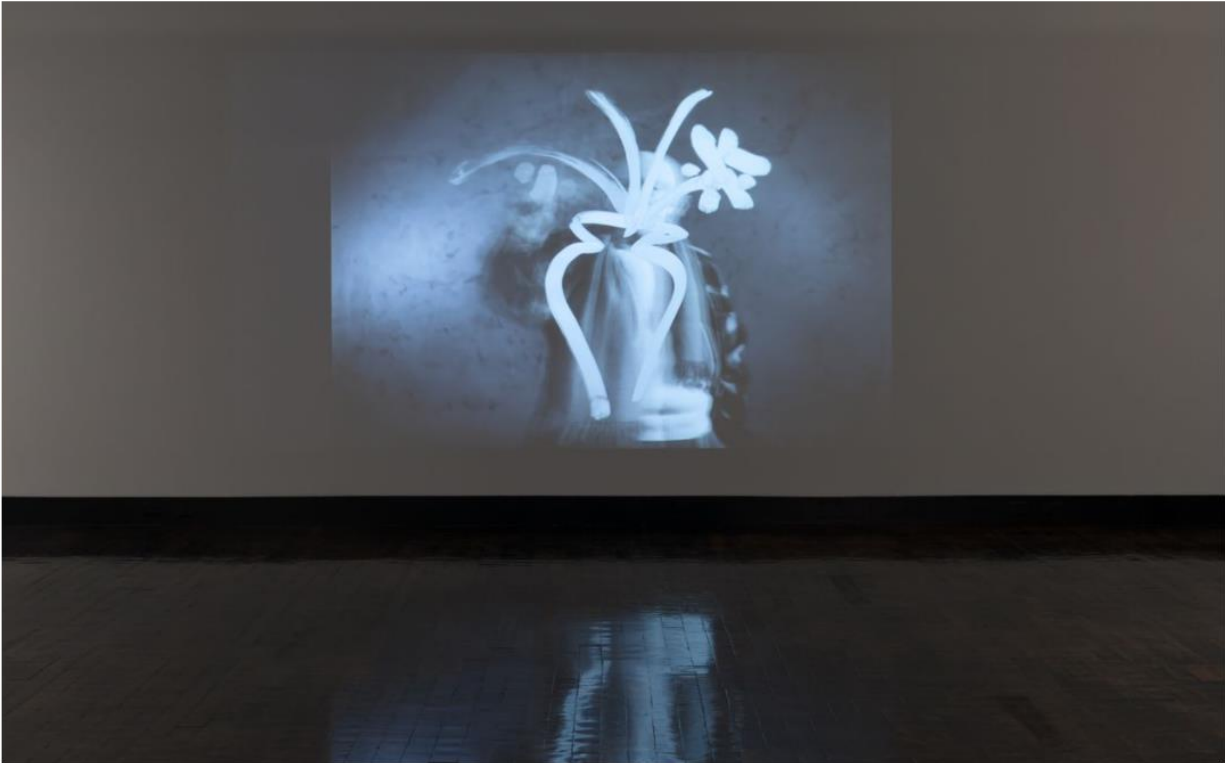


THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ART REVIEW

‘Picasso. Figures’ Review: Magic, Malleable Human Forms

At Nashville’s Frist Art Museum, approximately 75 works from the Musée National Picasso-Paris explore the artist’s varied interpretations of the body.



Paul Haesaerts’s documentary ‘Visit to Picasso’ (1949) on display in ‘Picasso. Figures’

PHOTO: THE FRIST ART MUSEUM/JOHN SCHWEIKERT

By *Lance Esplund*

Feb. 22, 2021 9:59 am ET

Nashville, Tenn.

If you visit “Picasso. Figures,” at the Frist Art Museum (its only U.S. venue), I recommend that you walk straight to gallery three. There loops a two-minute excerpt from Paul Haesaerts’s 1949 black-and-white documentary “Visit to Picasso.” Filmed at the artist’s studio in Vallauris, France, it shows Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) painting in white line on large glass plates, as Haesaerts films from the other side—offering us a real-time window into the Spanish master’s nimble, creative practice. In one shot, Picasso paints a bull’s head, which then becomes a woman’s bust. In another, he paints a tall, delicate stem, perched on as if by a bird; or perhaps capped by a flame or flower. After the artist makes a few adjacent strokes that suggest trees, and then human limbs, Picasso’s stem transforms

into the vertical juncture between the standing legs of a life-size female nude. And now the bird/flame/flower also reads as the crowning “V” of her sex—culminating in a long-haired figure reminiscent of Sandro Botticelli’s windswept protagonist in “The Birth of Venus” (c. 1485).

