

The New York Times
May 6, 2010

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Garden That Grew Into a Muse

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Published: May 6, 2010

The Gagosian Museum of Fine Art in Chelsea? Not yet, but Gagosian Gallery has definitely shaped itself into a periodic and ambitious kunsthalle over the past few years. In 2009 it gave us an invaluable retrospective of the proto-conceptualist Piero Manzoni and a survey of career-end Picassos. Now, moving closer to old master turf, it delivers “Claude Monet: Late Work,” a gorgeous “where on earth did this come from?” show of 27 Giverny paintings dating from 1904 to 1922.



Gagosian Gallery

And where, exactly, *did* these pictures come from? Among other places the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris; the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland; the Art Institute of Chicago; two Japanese museums; and several private collections. Loan shows on this order cost a mint, and they're calculated investments, usually promotional packages

for a single work the gallery wants to flog. But in this case, Gagosian says, nothing's for sale. The show's there because it's there, so enjoy.

And, seriously, do. This is pretty celestial stuff.

By 1904 Monet had been living at Giverny, a village some 45 miles from Paris, for more than a decade. There, with a passel of gardeners, he designed and gradually installed an elaborate and exotic park of flowers and trees, with a waterlily pond.

He adored the place, shaped it like art, like a grand horticultural earthwork. And it was a never-ending project, with workers constantly weeding beds, planting willows, reshaping the pond, adding Japanese bridges to it, arranging lily pads just so. For Monet the garden was ultimately a muse, a moral theater and the equivalent of a studio model, of whom he made severe demands, but to whom he was devoted.

During his first years in Giverny, though, he paid it only sporadic attention. His domestic situation was complicated; his career required attention. And he was traveling a lot, to London, to the Mediterranean, and painting all kinds of things, from haystacks to Houses of Parliament.

And when he did paint his garden, he went about it a bit stiffly, depicting it in classic Impressionist style, with infinite tiny strokes packed into tight compositions. He was on good painterly behavior, as if the garden didn't really belong to him.

But it did belong to him. And somehow, at some point, he internalized that idea and psychologically settled in. His take on the garden grew more personal, which meant more experimental.

He loosened up, and it loosened up. A main point of the Gagosian show, organized by the art historian Paul Hayes Tucker, is to trace this process as reflected in his painting.

No doubt the settling-in was eased by his relatively newfound financial security. By the turn of the century Monet was one of the richest artists in France, and he used his

wealth to customize his environment. In 1902 he expanded the waterlily pond to nearly three times its original size, transforming a sort of wading pool into an enveloping landscape. Soon afterward he painted the first of his extensive series of pictures titled “Nymphéas,” or “Water Lilies.”

Eight early examples, from 1904 to 1908, hang in the show’s gray-painted, rotundalike first gallery. And if you know the pre-Giverny Monet even a little you’ll instantly see the leap he made here. Anchoring structures are gone. So are most clues as to real time. Space is ambiguous. Where, as viewers, are we? On the pond’s edge? In the water? Hovering above the water, or peering up from its depths with lily pads over our head?

The disorientations can be surprisingly effective.

In a 1907 painting we see a Niagara of livid yellow light gushing from some crevice in the cosmos. We think apocalypse, volcanoes, nascent abstraction, but what we’re looking at is a Giverny sunset reflected in water. Whatever it is, dramatic effects like this are rare.

Mostly this early painting feels gentle, luminous and buoyant. The semiabstraction makes it look adventurous, but the venturing doesn’t go far. In every picture the edges of the lily pond are clearly visible, a lifeline to the reality we know.

The several years after 1908 were bad ones for Monet. His wife died, then one of his two sons, and his second son became gravely ill. World War I commenced and stretched out agonizingly. He was haunted by professional anxieties, crises of confidence. He knew that, as an Impressionist, he was a dinosaur — Fauvism and Cubism had made that clear — and that he somehow needed to change course. At the same time his eyesight was deteriorating as a result of cataracts, leaving his vision so bad that he had to number his paint tubes to determine what colors he was using.

For some or all of these reasons, by 1917, where the show picks up again, the Giverny garden had become his world and the primary subject of his art. His paintings had

grown large, even panoramic, to accommodate his increasingly broad brushwork. His surfaces, once so meticulously controlled, were now unpredictable, crusty here, paint-free there, as if intended for touch rather than sight.

Incidental elements in older pictures became main events in new ones. Willows, once secondary players, present in shadows or fringes of branches, are brought center stage. He wanted to examine them, really look, and he does, making their trunks fleshlike and sinewy, turning their branches into proscenium curtains of black crepe.

Once Monet's art was all about light; now it seems to be about darkness, or light escaping from darkness. It was about the garden at night. Whoever said a garden was necessarily a benign environment? It's a Darwinian battleground, rife with silent violence as plants compete for space, light, moisture, nutriment. It's a place of entanglements and strangulations, of poisonous, itch-inducing stabbing things. And of inexhaustible beauties.

The fact is that everything of essential importance that happens in the world happens in miniature in a garden in some form. To know this is to be absorbed into the botanical drama. Monet was absorbed, and he tried to simulate that drama in art.

In old age, when he was physically less adept at doing so, he painted large garden pictures in related sets, which were meant to wrap around the walls of circular or oval rooms, enfolding and enclosing the views, taking and keeping them in.

And a few years before he died, in 1926, he distilled this idea of absorption in nature and in art into a series of small paintings, "L'Allée de Rosiers," or "The Path Under the Rose Arches." Three of the pictures are in the show's last room, and they're incendiary. If some of the late "Nymphéas" are as dark as oil spills, here the oil is set alight in flames of daubed and splotched red, gold and violet paint. In each of the rose arches a passageway opens, like the entrance to a garden, to a grave, to the heart of a flower.

We're right on the lip of abstraction here; ignore the title, and we're there. A contemporary painter like Joan Mitchell, who loved this work and learned everything from it, saw that. Other artists have felt the Monet effect too. A second stated purpose of the exhibition is to keep such influence current and flowing, to emphasize, as Larry Gagosian writes in the show's catalog, "the revolutionary nature of these works in their time, as well as their continuing relevance to artists working today."

Obviously a worthy goal. And these days, when a handful of dealers are richer than many museums, commercial galleries may more and more be where the historical word can be spread. As to other artist-revolutionaries ripe for attention, I have my list, and I'm sure Mr. Gagosian has his. We'll see who gets the nod from him next. Meanwhile let's think of Monet.