ALMINE RECH

Celebrating Picasso Today: Infinite Modernism

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More than 40 years after creating a dozen paintings heavily influenced by Picasso, Peter Halley (b.1953, New York City, USA) unveils a selection of works which, having been stored in his studio, have never been publicly exhibited... An increasing number of contemporary artists are more or less directly paying homage to Pablo Picasso, re-reading, re-creating, re-interpreting or drawing inspiration from his very essence, whether it be his awareness of the world, his passionate relationship with love or his constant formal revolutions.

A place in history

Peter Halley had been working mainly with collages on paper when, in 1979, after a trip to Europe, he decided to return to the canvas. "I wanted to reclaim and understand what seemed like a global Western culture, as I belonged to a generation that picked up paint brushes again to reconnect with painting, just like Julian Schnabel and following in the footsteps of Anselm Kiefer," he explains. “My reference point within this culture turned out to be Picasso." This fascination led him to pursue his own research into geometry and compositional lines, as well as the construction of figures. He paid particular attention to the works of the 1920s and 1930s, among them paintings of Marie-Thérèse Walter, or the bathers evoking summers spent in Brittany. Beyond the paintings' formalism and hedonistic sentiment, the American artist admired his Spanish counterpart's analytical capacities. "Picasso embraced 20th-century life as realistically as possible. His paintings were the opposite of decorative and in this sense of Henri Matisse, for they bear witness to all the fear and cruelty his contemporaries endured." In a country shaped by the recent Vietnam War and a world undergoing transformation, Halley's paintings served as a kind of hiatus before he resumed his minimal, abstract research. In the words of Jose Dávila—who would frequently refer to modernist history—*Untitled (Guernica)*, 2021 stood out as a direct testimony to the major Picasso painting of the same name, revealing the cruelty of the 1937 massacre and complete with revolted mouths and disarticulated limbs. During his incarceration as a very young man, the self-taught artist Timothy Curtis found himself in desperate need of self-expression, and thus adopted a signature style of graffiti and acerbic geometric shapes stemming from the cubism he studied in prison books.

The role of women and passion

For other artists, Picasso's passions have given rise to something of a both gentle and persistent obsession. Take Aly Helyer, for example, who visited the Picasso Museum in Paris at the end of her studies. She then began a sketchbook, to which she returned regularly, becoming particularly obsessed with the painting *Le Baiser*, 1925 . "So much so that very recently," she relates, "I've begun to introduce this motif into my work. I'm fascinated by how Picasso expresses passion, instinct, and humanity in his work. His unexhibited pieces are constantly being rediscovered, as if he were still alive and hidden away somewhere..." Recalling the painter's 2018 exhibition at London's Tate Modern—which focused on year 1932 and in particular his relationship with Marie-Thérèse Walter— Helyer once again admired, with heightened attention in the face of male domination, Picasso's dual obsession with painting and with a woman. "He keenly delved into the full range of emotions, from utmost tenderness to a form of aggression..." In fact, the theme of the kiss, i.e. of the encounter or the alter ego, has established itself in a diffuse, almost unconscious way, linking the personal to the classics of art history. Take the example of Genieve Figgis, freely reinterpreting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, a 1907 painting that featured the "filles de joie" of a Barcelona neighborhood and that was to become the founding work of Cubism. These almost burlesque figures—which also reflect the humor found in her other paintings—can be read as part of a more feminist revolt. The same is true of Janet Werner's work, which deals with the classic genre of portraiture and questions what it conveys, in particular the violence that the need for seduction and beauty can inflict on women. This is also apparent in the painting by Sean Landers, where the dislocated female body can be seen as both in a state of desire and suffering. And what about Francesco Vezzoli's portrait of Olga Picasso, mixing dancing figures with bittersweet tears? Humanity is once again at the heart of many artists' research, to the point of being dissected, and deconstructed... reactivating Picasso's infinite modernism.

Uninterrupted formal research

Indeed, it is by focusing on the human figure, or rather the nude, that Farah Atassi has returned to the pictorial language of Pablo Picasso. "In painting, I like the efficacy and language of shapes... I like them to border on the symbol or sign, transforming reality with an apostrophe, a line or a stroke. This synthetic gesture is the opposite of retinal, descriptive painting," she explains. "One of the most important painters to have achieved these form-based solutions is Picasso." The Cubist period fascinates her particularly, prompting her to pursue a personal dialogue with this movement, in “a double possibility of rendering objects and bringing pathos or feeling to figures." Much like Brian Calvin who takes pleasure in developing classic themes without shying away from the influence of the Spanish master, all the while portraying emancipated, free women. Not to mention Stéphane Zaech, who celebrates the joy of painting and a frank, proud homage using playful, intriguing distortions. For Jameson Green, the challenge even lies in the application of paint, layers in multiple, thin strata, combined with the rigorous observation of his forebear’s composition of lines. The Surrealist period also saw a great deal of artistic research, a century after the official creation of the movement (the Surrealist Manifesto was drafted in 1924 by André Breton). In both Alejandro Cardenas' and Ginny Casey's work, human, animal, and plant forms and figures are softened, contorted, intertwined, or disintegrated. They seem to flow and escape from overly precise definitions, testifying to a sense of disquiet and strangeness. Another example may be César Piette and Pieter Schoolwerth's abandoning of reference points and the reconstitution of worlds, sometimes using digital insertions that give rise to more pop-toned creations. In 1973, Pablo Picasso passed away, yet it's clear that the artist's later periods will be gradually revisited, each in their own time.

— Press release written by Marie Maertens

Quotations are taken from interviews with the artists in July 2023.