

Art Ba Ba

The first Western artists to hold a solo exhibition in mainland China after the Reform and Opening Up, Jean Miotte: *Return to China*

Article by Tang Liu

February 8, 2025



Jean Miotte, *Ecart*, 2005 - Acrylic on canvas, 130 x 97 x 4.6 cm (framed) / ©
Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur

“When I work, I want to unite two extremes: one is total reduction, distillation and self-restraint except for the one mark that expresses the whole world of thought and feeling at once, as in Zen. The other is exuberance, complete spontaneity, and the unbounded multiplicity of brilliant and interposed colors. In both extremes is the desire to lose the self, to give oneself entirely.”

— Jean Miotte

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Installation view of Jean Miotte's exhibition *Return to China*, Almine Rech Shanghai, January 10 - March 15, 2025 / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

On January 10th, Almine Rech Shanghai presented *Return to China*, a solo exhibition by the late French artist Jean Miotte (1926-2016), as its opening exhibition of 2025. As one of the first Western artists to hold a solo exhibition in mainland China after the reform and opening up, Miotte made a remarkable impact with over fifty paintings displayed at Beijing's French Cultural Center (Institut Français de Chine) in 1980, establishing a deep connection with the Asian art world. More than four decades later, *Return to China* marks Miotte's long-awaited comeback to the country, and showcases twelve paintings by the French master artist. "Looking at his prolific oeuvre today, we realize that he can be considered a 'classic' of lyrical abstraction, and it's time to show his work again," said gallery owner Almine Rech when she was announced as the global representative of the estate of Jean Miotte in 2023.

After the Second World War, a new post-war artistic movement began to emerge as both French and international artists began to gather in Paris. In 1951, the critic Charles Estienne coined the term *Nouvelle École de Paris* (New School of Paris) to describe a group of Parisian artists who were exploring new possibilities in abstract art. In 1952, Michel Tapié published *Un Art Autre* (*A Different Art*), which introduced the concept of Art Informel. During the same period, artists such as Pollock and Newman began to emerge in New York, eventually forming what would later be known as Abstract Expressionism or the New York School.

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Jean Miotte's solo exhibition at the Institut français de Chine in Beijing in 1980 / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech



Portrait of Jean Miotte, 1998 / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Sylvie Rua

Born in Paris in 1926, Jean Miotte was undoubtedly influenced by both of these artistic movements. Originally a mathematics major student, Miotte only began his artistic journey after serving in the military, learning painting through visits to Parisian artists' studios and museums. In the 1960s, with the support of the Ford Foundation, Miotte traveled to New York, where he met artists such as Rothko and Motherwell. It was here that he began to create a body of work that would mark a turning point in his career—paintings that would shape his distinctive style and influence his work throughout his life.

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Jean Miotte's solo exhibition at the National Museum of History in Taipei, 1983 / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech



Jean Miotte's solo exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore, 1983 / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech

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Jean Miotte, *Untitled*, 1980 - Acrylic on canvas, 94 x 121 x 4.6 cm (framed) / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur

Despite similar time periods and parallels in the techniques employed and ideologies promoted, such as action painting, automatism, gesturalism, and calligraphy, post-war abstract art created by artists in Paris and New York remained distinctly different. In a curatorial essay about the New School of Paris, the French art historian Thomas Schlessler noted that the language used by gallery owners and artists in Paris was completely different from the one promoting avant-garde art in New York: “In America, people talk freely about automatism, self-reference, and the purity of form, while the style of New School of Paris is based on gestures and signs that re-lect human expression, the tumultuous history of social upheaval, and an intuitive sense of cosmic consciousness.”[1]

Jean Miotte’s works were influenced in turn by these schools of thought which overlapped and yet diverged from one another. On the one hand, lyrical, rhythmic, and full of emotional depth, the artist’s paintings seem to evoke music or dance on the canvas. On the other hand, both in terms of visual form and the spirituality that flows from the visual, they are related to typical Abstract Expressionist works in which the image is self-referential, existing in its own right with a complete logic and meaning.

