

# Picabia, the New Paradigm

BY BROOKS ADAMS



*Bernard Buffet: Annabel in a T-shirt, 1960, oil on canvas, 51 1/2 by 31 1/2 inches. Collection Annabel Buffet, Paris. Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris.*



*Francis Picabia: The Brunette and the Blonde, 1941, oil on board, 41 by 29 1/2 inches. Flick Collection. Courtesy Kunsthalle Wien. All works by Picabia © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.*

Late Picabia has overtaken early Picabia as a subject of consuming interest. The change began around 1980, when younger artists such as David Salle and Julian Schnabel started to imitate the overlapping, "non-compositional" imagery of Picabia's '20s and '30s "Transparencies." Even more popular over the last few years have been his female nudes of the 1940s, with their kitschy, cheesecake imagery appropriated from soft-core porn and fashion magazines. These paintings' twisted Neo-Classicism, their Ingresque backlighting, their intimations of lesbian couplings, not to mention the physical-culture allure of their 1930s photographic sources, combined to make Picabia's '40s nudes the paradigm of a new kind of pictoriality which has proved very powerful for contemporary artists.

Furthermore, late Picabia has become implicated in our revisionist ideas of postwar European art as a whole, for it turns out that his "Transparencies," not to mention his cheesy nudes and heavily impastoed '50s dot paintings, were scrutinized by the young Sigmar Polke as he began to deal, in the early '60s, with picture-postcard imagery and hackneyed abstraction. Most recently, the changed status of late Picabia has allowed us to

*Do Francis Picabia's kitschy late works hold the key to much current figurative painting? Is Bernard Buffet's oeuvre worthy of serious consideration? "Cher Peintre," a traveling European show that coincides with the Picabia retrospective now in Paris, argues yes on both counts.*

see the virtues of other postwar European painting previously dismissed as being mostly kitsch. Bernard Buffet, for instance, has long been held up as the lowest common denominator in French painting, but, as the current exhibition "Cher Peintre: Painting the Figure since Late Picabia" reveals, a lineup of Buffet's anguished stick figures and sloe-eyed gamines can look quite marvelous in the company of Elizabeth Peyton and John Currin.

Jointly curated by Alison M. Gingeras, Sabine Folie and Blazenska Perica, "Cher Peintre" succeeds precisely because it wears the Picabia mantle so lightly. (The show's three venues are the Centre Pompidou, the Kunsthalle in Vienna and the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt; for the latter two stops "Cher Peintre" is known as "Lieber Maler, male mir . . .," which the English-language edition of the catalogue renders as "Dear Painter, paint me . . .".) It takes a kind of romp through current figuration, casting sidelong glances at issues such as the conversation piece (and how painted subjects seem to address the viewer), society portraiture and new allegories of the self. (To this extent, it rather closely parallels the recent show of contemporary drawing at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and contains several of the same artists.) The show is relentlessly trendy and suggests lots of curatorial agendas that have little or nothing to do with late Picabia, but that's why I liked it. You can feel the curators straining to find some French contemporary art that will fit the mold; you can see them succumbing to their infatuations with the latest art stars (even if they are only tangentially associated with later Picabia); and you can witness them sometimes losing the thread entirely. All this paradoxically makes for a better show: a grab bag in which the visual lineages are manifold, rather than single track, a show in which Picabia's '40s nudes, while given a place of honor in a dark, red hemicycle at the Centre Pompidou, were nevertheless treated almost as they were the offspring of the recent art on view.

Having loved "Cher Peintre" last summer, I raced to the Picabia retrospective currently at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. "Francis Picabia: Singular Ideal" is a more typical full-dress affair, loose-limbed and a bit shaggy in its constituent parts, yet very strong and force-



*Martin Kippenberger: Untitled, from the series "Dear Painter, paint me . . .," 1981, acrylic on canvas, 118 by 78 1/2 inches. Martin Kippenberger Estate, Cologne. Courtesy Kunsthalle Wien.*

ful in its cumulative impact. Picabia, the painter with the anti-painting stance, the uniquely light yet heavyweight temperament who challenged singularities of authorship and style, the gag artist/impostor engaged in surprisingly steady production—each of these Picabia personae still carries weight.

