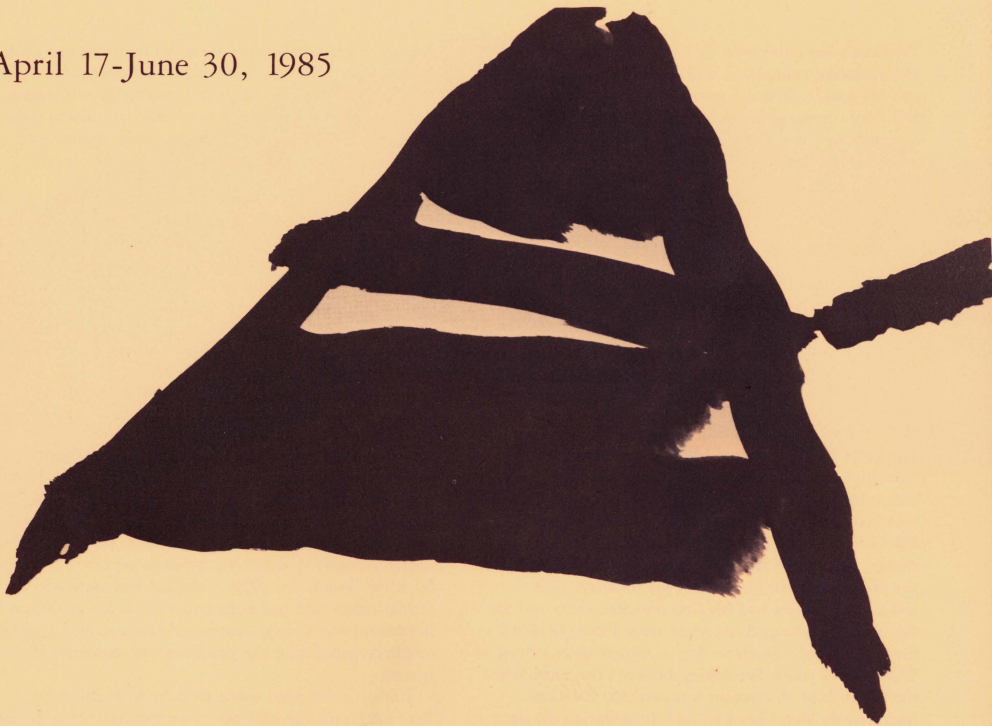


# Sustained Visions

## *Tal-Coat*

April 17-June 30, 1985



The New Museum of Contemporary Art

*Tal-Coat*



## Pierre Tal-Coat: “I Presume Nothing”

Tal-Coat's last exhibition in New York was in 1936. His enduring connection with America, however, has another source: It was a painting by Tal-Coat, owned and long contemplated by Wallace Stevens, that inspired the poem, “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” with the celebrated lines:

*Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,  
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,  
Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,  
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone  
Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,  
Like watery words awash; like meanings said  
By repetitions of half-meanings. . . .*

Stevens wrote the poem in 1949. His educated intuition had grasped the essence of Tal-Coat's artistic being. Only recently Tal-Coat had welcomed the necessary angel and had committed himself, permanently, to meanings by repetitions of half-meanings. The earth, still today as he nears eighty, is Tal-Coat's sacred subject.

Arriving at his subject was, in a sense, a return, for Tal-Coat had passed his childhood in the Breton countryside where his father was a fisherman. At the age of twenty-two, he asserted his identity: This self-taught painter had his first one-man show and for the occasion, changed his name from Pierre Jacob to Pierre Tal-Coat, which in Breton dialect means Brow of Wood. As a youth developing between the wars, when the recoil from abstraction was marked, Tal-Coat instinctively found his way back to essentials all the same. Already in 1935 he had challenged his own assumptions and decided, “The question is not color, but the contributions of color. When one acquires the

science, a gray surface can be as luminous as one with many colors. The search must be for luminosity.” Ten years later, Tal-Coat completed two series—*Movements of Water* and *Rocks*—in which his Heraclitan vision took form. His preoccupation with the earth, spaces, and time became the unvarying basis of his life's work:

I was always haunted by space and time, by the absence of simultaneity in perception. Nothing is ever the same. . . . One cannot see at the same time the landscape and the bird. For me, it is the displacement of the bird, its passage through the landscape, that is life. . . . If everything is immobile in the landscape one sees nothing. Then one must move one's head, walk, or run. Painting is always for me a problem of space, of moving.

Tal-Coat picks up a certain note of Cézanne, whose tradition he would extend after an important sojourn, in 1943 in the Château Noir. Tal-Coat was inspired by the rocks and trees, observing that, if you moved your head a fraction of an inch, as Cézanne remarked earlier, everything changed. At the same time, he pondered the millennial past through the writings on cave paintings by Abbé Breuil. By 1950, Tal-Coat had eschewed a formal idiom and had begun to express his intuitions of movement and change, earth and seasons, in a pictorial language paralleling the processes and mysteries of nature.

