

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art in America

Picasso Selfies, Home Movies and More at Gagosian

Brian Boucher



Pablo Picasso, Autoportrait avec Portrait d'homme, 5 bis, rue Schoelcher, 1915-16 (Paris), gelatin silver print, 6 3/4 by 4 3/4 inches. Private collection. Artwork © 2014 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo Maurice Aeschmann. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

“Most shows about Picasso and the photograph are simply rows of portraits of him, which is monotonous and boring,” Picasso scholar John Richardson told *A.i.A.* during a preview of his exhibition “Picasso & the Camera,” opening today (through Jan. 3, 2015) in New York, at Gagosian’s West 21st Street gallery. “We had to find a new approach—to get *into* the camera,” he said, with an accent fitting a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire, as he was appointed in 2012.

Stocked with 60 years of photographs, including self-portraits, as well as related paintings, sculptures, prints and films, and even a chair from his studio, the show makes an argument that Picasso’s practice at the very birth of Cubism was deeply informed by the camera. “The camera permitted Picasso to see his works anew,” Richardson writes in the catalogue.

Currently at work on the fourth volume of his Picasso biography (the *New York Times* pronounced the third volume to be “at once easygoing and magisterial”), Richardson, 90, has organized a series of shows at Gagosian devoted to the Spaniard; this is the fifth. A 2009 exhibition on the subject of the Musketeer works was followed by a 2010 show on the artist’s

Mediterranean years. A 2011 installment, the third, focused on Picasso and Marie-Thérèse; the fourth, in 2012, dwelled on his relationship with Françoise Gilot. Richardson knows all the players well; Picasso was the writer's close friend and mentor.

Richardson pointed out that many works in the show have never been exhibited, or never on these shores. Walking by one landscape, he said, "This one has been hiding in the Denver Museum for years, and no one knew it was there!" The scholar was full of recollections of Picasso's subjects; a nude drawing of American socialite Sara Murphy (wife of artist Gerald Murphy) brought to mind rumors of an affair between her and Picasso. "But she was notoriously pure," he said.

"This is my pet discovery," Richardson said, leaning over a display case with the book *Art in Greece* (1933), by the critic Christian Zervos (who also founded the magazine *Cahiers d'Art*).

"This book was Picasso's crib," Richardson declared, pointing out a page reproducing an ancient sculpture of a man bearing a calf over his shoulders, and then indicating, on the wall, a reproduction of a photograph showing Picasso standing next to his own sculpture of a man carrying a goat. "It's the most important discovery of the show, because it shows that so much of the sculpture from the 1930s comes straight out of this book."

But a portrait drawing of Picasso by an admirer, he said, was the genesis of the exhibition. He pointed out a highly realistic image of the artist's face, adorned with abstract curlicues.

"It started life in 1921 as a portrait drawing of Picasso by Valentine Hugo, wife of artist Jean Hugo and an old friend," he said. "Fifteen years later, she's divorced him and has fallen madly in love with Picasso, who was very busy with other ladies. He gets a photograph of the drawing of him and has it blown up and intensifies the eyes, and then he does *Guernica* drawings all over it."

The work is a loan from Richardson himself. "A friend went to the auction of Valentine Hugo's estate, and came back with all these lithographs" based on Picasso's altered photograph, he explained. "He gave me one. When I got home I realized I'd got the original. But he insisted that he'd given it to me and it was mine."

Many of the photographs included in the show, he said, inform his view of Picasso's canvases. He pointed out a 1925 picture of Picasso's wife, the ballerina Olga, posed in a tutu with one arm raised, and compared it to a 1932 painting. The canvas shows a woman, seemingly enraged, with her arms similarly positioned to Olga's in the photo. The ballerina's graceful pose becomes a contortion. "It's never been identified as Olga but of course it is," he said. "It's mockingly called *The Repose*, and it's anything but. It's poor Olga when she's having fits of hysteria. For a biographer like myself, these photographs are crucial. You learn how to perceive these balletic references in a cynical and satirical light."

Another highlight of the show, in Richardson's view, is a set of photographs Picasso took in his studio in 1931, shown alongside a group of professional photos of the same work. The sculptures show a head of Marie-Thérèse, among other female heads.

"It's a breakthrough sculpture," Richardson said. "He didn't show the sculptures until 1936. He's trying to shove two heads together into a kiss, but he finally gives up and does it as a painting."

The 1931 canvas, showing two heads in an embrace, hangs nearby. In the photos, Richardson said, “You see him making attempts to elongate the necks. If you compare them with the final sculptures, you see all kinds of gradual changes that he’s trying out that don’t work. It’s a record of the way he sculpted.”

There is a veritable bonanza of Picasso in New York at present. Thirty-four examples of the artist’s work are included in “Cubism: The Leonard Lauder Collection” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through Feb. 6, 2015), and Pace Gallery will devote both its Midtown and Chelsea venues to the show “Picasso & Jacqueline: The Evolution of Style” (Oct. 31, 2014-Jan. 10, 2015) focusing on the artist’s relationship with Jacqueline Roque.

As for the Met Museum exhibition, Richardson pointed out that the growth of Cubism owed a great deal to photography, so it’s fortunate for the shows to be on view at the same time. Having not yet seen the show, Richardson couldn’t comment on it, he said. “But I lived with most of that collection for 12 years in France, so I know it extremely well.”

“After Picasso died, I stayed with his widow,” he said, “so I do know a lot of stuff.”