

LIFE AFTER PICASSO

Beautiful, feisty, and fiercely independent at 90, muse and artist Françoise Gilot is exhibiting her own paintings alongside her famous ex's. By Dodie Kazanjian. Photographed by Tina Barney.



OPPOSITE PAGE: *La Femme-fleur*, 1946. PABLO PICASSO, oil on canvas 57 1/2 x 35 1/2. Private Collection. Courtesy of Thomas Amman Fine Art AG. © 2012 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



COLOR SURGE

Gilot in her New York apartment, hung with many artworks, including her own *The Eye of Ra*, 2003–04. Oscar de la Renta coat. Hair, Tim Rogers for Living Proof; makeup, Carla White. Details, see In This Issue. RIGHT: Picasso depicts Gilot as a flower in *La Femme-fleur*, 1946.

Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

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hen Françoise Gilot decided to take her two young children and leave Pablo Picasso in 1953, ending their ten-year relationship, the infuriated genius told her she was “headed straight for the desert” because no one would ever have more than “a kind of curios-

ity . . . about a person whose life has touched mine so intimately.” He was wrong. Life after Picasso has been a continuing adventure for Françoise—two marriages (the second a 25-year union with Jonas Salk, another twentieth-century genius, who developed the polio vaccine), a third child, many friendships, two best-selling books, and a successful career as an artist who continues, at the age of 90, to paint every day. Next month, for the first time ever, a selection of her paintings and drawings will be shown in a joint exhibition with Picasso’s. The show, titled “Picasso and Françoise Gilot [1943–1953],” at the Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue, is the fourth in a Gagosian series of Picasso blockbusters. Françoise agreed to cooperate because it deals with the decade when she and Picasso were together, and, as she tells me in her slightly imperious way, “I thought that was an interesting idea.”

We are in her apartment off Central Park West, her U.S. base for the last 20 years, during which she has divided her time between New York and Paris. There’s a large, double-height studio with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, north-facing windows, and two easels for her current work: abstract oils in resonant colors, which she paints without preliminary sketches and with both hands, alternating between left and right. Erect, alert, and somewhat aloof, she’s a handsome and impressive woman, a presence. Before we start to talk, her eye falls on a Xerox I’ve brought along of one of Picasso’s many paintings of her, and she says, firmly, in her clear French-accented English, “I’m not going to talk about Picasso. I have done my duty to those memories. I have had a great career as an artist myself, you know. I’m not here just because I’ve spent time with Picasso.” She brings out two oversize volumes documenting her oeuvre, which now numbers more than 1,600 paintings and 4,000 to 5,000 works on paper. As we talk, though, Picasso keeps finding his way into the conversation, even if Françoise characteristically refuses to let him dominate it.

Her early life, as she describes it, was privileged but lonely. An only child of haute bourgeois, highly intellectual Parisian parents—her father was an agronomist who developed several chemical firms; her mother was a ceramic artist—she decided at the age of five that she, too, was going to be an artist, but “with a big A.” An active and adventurous tomboy who rode horseback every morning in the Bois de Boulogne, she was tutored at home until she was ten. By the time she went to school, “I was ahead of other children my age, and I didn’t think the same way. I did not submit to rules if I did not see they had any meaning.” Brilliant and willful, she entered law school because her father insisted on it, but when war came and Paris fell to the Nazis, she dropped law—from then on, she was painting full time.

The famous meeting with Picasso—when he brought a bowl of cherries to the table at Le Catalan where she was having dinner with her school friend and fellow artist Geneviève Aliquot and the film actor Alain Cuny—took place in 1943.



A FINE LINE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Robert Capa’s famous photograph of Picasso and Gilot at Golfe-Juan, France, August 1948. Gilot’s *Maternity*, *Françoise and Claude*, 1953. Picasso’s *Woman Drawing (Françoise Gilot)*, 1951, shows Gilot as an artist.

She was 21; Picasso was 61. “I really think that if I had met Picasso during peacetime,” she tells me, “nothing would have happened.” Most of the men her age were at war. She admired the courage that had made Picasso refuse to leave occupied France. She herself had been arrested in a student demonstration, and like everyone else in Paris at that time, she felt both doomed and fearless. Although she was well aware of Picasso’s history with women (he was dining that night with Dora Maar, his soon-to-be-discarded mistress, who was looking daggers at their table), she wasn’t a bit afraid or in awe of him. A relationship with him, as she wrote in her 1964 book *Life with Picasso*, was a “catastrophe I didn’t want to avoid.”

