

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

SPECIAL GALLERY ISSUE | ART REVIEW

Raw Like Chelsea: A Big Tent, Gentrified but Not Gentle

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“Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L’Amour Fou,” at Gagosian Gallery, features, from left, “Femme Aux Arabesques” (1931), “Tête de Femme” (1931) and “Femme Nue Couchée” (1932).

When it comes to art and art galleries, Chelsea is the land of wild, mind-bending discrepancies. You know the drill. There are mega-bucks, big-box spaces on the same block as holes in the wall not much larger than a walk-in closet; great work within a stone’s throw of schlock; older art alongside the freshly minted; and blue-chip brand names across the street from young and emerging artists or forgotten and overlooked ones.

Chelsea’s inconsistencies and jarring juxtapositions give it the air of a permanent, slightly crazed art fair for which all entrance requirements have long since been abandoned. After nearly 20 years as a gallery destination, and despite a spate of sleek new apartment buildings, it is still nothing but art, and it still feels surprisingly raw — gentrified but not especially gentled. This may be partly a function of its wide streets, its riverside perch and its often brusque winds, but some of the rawness has to do with the staggering quantity and diversity of the art that confronts you at every turn, and what it says about the human urge to make art and have it seen.

The spectrum of art in Chelsea can seem especially broad when a big, museum-quality show lands within its precincts, an increasingly frequent occurrence of late. At the moment “Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L’Amour Fou,” at the Gagosian Gallery on West 21st Street, is such a show. At the same time, some other interesting exhibitions in the neighborhood feature art from decades past.

“Picasso and Marie-Thérèse” comes two years after “Picasso: Mosqueteros,” which similarly filled the same Gagosian space to overflowing and presented, Picasso-wise, a hard act to follow. Organized by the Picasso biographer John Richardson, the “Mosqueteros” show focused exclusively on painting and prints, showcasing the artist’s late, exuberantly distorted figurative style as fueled by his obsession with the old masters and his endlessly inventive emphasis on process.

While not quite up to “Mosqueteros,” “Picasso and Marie-Thérèse” is thrilling in its own completely different way. It is the largest exhibition yet devoted to works that Picasso made from the late 1920s through the ’30s under the spell of a young mistress — the voluptuous, Roman-nosed, level-eyed, full-limbed Marie-Thérèse Walter — and it is a wonderfully motley, almost scattershot affair, brilliantly installed. Ranging through mediums and styles as it explores this single if constantly evolving subject, it confirms that when Picasso told Walter she had saved his life, he meant that she had also saved his art.

Mr. Richardson is again the organizer, this time in collaboration with Diana Widmaier Picasso, an art historian whose mother, Maya Widmaier Picasso, born in 1935, is the only child of Picasso and Walter. There could be a better exhibition on the topic, I’m sure, going by paintings not in the show but reproduced in galleys of the catalog, due out in May. In addition, there are occasional small paintings and drawings that seem knocked out. But given the scope of what’s here, such shortcomings barely matter.

That Walter was the great passion of Picasso’s life is borne out by the erotic frisson that suffuses much of this exhibition. But *l’amour fou* — mad love — was also clearly productive, inventive love. As seen here, Walter is in constant flux, mutating throughout the show’s paintings, sculptures, drawings, occasional prints and even photographs. She appears actually to move in a tantalizingly brief video based on a flip-book Picasso made of her from photo-booth pictures.

More important, she inspires Picasso to review and preview nearly all the phases of his long career, up to and including his wild-style late paintings. These are presaged in some of the looser, small works and, with imposing monumentality, in a bright, bristling image of Maya, a dead ringer for her mother, fervently clutching a doll to her face as if it were a lover.

Above all, this exhibition confirms that there is more to Picasso’s depictions of his mistress than just paintings of a blond, pneumatic Surrealist goddess. Not that those works aren’t here: as an indication of the Gagosian clout, several have been lent by the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Guggenheim Museum. Some, like the Guggenheim’s “Woman With Yellow Hair,” seem a bit overexposed by now. Others, especially the Modern’s “Interior With a Girl Drawing,” acquire an amazing seen-for-the-first-time freshness in this context.

Surrealist automatism, neo-classical realism, semi-abstract forms of various weights and degree of geometries: there is very little that Walter could not inspire. In one gallery an unexpectedly marvelous tapestry of her looking at a sculpture of herself is a revisiting of Cubist collage, writ large. In a nearby painting she is both a reclining nude and a weightless sculpture hovering above a plinth, whose fluttering brushwork seems almost finger-painted. In a few sculptures here, her face can seem similarly inflated but heavy, and her nose becomes a kind of phallus. And in other, less familiar, sculptures, inspired by Etruscan art and not much larger than drumming sticks, her subtly carved form is elongated to a proto-Giacometti extent.

