

# JACQUELINE MATISSE

by Leslie Vallhonrat

(From the catalog)

Jacqueline Matisse (Monnier) is a significant presence in the artworld: the keeper of the Duchamp archives, an artist nourished and even influenced by her legendary forebears, and a spirited original in her own right. Her work has been shown throughout Europe and in the Far East; it has been featured repeatedly at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. She is the author of two books—*Nine Kite Tails* and *Fallout*—and she was one of seven signatories to the international Art Volant (Flying Art) Manifesto. In the United States she has exhibited at venues that include the Whitney Sculpture Court in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

For her exhibition at Moore, Matisse has been working since 1995 on a room-sized installation of kite-tail sculptures—linear assemblies of circular forms and anarchic fragments of circles—cut from aluminum and scored to catch the light. The individual pieces hang on plastic monofilaments (fishing-lines) attached to a ceiling grid. Randomly influenced by natural forces, the kitetails whisper, move, and metamorphose in faint air currents and dramatically changing natural light; echoing the more intense pressures of “civilized” life, they interact with visitors who traverse the gallery.

The three-screen collaborative video *Sea Tails* was created in 1983 by Matisse with filmmaker Molly Davies. The film follows ten kitetails on their dancing flight through the air and then—without a ripple—into the water; submerged, they float and slowly interlace. Their movement is accompanied throughout by electronic music composed, at the moment of filming, by David Tudor.

Best known for performative groups of kitetails that eschew walls and galleries, Matisse uses her installations of *vol à toiles* (woven flight, a pun on *volatiles/mobiles*) to develop two of her most important themes: the search for unprogrammed movement and the supremacy of chance. Her threaded kitetails evolve on location as she deploys their separate pieces: letters and numbers pulled out of a hat determine the order in which she matches forms with threads. A wordless dialogue defines the poles of the human condition: the artist allows no choices, yet she exercises control; she creates foredoomed ephemera and sets them free to shudder and breathe. Suzi Gablik has said that “Jackie [Matisse’s] art is exquisitely cosmic with its strange wild fluttering of freedom that is like a star falling to earth.”

Born in Paris in 1931, Matisse studied at the Sorbonne but had no formal training as an artist. She grew up—between Paris and New York—in a cultural atmosphere that offered art as a quotidian ingredient—so much so that she only realized in her twenties that it was her own vocation. Beginning in 1959 and until Marcel Duchamp’s death in 1968, Matisse worked as his assistant, helping him to assemble his *Boîte-en-Valise* (portable museum).

It was during this period that she began to work with kites and kitetails. A chance reunion with Niki de Saint-Phalle, introduced her to the polymorphous, self-transforming work of Jean Tinguely, Yaacov Agam, and Victor Vasarely; and, at about the same time, she purchased a small box that promised—improbably—a 22-foot kite. (“It was Pandora’s Box for me,” she writes; Pandora-like, she released the kite and lost it to the wind.) In 1979, one of her kites fell into the sea, and Matisse conceived the idea of deliberately launching kites into the water where they could drift and billow in the darker light like sargassum weed.

Both sky and sea became the artist's collaborators, transforming accident and loss into a positive creative statement. The kitetails responded to Matisse's fascination with the unpredictability of working with natural elements to create movement and color: they "put line and color into the sky and sculpt the air. They play a game of freedom."

Having discovered her own unique medium and vocabulary of form, Matisse remained virtually unknown until she had arrived at a fully formed vision. While the pared-down forms required by the aerodynamics of flight appealed to her modernist sensibilities, the unpretentiousness of kites suited her temperament; she used simple, often unorthodox, materials: crepe paper, rayon, transparent cellophane, even rolls of dyed, sturdy French toilet paper. Wanting to group her kitetails, she began to string as many as eleven of them under a single kitehead. Thus it became necessary to devise a stronger head and she turned to the monochrome square "in honor of Kazimir Malevich, the precursor of abstract art in the '20s." She further animated her families of kitetails with sequences of cut-outs or found materials. (One of her kitetails, enigmatically banded in black and white, is simply a weather printout from the Sandy Hook biological station in New Jersey.) As with so much else, Matisse found her predominant, curved and fragmented forms by chance: One day she came upon a vendor of ceramics who was crying out that he would break all his plates if no one bought them. "In front of this gentleman there was a small mountain of broken plates; the housewives were running up to buy from him. I adopted these shard-shapes, which, besides, are moon-shapes. We were in the middle of the Apollo missions. . . . The deflowering of the moon, that was something."

Since the 1970s, Matisse has joined with other kinetic artists, notably Curt Asker and Tal Streeter, to define their sky and sea works—historically, as part of a 2,500-year-old tradition that starts in China and includes the inventive and impractical flying machines of Leonardo da Vinci, and, philosophically, as participatory/kinetic/performance art. These makers of Flying Art are also confronting one obstacle that biases perception of their work by the artworld—the strictures of those who cannot take seriously what is not solemn. Asker observes, "Art has broken so many barriers, but the role of play is a path yet to be walked without some embarrassment and apologies."

An artist whose production is classical while her ideas and associations are radical, Matisse presents a unique opportunity to probe the art of this century: the search for space and rhythmic structures; the apotheosis of the viewer and the dismissal of the maker; the insurrection against pompousness and convention; the ascendancy of performance and the ephemeral.