Today, in his aged stone redoubt in Normandy, Tal-Coat, with the patience of an alchemist, begins each day searching for the most luminous expression of the universe. He is a member of a generation that cast itself back to the most simple phenomena, eager, as was the





poet Francis Ponge, to measure the world through a tiny shell on a strand of sand, or the space between the tree and its bark. Process became, for these men, a way to discover and celebrate nature in a way that acknowledged twentieth-century apperceptions. It was a period that taught us a new value: the value of emergence. Tal-Coat's paintings would be traces and tracks of emergences.

In Tal-Coat's earnest conversations certain words recur: sands, stones, furrows, skies, cinders, mud, small creatures, the mark of the harrow, flint. The massive fieldstone walls of his studio are his natural element, fortifying him as he undertakes his prolonged adventures in the genesis of painting. Peculiar to Tal-Coat is the extenuated intensity of his address to the question of making matter the means of image. He says, "One paints as one takes a step; it's an individual action, a singular experience. The earth moves. It is necessary to adjust each step." He is like Paul Valéry's protagonist who said, in "L'Idée Fixe," that he walked on the great piles of stone on beaches because "in this

chaos of stone, there was no one step, no composition of efforts that was similar to another, and no idea of it that could serve me twice." At each instant he was constrained to invent an original act.

Tal-Coat's feeling for an original act is pronounced in his wash drawings. For each he mixes a unique brew, using at various times soot, turpentine, pigment, and water, always depending on his original inspiration. He executes each with a sureness of brush that has sometimes induced critics to speak of his Orientalism. Motifs recur, but never with the same intonation. The "upsurges"—another of his favorite words—of a moment fill the page, in which no-space and all-space find equanimity. These shapes are not symbols, but rather the analogues of movements and objects in nature, produced by light. "Men think they seize things with their eyes, but it is the *light* that visits them." The nuances in these wash drawings, or rather, paintings, are always precise—the sure results of Tal-Coat's prodigious annotations of landscape over the years. Landscape is the great metaphor. As he says,



"everything is landscape." The startling character of the whites of his papers almost always suggest boundlessness, while the gradations of tone in the figures suggest the complexity of an imaginary parallel world.

Light is the agent that animates the oil paintings in which Tal-Coat studies the structure of his materials—oil and pigment—in order to elicit the optimal expression of light. "A blue sky: before one is taken with the blue, one is taken with the light." He describes his procedure with characteristic forthrightness:

The foundations of my paintings are for the most part crude pigments that I prepare myself, as I do my oils. I always go toward economy, toward the essential. I paint fast. I paint several canvases at the same time. Then I leave them to dry for days, for months, before taking them up again to question them anew. I play also with the imponderable, the accident. Finally, the canvases make themselves, all by themselves, and nothing is ever finished.

Tal-Coat's enormous stone barn is filled with paintings standing in labyrinthine profusion on the floor, ostensibly drying. But good magician that he is, Tal-Coat has divined the propensity of each canvas, and watches over it as a chef over his pot-au-feu, knowingly, but with a faint degree of uncertainty, of suspense. As the rich impastos dry, light deepens or lightens, giving Tal-Coat his cues for further development. Finally, these simple images, which, as he says, complete themselves, bespeak a series of experiences hidden in the depths of illuminated matter. Emergences. Stevens rightly remarked: "Tal-Coat scorns the fastidious." In these paintings, the tenderness of hue is always mitigated by a faintly disquieting motility, or eruption, engendered by Tal-Coat's modeled surfaces. As Stevens said, his is "an effort to attain a certain reality purely by way of the artist's own vitality." Nearly eighty, Tal-Coat is still infusing his work with the vital.

DORE ASHTON  
GUEST CURATOR

### Selected Solo Exhibitions (since 1975)

- 1985 Galerie Clivages (also 1984, 1983, 1982, 1981)  
1984 Centre Noroi, Arras (catalogue)  
Galerie Benador, Geneva, Switzerland  
Galerie Sapone, Nice  
1981 Centre d'Art Contemporain de Jouy-sur-Eure  
1979 Bibliothèque de la Ville de Lyon, France  
1978 Galerie l'Entracte, Lausanne, Switzerland  
1976 Galerie de France et de Benelux, Brussels  
Grand Palais, Paris (catalogue)  
1975 Ueno National Museum, Tokyo

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### Works in the exhibition

Height precedes width  
All works are courtesy the artist and Galerie Clivages, Paris

*Consumé*, 1965  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 29" (92 x 73 cm)

*Verticale*, 1977  
Oil on canvas  
8 x 7" (21 x 18 cm)

*Ciel en pré*, 1978-1979  
Oil on canvas  
13 x 9" (33 x 24 cm)

*Matin*, 1978-1979  
Oil on canvas  
13 x 13" (33 x 33 cm)

*L'éclat*, 1978-1980  
Oil on canvas  
14 x 11" (35 x 27 cm)

*Il fut un foyer*, 1980  
Oil on canvas  
16 x 12" (40 x 31 cm)



Pierre Tal-Coat

*Ponctué*, 1983  
Oil on canvas  
14 x 9" (35 x 24 cm)

*Cendres traversées*, 1984  
Oil on canvas  
16 x 11" (41 x 27 cm)

*Dans le mur*, 1984  
Oil on canvas  
14 x 11" (35 x 27 cm)

**Works on Paper\***  
36 Untitled wash drawings on paper, ca. 1980-1985

\*4 are reproduced in this brochure

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