

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



# Towering Ambition: Picasso and Marie-Thérèse at Gagosian; Vladimir Tatlin at Tony Shafrazi; Donald Judd at David Zwirner

By Maika Pollack 6/14 8:05pm

While much of New York's art world is away on a European grand tour—starting with the Venice Biennale, moving on to Art Basel, the annual art fair in Switzerland, which opens next week, and winding up in London for a round of auctions—a handful of museum-worthy exhibitions make this a good time to visit Chelsea's galleries. Artists on view through June include both past masters (Pablo Picasso, Vladimir Tatlin, Donald Judd) and living legends (Jasper Johns, John Chamberlain).

If you are interested in the spectacle of powerful men having affairs—and judging from the recent media attention given to Arnold Schwarzenegger and Anthony Weiner, who isn't?—it's worth visiting Gagosian's "Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L'amour fou."

This focused glimpse into the private lives of a famous man and his young, secret lover is curated by the couple's granddaughter, the art historian Diana Widmaier Picasso (along with Picasso scholar John Richardson). It is a story of a very private arrangement told through 80 Picasso paintings, sculptures, drawings and photographs.

The exhibition begins with photos of Marie-Thérèse Walter, a confident, sunny 17-year-old French girl. Picasso saw her on the street in 1927, when the already-famous artist was 45 and married to Ballets Russes star Olga Khokhlova. "I am Picasso," he said to Marie-Thérèse. His name meant nothing to her, but she said later that she found him charming.

In snapshots of Marie-Thérèse taken in Monte Carlo and Chamonix, we recognize the blonde bob and Grecian nose of one of the great Picasso faces: the crescent profile of the women in *Guernica*, the female figure in many of his best works.

Their affair lasted for over a dozen years, with Picasso arranging for his lover to be near his family at all times. But it began as a secret even from their friends, and remained so, to a certain extent, even after Marie-Thérèse had their child in 1935. When people would catch a glimpse of the girl, he'd call her the gardener's daughter.

In *Nue endormie* (1932) and *Nu couché* (1932), charcoal-on-canvas sketches of a sleeping Marie-Thérèse, undulating lines trace her body. In early paintings she is abstracted, her figure broken down into geometric shapes; in others she is shown with lips sewn shut, or reduced to a set of initials on a vase: a cryptic monogram hidden in plain view.

This show has a tension that derives from placing intimate matters on display. That their relationship was clandestine, that Gagosian keeps the lights so low, and that many of the works come from private collections creates a frisson of voyeurism: Picasso may have made these works to be seen, but seeing them in this context we feel we are getting a peek at something that wasn't meant to be shown.

In paintings and drawings of Marie-Thérèse such as *Femme nue dans un fauteuil rouge* (1932) and *La sieste* (1932), Picasso drew attention to her breasts and pudenda. Judging by the number of sculptures in this show, he clearly enjoyed representing her voluptuous body in three dimensions. (One Picasso catalogue notes dryly that the artist's wife, Olga, a dancer, was flat-chested). Yet in his work, Marie-Thérèse also becomes an allegory for eternal youth, her skin rendered in lilac and a range of pinks. She is girlish even when most womanly, e.g., even when pictured nursing

their daughter, Maya: while her nipples are depicted protruding pertly from her swollen breasts, her daughter might be a toy in her arms.

Most of all, Marie-Thérèse provided an endless site of experimentation for Picasso: sometimes she appears in electric, fauvist colors; other times the palette is muted; sometimes her figure is painted thickly and sometimes she is rendered by a single line; sometimes she is dressed up as the bride she would never become, Sleeping, thinking, reading, playing with dolls, nursing, Marie-Thérèse is a paradise of seemingly uncomplicated sexual and artistic fulfillment.

Some might consider Picasso a pederast for taking up with a girl not yet of the French age of consent. Yet he paints himself as the wounded minotaur. In *Minotaure blessé et Naïade* (1938), he is a love-sick boy or Humbert Humbert, the victim of his passion for a young girl. And yet, to hear him tell it, this passion is what restored him: he said at one point that meeting Marie-Thérèse saved his life.