Today, much of his work seems both classic and underknown: the Cubist sex machines, the Dadaist concrete poetry, the early appropriation work, the '20s film and ballet designs and the whole Côte d'Azur lifestyle—the fast cars and bohemian theme parties—seem at once seductive and stringent, the

**Vintage subjects and outmoded styles play an implicit, somewhat uncharted role in "Cher Peintre"—a number of its works evoke the old-fashioned look of Picabia's 1940s paintings.**



Picabia: *Woman in a Toque*, 1942, oil and gouache on cardboard, 22 by 19 1/2 inches; in *"Picabia: Singular Ideal."* Courtesy Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich.

Sigmar Polke: *Couple*, 1967, varnish and ballpoint pen on canvas, 67 by 51 1/2 inches. Speck Collection, Cologne. Courtesy Centre Pompidou.

product of a formidable temperament that through it all somehow stuck to painting. Picabia emerges from these combined efforts as every bit the supreme Dadaist jokester and dandy I thought I knew, but also as more of a contender in the shapeshifter sweepstakes of late 20th-century and early 21st-century art than I'd ever imagined. The Picabia fan club has long numbered artists such as Salle (strangely not included in "Cher Peintre") in its ranks, but until this retrospective, who knew that Barry Flanagan, Verne Dawson, Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, and Peter Fischli and David Weiss (each afforded a say in the catalogue) were all on board, too?

The rather narrower painting proposition of "Cher Peintre" is enunciated cogently by

Gingeras, a young curator at the Pompidou, in her catalogue essay. She asks rhetorically: "Is figurative painting intrinsically traditional, politically conservative, and the enemy of the avant-garde?" Although Picabia might have shouted from the audience, "Yes, guilty on all counts," the intense visual evidence of the show, which was full of great juxtapositions (Buffet with Polke, John Currin with Glenn Brown, Kai Althoff with Luc Tuymans), would be a resounding no. "Cher Peintre," Gingeras notes, "stakes the claim that figurative painting is not necessarily a 'return to order,' a regressive retreat into traditional forms of mimetic representation." In fact, Gingeras writes that all of the artists in "Cher Peintre" would defend the "dissident" nature of their work.

The exhibition takes its name from a 1981 series by Martin Kippenberger, who is pegged in the show as a "historical" figure (he died prematurely in 1997). This seems a strange sleight of hand in that other "historical" figures in the show include Alex Katz, Buffet and Polke, all notably senior to Kippenberger. Again, to view Kippenberger as predominantly a painter, let alone a figurative one, could seem a preposterous misreading of an artist well known for his sculptures, installations, collaborations and performances. Yet from the mini-survey of his often klutzy-looking figurative paintings on view in "Cher Peintre," I sensed a full-tilt Kippenberger retrospective might be in the offing at the Pompidou, and Gingeras has said, in fact, she would like to do such a show. (A Kippenberger survey is on view in



Kurt Kauper: *Cary Grant #1*, 2001, oil on birch panel, 90 by 56 inches. Collection Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson, Los Angeles. Courtesy Centre Pompidou.

Karlsruhe at the Museum für Neue Kunst, through Apr. 27.)

The fact that Kippenberger entrusted the execution of his 1981 soft-focus New Realist works to a group of commercial painters would seem like an eminently Duchampian idea, since Picabia's friend and colleague was one of the first to predate his works and assume other artistic identities. Here, Kippenberger is presented both as a journalistic raconteur, in his early portraits of political and media figures, and as an almost tragic martyr figure (one of his last works situates a self-portrait amid the doomed figures in Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*). This is only one of many strange, off-kilter resonances in "Cher Peintre," where the curators rather too easily assigned the label "historical" to both living and recently deceased figures.

