Art Reviews

Francis Picabia’s Prescient, Painterly Promiscuousness

Thirty years ago, viewers may have found the dramatic shifts in his work bewildering; today it’s obvious that he was an artistic driving force of the 20th century.

Dennis Kardon January 12, 2017

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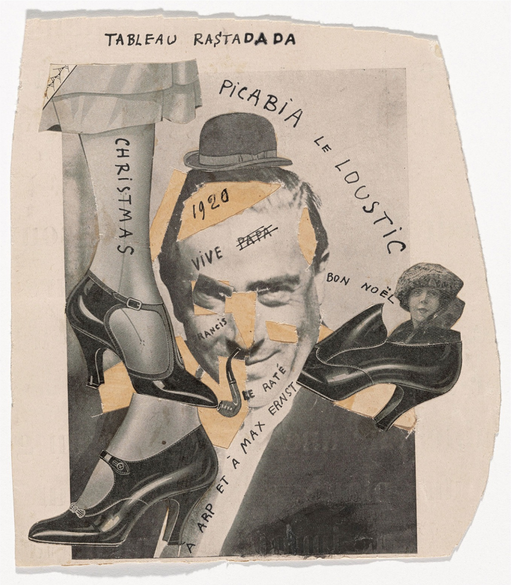

Francis Picabia, “Tableau Rastadada” (Rastadada Painting, 1920), cut-and-pasted printed paper on paper with ink, 7 1/2 × 6 3/4″ (19 × 17.1 cm), the Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller by exchange (© 2016 Artist Rights Society, ARS, New York/ADAGP, Paris; photo courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, Peter Butler)

Like an egg in a sizzling skillet, your brain on Picabia may have its synapses fried at the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) comprehensive retrospective of this underappreciated master. MoMA’s mouthful of a title, *Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction*, doesn’t begin to describe this volatile eyeful of a show. Francis Picabia, born wealthy and independent enough to do what he wanted, was charismatic, multitalented, and sharp enough to exercise his privilege. Starting at 26, Picabia rapidly transfigured his painting from faux Impressionism to Cubism to Dada, followed subsequently by several series unmoored from any art movement. Thirty years ago, viewers may have found the dramatic shifts in his work bewildering; today it’s obvious that he was an artistic driving force of the 20th century.

Picabia, a pioneering modernist, has long been known as an early cubist and a leader of the anarchic Dada movement, while his later work has gone mostly ignored. But the cultural transition from the monolithic austerity of modernism to postmodernism’s pluralistic deconstruction of meaning altered the way we view artists’ careers. Our idea of the artistic self has expanded from the fixed brand of a *signature style* to a concept of branching decisions made by an evolving personality in a fluid cultural context. Generations of painters as diverse as Sigmar Polke and Nicole Eisenman seem to have absorbed Picabia’s example that it’s possible for an artist to reject consistency of style without

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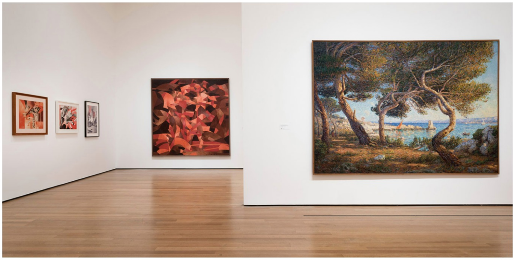
losing coherence of thinking.

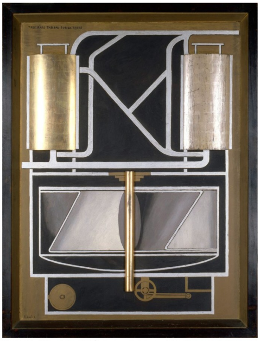


Installation view, *Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 21, 2016-March 19, 2017 (photo by Martin Seck, © 2016 the Museum of Modern Art)

Installation view, Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 21, 2016-March 19, 2017 (photo by Martin Seck, © 2016 the Museum of Modern Art)

From the very beginning of his career, Picabia displayed an impressive talent and rigor, along with a willingness to flout established taste. He achieved an early reputation as a major painter with massive, Impressionist landscapes, which begin this exhibition. Though constructed one thick brushstroke at a time, they were rather subversively painted from postcards rather than *en plein air*, emphasizing structure over ideology.

Disdaining a conventional career of quick sales and critical praise, Picabia abandoned his gallery and rapidly painted more abstractly as he absorbed the challenges being made by his more sophisticated peers. In 1912, he was astute and talented enough to start making and showing gigantic, fully realized takes on Cubism just a year after the first Cubist paintings were shown at the Salon d'Automne. Though at the time critics perceived only an incomprehensible heap of red and black linoleum shavings when contemplating "The Spring" (1912), today our practiced eyes can organize the fractured forms into several figures cavorting in a shallow pictorial space. His brand of Cubism didn't deconstruct individual brushstrokes, like Picasso's, but the style was new enough that he achieved an immediate *succès de scandale* and wound up in the Armory Show in New York City, where he discovered a love for controversy and publicity.

