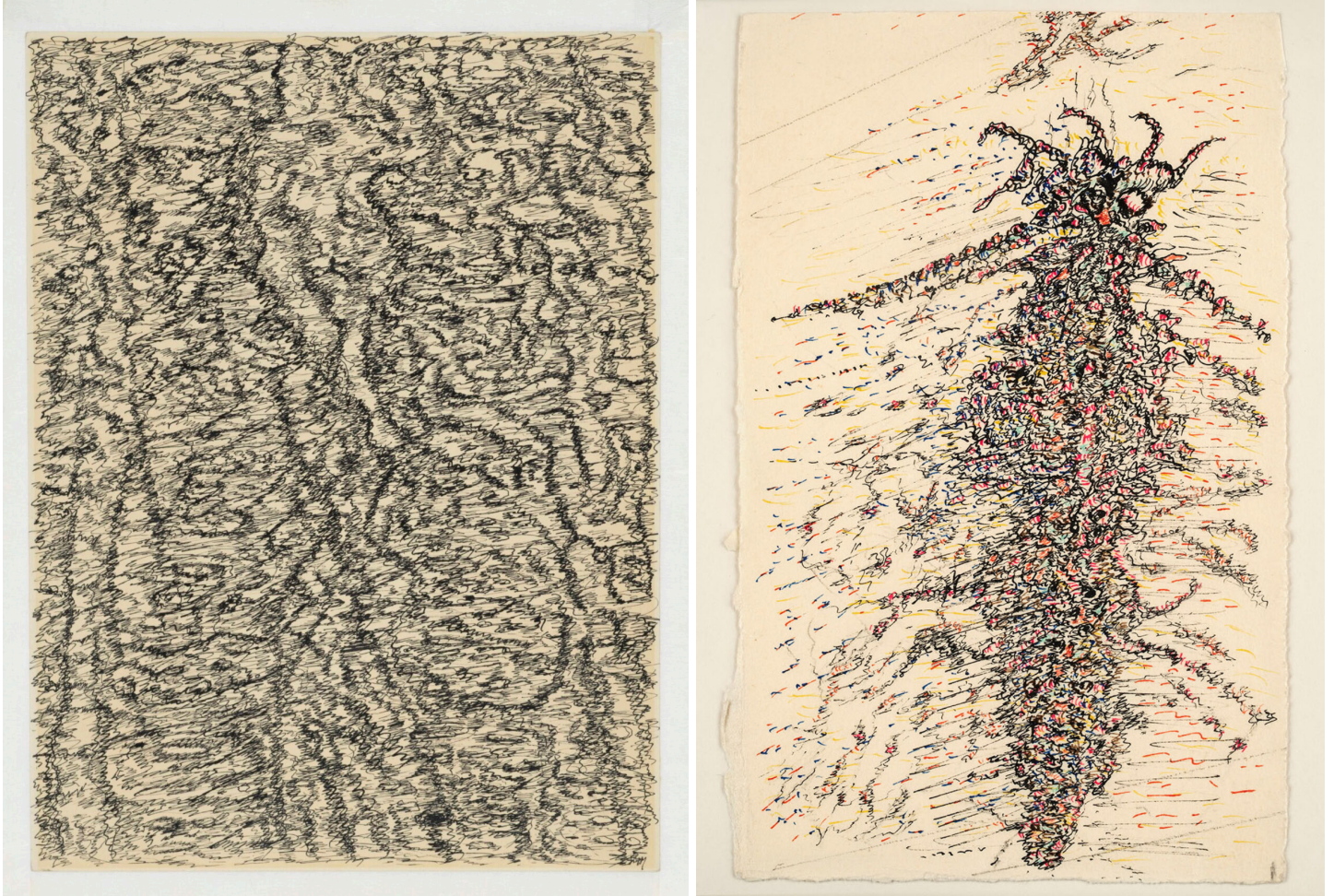


# The Courtauld



**Courtauld Study Day**

**Henri Michaux, Mescaline and the use  
of psychedelics in the creative act and  
as treatment for psychiatric disorders**

**Friday 9th May 2025**

**The Courtauld Institute of Art, Vernon Square**

# Introduction

Timed to coincide with The Courtauld Gallery current exhibition *Henri Michaux: The Mescaline Drawings*, this Study Day aims to investigate Henri Michaux's approach to the use of psychedelics, and reveal how they transformed his artistic creativity, and how this coincided with advances in medical research in the use of psychedelics.