After 1964, anyone who wanted to be friends with Picasso, or to be admitted to his studio, had to denounce Françoise’s memoir. One of the more prominent denouncers was John Richardson, who would go on to write a masterly multi-volume biography of Picasso. “This wretched book,” he wrote about *Life with Picasso* in a scathing attack in *The New York*

Review of Books, was "indiscretion masquerading as candor" and "chip-on-shoulder malice." So, how has Françoise dealt with the fact that Richardson is curating the Picasso/Gilot show at Gagosian? "Well," she tells me, "he changed his mind, little by little. In his first volume on Picasso, he said that everything I wrote was lies. In the second"—a burst of cackling laughter from Françoise—"he wrote that what I said is the truth, but it's not so important. In the third, he wrote that what I said is extremely important. He changed his mind about me, which I think is quite nice of him."

But Picasso was gone by that time, I say.

"To change your mind about something is always difficult," she says. "I think that people who are big enough to admit they were wrong can be counted on your fingers."

When I call John Richardson, he suggests it might have been better to wait until Picasso had died before publishing her book, but that the book itself is "fascinating and brilliant, and crucial to the understanding of Picasso." As for the upcoming show, which was organized jointly by Richardson and Valentina Castellani, a Gagosian gallery director, he says, "One of the things we want to establish is how she bounces off him, but how he bounces a little bit off her, too. She drew very well, and she was a serious and extremely professional painter. . . . I don't want to make this another mistress show."

There are no Picassos in Françoise's apartment. Some years ago, she sold the only one she had, the best of the *La Femme-fleur* series, in which he painted her as a semi-abstract, graceful, pale green-and-blue but quite un-flowerly flower. He painted it in 1946, soon after taking her to meet Matisse, who had made him jealous by saying he would like to paint a portrait of her with green hair and a light-blue complexion. Françoise had loved Matisse's work since she was fifteen, and she felt much more akin to it than to Picasso's. She saw it the same day she saw Picasso's *Guernica*, which was on view for the first time at the 1937 Paris International Exposition. "I fell in love with Matisse that day, not with Picasso," she tells me. (Her second book, *Matisse and Picasso*, is a penetrating study of the artists' complex relationship.) "Matisse was my God. I'm a French artist, that's for sure. I am color-oriented and what you might call a composer. I am not pouring my guts out; I keep them inside." Her other hero in the early days was Braque, so it's not by chance that she has a Braque still life on her library wall. "There is so much in it that is not said but implied," she tells me. "He doesn't disgorge his intestine in front of me."

The pull of Picasso's work, however, was inescapable for any artist in the forties and fifties, and you can't help seeing it in Françoise's paintings—the combination of abstraction and figuration, the deep saturated colors, the occasional violence of her clashing forms. But she was already an artist when they met, "painting more like Braque" than Picasso, according to Richardson. In addition to being Picasso's model and muse, Françoise was his intellectual equal. He wanted her to stay up late at night with him, often until two or three in the morning, talking and arguing about his work. Her independence, her directness, and her penetrating insights fascinated and annoyed him, and nourished his insatiable appetite for life. "Art is not a communicable disease," she says when I ask about Picasso's influence on her. "It's not like TB. You have it or you don't. And if you have it, you have to develop it yourself. I was interested in my work."

Françoise was not particularly interested in having children,

but Picasso insisted. Claude was born in 1947 and Paloma in 1949. "You might say I look feminine," she says, "but inside, I'm still a boy. I hated being pregnant." (Picasso and Gilot couldn't marry because Olga, his first wife, refused to give him a divorce.) Though fiercely devoted to the children—she would have another daughter in 1956 with artist Luc Simon, whom she did marry—Françoise didn't believe in overprotective motherhood. "I don't think the parent and child should be so intimate that it becomes a jail for the child. I've tried to help my children become themselves. Paloma has been working with Tiffany's for 31 years. She found what she wanted to do, and she's done it." Claude, who keeps an apartment in the same New York block as his mother's, runs the Picasso Administration in Paris, and Aurélia, Françoise's third child, is an architect who lives in Boston and manages the Gilot archives.

"When I left Picasso, I knew I would have a lot of enemies," she says. "They were already there, putting banana peels under my feet all the time. One of the reasons I came to the United States in 1961 was that I thought people would be more fair here, and I had also noticed that about 80 percent of my collectors were American." She came more and more often, traveling to different cities where she had gallery shows and staying in the Stanhope Hotel when she was in New York—it had artists' studios on the top floor. On a trip to Los Angeles in 1969, a friend introduced her to Jonas Salk. She had no interest in meeting him—she thought scientists were boring. But soon afterward, he came to New York and invited her to have tea at Rumpelmayer's. "He didn't have tea; he ordered pistachio and tangerine ice cream," she recalls. "I thought, *Well*, a scientist who orders pistachio and tangerine ice cream at five o'clock in the afternoon is not like everybody else!" He pursued her to Paris and a few months later asked her to marry him. She balked. "I said, 'I just don't need to be married,' and he said, 'In my position, I cannot *not* be married.' He gave me two pieces of paper and told me to write down the reasons why I didn't want to get married." She complied. Her list included: "I can't live more than six months with one person"; "I have my own children"; "I have my career as a painter and have to go here and there"; "I'm not always in the mood to talk. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

Salk looked at the list and said he found it "quite congenial." They were married in 1970 and were together until he died in 1995. "It worked very well," she says, "because after all we got along very well."