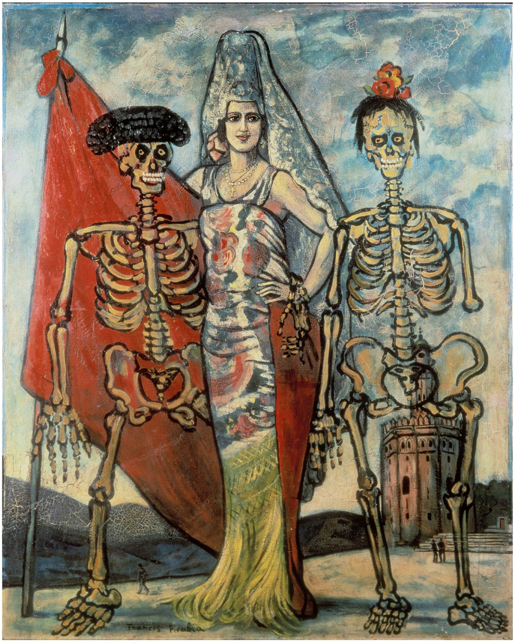


Francis Picabia, "Très rare tableau sur la terre" (Very Rare Picture on the Earth, 1915), oil, metallic paint, pencil, and ink on board, with gold and silver leaf on wood, in a wood frame possibly constructed by the artist, 49 5/8 x 38 9/16 x 2 3/16" (126 x 98 x 5.5 cm), with frame, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, 1976 (© 2016 Artists Rights Society, ARS, New York/ADAGP, Paris)

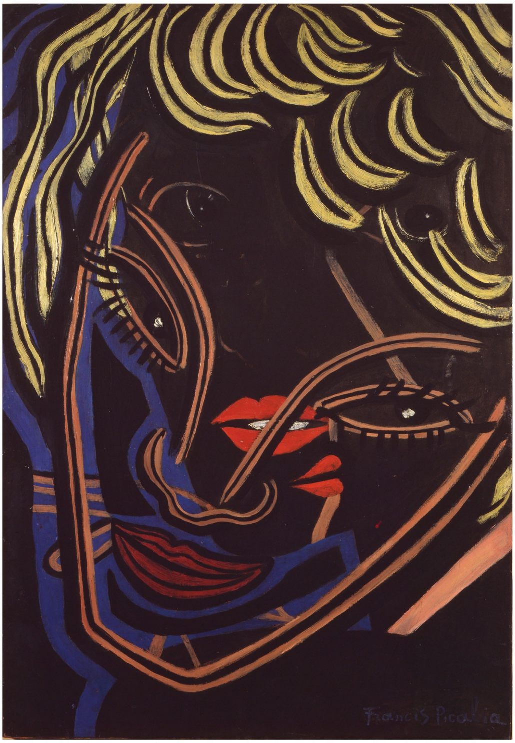
Rarely spending more than a few years exploring a particular path, Picabia abandoned the laborious complexity of Cubism following World War I and went on to help found Dada. In this phase, he made irreverent but inventive, well-crafted portraits of machine parts he called *mechanomorphs*. Although at the time he was celebrated as a provocateur, his paintings are rarely flippant, and there was intense effort and sincerity in even his most radical gestures. In "Very Rare Picture on the Earth" (1915), a work that could have inspired Peter Halley, Picabia not only uses oil paint but experiments with metallic paint, and introduces gold- and silver-leafed shallow reliefs as real depictions of pictorial volume in the flattened diagrammatic space. It's believed he even constructed the frame.

At 43, after lingering seven years with the Dadaists, he tired of their predictably unconventional antics. It was then that Picabia left established styles behind and found a way to synthesize his skill, radicality, and ingenuity into a series of formal inventions. These include a wild short film, "Entr'acte," made as an intermission for *Relâche*, the ballet he produced with Eric Satie in 1924. The film, directed by René Clair from Picabia's screenplay, involved innovative dissolves and edits, a flooded chess match with Duchamp and Man Ray, abstract dots, a bearded ballerina, and a funeral, which ends with the resurrected corpse popping through the "FIN" of the closing title.

The "Monster" paintings that followed were painted with industrial enamel and show embracing couples disintegrating into abstraction. Then came the *Transparencies*, large, dreamy superimpositions of translucently painted image overlays on wood. These were succeeded by the eclectic material and image experiments that foreshadowed World War II, like the spooky, skeleton-filled "The Spanish Revolution" (1937) or the deliberately clotted-varnish face in "Portrait of a Woman" (1935–37). Picabia constantly invented ways of painting, taking formal leaps that made the medium do what it hadn't done before and coming up with new ways of disrupting the idea of interpretation. These works require only close scrutiny of their complexly painted surfaces for Picabia's mastery to become obvious. Bear with me, then, for jumping ahead to examine one painting in the penultimate gallery, where nothing has quite prepared us for the work we find here.



