

The Courtauld

Henri Michaux

The Mescaline Drawings

12 Feb - 4 June 2025

Gilbert and Ildiko Butler Drawings Gallery

In January 1955, as part of an experiment prompted by his publisher and supervised by a doctor, the Franco-Belgian artist and author Henri Michaux (1899-1984) first tried mescaline. This non-addictive psychedelic drug is derived from the Mexican peyote cactus. Michaux's aim was to investigate its effect on the creative act. He considered these experiences to be a portal into the inner workings of the mind. They transformed his artistic life and provoked an outpouring of distinctive drawings and writings. A selection of those extraordinary works is presented here.

In the foreword to his book *Miserable Miracle* (1956), Michaux noted the fundamental aspect of the Mescaline drawings: he did not create them under the direct influence of the drug, but after its effects had passed, hours or sometimes even days later, resulting from a 'vibratory motion' that he felt in him for some time. The drawings convey Michaux's inner visions, and are based on the memory of those sensations and on the notes he took after the experiments.

In 1963, he co-directed *Images of the Visionary World*, a film in which he sought to further express through the moving image the feelings and emotions that could not be drawn or written on paper. This period of experimentation coincided with advances in medical therapeutic research using psychedelic drugs. Michaux's experiments lasted only a few years, after which mescaline, or other psychedelics, was no longer necessary; even without the drug, the artist was able to recreate on paper those earlier, compelling visions.

All works in this exhibition are by Henri Michaux (1899-1984).

Quotes from Henri Michaux's published works are used across the exhibition labels. They derive from the English translations of *Miserable Miracle* (1963), *Knowledge through the Abyss* (1994) and *Emergences Resurgences* (2001).

This project was conceived in collaboration with the Archives Henri Michaux, Paris.

The programme of displays in the Drawings Gallery is generously supported by the International Music and Art Foundation, with additional support from James Bartos.

Untitled

1944

Brown ink

Private collection

This drawing predates Henri Michaux's experimentations with mescaline. Its simplicity contrasts noticeably with the works he developed later and is characterised by controlled and uninterrupted lines.

Dots within tiny circles in the shape of an eye are already present here and resemble some of the marks that would become Michaux's own vocabulary of signs. This work demonstrates how mescaline was merely the facilitator of an artistic quest that had already begun.



Mescaline writing

1955

Black chalk on perforated-edge paper

Private collection

At home, away from prying eyes, Henri Michaux prepared himself for taking mescaline with great care - closed shutters, silent surroundings, music, both contemporary (Gustav Mahler, Olivier Messiaen) and traditional (Indian raga and polyphonic music from the Aka tribe of Central Africa), and hourly note-taking. It was important to report faithfully, as much as he was able to, what he felt.

However, writing in straight lines and coherently was hard. Here the artist conveys visually and through words the sensations he felt during the experience.



Untitled

1955

Black ink

Private collection

When describing his visions in his book *Miserable Miracle* (1956), Henri Michaux writes, 'For the first time a face appears, if it is a face. Two or three hundred alternate rows of eyes and lips, blubber lips that is ... and eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, composed this face which kept gliding ceaselessly downward, each lower row disappearing, replaced by others appearing, of slanting eyes, of slanting eyes, of slanting eyes ... the endless belt kept rolling with its enigmatic eyes, and you couldn't decide which one to watch more than another.'



Untitled

1955

Black ink

Private collection

One of the recurring shapes in Henri Michaux's inner visions, which the artist tried to represent in his drawings, is that of the 'unforgettable furrow.' He described it as a furrow that crossed his skull 'from the forehead to the occiput... A furrow without beginning or end, as tall as I am and whose average breadth is appreciably the same above and below, a furrow that I'd say comes from one end of the earth, goes through me and on to the other end of the earth.'



Untitled

1956

Graphite, black and coloured inks

Private collection

This drawing recalls a passage in Henri Michaux's *Miserable Miracle*, published in the same year: 'At times thousands of little tentacles of a gigantic starfish fastened to me so compactly that I could not tell if I was becoming the starfish or if the starfish had become me. I shrank into myself, I made myself watertight and contracted, but everything here that contracts must promptly relax again.'



Untitled

1955

Black and coloured inks

Private collection

Henri Michaux and his publisher Jean Paulhan, as well as the poet Edith Boissonas, decided to experience mescaline together in early 1955. At the time, mescaline, which is extracted from the Mexican peyote cactus, was being researched by neuropsychiatrists at the Sainte-Anne hospital in Paris.

