

WIDEWALLS

The Pioneering Legacy of Henri Matisse's *Jazz*

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By Balasz Takac



Henri Matisse, *Jazz*, 1947, twenty pochoirs printed in colors, each sheet approximately: 16 3/4 x 25 1/2 inches, edition of 250. All images courtesy Berggruen Gallery. Installation image by Impart Photography/ Glen Cheriton.

By the 1940s, jazz music gained a broader appreciation and became adorned despite being demonized by the Nazis. It influenced a range of visual artists as well, as they saw jazz rhythm as a liberating form. The sprawling harmony was perceived as limitless and inspired numerous practitioners to experiment. No wonder the great mage of Modernism, Henri Matisse himself, felt so bedazzled by jazz that he produced a series under the same title.

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After the artist showed the works publicly, they quickly gained popularity in art circles. Fascinated by Matisse's innovation and understanding of this musical genre, other much younger artists immersed themselves in formal experiments while remaining devoted to Henri Matisse's *Jazz*.

To closely explore the significance of the seminal set of twenty prints and their impact on the artmaking of the second half of the 20th century, as well as contemporary art, Berggruen Gallery is a group exhibition *Drawing with Scissors: Contemporary Works in Conversation with Matisse's Jazz*.



Sarah Crowner, *The Waves*, 2014, acrylic on stitched canvas, 78 3/4 x 118 1/4 inches

While struggling with illness, Henri Matisse transformed his isolation into highly imaginative liberation during the early post-war period. That is when he discovered collage and the stencil process. The artist used gouache to soak sheets of paper with paint, dry them for tactile texture, then cut and arrange the sheets into compelling formations. Matisse described this process as "drawing with scissors."

These chromatic series that were later executed in print are saturated with melodic figuration and are a vibrant combination of hopefulness and unease. Playfully, Matisse collaged various forms and colors

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to create *Jazz*. Looking from a contemporary stance, this series excels Matisse's experimentation. In 1951, the artist wrote:

By creating these colored paper cut-outs, it seems to me that I am happily anticipating things to come. I don't think that I have ever found such balance as I have in creating these paper cut-outs. But I know that it will only be much later that people will realize to what extent the work I am doing today is in step with the future.

The current exhibition also highlights the artist's relationship with the Berggruen family. In 1953, a German art dealer and collector, Heinz Berggruen, presented the first exhibition centered on Matisse's cut-outs at his gallery in Paris.



Left: Paul Kremer, *Cradle 01*, 2022, acrylic on Hemp canvas, 67 x 52 inches. Right: Anna Kunz, *Half Ocean*, 2022, ink and dye on polyester chiffon, 144 x 72 inches. Installation image by Impart Photography/ Glen Cheriton.

The cut-outs or *découpés* have set an example for new types of material and structural experiments. Triggered by Matisse, the Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes creates vibrant yet rather complex works saturated with a layered construction. *Drawing with Scissors* features a geometric assemblage of mixed media on paper titled *Yogurt*.

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The stitched canvases by Sarah Crouner were built on the premises of Matisse's cut-outs, as illustrated with the exhibited work *The Waves*. On the other hand, Austin Eddy builds his own collage style with paint; through his work *Pigeon in the park*, the artist explores the space found upon a painted surface, texture, and patterns.

Some artists explore Matisse's technical collage potential, while others nod to the artist's fluidity of form and exuberant use of color and line. One of them was Ellsworth Kelly, whose drawings, collages, and prints are included in *Drawing with Scissors*. Like Matisse, Kelly examined the simplicity of the color field; for instance, in *Untitled (Red/Blue)*, the artist contrasted colors in search of balance.

The installment also includes the work of the artist Paul Kremer, who responds to Matisse's collage technique with a recent painting titled *Cradle 01*, as well as the works *Berggruen Series* and *Center Break* by the legendary Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler. Also inspired by Matisse's treatment of color is a contemporary painter Anna Kunz whose painting is part of *Drawing with Scissors*. As she further explained, Matisse once described his approach as "studied carelessness."

This resonates with me because it regards the body's knowing and the trusting of one's intuition through practice. When I approach the canvas, I've got my studying done, so I can invite informed spontaneity to keep the works direct and fresh.

Other artists addressed *Jazz*'s gestural forms and movements through their works, such as Mickalene Thomas, who referred to Matisse's representations of the female form in work titled *Her Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires*. The presence of Matisse's cut-outs is also noted in contemporary still-life paintings. Bruce Cohen incorporated Matisse's cut-outs into his composition by placing them beside windows to underline their depth and openness. The work *Eight Soups* by John Baldessari appropriates Matisse's 1912 painting, *Goldfish and Sculpture*. The painting by JJ Manford, *Sunrise with Matisse*, features a colorful wall of cut-outs.

Drawing with Scissors includes Matisse's line drawings to underline their impact on contemporary artists. The drawing was of great importance for Matisse, the fact best illustrated with *Nu Couché*, which depicts an outline of the female form. The liaison with later artists such as the mentioned Ellsworth Kelly, but also Richard Diebenkorn, and David Hockney is apparent since all of them used drawing extensively in their own practices. Diebenkorn's charcoal on paper, *Untitled 1963-64*, evokes *Nu Couché* with its simplicity and elegance, while Hockney's lithograph *Black Tulips* features a singular still life.

Drawing with Scissors should be perceived as an homage to creative endeavors. Matisse's discovery of the cut-out technique was a genuine innovation that inspired him to take on a new conquest of form and color. Therefore, the series *Jazz* is a pinnacle of his late work and, as such, is a significant inspiration for contemporary artists.

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The exhibition *Drawing with Scissors: Contemporary Works in Conversation with Matisse's Jazz* will be on view at Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco until April 16th, 2022.

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