In this setting Marie-Thérèse Walter seems so far beyond the usual artist’s model as to become a kind of collaborator or partner, as essential in her way to Picasso as Braque had been two decades earlier. She is present not just as a face and form, but also as a very complicated personality, passive and compliant, as is so often said, but also oddly aloof and regal — at times, a near-mythic presence. Picasso’s first words to Walter were: “I’m Picasso. You and I will do great things together.” And they did.

For a vivid sense of the discrepancies that Chelsea can throw in your path, you need only cross the street from Gagosian and Picasso to the tiny Kravets-Wehby Gallery — a space not much larger than the Gagosian foyer — and take in “Multikulti,” the latest from Justin Samson, a 31-year-old graduate of the School of Visual Arts. In searingly bright, textured geometric reliefs (framed in painted fake fur) and jaggedly figurative sculpture, Mr. Samson is doing his irreverent best to convert some of the basic tenets of early Modernism into the art of his own time by combining toy-block simplicity with an extraterrestrial sense of light and space. Kandinsky, Malevich and Hans Hofmann seem to be his heroes in two dimensions; Picasso’s Etruscan stick figures are among the sculptures’ DNA.

Strong color of a more historical sort abounds at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, in the invigorating survey of early, casually geometric stain paintings by Kenneth Noland (1924-2010), exemplar of Color Field painting. The selection emphasizes unknown, idiosyncratic works, including several in which Mr. Noland’s characteristic target or circle motif evokes airplane propellers, military insignia and sign language, not to mention artists like Marsden Hartley, Jackson Pollock and Adolph Gottlieb. This is an expansive show, accompanied by a generally enlarging, if sometimes loopy catalog essay by Paul Hayes Tucker, a scholar of French Impressionism who states that Mr. Noland’s best works “have a legitimate claim to being the cleanest, clearest, most straightforward works of art ever produced by an American painter.” Yikes.

In an unusually effective show at Sean Kelly, Joseph Kosuth, a founder of Conceptual Art, mixes old, new and recent pieces while confirming that his unstinting commitment to language as his primary material has served him well for more than 40 years. In one small gallery Mr. Kosuth recreates the 1968 debut of his signature dictionary definitions: the word defined is “nothing,” in 10 entries ranging from almost that to quite a bit more. A 1998 neon installation charts the day of encounters that form James Joyce’s “Ulysses” but reinstates the names and places from the “Odyssey” that inspired Joyce, creating a kind of constellation or sky map. The most recent work, also in neon, quotes from the Samuel Beckett characters who await Godot and includes, by way of a reproduction, a night sky by Caspar David Friedrich.

Emerging slightly after Mr. Kosuth, the painter Elizabeth Murray (1940-2007) had little patience for Conceptual Art, as can be seen in the Pace Gallery’s stirring examination of the origins of her comedic, thoroughly loquacious brand of formalism. It begins with a small 1971 homage to Cubist still lifes; the picture’s precarious goblet of beer presages Ms. Murray’s later semi-abstract vocabulary of caroming coffee cups and spilling liquids. The goblet returns in the show’s last work (“Breaking,” 1980), straddling a split, jagged-edged canvas crowded with splintering forms.

In between Ms. Murray comes to terms with Minimalism in a series of endearingly patchy monochromes interrupted by assorted shaky, linear motifs, then gradually fleshes out her distinctive geometry, heats up her color and first tilts and then shatters the rectangular format. This show displays her gathering strength.

As Picasso demonstrates in the extreme, most art worth looking at reflects some kind of grand obsession, a requirement met by the show of new work by the Canadian filmmaker and installation artist Stan Douglas at the David Zwirner Gallery. On view are 28 large, impeccable black-and-white photographs from his “Midcentury Studio” series, each inspired by an existing image and elaborately staged using professional actors and vintage equipment.

The results are meant to evoke the freelance activities — and improving skill set — of an anonymous postwar photographer who frequented crime scenes and sports events; accepted portrait, newspaper and advertising assignments; and documented magic tricks. But the elaborate back story is clearest in a detailed checklist that evokes the image-text pairings of Conceptual Art. The works themselves are almost perversely mannered fusions of those postmodern staples, set-up photography and rephotography that, on their own, render obsession opaque.