After a couple of sessions, first Paulhan, then Boissonas, abandoned the experiment, leaving Michaux to continue his explorations alone. While he usually did so at home, he gradually entered what the botanist Roger Heim called the 'experimental circle' of scientists and pharmaceutical laboratories working in the field. This included Jean Delay at the Sainte-Anne hospital, the chemist Albert Hofmann at the Sandoz laboratories in Basel, and Heim, director of the Natural History Museum in Paris.



A peyote cactus in bloom



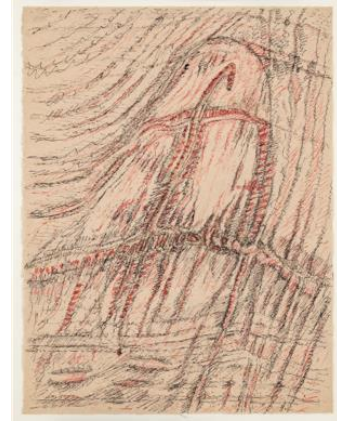
Untitled

1956

Graphite, black and coloured inks on pink paper
Private collection

Henri Michaux was neither the first nor the only artist to experiment with psychotropic drugs. For instance, in the first half of the 20th century, Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885-1939) preceded him. In 1954 Aldous Huxley published *The Doors of Perception* about his own experiments with mescaline; he was assisted by Dr Oswald Osmond who invented the term 'psychedelic' in a letter addressed to Huxley.

Huxley's book was very influential on Michaux's own research, however his artistic expressions remain distinct and unique. From a technical standpoint, Michaux's drawings are deceptively simple, relying on a limited range of media: black and sometimes coloured inks or chalks. Yet they abound with exuberant, agitated lines and shapes, which have often been associated with the output of a seismograph, or an encephalogram.



Untitled

1956

Graphite, black and coloured inks on perforated-edge paper
Private collection

In the hours or days following an experience with mescaline, Henri Michaux would begin to draw. The first marks 'would soon be overlaid by others - minute, multiple zigzaggings far more rapid than the ones I could have drawn, uninvited presences, characters or tiny animals, the advance guard of a large and impatient crowd on the march towards me or towards the page or towards the location of the drawing. The white did not remain white for long; even if I rapidly grew too tired to trace more than half a dozen marks, this was enough for an entire mass suddenly to start streaming in.'



Untitled

1956

Graphite, black and coloured inks

Private collection

While waiting for the hallucinogen to take effect, various objects around the artist would suddenly appear. In *Miserable Miracle* (1956), Michaux writes that the objects were 'all covered with these same patterns, but now larger, more numerous, made up of countless lines, no longer static or immortal, but active, agitated, scurrying around, animated by a life all their own, zigzagging like mad across these real surfaces as if they had been cinematographically projected on to them.' The 'seismic' effect, in the artist's own words, is perfectly rendered here in multiple lines of coloured inks.



Untitled

1956

Coloured crayons on perforated-edge paper

Private collection

In some of the Mescaline drawings, one glimpses figures or a face, sometimes exaggerated and devoid of any other part, 'visibly incapable of detaching itself from others ... Though the faces, when I try to describe them, seem monstrous, they really were not, having no expression at all.' In another passage Michaux adds, 'Instead of a carpet of faces it might also have been a landscape or a mountain of faces. It was simply that they were juxtaposed, and their parallelism more mechanical than deliberate.'



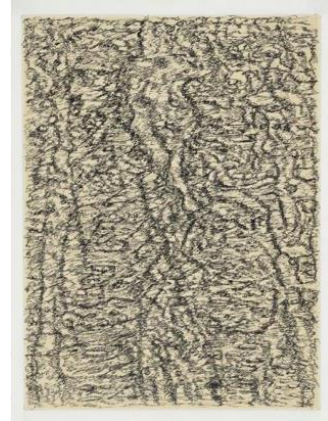
Untitled

1957

Black ink

Promised gift by Linda Karshan in memory of her husband, Howard Karshan. On long-term loan to The Courtauld Gallery, London

This extraordinary drawing, which is at the origin of this exhibition, appears at first glance as a cartographic map detailing a mountainous site, or, more precisely, a seismographic chart. In *Miserable Miracle* (1956), Michaux makes that association for the first time: 'Mescaline makes everything tremble with constant little tremblings, oscillations, junctions-disjunctions. There is a permanent miniature seism which makes one think of a ruiniform process, yet in spite of all the fissures nothing ever collapses'.



