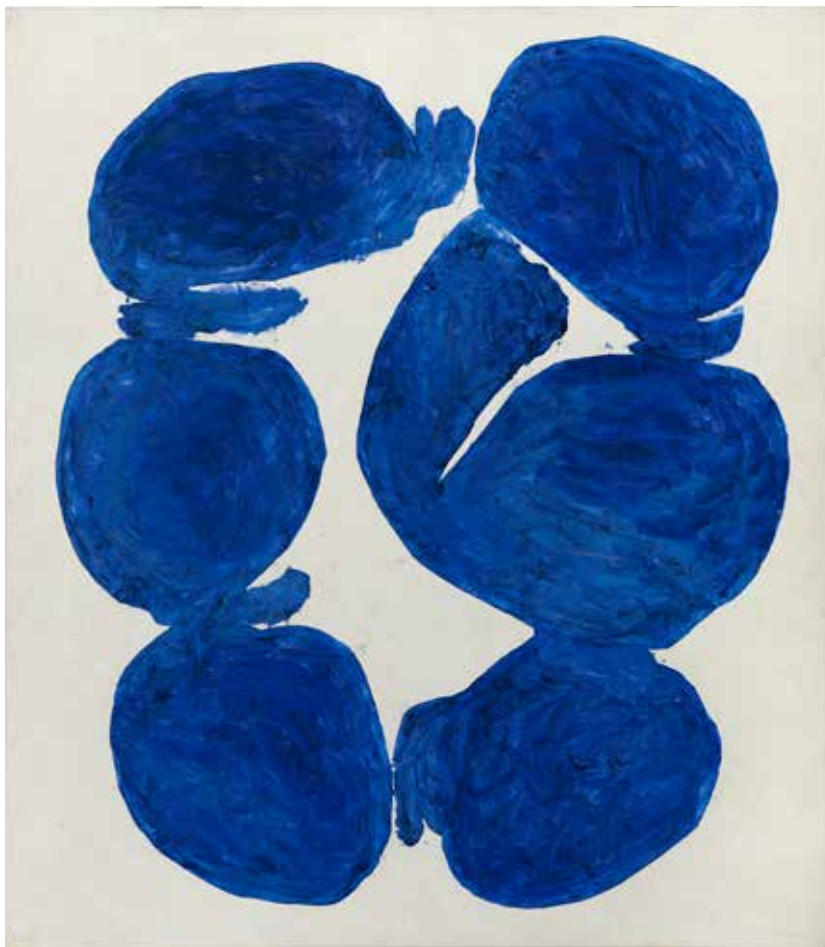




Simon Hantai, Mariale m.c. 7, 1962, oil on canvas, 86-7/8" x 82-7/18". Private collection © Archives Simon Hantai



Simon Hantai, *Meun*, 1967, oil on canvas, 94-1/16" x 82-15/16". Private collection, courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery © Archives Simon Hantai. Photo: Laurent Lecat

Simon Hantai/Pliage: The First Decade at the Mnuchin Gallery in New York City

by John Mendelsohn

The Simon Hantai exhibition *Pliage: The First Decade*, is a chance to experience the range of this inventive artist's work in fourteen large paintings. Hantai (1922-2008) developed his pliage method of folding and binding upstretched canvas and then painting the exposed surfaces in Paris during the 1960s. Stimulated by the work of Jackson Pollock, he produced paintings in distinct series, each provocative and implacable, and each in its own way beautiful.

Hantai's paintings are a kind of performance, with a set of physical procedures that yield often unpredictable results. Refining his technique over many works, Hantai became adept at a repertoire of indirect processes, which can variously suggest origami, batik, tie dying, and sculptural bas-relief.

The exhibition, which echoes the artist's retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in 2013, begins with the *Mariales*, including both a work with

a continuous expanse of small folds, and paintings with deeply fissured surfaces that resemble a fantastic geology. This approach is extended in the *Catamurons*, which use the same all-over composition, but within a border of bare canvas. In both series we are confronted with an unsettling experience of brokenness, with the ground of the paintings in continual upheaval. Furthermore, we are confronted with a seismic shift between two kinds of perception – our awareness of the material surface, and our immersion in the visual splendor of Hantai's faceted domains.

The *Panses* are rough tondos on bare grounds, with shards of nuanced, pale colors coalescing into mineral-like vortexes. These works have an undeniable spatial momentum, like looking up into a ceiling painted by Tintoretto. The *Meuns* are perhaps the most perplexing of the series with large, often bulbous forms in a single color, evoking both Matisse cut-outs and Yves Klein's paintings made by off-printing from women's bodies. The *Etudes* are complex works that involve multiple folds and applying a single hue, creating fields of white forms emerging from colored grounds, that suggest leaves or birds. Although physically insistent, the paintings become highly graphic images, blank silhouettes with all the middle tones lost, like a Warhol silkscreened image reduced to the nth degree.

There is a mystery at the heart of Hantai's work, with its richness and ambition paired with obliqueness and indirection. We do not have to resort to the artist's biography (with his largely withdrawing from the French art world for a quarter of a century) to intuit the sensibility at work. There is the feeling of Hantai's desire to find ways to work that are both generative and impersonal, where his touch is evident only after acts of rupture and concealment. Beyond discovering new ways to make images, the paintings suggest the pursuit of a kind of magic in which painterly method reveals something beyond itself and beyond the self of the painter.



Simon Hantai, Mariale m.d.4, 1962, oil on canvas, 92" x 81". © Archives Simon Hantai



Simon Hantai, M.M. 19, 1964, oil on canvas, 97-3/4" x 86-1/4". Private collection © Archives Simon Hantai



Simon Hantai, Peinture, 1964, oil on canvas, 98" x 85". Private collection © Archives Simon Hantai. Photo: Laurent Lecat



Simon Hantai, Étude, 1969, oil on canvas, 105" x 92". Private collection © Archives Simon Hantai. Photo: Laurent Lecat