades (*Imaginative Catholic and Papal Facade*).

A last group comprises abstract decorative patterns inspired by heraldic motifs and ancient grotesques, and purely ornamental shapes. The inscriptions on the back of certain drawings suggest that Soutter intended them as models for embroideries or tapestries. The artist's "manual obsession" - his urge to fill the blank surface with textured drawings - expresses itself fully here.

Painting

The support which certain artists and writers gave Soutter in the 1930s had visible consequences. He began drawing on larger, better quality paper. He replaced pencil with ink, even introducing colour. His friend, the painter Marcel Poncet, invited Soutter to work in his studio in Vich, where he supplied him with brushes, gouache and oil paint. Possibly Poncet's own "matierist" style influenced Soutter, who again concentrated on faces. His portraits of Christ, depicted as frontal views with eyes open or closed, recall the work of Soutter's exact contemporary, Rouault. The paint, usually gouache, is applied with visible, expressive strokes, almost certainly over an ink drawing, traces of which can still be seen, with corrections, accumulations and parts left blank; in other works, Soutter appears to have scratched the paint with the handle of his brush. In *Dawn* (1939), a silhouette lit from behind echoes the stark contrasts of black and white in the finger drawings.

This is an important, transitional work as it combines the graphic impact of the last period with the characteristic techniques of Soutter's paintings.

Back to the origins of modernity: finger drawings

As Soutter's health began to deteriorate from 1937, failing eyesight and arthritis obliged him to adapt his technique. He began working with larger formats. More importantly, he used his fingers to paint. At 66 years old, Soutter embarked on a completely new form of expression.

The extraordinary inventiveness, energy and boldness contained in this new style are hard to explain. Soutter dipped his fingers directly into ink, gouache or car paint to trace black silhouettes on the paper, thereby returning to the most ancient form of drawing, the primitive images left by the very first men, in which body and surface, dispensing with any intermediary, are in direct contact. Was Soutter thinking back to the Native American petroglyphs he had seen in Colorado, as Julie Borgeaud suggests?

Elongated silhouettes, dark against light, are brought to life. These archetypal figures offer a representation of humankind that had no equivalent then. They appear in small groups, surrounded by the empty surface of the page or among a constellation of "hailstones" formed by Soutter's fleshy fingertips pressed onto the paper. Their gesticulations and contortions remain a mystery. Some appear to go about their everyday business, tilling the land, harvesting grapes, or playing with a ball. Other scenes are suffused with violence as their titles, *Abortion, Alone, Struggle with the Demon*, suggest.

The repetition of simple and abstract forms - circles, crescents, crosses - adds to the impression that these are symbolic scenes whose characters are performing magical rituals. These images, produced in the intimacy of Soutter's room, take on a universal dimension.

Crosses are a recurrent motif in these compositions, some representing tombstones but most representing crucifixion, one of the most frequent themes of this last period. Possibly Soutter saw himself in the figure of Christ who echoes the tragedy of his own existence.

A second way: the drawn commentaries

Louis Soutter was not "without culture" as Dubuffet reminds us, thereby distinguishing him from the artists of art brut. The hospice in Ballaigues had a library where Soutter read Dante, Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Edgar Allan Poe, Pierre Louÿs and Léon Bloy. His drawings also include references to Tolstoy, Alfred de Vigny, Homer and Socrates. Books not only provided Soutter with reading matter; the blanks of their pages gave him a surface on which to draw. This was an original practice with few equivalents. Soutter *occupied* every available inch of space - margins around the text, gaps between paragraphs, illustrations or photos - with India ink drawings, sometimes highlighted with colour.

Seventeen of these books have survived, produced for the most part during

Soutter's mannerist period. The genres vary greatly, and the reasons that prompted him to choose one book over another are hard to explain. Some are classics (Mme de Staël, Flaubert), others are by contemporary authors (Rainer Maria Rilke, François Mauriac). Some are patriotic myths (Charles de Coster), others are illustrated works. In some cases, friendship is clearly the motivation for these "illustrated commentaries", for example *Journey to the Land of the Roman Sculptors* by Alexis and Emmeline Forel, who like Soutter were from Morges, or works by Le Corbusier. Soutter would "illuminate" four of his cousin's treatises, gifts from the architect himself. Soutter took ideas from the text, though wasn't afraid to depart from it when Le Corbusier failed to inspire him. Thus a second book emerges from the first, a visual "second way" that runs parallel to the written word, sometimes contradicting, sometimes accompanying it.