Bringing together art historians and researchers in the field of medical psychedelics, this interdisciplinary study day will explore the practice of art therapy alongside findings from research into psychedelics as treatments for psychiatric disorders, with the scope to provide a platform for a dialogue between these two fields.

**Organised by Dr Ketty Gottardo, Martin Halusa Senior Curator of Drawings, The Courtauld, in partnership with Catherine Bird and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) of King's College London.**

Images:

(left): Henri Michaux (1899-1984), *Untitled (Mescaline drawing)*, 1957, pen and black ink on paper 32 x 24 cm. Promised gift by Linda Karshan in memory of her husband, Howard Karshan. On long-term loan to The Courtauld Gallery, London © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2025.

Image (right): Henri Michaux (1889-1984), *Untitled*, 1966, black and coloured inks, and graphite, on paper, 191 x 122 mm. Private collection © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2025

# Programme

10.00–10.30 **Registration opens**

10.30–10.40 **Welcome and opening remarks**  
Ketty Gottardo, The Courtauld

10.40–11.50 **Session I**

**Oliver Davis**, University College Cork

'Turbulent Transformations: Henri Michaux's experiments with the psychedelic enhancement of creativity'.

**Nina Parish**, University of Stirling  
'Experimental Michaux'.

**Muriel Pic**, Institut Medical Humanities of the University of Lausanne  
'Psychedelic versus psychopharmacological: 'experimental alienation' by Henri Michaux'.

**Q&A**

11.50–12.15 **Coffee Break**

12.15–13.10 **Session II**

**Mike Jay**, independent writer and curator  
*Video extracts from the Art of Mescaline*

**Vanessa Tothill**, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

'Curating the *Why Do We Take Drugs?* programme at the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia'.

**Q&A**

13.10–14.15 **Lunch Break**  
Provided for speakers and organisers only

14.20 - 15.50 **Session III**

**Catherine Bird**, King's College London

'The Art and Science of Psychedelic Clinical Trials: Insights from 6 years of The Psychoactive Trials Group'.

**Matthew Butler**, King's College London

'Neuroscientific research on the potential clinical applications of psychedelics for neuropsychiatric disorders'.

**Amadeus Harte**, Princeton University and King's College London

'Scientific Paradigms and The Role of Self Experiment in Creative Discovery'.

**Katie Turnbull**, King's College London

'Art psychotherapy, Psychedelics and Image Making'.

**Q&A**

- 15.50-16.05 **Break**
- 16.05-16.30 **Frank Leibovici**, Henri Michaux Archives  
'What could shamanic ritual drawings teach us about Henri Michaux's Mescaline drawings'.
- Q&A**
- 16.30 **Closing remarks and Drinks**  
Open to all



# Abstracts & Biographies

## **Oliver Davis**

'Turbulent Transformations: Henri Michaux's experiments with the psychedelic enhancement of creativity'

Henri Michaux: 'Pullulation! Pullulation everywhere! Pullulation from which there is no exit. Space full to overflowing, space of gestation, space of transformation and multiplication; teeming space, which, even if it were only an illusion, would give better account than ordinary sight of what the Cosmos is.'

In this talk Oliver Davis explores Michaux's transmedial attempt to enhance his powers of creativity and innovation by harnessing the deautomating effects of psychedelics.