**Y**ou had to see it to believe it, but in my estimation, Buffet beat out Polke in the "historical" section, and Buffet may

## From Dada To Dots

Looking back at his 50-year career, we can see how Francis Picabia (1879-1953) had to get free of his French academic training in order to more radically embrace his own notion of a Spanish tradition. Paradoxically, the most formally advanced of his early productions, the large 1912-14 Cubist compositions, look like vaguely lubricious Salon machines in this huge Paris retrospective.

On an iconographic level, Picabia was remarkably consistent in different idioms. Indeed, he seemed intent on wasting nothing, not even the hackneyed motif of the dot, which recurs throughout his oeuvre: from the Neo-Impressionist daubs of the early landscapes, through the naughty sex jokes (a cleanly cut circle in the paper as a female signifier in the Dadaist *Jeune Fille* of 1920), to his striking, polka-dot costume designs for the Ballet Suédois's *Relâche* (1924) and the existentialist, painterly "Pointes" abstractions at the end of his career.



All works this page Francis Picabia.  
Top, *Young Girl in Paradise*, 1928, watercolor and pencil on paper, 32 by 29 inches. Private collection. © Archives Picabia, Paris/D.R.

Center, *The Kiss*, 1923-26, oil and enamel on canvas, 36 1/4 by 29 inches. Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin.

Right, *Six Points*, 1949, oil on cardboard, 21 1/4 by 18 1/2 inches. Michael Werner Gallery, New York and Cologne.

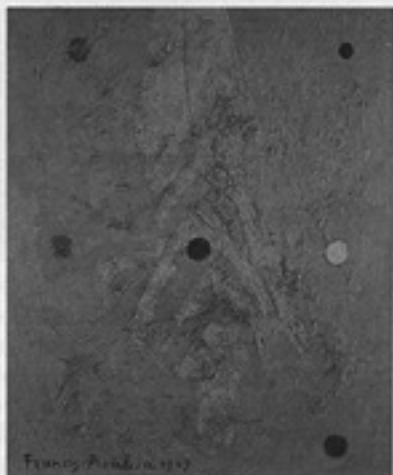
Left, *A Very Rare Picture on Earth*, 1915, oil and collage of gold and silver leaf on cardboard, 45 1/4 by 34 inches. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.

Below, *Acrobat*, 1949, oil on canvas, 25 1/4 by 21 1/4 inches. Frank Oleski, Cologne. Photos this page courtesy Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

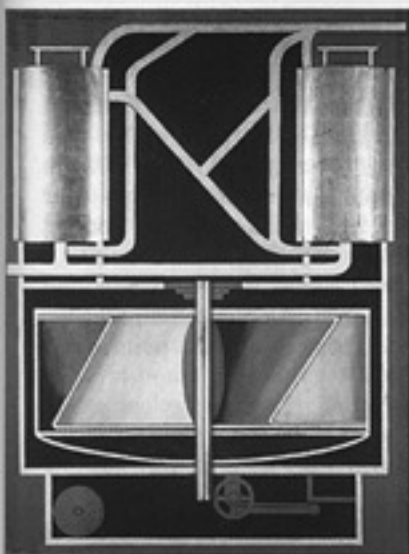


from Picasso, who also did it as part of a '20s classicizing vamp on *le retour à l'ordre*. Interestingly, Picabia's Spanish charades dovetailed neatly with the "Manet/Velázquez" show at the Musée d'Orsay, so that, amid this Parisian *hispanomanie*, even Picabia's '40s "Nudes" started to look more like Spanish *sol y sombra* in their strongly graphic studio lighting.

