

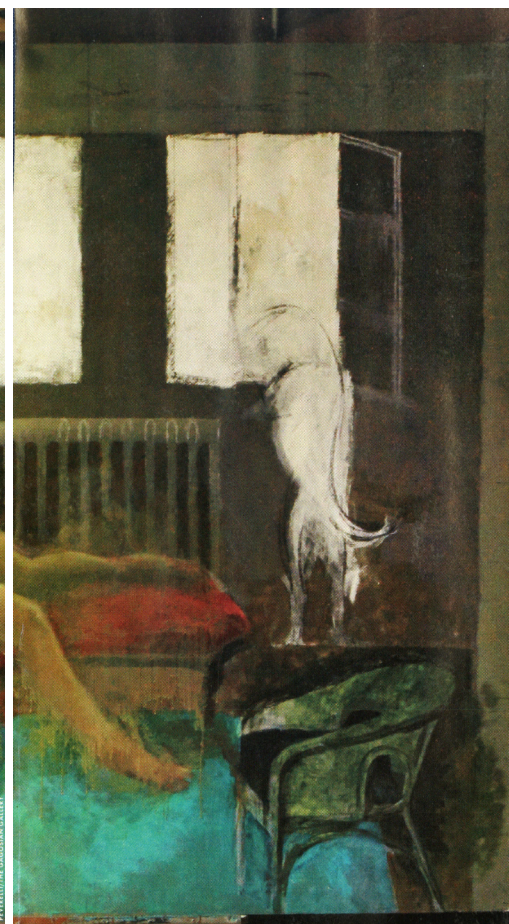
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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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FINAL STROKES

An unfinished painting, left behind by Balthus, who died in 2001. Photographed at his home studio, in Rossinière, Switzerland.



Balthus is always good for some crowds and controversy, as a big Metropolitan Museum show opening this month will likely prove. But, INGRID SISCHY writes, a concurrent exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery—featuring Balthus's previously unseen Polaroids of the young girl who served as his last model—reveals a more intimate, human, and even poignant side of the self-mythologizing artist

# Balthus's Last Muse

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#### ANNA'S WORLD

*Clockwise from bottom left: a Polaroid of Anna Whali by Balthus, circa 1996 (Anna is about 13 years old); Balthus and Anna, 1995; Balthus takes a Polaroid of Anna, circa 1993. Opposite, Balthus, photographed by Irving Penn, Paris, 1948.*

**W**ith New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art about to open "Balthus: Cats and Girls—Paintings and Provocations," focusing on the artist's work from the mid-1930s to the 1950s, one can already hear the crowds purring about his Alice-in-Wonderland-type paintings. Folks who think contemporary art is the emperor's new clothes will once again breathe a sigh of relief: "Whew! A real painter!" The shrinks will have a field day: "What's with the fixation on pubescent girls?" The feminists—please God, there are some left—will weigh in, and maybe the moralists too.

Balthus, who died in 2001, liked to stay above the fray, never embracing the isms that absorbed so many of his contemporaries. Born Balthasar Klossowski, he cultivated an air of mystery and myth, secluding

himself in old-world country houses and castles in France, Italy, and Switzerland and inventing a life (and an aristocratic lineage or two) where the discipline of work was the order of the day. "Balthus is a painter about whom nothing is known," he'd say.

But secrets have a way of busting through. Timed to coincide with the Met show, a polar-opposite exhibition will debut at the Gagosian Gallery in New York—one as intimate as the Met's is grand, comprising a selection of previously unseen Polaroids that Balthus shot in the 1990s of the model for his last works, at his legendary "Grand Chalet" in La Rosinière, Switzerland. The show leads us right into the heart of Balthus's process, and also of his humanity. It will include at least one of his final, unfinished paintings for which the Polaroids were made. An accompanying two-book work will be published by Steidl.

Even though Balthus stuck to his routine of a full day's work right up to the end, it became physically difficult for him to draw. Previously he had made hundreds of drawings as preparatory studies for his canvases; now he turned to the Polaroid. Anna Whali, the youngest daughter of Balthus's doctor, was drafted to be the model. Eight years old when she started sitting for him, she writes in an essay in the Steidl book that she was told Balthus chose her because he liked the sound of her humming Mozart. Across nearly nine years, she would show up Wednesday afternoons to pose. She remembers Balthus as being a bit of a klutz with the camera;

sometimes she'd have to step in and turn it right side up.

Balthus's widow, Setsuko Klossowska de Rola, and his daughter, Harumi, have kept a lid on the photos for more than a decade, and they would not have gone ahead with the show without Anna's permission. (Today she's a psychotherapist and social worker, and it's difficult to resist wondering if her sittings with Balthus led to her choice of profession.) The backing of all three women is important because of the content of the photos. Anna is dressed in either a tartan or a white dress when she is younger, typically posing in an armchair, but as time goes on she moves to a chaise longue and wears a brocade robe that sometimes falls open, so she's partially nude. These images are raw, and true, and risk being fodder for the censors who seem to rear their heads whenever children appear nude in art photographs, even when there is absolutely nothing dodgy going on.

Not that it's inappropriate to be super-sensitive to whether these images are exploitative. Balthus's most famous paintings often come with a purposeful sexual undercurrent, and Anna was just a child. The Polaroids have many moods: beautiful, awkwardly acrobatic, creepy, heartbreaking, luminous, timeless. They also document a meticulous artist's obsession with capturing exactly what he was after—say the position of an arm, the way a leg might stretch, the mood created by just a shaft of light. There is probably no better record of how Balthus worked.



More important, the pictures are a testament to what this unlikely duo shared—the famous “genius” with his glory days behind him, and the local kid with all her dreams ahead of her, both of them aware that their collaboration mattered in some unknowable way. Confession: I’ve always been put off by what I saw as the innate conservatism of Balthus’s work—the fact that everything is so controlled by the maestro. These Pola-

roids give witness to art, and life, as a much messier, much more democratic process, one in which the young girl is a bit of a boss, too. As such they are deeply touching, the reflection of an artist’s knowledge that time was running out for him. Balthus indicated how much he needed Anna by how much he’d light up when she’d arrive. “It may sound pretentious, but this is the feeling that he expressed so vividly, as if much depended

on my presence,” she recalls in her text. My favorite story about the Polaroid sessions comes from his daughter, Harumi, who prepared dishes of sweets for Anna. Once a sitting was over, Harumi remembers: “My father would watch this terrible soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, with her because Anna loved it.” What a perfect metaphor for art. What’s bold and beautiful to one person is a very different thing to another. □