These books are useful in understanding the pace and pattern that must also have existed in the exercise books. Selected pages, shown on the screen, give insight into how rich this little-known aspect of Soutter's work is. This is the first time that ten of these books (including two facsimiles) have been shown together. They are presented with drawings on corresponding themes. Indeed, these "drawn commentaries" reprise many of Soutter's favourite subject matters, such as flora and foliage, architecture, animals, nude and draped figures, arabesques and decorative motifs.

Even more than in the exercise books, Soutter demonstrates the ease with which he recomposes and distorts figures to fit them into the available space.

Soutter died in 1942, in the hospice in Ballaigues. He left behind a body of work whose extraordinary richness has yet to be fully explored. This journey to the heart of Soutter's oeuvre should reveal the "tremor of modernity" that burned inside him.

Biography of Louis Soutter

1871 : Birth of Louis-Adolph Soutter in Morges, Switzerland. Spends his childhood in an educated upper-middle class environment. Learns to play the violon at a young age.

1890-1895 : Studies of engineering, then architecture, which Soutter breaks off after a brief period to study music at the Brussels Conservatorium under Eugene Ysaÿe, the Belgian composer and violin virtuosi. Meets some groups from the artistic avant-garde of the period, like the "Groupe des Vingt". Abandons his music studies during Ysaÿe's U.S. tour.

1895-1896 : Returns to Switzerland. Studies drawing and painting in Geneva with Charles Koëlla, professor and art critic. Befriends with the American ceramist Artus Van Briggles.

Stay in Paris. Studies academic painting with Jean-Paul Laurens and Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant. Attends evening courses at the *Académie Colarossi*.

End of 1896-1897 : Leaves for the United States. Trips to New-York and Chicago. Moves to Colorado Spring, where live Artus Van Briggles and Madge Fursman, an American violinist, student of Ysaÿe, whom he has met in Brussels.

Marries Madge, and gives private tuition in violin and drawing.

1898-1903 : Becomes the head of the art department at Colorado College. Exhibition of his paintings and drawings at the "First Colorado College's exhibition".

Divorce and resignation from his position at Colorado College. Returns to Morges, to his parents, after a brief stay in Paris.

1904 : Death of his father. Soutter is very affected.

1907-1922 : Appointed as a violinist in the Lausanne symphony orchestra. It seems that Soutter stops drawing during this time.

In Morges, regular contacts with the writer Charles Ramuz, art collector Alexis Forel, Igor Stravinsky, and other intellectuals and artists.

Plays occasionally in small silent film theaters. Wastes a lot of money; his relationship with his family rapidly becomes problematic as he becomes more and more of a financial burden. Placed under guardianship by his family in 1915. Death of his sister Jeanne in 1916.

1923 : Admission, against his will, to a home for old and needy in Ballaigues, canton Vaud, where he will spend the remaining nineteen years of his life, in great isolation and deeply unhappy.

Beginning of the period of «school exercise books ».

1927 : Beginning of friendship between Soutter and Le Corbusier, his cousin, who is very interested in his drawings and supports him by sending material up to 1937.

Death of his brother.

1930 : Beginning of the « mannerist period ». Befriends with artists who encourage him, especially the Swiss painter René Auberjonois, that he knows since he's young, and Marcel Poncet, who occasionally lends him his studio.

1932-1933 : Jean Giono, who sometimes stays in Vallorbe, discovers Soutter and buys him some works. Beginning of their friendship.

1936 : First solo exhibition in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Hartford (Connecticut, USA), thanks to Le Corbusier. He writes an article in the periodic *Le Minotaure* about Soutter's work.

1937 : Soutter's eyesight starts to fail ; he develops arthrosis. Produces his first "fingers-paintings", starting a new pictorial direction.

Sells drawings to American collectors, through Le Corbusier.

Exhibition in the Vallotton Gallery, Lausanne.

1939 : First exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery of New York. Five of his drawings enter the MoMA's collections.

1942 : Soutter dies at the age of 71, in Ballaigues.

1961 : First exhibition at the "Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne".

1974 : Publication of the *catalogue raisonné* of Soutter's work, who represents then 2844 works. Since then, over 130 drawings, which were attributed to him, have been found.

This exhibition was organized in partnership with the "Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne".