It’s not that you have to start with Haesaerts’s film in this exhilarating, chronological exhibition of approximately 75 paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures. To do so, however, will ground you in Picasso’s magical, malleable approach to his subject. Picasso was a traditional genre artist. And this show would be equally compelling if its focus were still lifes or landscapes or interiors. Haesaerts’s film establishes that, as Picasso explores the figure, his forms are forever in flux, always associative and metaphorical, never descriptive, never fixed. Picasso is not so much depicting figures as he is meditating on the theme of metamorphosis. He explores the complex relationships between artist and model; among family members, lovers and friends; between himself and other artists.

Co-curated by Emilia Philippot and François Dareau from the Musée National Picasso-Paris—and drawn entirely from that museum’s permanent collection of over 5,000 Picassos—every work in “Picasso. Figures” is exceptional. If for no other reason than that the majority of these artworks are from the artist’s private collection—Picasso’s Picassos. Often, his attachment is understandable. The show opens with “The Barefoot Girl” (1895)—the kind of painting that causes bottlenecks. An astonishing, full-length, melancholic portrait of a girl in a long red dress, it rivals figures by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo and Gustave Courbet. Picasso painted it when he was 13.

Half of the artworks here are Surrealist, from the 1920s and ‘30s. In the wry, playful self-portrait “The Sculptor” (1931)—a life-size linear painting filled with localized color, as in a child’s coloring book—Picasso pits painting against sculpture; artist against model; two against three dimensions. Flat planes billow into biomorphic volumes. The sculpted female bust advances, as the artist and model recede—and sculpture contemplates sculptor. In other Surrealist works from the 1930s, Picasso transforms figures into stones, clubs, bones, horns and discombobulated, writhing geometries. Sex becomes battleground, and lovers’ limbs and tongues parry like swords. Or, as in the candy-colored painting “Reading Woman” (1932), the figure soars and interweaves, curving with lovely arabesques and distortions worthy of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.



Picasso's 'Woman With a Baby Carriage' (1950)

PHOTO: THE FRIST ART MUSEUM/JOHN SCHWEIKERT

Here, too, are Picasso's first sculpted Cubist head, the bronze "Head of a Woman (Fernande)" (1909); and the inventive contraption "Woman With a Baby Carriage" (1950), a cast bronze assemblage of objects including a stove plate, a gas ring, cake tins and an actual baby carriage.

Fast-paced and packed with masterpieces, "Picasso. Figures" is striking and dynamic—traversing its eight galleries is like going eight rounds in a prizefight. Viewers, though possibly punch-drunk, are lured from room to room by large, graphic, gasp-inspiring works that announce, as if with fanfare, another of Picasso's entirely new stylistic approaches.



From left to right: 'Nude on a White Background' (1927); 'The Acrobat' (1930); and 'Painter With Palette at His Easel' (1928)

PHOTO: THE FRIST ART MUSEUM/JOHN SCHWEIKERT

Gallery two opens with the Cubist painting “Man With a Guitar” (1911/13), which explodes as it reunifies the figure and his environment. Gallery four’s salvo is the large, Surrealist, nearly abstract painting “The Acrobat” (1930)—a contorted, four-legged man whose arm suggests a tail; his leg, an elephant’s trunk; and whose head hangs like heavy genitalia. Pulling us into the final gallery is the bejeweled, beautifully frenetic interpretation “Luncheon on the Grass After Manet” (1960), in which the figures—as in the original—drift like apparitions.

But “Picasso. Figures” is not a full representation of the artist’s wide-ranging stylistic gifts. It makes enormous leaps among Picasso’s various periods, ignoring his Blue and Rose phases and barely grazing his Neoclassical period. This curatorial treatment seemingly mirrors Surrealist and expressionistic trends in contemporary figurative art, and emphasizes those styles at the expense of others. As a result, it turns some works, such as the dreamy, Neoclassical gems “The Bathers” (1918) and “Bathers Watching a Plane” (1920), into eccentricities.

