

Francis Picabia: A Painter for This Moment

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New York's Museum of Modern Art is currently exhibiting Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction, an exuberant and sometimes disquieting retrospective of an artist who consistently defied expectations. Marcel Duchamp said of Picabia: "[he was] a negator... whatever you said, he contradicted." In an exhibit that spans over fifty years - which included work as a painter, poet and filmmaker - Picabia's refusal of any fixed position is on full display, while his restlessness and eclecticism makes him seem oddly contemporary.

Born in Paris in 1879, the son of a Cuban diplomat, Picabia came from a wealthy family - which allowed him to indulge his penchant for the life of a playboy. But wealth also meant that Picabia did not have to bend to the market's preference for stylistic consistency and predictable output.

Picabia began painting by copying the works in his father's collection, and did so with such precision that he succeeded in replacing them with his own and selling off the originals. Even as an adolescent, he was "bootlegging" so to speak, and would continue to do so until his debut in 1899 at the Salon des Artistes Français, where critics lauded him as a young master of Impressionism - favorably compared with Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley (who is currently enjoying a retrospective at the Bruce Museum).

In fact, this first period, which lasted six years roughly, is more aptly described as pseudo-impressionist: for Picabia made use of photographs rather than plein air painting. This outraged Camille Pissarro and already revealed Picabia's tendency towards pranksterism, his irreverence and readiness to appropriate an established, ready-made style only to overturn its presuppositions.

By 1911, Picabia had shifted to cubism, and his work was shown that year at the Salon d'Automne in Paris, the first Cubist group exhibition. He produced extraordinary works during this time, pieces which display movement, and energy; the sheer joy of the restless surfaces are remarkable - earth-toned planes and solids seem on the verge of an identifiable form only to continue to shift and roll, converge and disperse. *The Dance at the Springs [II]* is one of the standout works from this period. Its forms are discernible, but utterly enveloped within each other and their surroundings - it as lyrical as cubism gets.

The mechanomorphs were Picabia's great contribution to the Dada movement, and they are the works for which he is most readily known. These fictional machinic forms are on the one hand satirical portraits - personality is revealed as the working of gears and levers - and on the other hand, ironical images of sexual union. Picabia's portrait of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz takes the form of a metal contraption, with a retractable metal grille, while a "nude American girl" appears as a hydraulic cylinder.

In *Tableau Rastadada*, a collage from 1920, we see a photo of the artist and on his chin Picabia has placed a label with the word “RATÉ” – meaning, a loser, a failure: in a world that had gone mad with war and nationalistic fervor, to be “a failure” or “a loser” was perhaps Picabia’s way of markedly rejecting the values of a society that had produced so much pointless misery.

Ever uncomfortable with definable movements of any kind, Picabia soon abandoned Dada. The so-called monster paintings followed and they are probably the most fun of all. Using enamel – an example of his avant-garde practice of mixing fine art and industrial materials – he painted gaudy carnivalesque images of men and women in outlandish costumes kissing, and in some cases almost cannibalistically devouring each other. With zigzags and polka dots, confetti flying all around, never were “bad paintings” so gorgeous. And, admitting their garishness, their ugliness even, they are also no less irresistible for it.

Undoubtedly, the most controversial and reactionary works date from the War Years, when Picabia copied nude blondes from soft-core porn magazines. He deliberately retained the soft-focus studio lighting of commercially reproduced photographs to portray high-contrast, kitschy images that seem to draw on Hollywood publicity stills and the fascistic painting of the day. In terms of their appropriation of imagery from reproductions in mass media sources we can trace their lineage back to the early photographed-based impressionistic works.

The Adoration of the Calf (1941-42) was inspired by a black and white image, *The Minotaur or The Dictator* (1937) produced by surrealist photographer Erwin Blumenfeld, and it is perhaps one of the greatest works of this period, and certainly the timeliest. The painting depicts a torso robed in royal purple, with the head of a calf menacingly baring its teeth. Not in the original source, Picabia included in the foreground a number of expressionistically painted hands splayed open in gestures of entreaty, praise and fanatical zeal.

Picabia offers viewers a pointed warning about the dangers of authoritarianism and empowered imbecility – one that we should take heed of when we have a commander-in-chief who recently declared that the media “is the enemy of the American People,” and is currently preparing to deport millions of undocumented immigrants.

Picabia seems to embody the fluid subject, permanently reinventing and reconstructing himself. In 1923 he writes: “What I like is to invent, to imagine, to make of myself at every moment a new man, and then to forget him.” In this light it is easy to see him as one of us – an artist heralding the arrival of a new subjectivity that joyfully experiments with combinations of different identities. The question that is less often raised is where is the emancipatory potential in this vision of a new fluid subjectivity? Is this not precisely the hegemonic form of subjectivity today? As the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, the prevailing ideological message today is don’t get too fixated on any one role, reconstruct yourself continuously, play with numerous identities, sexualities, etc. But how emancipatory in fact is this trend? Could this not be another example of the predominant ideology presenting itself as really subversive?

All of which is to say that Picabia is an artist who resists summation. It is tempting to see his work as essentially freeing, upsetting expectations, defying the premises that define movements and styles. It is tempting to see Picabia as one of our own, an artist who feels perhaps more contemporary now than he ever did in his lifetime. It is especially tempting to see Picabia as brother-in-arms against the religion of Trumpism, with its worship of winning

and being a winner, its glorification of dictatorial leaders, and its rejection of the importance of art in contemporary society.

While some critics insist that Picabia was a nihilistic anti-artist, this seems to be an unduly harsh assessment. If nothing else, here was a painter with a genuine passion for the medium in all its physicality. There is something wonderful and liberating about this body of work, especially in its embrace of experimentation, its joyful abandon, and playful mockery of aesthetic conventions.

Still, we might do well to remind ourselves that it is not enough to merely “change direction”, that genuine emancipation today will come not from merely embracing change as an end in itself. Especially at this crucial social-political juncture, we need to give more attention to our direction and to the kind of change we want.

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