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June 7, 2010

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### Picasso: The Mediterranean Years, 1945-1962 at Gagosian Gallery, review

A new exhibition focused on Picasso's domestic life offers insight into his intimate world.

Rating: \* \* \* \* \*

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Published: 5:19PM BST 07 Jun 2010



Detail from Picasso's *Portrait de femme assise à la robe verte*

We are having a Picasso moment. Last month *Picasso: Peace and Freedom* opened at Tate Liverpool, a look at Picasso's political involvement in the post-war period, which, however off-beam its conclusions, unites a magnificent collection of works. Now we have this extraordinary exhibition, curated by the artist's grandson, Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, and his octogenarian biographer, John Richardson.

At first sight the exhibition's title appears something of a red herring. There's little obviously apparent of the light, landscape or lifestyle of the Mediterranean. And thank goodness for that. I wouldn't care if I never saw another photograph of the master hamming it up in shorts for admirers, or heard another gushing account of a lunch in one of his villas.

Instead, the exhibition offers a tight focus on domestic themes, the Gagosian's stark white walls turned a sombre grey for the occasion.

The presence of the women in Picasso's life permeate the three large rooms even when their images are only fleetingly present. The magnificent central room, devoted to the period with Françoise Gilot, his partner from 1944 to 1953, is full of the joys of fatherhood, with a wall of paintings of children at play. The artist's own play with exuberant colour and simplified form shifts restlessly from painting to painting, and while apparently childlike, these works are, of course, anything but.

The room presided over by the artist's second wife and last muse, Jacqueline Roque, is cooler in mood, with a more self-conscious relationship to the art of the past. Pipe-playing figures cut from plywood and sheet metal, related to Picasso's classically inspired War and Peace murals near his home in Vallauris, frame a marvellously vigorous portrait of Roque seated.

I came to this exhibition wanting to leave Picasso the man, the mythology and the mystique at the door, and judge the contents according to hard, objective criteria. That, however, is impossible. There's a sense here of the artist's personal ménage so palpable you can practically smell it. And this, you are persuaded, isn't the semi-public ménage described in the memoirs of all the minor celebrities and other liggers who fought their way into Picasso's presence, but the artist's real intimate world.

There's a roomful of posters, prints, drawings and other ephemera – paper sculptures made for fun in a few moments, ink silhouettes of the family – much of it glorified memorabilia. Yet even these fleeting creations are imbued with a presence and a force.

For Picasso, you feel, the act of creation was first and foremost about getting this animating spirit into the work. Saying something came second.

The Mediterranean theme is apparent in a feel for the region's ancient, pre-classical culture, a quality that was apparent even in early urban masterpieces such as *Desmoiselles d'Avignon*, and is evident here particularly in the sculpture. A room-size cabinet of dimly lit objects – a primal bull, a diamond-shaped head – have a brooding energy that gives credence to all those hoary clichés about Picasso the magician.

The artist's minutest shifts in mood and idea manifest themselves in leaps in visual language and perspective, not only from day to day and painting to painting, but inside individual works. The bronze of a girl skipping that dominates the central room, for example, is a light and whimsical work on the one hand, and a breathtaking compendium of sculptural ideas on the other.

The exhibition gives us flashes back to Picasso's early career, premonitions of what he'll be doing decades ahead. Every stylistic departure he's ever made seems permanently available, permanently present in his fingertips.

That's what makes him such a magnificently challenging and energising presence, and why even in a contemporary art world dominated by concepts, he still feels mysteriously yet spectacularly relevant.

This is a brilliantly mounted, gloriously rich and idiosyncratic exhibition that acts both as a wonderful complement and challenge to the Liverpool show and an unmissable experience in its own right. See either of these exhibitions if you possibly can. Better still, see both.

Until August 28