

## Press release

L'Œuvre-Messagier. Une mimesis  
abstraite du Monde : les  
commencements et les achèvements  
Fondation Fernet-Branca, Saint-Louis  
14 September, 2024 – 2 February, 2025

## To the Media

Saint-Louis, 2 September, 2024

### Dear members of the media

**The Fondation Fernet-Branca invites you to discover an exhibition dedicated to the work of Jean Messagier, one of the most unique and influential painters of his generation, with a deeply personal and intimate pictorial universe.**

His work is among the most important in the history of modern art and abstract painting in the second half of the 20th century. This exhibition, featuring more than one hundred and ten works, traces his artistic journey by moving backward in time: starting from his later works that seem to give precedence to form, as they crystallize the magnificent achievements of his life's work as a painter, his story, his stories, and moving back to his early works where the characteristics of his art that reached absolute abstraction in the late 1960s were first established. We have deliberately only alluded to the surprising works of the 1970s and 1980s, which have been the subject of recent presentations.

In his ultimate achievements, everything is ordered, sublimated, within the confines of the painting, the art. The most innovative experiments, formal ruptures, the movements from one medium to another—from painting to engraving, from drawing to sculpture, from happening and performance to poetry—the oscillations between the ephemeral and what "freezes" time in the timelessness of the work, all "stop" in each painting of this final moment. Did he foresee it when he wrote, facing one of his paintings: "I am seized with great fear because this is the first time that my work stands before me in pure abstraction, and yet with a terrible presence." Rewinding the timeline of Messagier's work is not a journey along a tranquil river but rather a ride along a river with the temperament of rapids, sometimes peaceful, sometimes torrential. Messagier's work was made up of leaps, formal ruptures, brutal recoveries, in short, battles between form and content, signifiers and the signified. Like making snow sculptures while simultaneously creating bronze sculptures, or bringing forth, manifesting a crude figure of interlacing, resolutely abstract arabesques traced by an imperative gesture and glittered like a pop painting. If we have neglected this period of "excesses" that were the 1970s and 1980s, it is, as mentioned earlier, because the works of that time have been often and very well exhibited. Mocked during the 1981-1982 exhibition at the Grand Palais, they have, since the beginning of this century, been sought after and praised for their provocative audacity. Perhaps today, it is necessary to dare to confront them with the figurations that have been in vogue since the 1980s, since the exhibitions *A New Spirit in Painting* in London, and *After Classicism* in Saint-Étienne. And particularly with those of the Italian *Transavanguardia*! With those of Robert Combas, Hervé Di Rosa, Gérard Gasiorowski?



Espace d'art contemporain  
2 rue du Ballon  
68300 Saint-Louis – France

Ouvert du mercredi au dimanche  
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The works of the 1960s and the second half of the 1950s, always moving back in time, show us the fulfillment of an abstract, gestural painting in the ostentation of the creative process, which the labels of lyrical or "nuagiste" reduce to a kind of impressionist reference. What these "paintings" show us, with effective determination, transposed into "painting," is first of all a physical and emotional experience of *Natura naturans*. It is also the battle, the struggle, of a contemporary man-artist, with water, air, the manifestations of energies that Nature, starting from a generating core, liberates and which, in painting, in Jean Messagier's painting, are knotted, untied, in whirlpools, bundles, skeins, twists of more or less thick threads of paint, aggregating into strips, into ribbons. The artist releases them in painting through the authority of a gesture that propagates them in an expansion that seems to want to push the edges of the canvases. It is between the edges of the canvas, in its limited space, that these battles, these hand-to-hand combats of the artist with nature are "re-presented." For each painting, each work of Messagier, restitutes them in "painting," immobilizing the fusion of their osmosis into a spectacle, a perfectly, dare we use the term, realistic "abstract" representation...

To achieve this, Jean Messagier needed a conviction, well anchored in his certainties, of what he was meant to accomplish in the field of modern painting, in the art of his time, to offer it an after him. This conviction seems to have been reinforced by his lived experience during a journey through the sublimated whiteness of Algerian light, its shimmering where the contours of things blur, fade, break, carried to vibrations that make time and space tremble. This experience is perhaps the striking surprise of Italian art, especially Tuscan, which allowed him to transpose it into painting, making it the foundation of his style's development. But at the beginning, there was the education provided at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris by serious teachers with recognized artisanal skills. He completed this training in 1942 by attentively listening to the poetry courses delivered by Paul Valéry at the *Collège de France*. A kind of preparatory study for the outline of a "theory," these fragments in the form of haikus gathered in *Leaves of Thousand-Layered* and *Daily Meteors*. This poetic "theorization" perfectly aligns with his artistic practices. In this "dialectic," there are the beginnings of the shuttle-like play that characterizes the *Supports/Surfaces* movement, between their practice and their theoretical textual production, nurtured by the thought of Marx, Freud, Althusser, Sollers, and Leroi-Gourhan.