The real core of the show is a whole room devoted to his large and midsize "Transparencies," which feel solemn and devotional in their Paris presentation, and (for me, the biggest surprise of the exhibition) a thrilling lineup of neo-Pointillist painterly depictions of lovers from 1924-27, especially *Mardi Gras (Le Baiser)* of 1925, where the dots become literal images of confetti. A pull-out-the-stops display of 15 "Nudes" is the climactic unfolding of the exhibition, the place where Picabia seems to become most himself. Then on to the two last galleries—one with hard-to-love paintings depicting animal masks and one great anomalous *Portrait of a Doctor* (apparently worked on during two different decades and thus dated 1935-ca. 38? or 1946?), a long-eared figure covered in phallic scissor shapes and dots. The last room is especially unsettling, sparsely hung as it is with the small, heavily impastoed and pentimentoed "Pointes" paintings that are offset by one more lighthearted *Acrobat* (1949), whose nip-



ples are also depicted as dots. In their searching difficulty, these last works substantially firm up a more cosmic, otherworldly strain first glimpsed in the early Orphic Cubist works. Picabia emerges in this exhibition as a belated Symbolist (his female crucifixions of the '20s seem particularly indebted to Félicien Rops), and also as an unremitting, unapologetic modernist. — B.A.



The show is especially strong at laying out the notion of Picabia as a serial painter with a quality of stick-to-it-ness we would have hardly expected from this supposed dilettante. On view is a whole wall of Dada sex-machine paintings which, when seen en masse, reveal an iconic, neo-Byzantine splendor. A long corridor gallery hung with his seemingly silly but increasingly portentous "Espagnole" drawings and paintings of pretty ladies' headshots from the '20s makes the point for me that Picabia was really working his Spanish identity in quite shameless fashion, in a way not dissimilar



Alex Katz: February 5:30 P.M., 1972, oil on canvas, 73% by 144 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Centre Pompidou.

have even stolen the show entirely, not least because his inclusion succeeded in making the French press go crazy. The problem appears to be that his work is still widely considered not worthy of being hung in a French museum, which alone would have prompted Picabia and the other Dadaists to hang his work immediately. But in fact Buffet, who committed suicide in 1999, is one of the great commercial success stories of postwar French painting, and his work is, in a sense, as Pop as it gets. In "Cher Peintre" he is represented by a 1949 grimacing self-portrait and a taut grisaille standing female nude from the same year. Both have just the right mix of stick-style anguish and existentialist punch. These early works feel self-consciously tough and deliberately unlovely, even if they also look excessively indebted to '40s Picasso and contemporaneous Giacometti. The duo of 1960 portraits of Buffet's wife, Annabel (a dead ringer for Anouk Aimée), reed-thin in blue jeans and T-shirt, also have a kind of fashion-icon presence and Nouvelle-Vague allure. In Paris they stole fire from the three rather wimpy-looking '60s works by Polke in the same pale pink room, including *Couple* (1967), with its ballpoint-pen rendering of lovers' heads floating above a tropical sunset on a blank white ground, which is closely linked to a

late Picabia composition, *Portrait of a Couple* (1942-43), which was in the Paris version of "Cher Peintre" as well as in the Picabia retrospective.

The biggest painting in the Buffet-Picabia room was Buffet's *Femme Couchée* (1965), a takeoff on Manet's *Olympia*, with the reclining odalisque and her attendant in pointy period brassieres and garter belts. This work

made good visual sense on the same wall that segued into the Alex Katz gallery, with its enormous *February 5:30 P.M.* (1972) in which the three central female figures wear fuzzy red and pink sweaters. In the context of Picabia's skewed classicism, Katz's '70s muses—all with long, unkempt hair and split ends—looked like a disguised allusion to the Three Graces. A recent painting by

Kai Althoff: Untitled, from the "Impulse" series, 2001, lacquer, paper, watercolor, carnish, canvas, 15% by 19% by 1% inches. Collection Icelin & Craig Robins, Miami Beach. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.



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Katz, *Saturday* (2002), played out this Three Graces idea on a beach, with the added compositional trick that there is a fourth figure only partially visible behind the central woman wearing a vaguely '40s-style two-piece bathing suit. Thus were Picabia's conventions of truncated anatomies, vintage bathing beauties and eternalized vacation cultures refracted through "Cher Peintre." Later in the show, Katzian affinities also spun out into the strange landscape paintings of Peter Doig and the disaffected slackers of the young Los Angeles artist Brian Calvin.