Untitled

1957

Coloured crayons

Private collection

In 1956, Michaux exhibited his Mescaline drawings at the Galerie La Hune in Paris, before publishing five major books on his experiences, including *Miserable Miracle* (1956) and *Knowledge through the Abyss* (1961), and collaborating with Sandoz laboratories in making the film *Images of the Visionary World* (1963). His texts and drawings helped to promote the scientific revolution behind the use of psychotropic drugs, and arose from medical research conducted using artistic methods. They illustrate Michaux's success in opening a channel of communication between rationalism and irrationalism.



Untitled

1959

Coloured crayons

Private collection

The furrow is a recurring element of Michaux's Mescaline drawings; it can be seen in other works displayed in this exhibition.

In a passage, the artist describes what he saw during his Mescaline experiences. 'By means of zigzag strokes, by means of transversal flights, by means of flashing furrows ... always beginning again, asserting itself, recovering itself, steadying itself, by means of punctuations, of repetitions, of hesitant jerks, by fissurations, I see, being formed, unformed, re-unformed, a jerking building, a building in abeyance, in perpetual metamorphosis ...'



Untitled

1959

Black ink

Private collection

This drawing is the result of Michaux's experiments with psilocybin, the principal component of hallucinogenic mushrooms (also called 'magic mushrooms'). These have been in use since prehistoric times, largely in Central American cultures, in religious, divinatory, or spiritual contexts. Michaux's first experience with psilocybin occurred in 1958 at the Sainte-Anne hospital, Paris. The psychedelic was provided by the director of the Paris Natural History Museum, the botanist Roger Heim, who had discovered and isolated the organic component of the drug. It was administered by Professor Jean Delay, who was studying its effects on the human body and mind.



Untitled

1962

Graphite, brown and black inks

Private collection

Before the development of brain imaging, words and images were used to record the effects of psychotropic drugs on the brain. The results were imperfect as the records were unverifiable internal mental images to which no one else had access. Comparing Henri Michaux's undertaking with the results of medical imaging (encephalograms) highlights the difficulty of representing these experiences.

The drawings linked to his experimentations are not straightforward records of mental images, as we might imagine of a hyperrealist painter copying what they see. For Michaux, the drawing process provided a crucial way of learning and understanding these experiences.



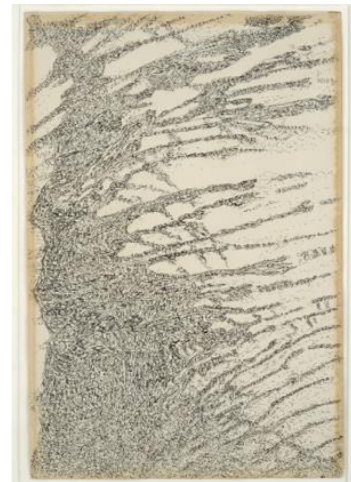
Untitled

1962

Graphite, brown and black inks on perforated-edge paper

Private collection

In the 1960s, after Michaux ceases his experiments with mescaline, his work reflects a new grasp of a fragmented and scattered world. In *Emergences and Resurgences*, Michaux writes, 'From time to time, if I'm drawing with pen and ink, I see the linear drawing fall apart, tending towards division, the division of division, division. Disaggregation? The name drawings of disaggregation was used. Despite the obvious analogy, they are more about reaggregation.' Such drawings aim to recreate visions similar to those he experienced after using mescaline.



Untitled

1962

Graphite, black chalk and black ink
Private collection

In Europe, particularly in Paris and Basel, the 1950s and 1960s were a time of pharmacological revolution, when science was discovering and learning how to control substances that act on the brain. The pharmaceutical industry was on the threshold of producing all kinds of psychotropic drugs, from neuroleptics, which combat schizophrenic psychosis, to anxiolytics and anti-depressants, which treat neuroses. It was in this context of psychopharmacological revolution and in collaboration with doctors that Michaux encountered mescaline.