In a film loop composed of old photographs, she seems happy, entertained by the adoration of Picasso's camera, a model for only one pair of eyes.

The Gagosian exhibition is tightly focused: it omits Dora Maar, whom Picasso was seeing concurrently with Marie-Thérèse, as well as Françoise Gilot, his much-younger mistress through much of the 1940's. Also missing is the postscript: his marriage to Jacqueline Roque in the 1960's after his divorce from Olga in the 1950's. (Roque, like Marie-Thérèse, took her own life after Picasso died.) It's a show of strategic omissions and extraordinary visceral pleasures—a fitting framework for an affair.

It was not Picasso's dreamy Marie-Thérèse paintings, but his cubist guitars that inspired the Russian Constructivist artist Vladimir Tatlin when Tatlin encountered them in Paris in 1914.

Shafrazi gallery's exhibition of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1915-20) is dedicated to the dynamic architectural model of one of the most famous unbuilt buildings of the 20th century, on view for the first time in the United States.

Tatlin's original 16-foot model was destroyed in 1932. The electric-powered piece at Shafrazi is a (rather disappointing) Swedish 1960's scale reconstruction, albeit one with an impressive pedigree: it was built under the supervision of Tatlin's original collaborator.

The 1,300-foot-tall behemoth this lost Constructivist curiosity anticipated ran into engineering problems and steel shortages and was never realized. Yet the utopian piece loomed large in the collective imagination of American artists of the 1960's: during his lifetime the minimalist Dan Flavin, known for his fluorescent light tube sculptures, assembled 39 homages to Tatlin's tower.

At Shafrazi, gears grind wearily, turning stacked geometric shapes intended to house branches of the Communist government. (The original model was operated by a small boy, hidden from view, turning a hand-crank.) The surrounding scaffolding is one part Eiffel tower and two parts vintage roller coaster. The structure is set at an improbable angle corresponding to the axis of the earth's tilt.

Accompanying the Tatlin replica is a side exhibition, "Revolutionary Film Posters: Aesthetic Experiments of Russian Constructivism, 1920-1933," consisting of two rooms of terrific vintage Soviet film posters shown to a blaring soundtrack of music from Sergei Eisenstein's films. It is entertaining, but ultimately slight.

Tatlin's notion of truth to materials—his belief that wood, metal and glass impose different necessary conditions on the art object—and his interest in the fusion of art and technology are one of the precursors of Donald Judd's Minimalism, currently on view at David Zwirner.

Zwirner's gallery, which recently began representing the Donald Judd foundation, reunites 12 works that figured in a 1989 Judd exhibition at the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Baden-Baden. For obsessive enthusiasts of Judd's work—and there are many—this chance to observe the first time Judd used colored anodized aluminum in such a large, floor-mounted format, as the gallery's literature puts it, is cause for excitement.

For those not enticed by this formal description, however, there is the overall appearance of the exhibition. Light falls from the Zwirner skylights, catching each of the regal open aluminum boxes, hitting the orange and turquoise plaxi

interior panels and radiating onto the walls of the gray aluminum cubes. A subtle effect is produced that is both atmospheric and antiseptic.

From drawings on display we glean the logic of the show: large, open aluminum boxes with black, blue or orange inserts configured systematically; the dozen boxes together create a set of repeated forms.

Judd famously defined his works as “specific objects”—neither painting nor sculpture. He jettisoned most of the qualities that people associate with art (representation, flatness, composition) while retaining others (rectangularity, space, form and color). Judd’s objects are simple forms that employ new industrial materials like formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, plexiglass and brass.

As usual, Judd’s claim to the pure logic and compositional order seems suspect, and what you experience here is the beauty of the color and texture of these supposedly banal materials, and the eccentricities of what he proposed were systematic compositions.

As New York’s museums battle for visitors and put on exhibitions that sometimes seem safe or uninspired, commercial galleries are increasingly filling in the gaps. Dealers hire guards, pay commercial rents and manage block-long lines. Sure, these shows may be ways for galleries to advertise their clout to prospective clients, but they display remarkable artwork at no charge to the viewer, so, in the end, we all profit.