Vintage subjects and outmoded styles played an implicit, and somewhat uncharted role in "Cher Peintre," where the very keynote works were literally 1940s period pieces. For instance, *Portrait of a Couple* has a kind of old Hollywood movie-star allure—the male and female figures in the foreground even seem to have modeled themselves after some fanzine couple. What a coup de théâtre, then, to come upon Kurt Kauper's meticulously rendered nude portraits of Cary Grant later in the show, just as we'd almost come full circle, back to the Picabia hemicycle. Kauper's monumental nudes looked especially apt in the city of Jacques-Louis David, and the standing portrait of a full-frontal Cary leaning against the mantelpiece seemed like the dream come true of David's ambition to paint Napoleon nude.

Other works seemed to address the old-fashioned look of Picabia's '40s paintings with equivalently old-fashioned idioms and iconographies. Neo Rauch's paintings evoke a kind of Socialist Realist comic book, full of high-modernist architecture and vernacular flourishes. To my mind, Rauch is fascinating as an example of a figurative painter who was schooled and still practices in the former East (he lives in Leipzig); his work really suggests a kind of belated reverie of how great Eastern-bloc painting might have been. The most Picabiaesque work by Rauch on view was *Die Wahl* (1998), with its figure of the two-headed, almost Siamese-twin artist



*Sophie von Hellermann: When he came . . ., 2001, acrylic on canvas, 71 by 102 1/2 inches. Courtesy Saatchi Gallery, London.*



*Peter Doig: 100 Years Ago, 2001, oil on canvas, 90 1/2 by 141 1/2 inches. Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne.*

going about the act of painting a huge polka-dotted abstraction (or is it a depiction of a head?). On the other hand, we were greeted by the strange miniaturist refinements of Kai Althoff, who made a very powerful impact with a group of small paintings and drawings, some of them abstract. The most memorable are those from the series "Impulse" (2001), which illustrate, in patchy, almost children's-book fashion, scenes of Prussian brutality, such as one in which an officer in a greatcoat appears to violate a clump of dead soldiers in the snow. This looked like a col-

lective World War I fantasia being excavated for the first time. Scenes from contemporary life, ever so slightly dated, played out in banal landscapes, both lost in time and relentlessly modern.

The French artist Carole Benzaken's very long canvas scroll *Painting Roll*, begun in 1989 and still ongoing, depicts what look like film clips of little appropriated painting scenes—airial freeway views, electric guitars, billboard close-ups, excerpts of TV imagery and scenes from her own life (the artist divides her time between Paris and



Left, Glenn Brown: *The End of the Twentieth Century* (after Fragonard and Baselitz), 1996, oil on canvas mounted on board, 29½ by 22½ inches. Collection Byron R. Meyer, San Francisco. Courtesy Patrick Painter, Inc., Santa Monica. Right, John Currin: *The Moroccan*, 2001, oil on canvas, 26 by 22 inches. Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne.

Los Angeles). This diminutive work, exhibited only partially unrolled (it's less than 2 inches high, though over 147 feet long), looked both novel and inventive, if not particularly Picabiaesque. Her ceramic floor mosaic depicting similar scenes, alternating with flat colored tiles, was the most unusual incarnation of painting on view, far more compelling than Bruno Perrament's stacked canvases on the floor or his multicanvas *Dessous dessous maintenant/toujours plus* (1997), with its gee-whiz central image of a young guy looking into a slide viewer while surrounded by other images of light—chandeliers, stained glass and motel-style table lamps. Here the intimation of a boy-inventor allegory on modernity looked a bit too close in spirit and style to Rauch's cartoonish artist-inventor types.