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Luka Fineisen

Perfect Fluid, 2012

"Throughout la maison rouge's opening hours, an elevated tank pours frothy foam onto a plane of glass, set slightly at an angle. The slope of the glass surface introduces a strict formal purity to the organic matter. [...] From outside the patio, this semi-transparent installation presents itself as a moving tableau. [...] Holes in the surface of the foam allow occasional glimpses of black or grey while variations in sunlight produce flickering shadows in the monochrome structure." This is how Luka Fineisen describes the installation she has made specifically for the patio at la maison rouge.

Since the early 1960s, artists such as the American Robert Morris have challenged the idea that sculpture must be durable and solid. Morris put forward the notion of anti-form. In his 1968 essay, he suggests a new way for sculpture: that form should be generated by the material and its inherent properties of weight, resistance, elasticity, etc.

This implies that the artist must accept a certain loss of control, an unpredictable element; sometimes even that the work should disappear for good.

Luka Fineisen's art is clearly part of this tradition. Since her first works in 2000, she has given form to non-traditional, unstable materials such as smoke, steam, ice, wax, liquids, glitter, cellophane and foam. Foam has been part of her work from the beginning (including in 2001 at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, in 2002 at the Kunstverein in Offenburg, and in 2003 at the Folkwang Museum in Essen). The pure, white foam she uses contains neither fragrance, colouring nor preservative. Its extremely short lifespan means it must be constantly regenerated. It is light as air yet visually can occupy vast amounts of space. It is monochrome yet allows light to filter through; it is volatile, irregular, elusive. The heavy, transparent glass over which it flows introduces a monumental dimension to the piece that contrasts with the fragility of its main component. The least current of air might snatch a piece of foam and carry it away from the installation space, into the café that takes up the other half of the patio.

Fineisen plays on the contrast between the "magical" aspect of this white foam as it constantly grows and disappears, and the deliberate exposure of the process. The motor generating the air to produce the foam, and the pipes that carry it, are in full view behind the patio window. Yet the visitor's fascination for this seemingly organic, endless growth remains intact.

It is this permanent evolution that so captivates. Like clouds in the sky, the foam is in a constant state of change. We see shapes forming, or simply imagine it as a bubble bath or fluffy whipped cream. However, as often in Fineisen's work, such sensual appeal can so easily become something more unnerving, disturbing even. Who's to say this shifting mass isn't about to engulf the spectator?

Biography

Luka Fineisen was born in 1974 in Offenburg, Germany. After studying in the United States, at the Memphis College of Art, she attended courses at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. Her works include installation, sculpture, photography, video and drawing. She currently lives and works in Cologne and is represented by Rupert Pfab Gallery in Düsseldorf and Todd Hosfelt Gallery in New York.



Didier Vermeiren

Sculpture–Photography

The work of Didier Vermeiren has developed as a constant back-and-forth between past and present; references to the history of sculpture and an examination, here and now, of what constitutes its essence.

His approach is consciously informed by various stages in the tradition of sculpture. First Rodin, often cited in Vermeiren's work, who transformed the notion of monument and whose *Burghers of Calais* (1889) first questioned the role of the plinth and its relationship with the sculpture. Brancusi, another important figure, refused to consider the base as a mere supporting structure and made it an integral part of his works.

Vermeiren, who began his career in the 1970s, draws on a legacy of conceptual art and minimalism: assuming that the plinth is no longer necessary, there is nothing to prevent the artist from placing a sculpture on the floor, level with the viewer.

While many of Didier Vermeiren's sculptures make reference to works by other sculptors, they also refer to each other. A sculpture is always one stage in a continuity and a response to an earlier work. As such, they are all connected, and form a coherent and prolific whole. Vermeiren believes that the form of the sculpture when it leaves the studio is not, might we say, set in stone. It continues to be shaped by the places where it is displayed. Thus new connections form between the sculptures whenever they are shown.

In each of his exhibitions, Didier Vermeiren establishes a dialogue between recent and older works, allowing new links to emerge between the different sculptures. Thus every exhibition looks both backwards and forwards. Photography, as much a part of his artistic practice as sculpture, also creates a distance. By abolishing space and presenting the work from a single point of view, it alters how we see the piece and opens new visual possibilities. This is not new among sculptors. In the work of Brancusi, for example, photography is part of the concept of the *groupe mobile* in which separate works are arranged side by side to form a new, ephemeral entity of which only a photograph will remain. The photos that Vermeiren takes of his sculptures on a daily basis serve the same purpose as a sketchbook might for another artist. Some become works in their own right. One such piece is *The Studio at 4am*, a tribute to Giacometti's *The Palace at 4am*, conserved at the MoMA in New York. Thanks to an exposure time of several hours, the image captures the night. The lenticular photographs (a nineteenth-century process that displays a third dimension) at the gallery entrance visually recreate the impression of space, but in a dream-like, unreal way.