Untitled

1966

Black and coloured inks
Private collection

In *Miserable Miracle* (1956), Michaux writes 'Mescaline spreads out great sheets of colors with millions of distinct points and assembles crowds with the agitation of crowds. Later it is capable only of the agitation of marching caterpillars. The forms almost always innumerable, incredibly elongated, exaggeratedly frail and slender, hollowed out in the middle, disclosing hair-thin minarets, columns like needles, little pinnacles that are altogether too dainty, lozenges, and all the things that are thinnest and most elongated, elongated and frail.'



Untitled

1966

Coloured crayons and pastels on perforated-edge paper
Private collection

Research on the therapeutic use of psychotropic drugs, including hallucinogens, was officially launched at the first World Congress of Psychiatry in Paris in 1950. Michaux's first experiment with mescaline took place on 2 January 1955, at the age of 56. This marked the start of a dozen years of experiments, partly using the model that psychiatrists have variously called 'experimental psychosis'.

In 1966, the fourth World Congress of Psychiatry in Madrid decided to end research using the major hallucinogens, as psychiatrists had come to regard their therapeutic virtues as negligible.

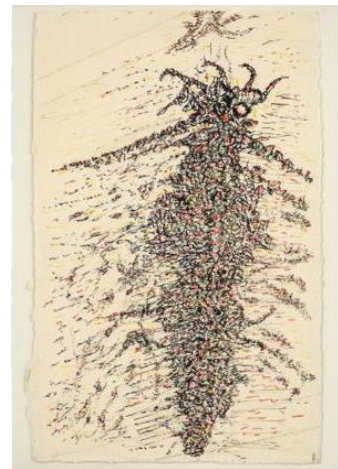


Untitled

1966

Graphite, black and coloured inks
Private collection

Resembling a vibrating insect or a cuttlefish, this form was drawn in 1966, when the artist returned to the style of the Mescaline drawings, but he was no longer under the influence of the drug. Previously, in *Miserable Miracle* (1956), he had written, 'Just as Mescaline has a style of its own, there are colours that belong to it. Show them to anyone who has taken Mescaline and they will recognise them. (Not always the very same but with a strong family resemblance).'



Untitled
1969
Graphite, black and coloured inks
Private collection

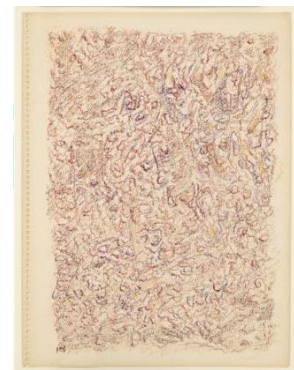
Michaux initially described some of his works from the 1960s with the term 'drawings of disaggregation', although he later preferred 'of reaggregation'. In them, the artist managed to recreate visions similar to those he experienced as a result of mescaline.

Over time, and through experience, the artist had gradually learned to sail 'the mescaline ocean' and perfected his tools: drawings that were at first fragmentary, disjointed and unstable came to occupy and saturate an entire sheet of paper.



Untitled
1969
Coloured crayons on perforated-edge paper
Private collection

At first glance, both the Mescaline and post-Mescaline drawings-this sheet belonging to the latter group-seem to share the same spatial structures, the same fluctuating microorganisms, the same 'neural dance', as Michaux described it. Yet their pulsating pace differs; there is less urgency, they appear more measured.



Miserable Miracle
1956, original French edition, Monaco (Éditions du Rocher) Private collection

Miserable Miracle is Henri Michaux's first book on his experiences of psychotropic drugs. Through text and 48 images, the artist attempts to convey the internal images and feelings he lived through while under the effects of mescaline.

In its Afterword, the author lays out how he prepared very methodically for these moments, drinking lots of water, avoiding any other stimulants such as coffee, tea or tobacco. He adds, 'This book is an exploration. By means of words, signs, drawings. Mescaline [is] the subject explored.'



Miserable Miracle

1963, English translation, San Francisco (City Lights Books)
Translated by Louise Varèse, with Anaïs Nin
The Courtauld Gallery Archives

Miserable Miracle is Henri Michaux's first book on his experiences of psychotropic drugs. Through text and images (only eight drawings are reproduced in this later edition), the artist attempts to convey the internal visions and feelings he lived through while under the effects of mescaline.

In the Foreword, the artist relates his difficulties with representing in words what he felt and saw, based on notes written during the experiences, which reflected 'the rhythms, the forms, the chaos ... we found ourselves in difficulties, confronted by a typographical wall. Everything had to be rewritten.'