**M**elancholic landscapes peopled with disaffected figures seem to obsess both Doig and Sophie von Hellermann. Hellermann is a relative newcomer in London (all the works on view are owned by

the Saatchi Gallery). Her brushy allegories of girl subjects looked fresh and breezy, like takeoffs on Chagall or Ludwig Bemelmans's illustrations for the "Madeline" books. *When he came . . .* (2001) is particularly memorable: another update on Manet, this time *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, with a young, naked female laid out on a picnic blanket between two men who look like they are going to eat her.

Hellermann's work seemed very much in the spirit of late Picabia and Surrealism. Doig's contributions, on the other hand, brought an alienated, outsider's aspect to a show that could otherwise seem relentlessly cosmopolitan. His

*100 Years Ago* (2001), bought by the Centre Pompidou, was a great penultimate image for an exhibition about time warps. It depicts a bearded hippie type in a long red canoe that spans almost the entire width of the canvas. Reminiscent of both Katz's vacationers and Picabia's lone dandy personas, the figure suggests at once a '60s dropout and a 19th-

Carole Benzaken: *Painting Roll*, 1989–present, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Centre Pompidou.



**The pairing of John Currin and Glenn Brown is the strongest of its kind in "Cher Peintre." Both painters use tropes of expert technique to unaccountably subversive and twisted ends.**

century man in the wilderness and, as such, was the perfect antidote to the very cultural confections that characterize so much of the show.

"Cher Peintre" is especially strong on small paintings, and this emphasis on scale, which to my mind has nothing to do with Picabia, has a lot to do with how the contemporary art world construes value and cachet. Little paintings hung far apart are an effective way to radicalize an enormous white wall with disruptive nuggets of color. Thus the presence of Peyton's paintings is somewhat predictable, even as they seem to incarnate new forms of portraiture, new society painting and, best of all, new male odalisques. The tiny *Nude Tony* (2001) looks just as fluffy on his white sheets as do some of Picabia's '40s girls in white fur. (None of the latter were in the Beaubourg show, but one, *Femme à la Toque*, 1942, is a standout in the retrospective.) An early series by Tuymans, "Das Diagnostische Blick" (1992), though beautiful and subtle in its way, had, as far as I could see, little to do with Picabia; the inclusion of Tuymans seemed more like an attempt to historicize, and give some historical precedence, to a much lionized European figurative painter.

Far more successful, in my opinion, was the juxtaposition of Currin's and Brown's small and exquisitely crafted paintings. Yes, I did find myself thinking old-masterish thoughts in front of Brown's *The End of the Twentieth Century* (after Fragonard and Baselitz) of 1996, with its immediately legible, upside-down rendering of a little Rococo lad done in Brown's signature style of flat and gelid brushiness. Nearby, Currin's ode to Dutch fishwife pictures, *The Moroccan* of 2001 (also recently acquired by the Centre Pompidou), looked like a symphony of white embroidered fabric and scumbled fish scales. That emblem of a smiling figure's head balancing three flapping fish, their skins shining against the lushly painted wood grain of the background, was unforgettably weird. "Cher Peintre" was strongest in this kind of pairing: the glossy facture of the Browns next to the culinary impasto of the Currins,



Neo Rauch: *Die Wahl*, 1998, oil on canvas, 118 by 78 1/2 inches. Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

both of them tropes of expert technique being used to unaccountably subversive and twisted ends, all the figuration somehow familiar yet alien, all of it haunting, hackneyed and yet somehow original. □

"Cher Peintre" appeared at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (June 12-Sept. 2, 2002) and the Kunsthalle Wien (Sept. 20, 2002-Jan. 1, 2003); it can currently be seen at

the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (Jan. 14-Apr. 6, 2003). There is an accompanying catalogue, published in French, English and German editions. "Francis Picabia: Singular Ideal" is on view at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Nov. 16, 2002-Mar. 16, 2003). The 461-page catalogue includes contributions from numerous Picabia scholars, as well as an anthology of texts about Picabia written by other artists.

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