Despite this fashionable misstep in an appeal, seemingly, to contemporary taste, “Picasso. Figures” delivers enormous range and quality. The final gallery is perhaps the show’s strongest. There, in the late paintings “The Family,” “Reclining Nude and Man Playing the Guitar” and “Seated Young Girl” (all 1970), Picasso, continually reinventing the figure, challenges himself, Rembrandt, Velázquez and Willem de Kooning. We encounter the many faces of Picasso.

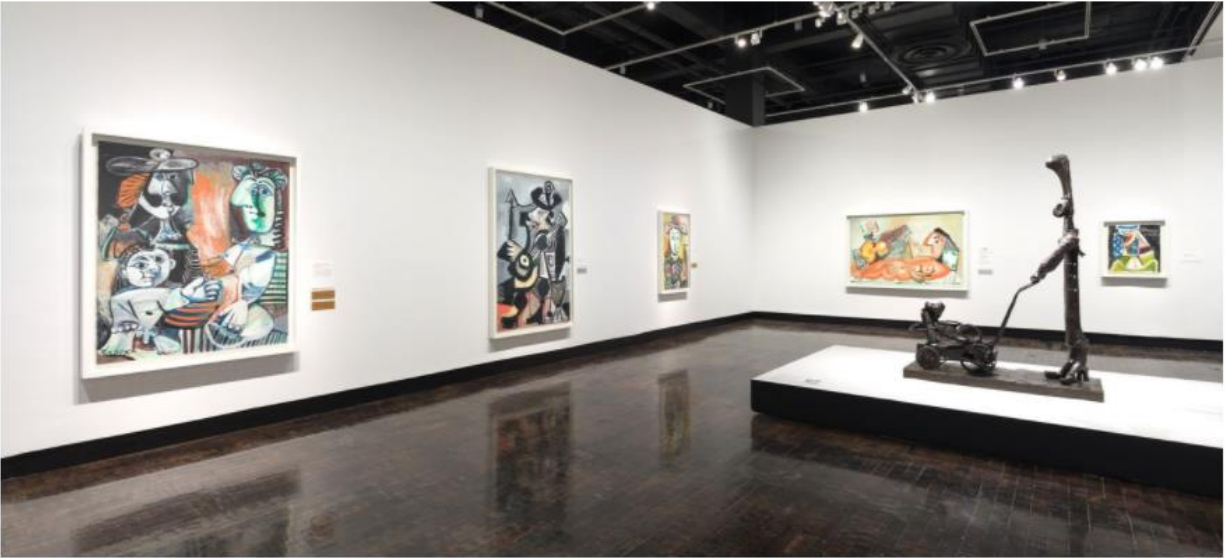
—Mr. Esplund, the author of “The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art” (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.



Portrait of Dora Maar, 1937 PHOTO: ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARS, NEW YORK/PHOTO: RMN-GRAND PALAIS/MATHIEU RABEAU



Mother and Child, 1907 PHOTO: ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARS, NEW YORK/PHOTO: RMN-GRAND PALAIS/RENÉ-GABRIEL OJÉDA



Left to Right: The Family, 1970; Musician, 1972; Seated Young Girl, 1970; Reclining Nude and Man Playing the Guitar, 1970; Woman with a Baby Carriage, 1950; Sunday, 1971



The Suppliant, 1937 PHOTO: ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARS, NEW YORK/PHOTO: RMN-GRAND PALAIS/MATHIEU RABEAU



Jacqueline with Crossed Hands, 1954 PHOTO: ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARS, NEW YORK/PHOTO: RMN-GRAND PALAIS/ADRIEN DIDIERJEAN



Left to Right: Woman Throwing a Stone, 1931; Head of a Woman, 1931; Woman Reading, 1935; Child with Doves, 1943; Large Bather, 1929



The Bathers, 1918 PHOTO: ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARS, NEW YORK/PHOTO: RMN-GRAND PALAIS/SYLVIE CHAN-LIAT

Appeared in the February 22, 2021, print edition as 'Magical, Malleable Human Forms.'