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Gagosian's Game of Perception in Paris

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*An installation view of the Gagosian Paris show "Critical Dictionary: Homage to G. Bataille."
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From 1929 to 1930, the French philosopher and writer Georges Bataille, known largely for his sexual and Surrealist writings like “Eroticism” and “The Absence of Myth,” published an art magazine called Documents. Bataille referred to the magazine as “a war machine against received ideas,” and his core intent with it was to bring together high and low art (“beaux arts et variétés”) in order to re-structure tired forms of thinking. The magazine, for instance, published works on the influence of archaeology on jazz and, among other oddities, a photo series on big toes that questioned notions of fetishization, in media, sex, and otherwise. The magazine’s absurdity was meant to showcase “the most provoking as yet unclassified works of art and certain unusual productions,” its mission statement read. “Neglected until now [these works] will be the object of studies as rigorous and scientific as those of archaeologists.

On view until July 28 at the Gagosian Gallery in Paris, “Critical Dictionary: In Homage to G. Bataille” uses the gallery’s formidable roster of artists in an attempt to make fresh connections between seemingly incongruous works — taking the name “Critical Dictionary” from a section published in all fifteen issues of Documents.

Serena Cattaneo Adorno, the director of Paris’ Gagosian Gallery and the curator of the current exhibition, has grouped together apparently disparate art: post-war Abstract Expressionism with antiquarian sculpture, a Surrealist painting with a hyper-real Contemporary sculpture, a gold-framed Medieval virgin and child painting with a Contemporary marble sculpture. Like Bataille, Adorno’s curation attempts to transform works based on their context. How does our conception of a big toe change when it’s sexualized in giant photos, Bataille once asked? How, too, does our

understanding of, say, a Rene Magritte painting change when it's juxtaposed with a Duane Hanson sculpture, Adorno now replies?

In one of the most compelling juxtapositions of the exhibition, Frank Stella's "D. Scramble: Ascending Green Values/Ascending Spectrum" — in which a concentric, multi-colored square pulls the viewer into its center — is placed next to a small, white marble sculpture of a man standing in contrapposto (probably the Greek god Apollo). "D. Scramble" creates an optical illusion in which each of the squares appears to jump out while pulling back at the same time — creating a seemingly visible vibration — while the small Greek god, just in front and to the side of the painting, casts his gaze downward. The almost-mathematical seductiveness of the maximalist Stella combined with the smallness and shyness of the Greek god sculpture at once questions notions of gaze, modern media culture, and power. Stella forces you to look at his work; the unknown sculptor makes you shy away. How do power dynamics shift throughout media, throughout time? The juxtaposition of the works is meant to take you into this headspace.

In another so-called "dialogue," a sculpture by Anish Kapoor called "Chamber 3" is chiseled out of a slab of alabaster; inside, a hollow chamber is covered in gold and gold leaves, as if the alabaster has become gold, alchemically. The sculpture is placed next to Paolo Schiavo's 15th-century virgin-and-child painting "Madonna con Bambino in Trono," in which the frame and the background both shimmer with gold, a quintessential medieval tool in images depicting Christ. Taken together, Kapoor's sculpture comes to appear divine — the gold representing that which cannot be depicted, namely God, in Schiavo's work — while Schiavo's begins to look like the originator of Contemporary works like Kapoor's.

In a juxtaposition that questions the objectivity of color, an exceptionally tall Dan Flavin installation emits a blue light onto the gallery's ceiling in the corner, the light leaking down and vaguely touching a painting composed mostly of purples and light greens by Helen Frankenthaler, thereby questioning where color begins and ends and the way in which surrounding context shifts our understanding of even the most basic aspect of a work, like its pigment or brightness.

Throughout "Critical Dictionary," there are also works by Louise Bourgeois, Donald Judd, Wassily Kandinsky, and Mary Weatherford as well as almost-ancient treasures like a second-century Roman sculpture along with a Togolese shrine figure. Only a gallery as large and as ambitious as the Gagosian could pull off such an exhibition, namely because few others have access to this many works of such quality and variety.

It's at first curious why Adorno and the gallery settled on Bataille as the thematic unifier of the exhibition. But there are few others of the past century who have been able to at once move seamlessly between media while also finding a way to reexamine the world in wholly new ways: What is sex? What is power? What is a big toe? This is also the spirit that infuses the exhibition, and although it has a relatively short run and has been dropped within the summertime months during which many Parisians leave town, "Critical Dictionary" is a show worth not only seeing but also taking your time with. The longer you look, the more is revealed, even if what is being revealed has little to do with the art and everything to do with your shifting perception.