Oliver Davis is Professor of French at University College Cork and Co-Editor of the Frontiers in Psychology series in the psychedelic humanities. He has published on psychedelic self-experimentation by Henri Michaux and on the conceptualisation of autonomy in psychedelically-assisted psychotherapy and has just completed a book on the political ramifications of the ongoing 'psychedelic renaissance'. In March 2024 he organised the first research day on the psychedelic humanities in Ireland and he is a member of the Drug Science Medical Psychedelics Working Group. He is currently working on a history of French thought over the last four decades, among other projects.

## **Nina Parish**

'Experimental Michaux'

In this paper, Nina Parish will give an overview of Michaux's work, both literary and visual, to provide a context for his mescaline drawings. She will demonstrate how these investigations are characteristic of an experimental attitude that can be seen in different patterns of his visual and verbal production throughout his life, which interrogate the interaction between writing and drawing and often use the body as a site of experimentation.

Nina Parish is Professor of French and Francophone Studies and Head of the Division of Literature & Languages at the University of Stirling. Much of her current research is in Memory Studies with a focus on representations of difficult history, the migrant experience and multilingualism in the museum. But she is also an expert on the interaction between text and image in the field of modern and contemporary French Studies and has published widely on this subject, in particular, on the poet and visual artist, Henri Michaux. Her PhD thesis and first monograph was on his experimentation with signs.

## **Muriel Pic**

'Psychedelic versus psychopharmacological: 'experimental alienation' by Henri Michaux'

In this talk, Muriel Pic discusses how Michaux gradually entered in the 'experimental circle' of scientists and pharmaceutical laboratories working in the field of psychopharmacology. The aim is to measure the role of an artist in a scientific revolution, and to understand the dual status of Mescaline works: artistic productions and documentaries. We'll also draw on his unpublished notes taken while he was on drugs.

Muriel Pic is a freelance researcher, writer, filmmaker, who has taught at Universities in France, Germany and Switzerland. Her work explores the connections that take shape between thought and poetry, document and fiction, science and art, imagination and knowledge. This has yielded a body of work that combines poetry, documentary narratives, lyrical essays, and texts formed from archival materials. She has published extensively, notably on Henri Michaux, Rosa Luxemburg, and W. G. Sebald, and has received several awards for her literary work.

## **Mike Jay**

We will showcase extracts from Mike Jay's talk on the *Art of Mescaline* recorded in 2020.

## **Vanessa Tothill**

'Curating the Why Do We Take Drugs? programme at the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia'

Vanessa Tothill provides a brief summary of 'Power Plants: Intoxicants, Stimulants and Narcotics' and 'Ayahuasca & Art of the Amazon' - two 'drugs' related exhibitions that were shown at the Sainsbury Centre in autumn 2024. This presentation discusses Vanessa's experience of developing exhibitions exploring the relationship between art and Indigenous uses of psychotropic substances and the varied responses she received from press and visitors.

Vanessa Tothill is the Curator of Transhistorical Narratives at the Sainsbury Centre. Her current exhibition titled Eyewitness will open in September 2025 as part of the 'Can We Stop Killing Each Other?' season. Vanessa has curated a variety of exhibitions, including Power Plants: Intoxicants, Stimulants and Narcotics(2024), Julian Stair: Art, Death and the Afterlife (2023), Scottish Women Artists: Transforming Tradition (2022). She was the Sainsbury Centre curator of the touring exhibition Ayahuasca & Art of the Amazon, and editor of Why Do We Take Drugs? (2024) and Planet For Our Future (2023) publications. Vanessa studied Ceramic Design and East Asian Art History in London, completing her doctorate in Japanese Art History at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto in 2018.

## **Catherine Bird**

'The Art and Science of Psychedelic Clinical Trials: Insights from 6 years of The Psychoactive Trials Group'

The Psychoactive Trials Group (King's College London) is a research group that studies psychedelic therapies for conditions including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Since 2018, The PTG has been undertaking controlled clinical trials with psychedelics and related compounds such as psilocybin (the psychoactive component in magic mushrooms), 5-MeO-DMT and MDMA. From patient stories to professional insights, this talk will chart the creativity involved in executing complex and impactful clinical trials and the art that results from taking part in them.

