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The One That Got Away: 'Picasso and Françoise Gilot: Paris-Vallauris, 1943–1953' at Gagosian and Frank Stella at L&M Arts

By Maika Pollack 5/29 6:06pm

PABLO PICASSO WAS 61 when he met Françoise Gilot, a pretty 23-year-old art student, in a Parisian café in 1943. That he seduced her surprised no one; that she eventually left him was, given his successes with women, pretty shocking, and became the subject of several books and films. Artworks originating during and depicting their decade-long relationship are now on display at Gagosian Gallery, where they constitute the fourth Picasso exhibition there curated by the artist's biographer John Richardson. This period of Picasso's production isn't as inspired as his early collage, as eccentric as his late imaginary portraits (the subject of Gagosian's 2009 show "Picasso: Mosqueteros"), or as inventive as the passionate painting in last spring's "Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L'amour fou." Instead, the pottery, paintings, lithographs and sculptures, shown alongside a room of paintings by the young Ms. Gilot—who curated the exhibition in tandem with Mr. Richardson—are placidly domestic. The two artists often worked from the same subject: their family life in the south of France and, especially, their young children, Claude and Paloma.

This work was made in the home of a man who has settled down. The paintings' surfaces are, in most cases, composed of the layered washes of oil paint that require time to dry between coats; it's a leisurely process, in contrast to the hurried, thick impasto or slapdash constructions of the earlier years. He dotingly depicts the children playing games in *La Lecture et les Jouets* (1953) and the decorative *Les Jeux* (1950). Daughter Paloma's moon-round face in the grisaille oil painting *Paloma et sa Poupée* (1952) is caressed by electric-blue highlights.

The family of four is depicted in silhouette in *Chinese Shadows* (1952), one of Picasso's most bourgeois images.

The Picasso-Gilot relationship was a Mediterranean idyll: photographs on display in the show place them in Antibes, the Chateau Grimaldi, Cannes and Vallauris, where his success afforded them comfortable homes, lithography and pottery studios, and the company of famous friends. He introduced her to Matisse early in their courtship, and Matisse chose the vegetable green and cool blue tones with which Picasso would render Ms. Gilot in *Femme au collier jaune* (1946) and in the serene *Femme en vert et mauve* (1947). Picasso depicts Ms. Gilot with a tiny, delicate face, enormous breasts and square hips, in his habitual easy interweaving of beauty and sex. In a wall of lithographs he repeats her sharp, handsome eyebrows, wide sculptural nose and signature single beauty mark. The crumpled drawing *Femme Peignant* (1953) captures her painting, absorbed by her work. More often than not, though, Picasso depicted her as just another object in the house: wringing out her mane of dark hair, calmly playing with their two children, or just there, as in the interlocking shapes of *Mère et deux enfants* (1950). A wall of small twisted figurines equate her nude, seated, maternal body with the malleable clay and metal from which they're made.

An extended-exposure photograph of Picasso drawing with light is paired with one of Ms. Gilot doing the same, suggesting mutual aesthetic influence. And yet it is her paintings that are Picassoesque, there is no vice versa (the ones that aren't channel Van Gogh, or a Balthus-y realism). Of the two, she was more invested in chronicling the details of daily life. The children are real children in her work, rather than abstracted blocks of color. They write real words ("Liberty!"); they light real matches. The sliced up anchovies in *Les Poissons et Couteau* (1942) leak real guts: the world Ms. Gilot inhabits in her art is populated by actual people with independent volition and irreducible qualities, rather than with Picasso's endless plastic possibilities. Unfortunately, her paintings tend toward moralistic messages—the dignity of old age, the willfulness of youth. She exhibited with famed dealer Daniel Henry Kahnweiler until her 1953 breakup with Picasso; his gallery dropped her three years later (at Picasso's urging, she would claim).

It must have been difficult for Ms. Gilot to encounter the women Picasso had discarded still stubbornly hanging around even as they grew old: his first wife, the ballerina Olga Khokhlava; his crazed mistress Dora Maar; the youthful and pliant Marie-Thèrese, whom he persisted in visiting each Sunday. After leaving Picasso, Ms. Gilot made a project of reclaiming her autonomy—it was probably her best move. In this show, she resolutely portrays her time with Picasso as a meeting of equals. But there are ironies here. By the time they met, the man who had made incisive discoveries about texture and form, who had painted the *Demoiselles* and *Guernica*, was an old man enjoying the comforts and privileges of success and, for all her feistiness, pretty Ms. Gilot was among those privileges. If Picasso wanted nothing more than for the world to think he was still virile and

young by choosing and reinventing himself through her, that anxious desire indicated that his artistic potency was on the wane. Her independence may have remained intact in spite of him, but it's undeniable that she accrued the lion's share of her life's attention and fame as a result of her liaison with Picasso. However difficult it was for Picasso to bear the blow of her leaving him—she claims to be the only woman ever to do so—he appears to have recovered swiftly; he started an affair with his quiet pottery assistant, Jacqueline Roque, just a year later and married her in 1961.

Ms. Gilot clearly relished being in the driver's seat of this exhibition. If Picasso's occasional claim was that he "invented her," that he had made drawings of women who looked like her before she was born ("You should be thankful to me"), she retaliated by resisting him, running away, removing their two children to Paris, and finally by writing the definitive tell-all book, *Life With Picasso*, about their relationship in 1964. In this show's catalog she writes, "When Picasso became disagreeable, he could be very disagreeable. And when I don't want to be nice, I, too, can be very un-nice." That the French have made Ms. Gilot an officer of the Legion of Honor is perhaps not so much a testament to her work as a visual artist as it is a recognition that her dedication to insisting on her side of the story, and her right to tell it—in art, books, lectures and exhibitions like this one—is, ultimately, a feminist enterprise.

A FEW BLOCKS OVER from Gagosian, and worlds away aesthetically, is a bravura demonstration of what Picasso sought in Ms. Gilot: the raw talent that, when it accompanies youth, annoys pundits and changes paradigms. In his early 20s in the late 1950s, Frank Stella created an extraordinary series of monochrome paintings, now on view at L&M Arts. Fifteen Stellas made between 1958 and 1962 are on loan from major museums and the artist's private collection to make up an exhibition that, if you are interested in postwar painting, you must see.

Even if you know Stella's iconic black paintings, like *Zambezi* (1959), you may not know how economical and satisfying they are in person. The lines in between the black paint stripes fuzz slightly on the unprimed canvas; the industrial paint on notched canvas works have edges covered by what looks like duct tape. The tiny, sparkly *Untitled* (1959) is a revelation. *Delta* (1958) takes up Jasper Johns's drippy, striped flags and renders them in black enamel. Two rhymed L-shaped, copper-colored paintings, *Creede I* and *II* (1961), shift the figure-ground relationship to a dance between the painting's form and the gallery's white walls. These are artworks that changed the way art worked.

When people chastise the contemporary art market for occasionally rewarding very young artists, they seem unaware that extraordinary things have long happened in the studios of those who are 22 years old. This show allows us to be physically present with paintings that are endlessly reproduced in art history

books; it's a moving experience that results in visitors to the gallery backing up from the paintings, then zooming in on them, smiling, and sharing their enthusiasm with perfect strangers.

Last Thursday, a show of Mr. Stella's eccentric new sculptures opened at the nearby gallery Freedman Art. When this critic asked the artist about his old work, he seemed genuinely unconcerned. "Ah, the past," he said, waving his hand in the air, and wandered away to talk about the present.