It is not surprising that his first significant paintings retained a touch of Picasso's drawing and that he meditated on the lessons of Cubism. But he never conformed to the post-Cubism of the dominant non-figuration of the 1940s. Remarkably, he quickly freed himself from the constraints of traditional figurative art and the more decorative ones of the geometric, idealistic abstractions of the post-war period. Charles Estienne and Jacques Putman were able to detect the singular originality that his works promised, which, exhibited under the label "*École de Paris*," did not correspond to any of the "schools of Paris" that it claimed to label.

Messagier quickly explored other, more unique paths, leading him towards an abstraction that asserted the plane of the canvas where a motif is organized, sometimes symmetrically, but never imposing itself as a figurative or geometrically decorative representation. It is the expressiveness of the gesture, driven by the feeling of his experience, of his fusion with Nature, that the artist would later express, starting in the 1950s. This resulted in works, often of large dimensions, rectangular like those of Morris Louis, oblong like the cinemascope formats of Pollock, or square like those of Clyfford Still. Messagier inscribed cloud-like forms in them—at a time when Turner's painting was experiencing renewed interest—seemingly formless, kinds of skeins, interlacings, traces, more or less wide, more or less thick, left by the creative gesture of the painter handling more or less wide flat brushes loaded with color, with paint. He developed this expressive manner by accentuating the presence and intensity of his gesture throughout the 1960s, briefly tempted by the radicality of monochromy practiced by his friend Yves Klein. Both



shared a fondness for the theatrical, for spectacular action.

Commenting on Jean Messagier's works, Olivier Kaepelin, in the text published in the exhibition catalog, writes: "If we are dealing with pictorial bodies, with surfaces inspired by the grass of the fields, the night of animals, the water of lakes, we have no definition for them, they embrace and gather into an unknown figure. No name for this synthesis, this effusion, except for the one given by Gérard Gasiowski: 'PAINTING.' Painting as an equivalent of that 'Everything' that Messagier evokes, painting as a companion when, attentive to our sensations, we find that it never ceases to invent its lexicon, of which no grammar can take possession. We are traversed by the plurality of the world. Immersed, we let ourselves be carried by its movements."

Since the late 18th century, with the death of God, the fragmentation of the world, the multiple and synchronous collages, totality no longer exists as an organic unity. It is this, however, that Jean Messagier wants to paint. He finds it no longer in an all-encompassing vision of an ordered and static world, but in the only reality where it still exists, in the full moment of movement, where we can perhaps find this essential dimension of our ordinary lives. His painting then becomes a succession of intense expressions of air, of substances that form and dissolve through the journey it allows us to undertake. Within us and outside of us, in a spring where everything moves, everything blooms, like a part of eternity that only art allows us to experience..."

In the same catalog, Bernard Ceysson places him in this context: "Just as Newman and, later, Frank Stella did, Messagier revives the classical convention of history painting, which 'supposes that any great historical or mythical event can be represented by art and, conversely, that any great painting must depict a great event.' Each work of Messagier represents a great event of *Natura naturans*. He lives it with it. And he, Messagier, paints it as an exceptional moment of his life. He does not describe it, but he depicts it in a remembrance where 'narration and description' merge, made 'indiscernible' by his active 'presence.' As Starobinski suggested for Fragonard's *Coresus and Callirhoe*, each painting by Messagier is also 'inhabited by a dreamlike atmosphere.' This exhilarating and exalted atmosphere is supported by an accompaniment in words, in a poetic language using all the imaging rhetorical devices to make almost audible the sounds of their spoken or declaimed assonances. This affirms the inseparability of the artist creating and the creative power of Nature, in a place, at a moment, in the cycle of hours, days, and seasons. In this sense, there is something in Messagier's painting retained from Monet, at that point from which both the molecular expansion well described by Diderot in *D'Alembert's Dream* and the generative expansiveness released by the artist's gesture occur. He does this from an impassive core, from which, charged with pictorial matter, skeins of lines of paint, destined to 'depict' what the title describes with sharp writing, unfold, deploy, intertwine. It is then that it is confirmed that what we see is indeed what we see: the making of the painting. In Messagier's writings, this confirmation is reiterated, but differently, in a recall, a return, of the same, with an insistence that I reproduce, that painting is like poetry: *Ut pictura poesis*.

Lymyfy Art Consulting, August 11, 2024



## **Program**

### Vernissage

13 September, 2024

### Exhibition

14 September, 2024 - 2 February, 2025

### Opening hours:

Wednesday to Sunday, 1 pm to 6 pm

Closed Mondays and Tuesdays

### Guided tours:

By appointment only at [info@fondationfernet-branca.org](mailto:info@fondationfernet-branca.org)

## **Support**

We thank the Saint-Louis City Council and its mayor Pascale Schmidiger for their generous support.

This exhibition would not have taken place without the support of Thomas and Élie Messagier. It was curated by Bernard Ceysson and Arlette Klein, and organized in collaboration with Lymfyr Art Consulting. The catalog, prepared by Arlette Klein and Élie Messagier, was produced by Nastasia Hadoux.

## **Press**

A media tour takes place on September 12, 2024, at 4 pm. Please register at [presse@fondationfernet-branca.org](mailto:presse@fondationfernet-branca.org). Press images can be found on this [link](#). Should you have any questions or require further information, do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Lukas Zitzer

Communication and press

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