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These two artistic directions may appear to be completely disparate, but Jean Miotte believed that they could ultimately converge. He once summarized his approach to art as follows: “When I work, I want to unite two extremes: one is total reduction, distillation and self-restraint except for the one mark that expresses the whole world of thought and feeling at once, as in Zen. The other is exuberance, complete spontaneity, and the unbounded multiplicity of brilliant and interposed colors. In both extremes is the desire for loss of self, for total surrender.” [2]



Jean Miotte, *Untitled* (detail), 1980 - Acrylic on canvas, 94 x 121 x 4.6 cm (framed) / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur

This so-called “desire for total surrender” is, in many ways, what distinguishes Jean Miotte’s painting from that of many other artists. Just as we often recognize the distinct inner worlds of Abstract Expressionist painters, such as Rothko’s religion and Motherwell’s sorrow, Miotte’s complex colors can be understood as a form of self-forgetfulness in a tumultuous action. His works are light, colorful, and bear a distinctly French flair, in contrast to the New York School. But they also evoke the feeling of an exhausting meditation: in such a mind state, thoughts spiral out of control, ultimately overwhelming both the meditation itself and the meditator.

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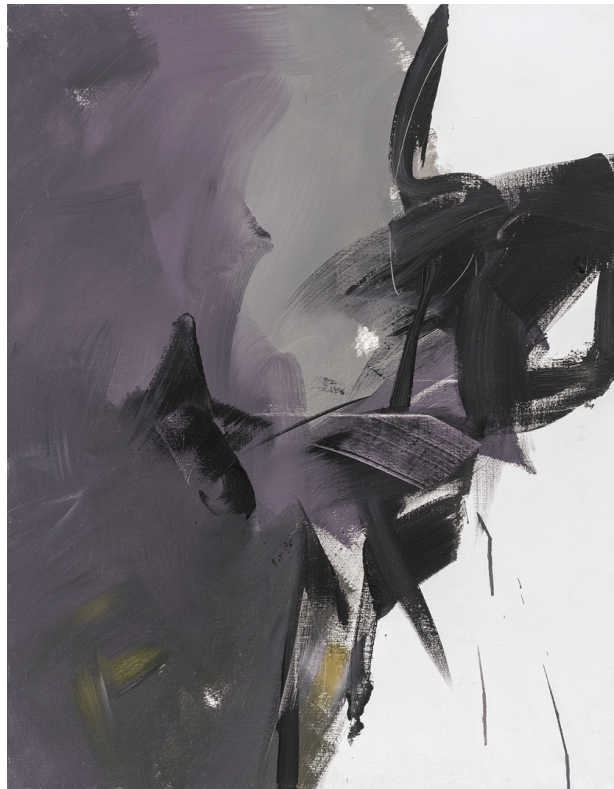
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Jean Miotte, *Untitled*, 1994 - Acrylic on canvas, 167 x 135 x 4.6 cm (framed) / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur



Jean Miotte, *Obliques*, 1989 - Acrylic on canvas, 134.5 x 101.5 x 4.6 cm (framed) / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur

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Jean Miotte's attempt to combine these two extremes and express the harmonious, self-forgetting experience they produced can be seen in some of his earlier works. In a series of works from around 1949 titled *Recherche d'Espace (Space Exploration)*, the artist made a clear distinction between the color and the imagery within the color. Sometimes these were mystical symbols, sometimes shapes or lines inspired by artists like Delaunay and Klee. From the 1950s, his paintings began to feature an increasing number of spontaneous elements. Miotte started to engage more directly with the canvas, reacting to the immediate visual experience, and translating these reactions, which reflected the inner and spiritual world, into physical (brushstroke) and visual (color) energy.

Jean Miotte himself described his creative process as follows: "I see my work as a projection, the result of moments of intense experience, the consequence of confrontation with experience, and of internal conflicts. Painting is not rational theorizing or intellectual observation, painting is an action, a sequence of movements carried within oneself and whose origin is internal." This statement hints at the ultimate path he would take to achieve this "self-forgetting" dance or meditation, which would lead to the characteristic gesturalism that would define his later work.



Jean Miotte, *Untitled*, 1948 - Oil on linen canvas, 50.5 x 42.5 x 4.6 cm (framed) / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur

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Jean Miotte, *Untitled*, 1948 - Oil on linen canvas, 50.5 x 42.5 x 4.6 cm (framed) / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur

Gesturalism appeared at a very early stage in Miotte's paintings, initially as a component of the composition, and sometimes even as a secondary element. Often contrasting with a dark, dense background, it acted as a delicate, lyrical passageway, illuminating and activating psychological texture and depth (as seen in the two small oil paintings titled *Untitled* in the current *Return to China* exhibition). On other occasions, it served to shake up the composition, preventing the rhythm of color arrangement from becoming overly tense (as seen in *Untitled*, 1960, in this exhibition).