Before I leave, I bring out the Xerox she had seen earlier, of a 1951 Picasso painting called *Woman Drawing (Françoise Gilot)*, a picture she had once described as "the best portrait Picasso made of me." I tell her that the painting now belongs to Phyllis Hattis, the art historian/private dealer and widow of William Rubin, who curated four groundbreaking Picasso shows when he was the director of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. Phyllis is a good friend of mine, I say, and she would love for me to bring you over to see the painting—she is not lending it to the Gagosian show. "I know it very well," Françoise says. "I saw it being painted."

We go to see it a month later in Phyllis's art-filled penthouse overlooking the East River. Françoise hasn't seen the painting for many years, and at first she seems not to want to focus on it. She admires the two Dubuffets, which bring back memories of her 1944 meeting with him ("When I told Pablo I had seen Dubuffet, he was furious"); the (continued from page 601)

LIFE AFTER PICASSO

(continued from page 555)

big aluminum relief by Frank Stella; the African tribal sculptures and Oceanic figures; the many Matisse and Miró—and the Picassos. She falls silent in front of a large 1952–53 ink drawing of Paloma as a baby, and I notice that she's not really looking at it. She's looking at a small drawing on the grand piano that shows a nude and highly eroticized Jacqueline Roque, the woman who replaced her in Picasso's life.

We finally sit down in front of *Woman Drawing*, which hangs alone on a long wall, flanked by two masterpieces of tribal art. "Well," she says, after a longish silence, "the breasts are going up instead of down. That's optimistic!" Her raucous laugh rings out. "But something I never understood is why on earth does that pencil I'm holding have a string attached to the table? I never used a pencil like that, so it's pure imagination."

Phyllis mentions that a prominent art historian once wrote that the pencil was tied this way so her children wouldn't knock it off the table.

Françoise makes a derisive noise. "That's hot air. Pablo imagined that pencil. It had nothing to do with anything he saw. He had such a fantastic visual memory, and most of the time he drew from what was in his mind." She stands up, moves closer to the painting, squinting, then sits down again.

"For each of the women in his life, he had a kind of leitmotif, like in Wagner. For me, it was blue and green—although here, I have only green. You can hear it, if you like. For Marie-Thérèse Walter, it was lavender, lemon yellow, and pale green. Black was usually associated with Dora Maar, but he played more with form than with color for her. Dora Maar had both eyes on the same side—with me, they are on each side of my nose, thank God." More laughter. "It's because I have a very regular face, and usually I'm in control of my emotions."

Picasso made hundreds of paintings of Françoise and thousands of drawings and prints. She can be a flower, a bowl of cherries, a knight in armor, "and when there's a lobster, that's me, too, because he always said I had the bones outside to protect myself." Phyllis says that to her knowledge, this painting is the only one that shows Françoise as an artist, without the children, working alone in her

studio. Two years later, she was gone—the only one of Picasso's women who left him, and the only one who went on to have a rich and rewarding life of her own. "I knew if I didn't leave Pablo, he would devour me," she says.

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Picasso's longtime dealer, who had been showing her work, too, ended her contract when "Picasso said, 'It's her or me.' Picasso was waging war on me, a very dirty war, because he had all the power." But Kahnweiler helped her find another gallery in Paris, and Gilot has continued to grow as an artist. Dorothea McKenna Elkon, her close friend since the 1960s and her New York dealer for the past two decades, tells me that a large Gilot oil painting can bring up to \$200,000, and that four of her works are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Three weeks after the Picasso/Gilot opening at Gagosian on April 28, a Gilot retrospective goes on view at the Musée du Vieux Nîmes, running concurrently with a show of Picasso's bullfighting images at the Musée des Cultures Taurines, by the same curator (Aleth Jourdan) and in the same city. "He did them," she tells me, "during the years we were together."

We've been talking for nearly four hours, and Françoise seems as fresh as when we arrived. We discuss what she calls her "ancestors" in painting—Gauguin and van Gogh—and she adds, decisively, "I could live without Rubens or Cézanne." When I ask if she looks at contemporary art, she says, "Overall, I like Jasper Johns. For me, he's the best. His gray paintings, precisely. He understands what gray is all about." I am struck once again by Françoise's vivid presence, and by her ability to live entirely in the present. "You always survive if you think you should," she says. "I didn't ask permission to be who I am." □