

The New York Times
May 10, 2012

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

A Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man in Love

‘Picasso and Françoise Gilot,’ at Gagosian

By KEN JOHNSON

Life was sweet for Picasso during his 10 years of romance and cohabitation with Françoise Gilot, from 1943 to 1953. Or so it would seem, judging by “Picasso and Françoise Gilot: Paris-Vallauris, 1943-1953,” a wonderful exhibition at Gagosian Gallery. The Picasso of these years — he was in his 60s and early 70s — seems to revel in the joys of family and domesticity. Gone are the moonstruck years with Marie-Thérèse Walter and the violently conflicted ones with Dora Maar. The crazy-old-man last act is yet to come. Looking at pictures here of his young children Claude and Paloma at play, you can imagine yourself seeing through the eyes of a loving, benevolent father — who just happens to be the most inventive artist of the 20th century.



2012 Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Maurice Aeschmann/ Gagosian Gallery, Private Collection
“Femme au Fauteuil N. 1 (d’Après le Rouge),” 1949, one of Picasso’s works depicting his lover Françoise Gilot as a regal beauty in serene domesticity.

There may be other stories to tell about the Françoise years. Ms. Gilot told one in her invaluable memoir, “Life With Picasso” (1964). The tale told by this exhibition is the product of dialogue between Ms. Gilot, now 90, and John Richardson, Picasso’s biographer and the curator of previous crowd-pleasing Picasso shows at Gagosian, including “Picasso: Mosqueteros” in 2009 and “Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L’Amour Fou” last year.

Ms. Gilot is the subject of many portraits picturing her not as a pneumatic odalisque or a weeping harpy but as a beauty of regal bearing, queen of the house. Picasso’s angry and mean side is not completely in abeyance; there are some female monsters on canvas here, but they mostly tend to the comical side. “Femme Nue Sur Fond Bleu” (1946), a painting of something resembling a sculpture made of rounded, gray boulders assembled into a vaguely female form by the people of some prehistoric civilization, is more funny than terrifying.



2012 Françoise Gilot, Ali Elai/Camera Arts Inc. — Gagosian Gallery, Private Collection. Françoise Gilot’s “Picasso’s Face (Portrait From Memory),” 1945.

Curiously, there are almost no self-portraits (assuming, that is, that you do not view everything he made as self-portraiture). Picasso seems less preoccupied by his self and its conflicts than at other times. Maybe a painting from 1946 explains. Fine lines and curvy planes define a Cubist-style image of a woman with a knife in one hand and the bovine head of the Minotaur held by the other. Beauty has vanquished the troublemaking beast.

The numerous images of children stand out especially, because they are so uncommon in art of the avant-garde, for which having and raising offspring has never been a high priority. A few decades ago this phase of Picasso’s art was routinely dismissed as sentimental kitsch. In truth, there is a high sugar content. But emotional nuance was not Picasso’s strength; a caveman with a ferocious analytic intellect, he was drawn to the mythic and the archetypal on the one hand and endlessly fascinated by the ways and means of painting on the other.



2012 Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Maurice Aeschimann/ Gagosian Gallery, Private Collection. Picasso's "Enfant Dans Sa Voiture, February 20, 1949."

He was certainly inspired by the spectacle of his children at play. "Enfant Dans Sa Voiture" (1949) is a delightfully zany painting in red, white, blue and gray of an infant in a stroller. The baby's head is twisted and flattened into a blob with displaced googly eyes, its chubby arms and hands pointing this way and that, and the wheels and other parts of its vehicle reconfigured into a geometric jumble. There is an infectious exuberance here that owes as much to the idea of the child as an agent of centrifugal energy as to the whirly, Cubist dynamics.

Sometimes abstraction and bodily gesture are neatly unified. In a painting from 1953, Paloma, age 3 or 4, sits on a red rug that fills the canvas. She leans forward on legs folded under her at a seemingly impossible angle, supporting herself on one straight arm and reaching with the other to slap a sausage-fingered paw on a yellow toy in the foreground. Rendered with wide brushes, the features of her round face defined by black lines and her cheeks spotted bright red, she embodies the kind of concentrated, albeit momentary urgency of intention and desire that is so characteristic of little children and, not incidentally, of Picasso himself, whose own attention span tended to be short but intense.

During this period Picasso got into painting pottery and making small clay sculptures of women. He also explored lithography in depth, mainly in the form of black-and-white portraits of Ms. Gilot. Both directions are well represented here, and they attest to a creative drive that was either compulsive or unfathomable, and always impatiently alive to the next possibility of any given medium.

The exhibition includes a selection of works by Ms. Gilot, who was an artist at 21, when she met Picasso, and continued to be after leaving him. Looking at the 30 paintings here, including naturalistic portraits of herself and her grandmother, Cubist still lifes and abstractions and

pictures of herself and her children, you might think for a moment that you are looking at more Picassos.

But that impression is quickly dispelled by the overfinished quality of her work. Ms. Gilot clearly was a competent painter, but whereas, with Picasso, it seems that every painting is an adventure, every mark or stroke the registration of a thought or an impulse in real time, her works resemble dutifully completed assignments for a class in how to paint like Picasso.

What was life with Picasso really like? That is not a question that this show answers. But one of two landscapes by him here is suggestive. In the wildly animated scene of “Paysage d’Hiver” (1950), each of two gnarly, leafless trees in the foreground reaches a branch toward the other, almost touching, as if with index fingers. Rolling, striped green fields in the middle distance lead to a couple of ramshackle farm buildings standing on the horizon line under a gloomy, gray sky that threatens stormy weather.

It could be an illustration for “Wuthering Heights,” if that Gothic romance had been set in Spain, and it might be a truer portrait of the spiritual marriage of Pablo and Françoise than anything else in the exhibition.

“Picasso and Françoise Gilot” continues through June 30 at the Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Avenue, near 77th Street; (212) 744-2313, gagosian.com.