Beginning with the transformative period of the 1960s, influenced by the New York School, the artist gradually abandoned the tense, dense compositions of large groups of color, in favor of a freer, more organic mode of expression. These spontaneous brushstrokes, especially those characterized by a sweeping, gestural approach, became increasingly central to the composition. Often beginning with a black mark that conveys an obvious sense of speed or motion, other colors join this dynamic with softer, more measured gestures. Together, they create a spatial depth between black and white, forming the work's overall visual structure.

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In part, Jean Miotte's love of dance led to his emphasis on gesture. In his early years, the artist participated in dance performances and frequently designed sets for theater companies and costumes for actors. Beyond being inspired by the movements of dance or the presence of actors, Miotte connected painting and dance from a more fundamental perspective of the incomplete gesture. He once said that the so-called work, the so-called making, occurs only between the desire to move and the physical posture.



Jean Miotte, *Insurrection*, 1996 - Acrylic on canvas, 300 x 500 cm / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

This philosophy meant that for Miotte, neither the work nor the creation as an artistic activity, including the act of making, was anything pre-ordained or retrospective. Instead, it was immediate and impulsive. This way of thinking has infused his paintings with energy and unpredictability, with each piece rooted in the specific moment of its creation. It also gave his work a particular depth of thought: Dance, as an art form itself, is inherently about contemplation, about how our spirit extends through the body, and how we constantly unfold in time and space, second by second, minute by minute.

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Jean Miotte, *Insurrection* (detail), 1996 - Acrylic on canvas, 300 x 500 cm / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

Besides dance, Eastern philosophy and art were other important sources of inspiration for Miotte. He visited Japan and China several times and formed friendships with artists such as Zao Wou-ki and Sam Francis, who were either from China or closely associated with Eastern thought. In contrast to the Western view of humans as the measure of all things, Miotte saw Taoist culture as placing greater emphasis on the human's relationship with nature and the cosmos, highlighting the non-action (无作). Eastern philosophies, including Zen Buddhism, inspired his reflections on white, and on the blank voids within the canvas as existing in a state of colorless presence.

In the works on view in *Return to China*, several paintings were created on a white primer base, while others leave white spaces amid intense colors. In the mid-1970s, Jean Miotte began experimenting with integration of white and the natural brown of the canvas into his compositions, creating a series of two-toned paintings (featuring only a background color and one other hue). Not only do these whites (whether as negative space or intentional blank voids) regulate and control the complex rhythms and spatial dynamics of the vibrant colors, making them glow and move, but Miotte also felt that white offered depth to both thought and spirit. "Duality is a constant in my painting. I have never tried to eliminate it; on the contrary, I am now able to use it productively" Jean Miotte explained. "I am fascinated with the abundance of light and the 'natural' instinct of the rational Mediterranean civilizations, but at the same time, perhaps because of my northern heritage, I am just as concerned with metaphysical problems as I am with sensual expression."

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Jean Miotte, *Untitled*, 1995 - Acrylic aerosol on canvas, 101.5 x 134.5 x 4.6 com (framed) / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur



Jean Miotte, *Untitled (detail)*, 1995 - Acrylic aerosol on canvas, 101.5 x 134.5 x 4.6 com (framed) / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Nicolas Brasseur

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One of the most important things that we must keep in mind when we approach Jean Miotte's oeuvre is that, while his paintings are visually striking and offer a rich and unforgettable fascination, we must never forget the need for contemplation. This contemplation is both the result of his work and the process through which his paintings were created. It might differ from the stereotypical image of a philosopher's meditative posture, for it is lighthearted, even simple, and yet its depth is no less significant. It may even have an Eastern quality, unfolding on the road, within a journey, or perhaps in the carefree abandon of a dance.



Installation view of Jean Miotte's exhibition *Return to China*, Almine Rech Shanghai, January 10 - March 15, 2025 / © Courtesy of Jean Miotte Foundation and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

[1] Thomas Schlessler, *The New School of Paris Through Its Pioneering Women (1945-1964)*, translated by the author.

[2] The artist's dialogue cited in this article comes from Jean Miotte's published albums or from his personal website.