

EXHIBITION REVIEW: HENRI MATISSE, THE CUT-OUTS AT TATE MODERN

Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs

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I have been no more than a medium, as it were.

Henry Matisse

As you enter the first exhibition room on the second floor of the Tate Modern in London, you may notice a 1945 homemade film in living colour by Adrien Maeght. Not all visitors linger in front of it; but many will. Resting on the black leather cubes only for a moment, they may observe the master, Henry Matisse himself, aged 76, accompanied by his young female assistants at work. Matisse is cutting. His fluid, vigorous scissoring movements alternate with quick and curvilinear serpentine-like outbreaks of the hand, shaping a form out of matter. Screened in the right-hand corner of the entrance room, opposite Matisse's first hybrids comprised of traditional painting reinforced by cut and pasted gouache tinted paper, this short, one minute-long film acts as road sign: a visual invitation to the spectator to contemplate Matisse's ultimate works, the cut-outs.

The cut-outs retrospective is a conjoint undertaking of the Tate with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, where the exhibition will travel next, prior to returning to the different galleries and private collections that house the works. In London, the exposition was curated by Nicholas Serota, the Tate Director; with Nicholas Cullinan, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and with Flavia Frigeri, an Assistant Curator at the Tate. It consists of 14 rooms, in which the 120 artworks, created between 1936 and 1954 (the year of Matisse's demise) are arranged chronologically. Ablaze with vibrant colours, this critically acclaimed exhibition invites the audience to savour the eye-candy masterpieces of one of the greatest Modernist painters. Yet despite its cheerful agility, Matisse's oeuvre in his last years was not an uncomplicated one. Far more than a show of *bonheur de vivre*, Matisse's vivid multichromatic array of cut-outs brings forward interesting questions about space and memory vis-à-vis medium.

As you very quickly discover, Matisse's artistic conduct with the notoriously flat surface that is the paper sheet is informed by a potent three-dimensionality. This vehement sense of roundness (as opposed to flatness) has three major temporal strata that can be observed both in the video and throughout the exhibition.

As the film beautifully demonstrates, at the very beginning of the creative process there is the preparatory stage: the cutting of the tinted paper. As Matisse moves his hands, carving the paper with his scissors, a helix form with lobate margins is formed. Separated from the flat sheet, the form performs a dance of twisting layers. Thus, in this initial state of the artwork's life, spatiality has a twofold importance. Not only does the artist's body movement gain prominence in the studio space (as, for instance, with action painting), but also following those movements, the artist's materials – pieces of paper – are themselves transformed into three-dimensional forms that are active in space.

Then, there is the placement of the cut pieces. As the pins and the pin marks, particularly visible in *The Dancers* (1937–8) and *Acanthuses* (1953), suggest, Matisse's method involves multiple additions, repositions and re-compositions. A creative comportment of adding and removing that has brought Lydia Delectorskaya, Matisse's ultimate assistant and muse, to state that he is 'modelling [the cut-out figure] like a clay sculpture'. Indeed, it is only appropriate that a three-dimensional material treatment will be followed by a compositional practice comparable with sculpture, the three-dimensional aesthetic practice par excellence.

At last, there is the final stage: the finished artwork. Here too three-dimensionality prevails. In 1947, publisher Tériade translated 20 of Matisse's cut-outs made especially for the artist's book *Jazz* (1947) into print. Matisse's reaction was telling. Upon seeing the product taking its final form of the flat printed page, Matisse expressed his discontent, stating that the new medium 'removes [the cut-outs'] sensitivity'. The mentioned 'sensitivity' is the cut-out's volumetric quality: being reproduced in print in the form of a flat image cancelled the light superposition of the different cut-out pieces. It cancelled their presence in space. At the exhibition this disparity between volume and flatness is well demonstrated thanks to the hanging of the original maquettes atop a glass showcase displaying the printed book. The differences are truly remarkable.

Walking through the exhibition the spectator discovers the extent to which space and volume are, in fact, vital notions for Matisse's colourful cut-outs. As the careful curatorial work in this exhibition intimates, this link between space and colour is not coincidental: the two notions are closely related. Artistic theory is in favour of such a view. In his study of Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981), Gilles Deleuze, for instance, states that 'space is colour'. Deleuze means that certain painters, to which he refers as 'colourists', achieve space – volume – in their work through colour, bringing out what he calls a 'haptic sight of colour-space'. The colourist is, thus, a painter whose moulding of space by colour calls forward a haptic vision: a somatic sensation.

Matisse is not a colourist in the Deleuzian sense: Colourism in Deleuze refers first and foremost to relations of tonality, not to relations of value, as in Matisse. That is, colourists use relations within the colour itself, instead of simply relating one colour to others. Nevertheless, it is by no means a surprise that Matisse defined his own work as 'cutting directly into colour'. Matisse's relation to colour may not be colouristic, but it is *haptic*. Matisse's medium is neither the paper, nor the scissors. Matisse's medium is the colour, which he moulds in a tactile manner.

Interestingly, as you can see in the exhibition, sculpture is not the only artistic medium Matisse's cut-outs may be paralleled to. There is, for instance, a strong link to modern ballet, which in terms of dynamism and compositions found in Matisse an apt stage designer, as one can notice in room two. Additionally, there is the practice of stained glass, like the one Matisse designed in 1947 for the Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence (France), the study for which can be seen in room seven. Both are mediums of expression that have a strong presence in space.

Most interesting of all, however, is the relation to drawing. In fact, the exhibition's room guide states that 'cutting is a way of drawing and sculpting at the same time'. If drawing is an immediate form of artistic thought that leaves a positive mark on a surface, cutting is the opposite: while maintaining the immediacy of expression, it reverses the sign into negative. Instead of adding to the surface, cutting subtracts from it. Cutting does not locate a form on the surface, but rescues the form from within it. In this, cutting is, indeed, much like sculpture: Michelangelo's trapped slaves meant for the tomb of Pope Julius II (today at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence) come to mind.

Yet the similarity between Matisse's cut-outs and drawing can be pushed further, into questions of medium and memory. It is traditional to think of the draughtsman's pen as a tool of expression that is guided by impulses of creativity. Similarly, the cutter's scissors are a tool – a body extension – guided by memory. As Matisse is quoted to say in relation to his *Oceania, The Sky* (1946), 'it's as though my memory had suddenly taken the place of the outside world'. The artist sees his own memory embedded in the paper and, by moulding it, brings out – releases – the form from the matter that confines it. He sees the memory in the colour, and through that colour – through the direct, tactile work into colour – he brings it out.

The cut-out exposition is an extraordinary opportunity to see this process of from-memory-to-form come about. Besides being a fantastically colourful experience of Matisse's truly spectacular ultimate outburst of creativity, Matisse's cut-outs bring the spectator to the very heart of the master's artistic research. Colour and space, sculpture and drawing, medium and memory – all are there, present, thought intriguing and conversation provoking, in what critics have rightfully deemed a once-in-a-lifetime exhibition.