

‘Chaim Soutine: Flesh’ Review: Bloody, Brilliant Still Lives

By Lance Esplund
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Everything Chaim Soutine painted is visceral, meaty. It’s as if each element in his pictures is corporeal—made of flesh. This is abundantly clear in the Jewish Museum’s “Chaim Soutine: Flesh,” a concentrated exhibition of 32 oil paintings, including an early cityscape and a few small late landscapes depicting live animals, but whose main course is two dozen still lifes portraying dead fish, fowl, rabbits and glistening flayed carcasses of beef.

Soutine (1893-1934), who was born in Russia and lived most of his life in Paris, created dozens of paintings of dead animals. But what this exhibition reveals is that flesh is less a subject for Soutine than an overriding metaphor in his oeuvre, through which he explores themes of sacrifice, torture, execution, bounty and crucifixion, as well as sensuality. Soutine’s thick, swirling pigment is not used descriptively but actively, almost as living bas-relief. His lush, fluid, malleable surfaces—skins—in which torqued planes and slashing brushstrokes build-up and obliterate forms simultaneously, allow us to see the world through emotive forces, a world coming into being, congealing, opening up and falling apart.

A consummate expressionist, Soutine anthropomorphizes and upends the universe. Despite all the turmoil, however, he never forces his emotions onto his motif—never bends the world to his will. Inspired by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779), Soutine achieves crystalline specificity (peaches retain their fuzziness; eggs, their fragility; feathers are downy; eyes have the glassy stare of death). Influenced by Rembrandt, Soutine aspires toward a physicality that transcends itself. Evoking both body and spirit, he gives forms enormous tactility, movement, viscosity and weight, as he also dissolves them, like debris in a windstorm, into vestiges.

Unlike some expressionists—who hit everything with the same blunt end of their feelings—Soutine is extremely versatile, exacting. In “Flowers and Fruit” (c. 1918), petals glisten like wetted lips. In “Still Life With Herrings” (c. 1916), the plate doubles as a human head, and two forks’ handles suggest arms, their prongs tiny hands. In “Flowers and Fish” (c. 1919) red blossoms lick like flames.

pening “Flesh” is the masterpiece “Still Life With Rayfish” (c. 1924), based on Chardin’s “The Ray” (1728). Soutine’s table is brutally buckled, and the roiling white tablecloth, yellowish-green, suggests putrefying flesh and pitching sea, nearly capsizing a standing jug and pitcher. Above it all spreads the gleaming, sometimes transparent expanse of the cut-open rayfish, whose spilling entrails merge with a pile of blood-red tomatoes. Here, as elsewhere, Soutine vivisects not just the animal but, seemingly, the “flesh” of the painting itself, which opens, through the rayfish’s sacrifice, like a window.

Soutine painted directly from life, or in this case death. He kept rotting animals in his studio, including whole sides of hanging oxen and beef that he regularly drenched, or freshened, with blood—which made him

unpopular with neighbors. Life-size paintings of strung-up plucked chickens and turkeys are a highlight here. They feel arrested in flight, between life and death—as if darting upward and downward simultaneously. As in El Greco's crucifixions, we lose sense of orientation: the canvases often feel inverted, as if their subjects were transforming down into up, falling into flying.

In "Chicken on Blue Ground" (c. 1925), planes swipe like cleavers and pull us under, like waves. In "Turkey" (c. 1925), a skylight brace from which the animal is suspended invokes a medieval torture device, as scratched and incised lines spiral across the picture's surface like a death rattle. Diaphanous feathers glint like silvery fish scales and butterfly wings in "Dead Fowl" (1926), as red lines charge through the wood table like veins of electricity. In "Hanging Turkey" (c. 1925), the spinning fowl corkscrews the whole composition, as if the neck of the painting were being snapped. And in "White Duck" (c. 1925) the bird explodes into a dizzying array of blues, blacks and bright whites, suggesting the sharp crack and flash of lightning.

Based on Rembrandt's "Slaughtered Ox" (1655), and evoking portraits or environments, not still lifes, are the handful of Soutine's gorgeous, luminous sides of bloody oxen and beef. "Flayed Ox" (c. 1925), a field of zigzagging molten crimsons, yellows, blues and blacks, has the immediacy of a compound fracture. Trying to navigate "Side of Beef With a Calf's Head" (c. 1923) is like attempting to chase individual flames in a roaring furnace. "Carcass of Beef" (c. 1925), looming like a huge boulder hurling toward you, is the greatest picture here—eclipsed, perhaps, by Soutine's magnificent "The Beef" (c. 1925), the largest painting in "Flesh."

Organized by Stephen Brown, associate curator at the Jewish Museum, with consulting curators Esti Dunow and Maurice Tuchman (authors of the Soutine catalogue raisonné), "Flesh" is the first major Soutine exhibition in an American museum since 1998, a retrospective (also at the Jewish Museum) which was the first U.S. survey since 1950. These beautiful, carnal paintings startle as they ground us in the immediacy of our physicality—our own flesh—reminding us that we are long overdue for another full-dress Soutine retrospective.