

For the Love of the Anti
Written by Nathan Jon Smith

Pierre Soulages' *Painting*, August 1, 1956, looms before me—its dark gravity pulling me inward, intensified by the stark white walls of the MoMA. Thick black strokes layered into an architectural heaviness anchor themselves above a wash of veiled pigment. The edifice and its shadow stretch across the six-foot canvas, obscuring the space that lingers below. Taken together, the painting is impenetrable, sealed by its own darkness. What will it take for me to enter the heart of this beast? What will it take from me? What is owed? The debt of joy—I see its accumulation hoarded behind the density of the brushstrokes. The darkness marches forward. Upward. In a systematic spin—a centrifuge of control—it orients itself only to the contextual joy that it conceals. The beast forges its skeletal frame with blocks of censorship. Only it can have... And I, like the rest, must submit to the desire it breeds within me.

From near view, the paint thickens into ridges, each black block stamped into the canvas like a seal of labor. Their edges catch a faint glisten as the gallery light slips across the textured surface. The work churns with an industrial rhythm, each repetition expanding outward, pressing into my spirit—I barely notice its poison entering me. As I shift my gaze across the surface, caressing the blackness, seeping it into the cracks, I begin to fall victim to the machine's devices. There is a tremble of dimmed light—ethereal and fleeting—calling out from beneath the rubble. My lust for that which cannot (or should not) be seen only fuels this violent production. Joy becomes increasingly distant the more I fight toward the light. The products of effort, pain, and productivity—blood, sweat, and tears—congeal, adding to the eternal blackness. This stream of work is a lubricant for the beast's efficiency, and as it tirelessly appropriates my efforts, puffing out a dark, pitiless steam, it proclaims, "*We must build. Put away your joy. Kill it and hide the blood.*" In my desperate search, I find myself in agreement. Let the passing of time wash over the light. Soon enough, it will all be absorbed by the eternally expanding nothingness. The edges of the painting, a burgundy red, hint toward this painful existence. Puddles of the same color become apparent under the lighter

brushstrokes—where the light struggles against its censorship—confirming this cursed fate.

The anti-spirit is spreading within me. Yet beneath this overwhelming negativity, a smothered but unrelenting light maintains its fight against the darkness—a beacon of hope, resistance, and truth. No matter how dim, its presence refutes the certainty of despair. I find myself unapologetically returning to its luminance. The paradox builds—a paralysis of productivity, a vital suspension. The beast moves swiftly to keep up with the light and as it accumulates increasingly over the terrain, the lucid fog captures what it carries into a present stillness. Timestamps. Frames destined to be forgotten. I'm called to step within its approach, to remove its veil, to peer into the dark—but I am afraid of its erasure, that it will erase me too. It is doubtful that any joy breathes on the other side, but perhaps I will find endurance smeared along the pistons of its engine. I want to escape to the joy, and will not let the fear, nor the beckon for yield, keep me from flux.

Surely, this isn't what it wanted, but this is what I've become—what it's transformed me into. Subverting its defining mechanism, the adversarial spirit, I find any effort that the beast makes to erase what remains urges me to stay. I have become that lingering light. The productive gravity of the blackhole repels me away. Light and darkness have become more polar than ever, and in recognizing my negative, I need nothing more than the positive. The toxic and decaying is truly the salvific and purifying. The blight that entered me, spawning a rebellious nature, has faded every shadow of darkness.

The fever has broken, but the body still trembles. There was a heart inside this beast after all, and what has it taken for me to enter it? The only way inside, to see and understand the inner workings of the machine, was to become yet another spinning axle propagated out of its driveshaft—cycling, caught in its industrious loop. In that cycle, I have traveled through the darkness and returned to the light. But the light has changed, forged by a dark flame—purified by the hate, anguish, and drudgery. The coarse, dimensional, black units, overlapping one another, once represented a cold denial. They now insist upon a Sisyphean struggle.

There is a steep mountain inside the belly of the beast. Those blocks that build and blind, they are the incline—collapsing inward, directly to its heart. It is a futile labor to reach through this darkness toward the light that trickles beneath, yet I was trapped with no way out and no other goal set before me. As I stood before the canvas, staring into this burden, I could feel that futility mirrored within me in the endless push against that which will not yield. I was punished for the “anti” framework of my mind—tirelessly imposing my gaze upon the dark structure. Working the work. In this absurd futility, I became Albert Camus’ Sisyphus—happy. I became the light that I had sought so desperately. *The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart (Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus)*. In accepting my struggle—my punishment—amid the painting’s overwhelming illegibility, one truth became violently clear to me: my nature. This compulsion to push against—that is who I am.

Gazing back into the painting—that deep abyss—I make amends with the trails it provides me and the joy it denies me. The echo of resistance found in its repeated black stamps is not bound to the canvas. It escapes its frame. Its form reaches into three-dimensional space, its texture lifts in a similar sentiment, and its spirit whispers beyond materiality—a metaphysical residue speaking in favor of refusal. The slow brushstrokes washing away the light beneath is an outpouring of obscurity, submerging the easily available. Life is hard—the blood-red borders remind me—and I want life.



Pierre Soulages. *Painting*. August 1, 1956