Vermeiren has taken advantage of the layout of la maison rouge by choosing two groups of works for two galleries which face each other on separate levels. The large black-and-white photograph between the two spaces shows the exhibition as we can never see it, namely a bird's-eye view of the model the artist used when working on the position of the sculptures in the galleries.

The nine large pieces in the upper gallery are Vermeiren's most recent work (2007-2010), shown for the first time in France. Arranged around the two central sculptures, *House #2* and *Terrace #1*, are others that communicate back and forth, in particular the two "pairs" of *Study for Stone #1* and *2*, and *Study for Urn #1* and *2*. They refer back to *Caryatid with Stone* and *Caryatid*

with Urn, two figures which Rodin sculpted for *The Gates of Hell*. Traditionally upright like the pillars they replace, Rodin's caryatids are instead doubled over as though crushed by the weight they bear. While Vermeiren's sculpture is exempt from figuration, we are nonetheless confronted with the same dense, compact form, full on one side (stone), hollow on the other (urn).

These references to existing works are the point from which the artist has continued to question, since the early 1980s, the sculpture's constituent parts of shape, size, dimension and material, but also upward force, gravity, orientation, light and shadow, positive and negative, and the sculpture's relationship to the ground, space, its surroundings and other works. Vermeiren's interrogation of the sculpture's base is part of this questioning, materialised by the "plinth sculptures" with which he rose to prominence in the 1980s. Traditionally, the plinth is not part of the work but serves to display it, to lift it out of "real" space into artistic space. The plinth's function as a pedestal was gradually eroded over the course of the twentieth century as modernism divested the plinth of its purpose. Didier Vermeiren's response has been to rethink the role of the plinth, and to transform it into an autonomous mass within physical space. The plinth is a base and a foundation; it can also exist for itself and of itself. This is equivalent to abolishing the plinth to leave only the sculpture's relationship to the floor. The chosen volume is "sculpted" using traditional methods of modelling, casting and assembling. The artist experiments with forms, materials and techniques, leaving the door open for chance, resonance and intuition to intervene.

Vermeiren's work is far more physical and sensual than its strict form might suggest. The body is present not just in terms of scale – his sculptures are never monumental – but also in the traces that subsist of their production. Indeed, several works start out as clay models which bear the marks of the artist's hand, his body even. One such work is *Urn*, fashioned by blows from the artist's fists and a stick as he crouched inside a clay form.

The work in the centre of the gallery, *House #2* whose upper part recalls Malevich's architectons, appears to turn on itself, and in doing so impart a rotational movement to the sculptures around it.

Counterpart to the centrifugal movement at play in the upper gallery is the centripetal movement in the lower gallery. All the works shown here belong to the series of "upturned sculptures" (1995-1999) and were produced using the same technique. Their hollow form, which echoes the well of the second gallery, opposes the predominant upward movement in the first room. These works begin as replicas of important sculptures in the history of art, referred to in their titles: Canova's *Creugas* and *Damoxenos*, Rodin's *Caryatid with Urn*, *Caryatid with Stone*, *Ugolino*, *The Call to Arms*, and *Monument to Victor Hugo*.

First Vermeiren modelled clay replicas of the plinths then, using a traditional casting method, produced plaster models with a metal armature inside. These forms have been doubly "overturned", first cut at the corners and turned inside out like a glove, thereby revealing the armature, then turned upside down to show the hollow that forms them. They rest on the floor, precariously balanced on the armature. When several are arranged together, their sloping position creates an impression of movement.

The 27 black-and-white photographs on the wall, taken in Vermeiren's studio, show *Caryatid with Stone* (which can be viewed in the lower gallery) in successive states. After leaving the camera diaphragm open, Vermeiren spins the sculpture more or less slowly. The viewer does not move around the sculpture; instead, the sculpture moves around itself and is captured as though in levitation, taking up an unreal position in space.

The juxtaposition of these enigmatic images and hollow sculptures, positioned in a seemingly random fashion in the middle of a room which is itself placed in a hollow, encourages the visitor to adopt the sculptor's own multiple points of view of his sculptures. When, as is the case here, in these two galleries, the works refer back to each other, each bearing the imprint or memory of another, the entire space is caught in the momentum, as though endlessly reflected in mirrors.

Biography

Didier Vermeiren was born in 1951 in Brussels, where he still lives and works. He is represented by the gallery Greta Meert, in Brussels.