

The Brooklyn Rail The Echo of Picasso

By Amanda Gluibizzi, December 2023.



Installation view: The Echo of Picasso, Almine Rech, New York, 2023. Courtesy Almine Rech.
Photo: Thomas Barratt.

I learned what it means to be the contemporary of another person right around the same time that I learned about Picasso and was struck that we just missed each other. The little girl I was had a hard time believing that famous artists might have been alive in the same world I occupied: shouldn't they have lived much longer ago than that? Not so, two interconnected shows at Almine Rech tell us, at least not if we're considering the work. Curated by Eric Troncy in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the artist's death (Almine Rech is married to Picasso's grandson, Bernard Ruiz-Picasso), and complemented by important exhibitions dedicated to Picasso at museums and galleries throughout New York, *The Echo of Picasso* demonstrates the very real influence—whether positive or anxiety-inducing—that the artist still exerts on art today.

The gallery's Upper East Side space houses earlier works by Picasso and by artists whose lives and practices overlapped temporally with his: Francis Bacon, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Louise Bourgeois, George Condo, Willem de Kooning, Peter Halley, Jeff Koons, and Louise Nevelson, in works that illustrate to greater and lesser degrees the ways they considered Picasso.

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De Kooning's sketch *No title* (1950–53) hangs on the same wall as Picasso's *Buste de Femme* (1907), allowing us to identify the mask-like faces of de Kooning's women as stemming, at least in part, from Picasso's reduction in geometry as well as derivation from African sources to produce his own female heads; that both drawings also include prominent pentimenti solidifies the side-by-side comparison. Bourgeois's *Portrait of C.Y.* (1947–49), on the other hand, is a trickier connection to make, though the exercise is rewarding. The upright, squared-off bronze stele reads as a stereotypical masculine shape and the nails driven into it at heart height suggest a fetish object, operating almost like a Kongo power figure, while perhaps intimating a symbolic "killing" of the object (or what it represents), as well. Here is that anxiety of influence—and its overcoming—at play. Positioned in the center of the room near to the Bourgeois is an attenuated Picasso bronze woman, *Femme* (1930), the likes of which we haven't seen in New York since MoMA's 2015–16 Picasso Sculpture exhibition, which included a vitrine of them. In their proud postures, whittled facture, and seemingly found-yet-hewn profiles, these marvelous objects recall ancient sources as diverse as the lion-headed Löwenmensch, carved of mammoth ivory (ca. 40,000 years old), and Maya eccentric flints. It is my favorite piece in the exhibition.

To make these kinds of connections—to engage in the history of art history—feels appropriate: Picasso was a great student of art and visual culture, exploiting and repurposing sources throughout his career. The installation gives us permission to do the same, if we feel we need it, through its inclusion of David Hockney's print *The Student - homage a Picasso* (1974), which depicts Hockney, drawing board under arm, regarding a monumental portrait of Picasso. Installed on a monolithic pedestal, Picasso is just a little higher than Hockney's head. We can see that same action in several pieces by contemporary artists, some of whom reappear in the Tribeca location: Urs Fischer channeling the Blue Period in *Facsimile* (2022) and the Rose Period in *Cadmium* (2016), Koons's take on Cubist simultaneity in the bifurcated head of *Split-Rocker (Pink/Orange)* (1999), and Basquiat's untitled skull (1981) reaching out to Picasso's lithograph *Composition with a Skull 20 February 1946* (1946). The younger artists included in each location refer to these forebears—and through them, Picasso—in turn. On the Upper East Side, an untitled 2017 watercolor-and-ink bust of a figure wearing a hat by Jameson Green hits just the right limpidness and awkwardness of both Picasso and Basquiat, and Zio Ziegler's *Accelerating Expansion* (2023), in its centrifugal cyclone of color and gritty texture, recalls Picasso's beach paintings and his experiments with adding literal sand to his still lifes of the twenties and thirties, as processed by Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock.

Downtown, the connections to Picasso are still present—and especially clear in Timothy Curtis's *AGUA* and *The Graffiti Writers Composing Compositions in a Marble Composition Book while Gambling. (After The Three Musicians)* (2023)—but now we have to work a little harder; seeing the shows in conjunction with one another helps, as there are no Picassos and few twentieth-century referent artists included (Karel Appel and Louise Nevelson being notable exceptions).

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The two scrambled portrait heads in Genesis Tramine's *Saint Rainbow* wrapped in *Cloud Talk* (2023), for example, vibrantly pick up where Condo and Basquiat's retorts to Picasso left off, and Antoni Clavé's *A Domenikos T* (1965) responds to the pressure of Bacon, Picasso, and El Greco—and all of the artists' inspiration from El Greco—simultaneously.

I was interested, too, in the artists who aren't mentioned but are felt, particularly Picasso's important and exact contemporaries, compatriots, and rivals, Henri Matisse and Marcel Duchamp. Brian Calvin's *On the Beach* (2023) builds on Picasso's beach paintings, as well as forming a connection to the scumbling texture of Ziegler's work. Calvin's reclining figure, which turns its body away from us, is mirrored in Farah Atassi's *Reclining Woman with Oranges* (2023), who turns toward us. In her pose, this woman owes a debt to Picasso and through Picasso to Manet and Titian, while the clothes she wears—a flat blue garment with white checks—are all Matisse's *Large Reclining Nude* (1935). I thought of Matisse again and Duchamp, too, when looking at Oliver Beer's two mysterious assemblages, *Recomposition (The Three Graces, after Picasso)*, II and *Recomposition (Succès de Scandale, after Picasso)*, III (both 2023), which compile objects—beads, feathers, parts of musical instruments—within the box of a frame and press them up against the picture plane; certain details are visible, while the sides of the objects not pressed against the surface recede. The effect is that of the tenebristic Dutch Baroque still life painters who were considered not only by Picasso, but also by Matisse (*Still Life after Jan Davidsz. de Heem's "La Desserte"* [1915]). The elevation without alteration of everyday objects to art nods to Picasso's sculptures such as his bicycle seat *Bull's Head* (1942), which itself owes a debt to Duchamp's readymades. Beer slyly acknowledges both artists in his inclusion of an image of the *Mona Lisa* in *Recomposition (Succès de Scandale, after Picasso)*, III: when the painting went missing from the Louvre in 1911, Picasso's name was floated amongst the suspects, and Duchamp skewered the painting's fame (in reproduction) both *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) and *L.H.O.O.Q. Rasée* (1965). Here and throughout these exhibitions, we feel the seriousness of play in which Pablo Picasso engaged and that he continues to spur in artists one hundred years his junior. Fifty years after his death, he remains our contemporary, and we are still catching up.