Catherine Bird is a Senior Clinical Trials Manager at The Psychoactive Trials Group (PTG), King's College London. After completing a masters in Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London, Catherine joined The PTG in 2018 as a research assistant. Since, she has coordinated multiple clinical trials within an NHS research setting; all investigating the use of psychedelics and related compounds as therapies for different health conditions. She is currently completing her PhD exploring the anxiolytic effects of cannabis based medicinal products.

## **Matthew Butler**

'Neuroscientific research on the potential clinical applications of psychedelics for neuropsychiatric disorders'

Matthew Butler will summarise the latest neuroscientific research on the potential clinical applications of psychedelics for neuropsychiatric disorders. He will explore how clinicians and scientists have been attempting to understand the psychedelic experience through methods such as brain scans, clinical surveys, and subjective interviews. He will touch on some of the many challenges currently facing researchers in the psychedelic field.

Matthew Butler is a specialist registrar in psychiatry and a doctoral clinical research fellow. He has several years' experience working as a study doctor on clinical trials of psychedelics for a range of neuropsychiatric disorders. He is currently based at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience undertaking a neuroimaging study, funded by the Wellcome Trust, of psilocybin assisted psychotherapy in functional neurological disorder.

## **Amadeus Harte**

'Scientific Paradigms and The Role of Self Experiment in Creative Discovery'

Self experimentation with psychedelics is usually associated with the underground fringe, but actually, some of the foremost researchers in modern science used drugs to understand how the mind works and make discoveries. From Humphrey Davy, who discovered sodium, potassium, magnesium, and calcium, to the fathers of psychology, Sigmund Freud and William James, testing substances on oneself has historically been a cornerstone of psychoactive research. Drug use has also helped to inspire the work of Nobel Prize winning scientists, as well as artists, musicians, and writers. This talk will consider the role of self-experiment in creative discovery, and the evolving moral and scientific paradigms that have attempted to restrict it.

Amadeus Harte is a PhD student in anthropology at Princeton University. She works with cultural psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience to understand how medicalized psychedelics impact the sense of Self, Meaning, and Value in participants on clinical trials.

## **Katie Turnbull**

'Art psychotherapy, Psychedelics and Image Making'

This talk will explore the historical intersection of interest in creativity and psychedelic research. Specifically, the impact psychedelics may have had on clinical practices focusing on artistic output and art psychotherapy. Central to the talk is the role of image-making as both process and artifact—analysing how institutional frameworks may conceptualize, value, and integrate creative output. As a gesture to creativity outside an institution Katie will include artists recently working with and inspired by psychedelic substances.

Katie Turnbull is a registered Art Psychotherapist. She works psychodynamically with a trauma informed approach. She has a history of working with adults in the healthcare industry, community and care sector and with children and adolescents. Her background includes artistic facilitation, working with communities and an ongoing arts practice.

## **Franck Leibovici**

'What could shamanic ritual drawings teach us about Henri Michaux's Mescaline drawings'

Michaux' experiments with drugs may be seen as a rare moment where art and poetry produce forms of knowledge circulating towards scientists. Michaux was aware, however, that the production of any new knowledge implies the destruction of older ones. He was also aware of the cultural cost of the transformation of peyote into mescaline. What could the rituals from indigenous people teach us about Michaux's experiments ? Would that reverse movement help us to have a better look at his drawings?

Franck Leibovici is responsible for the Henri Michaux Archives, in Paris. With Micheline Phankim and Rainer Michael Mason, he has been working on the catalogue raisonné of Henri Michaux since 2001. His book, *Henri Michaux : voir - une enquête* (2014), is an introduction to the catalogue raisonné and its methodological problems.