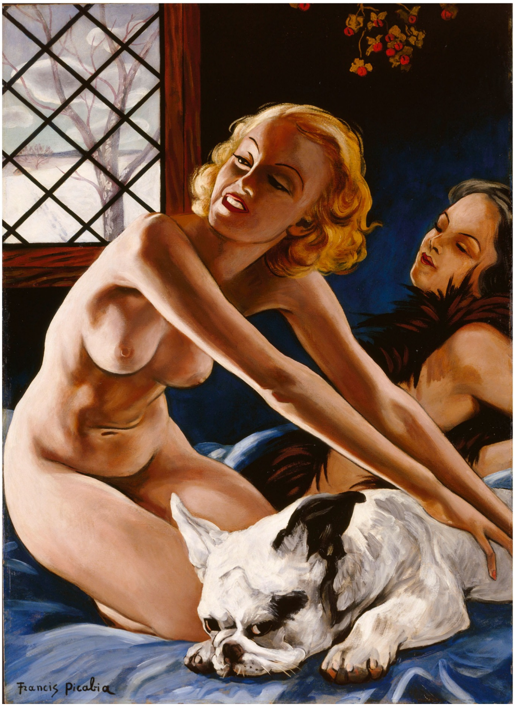
Francis Picabia, “La Révolution espagnole” (The Spanish Revolution, 1937), oil on canvas, 63 3/4 × 51 3/16″ (162 × 130 cm), private collection (courtesy Dominique Lévy Gallery and Michael Werner Gallery; © 2016 Artist Rights Society, ARS, New York/ADAGP, Paris; photo courtesy Archives Comité Picabia)



Francis Picabia, Têtes superposées” (Superimposed Heads, 1938), oil on wood, 28 3/4 x 24 13/16″ (73 x 63 cm), private collection (© 2016 Artists Rights Society, ARS, New York/ADAGP, Paris)

In 1941, at 62, self-exiled to a chateau in the south of Nazi-occupied France, Francis Picabia painted "Women with Bulldog" on a 42″ x 30″ board. The work depicts two women, blond and brunette, on a blue-sheeted bed, a disgruntled white and black bulldog occupying the foreground. The blonde, completely naked and gazing to her right, is crouched over the dog in a soft-core cheesecake pose with heavy-lidded eyes, parted ruby lips, exposed lustrous teeth, and wavy locks. The brunette, reclining in the background, also appears to be naked, but is covered to her waist by a brown feather boa, with a dreamy expression produced by softly closed eyes. The two glamorous nudes are facilely modeled in a style which owed nothing to any of the painting traditions of the 19th or 20th centuries, but to the photography in girly magazines.

But it is through the easily ignored, diamond-patterned window in the background that this odd vignette doubles down on its perversity. Some have charged that Picabia's intent was merely to titillate, or to glorify perfect Aryan bodies for the Germans. Had that been the case, however, he could have stopped with the two women and the dog — whose peculiarly brooding expression alone complicates the eroticism.



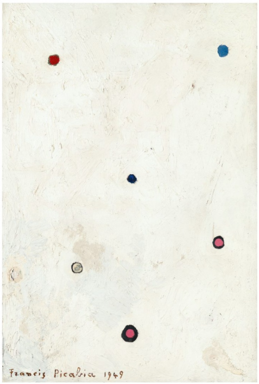
Francis Picabia, "Femmes au bull-dog" (Women with Bulldog, c. 1941), oil on board, 41 3/4 x 29 15/16″ (106 x 76 cm), Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle, Paris, purchase from a public sale, 2003 (© 2016 Artist Rights Society, ARS, New York/ADAGP, Paris; photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Jean-Claude Planchet/Dist. RMN–Grand Palais/Art Resource, New York)

Outside the window of this cozy, dark bedroom is a barren, snowy landscape consisting of a leafless tree, a celadon sky filled with burgeoning gray clouds over a mountain, and a field dotted with a series of strange, faint footprints. Though ostensibly it's a mere background note, the landscape is painted with such expressionistic sincerity and detail, it throws off the emotional balance of the whole scene. A mysterious cluster of red berries is also, absurdly, included at the top of the painting.

Many viewers, even those accustomed to the profane spirit of Dada, have found the uncanny, photo-based *mise-en-scenes* in this room, all painted during the war, embarrassing, lacking any conventional indicators to mark them as modern. Disturbingly uncategorizable and puzzling, the paintings have been casually labeled as kitsch by most critics in order to dismiss them.

No stable interpretation has, to my knowledge, ever been presented that explains these paintings. What attitude might we adopt, for instance, towards "Woman with Idol" (c. 1940–43)? It focuses so intently on the precise rendering of a garter button fastening a black stocking to the leg of a topless woman, it takes a moment to see she's kneeling in the arms of a loosely painted bronze statue, and another until we notice the carefully nuanced light seeping through slatted windows in the darkened room. Then, in the bizarrely bleak "Hanged Pierrot" (1940–41), a woman in white demurely mourns the titular lynched clown, distracting us from the spatial complexity of the pine tree from which he dangles. There are so many changes in tone in even a single painting; we are rudderless to steer an approach to meaning.

Installation view, *Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 21, 2016-March 19, 2017 (photo by Martin Seck, © 2016 the Museum of Modern Art)



Francis Picabia, "Lâcheté de la barbarie subtile (Carte à jouer)" (Cowardice of Subtle Barbarism (Playing Card), 1949), oil on board, 29 15/16 × 20 1/2" (76 × 52 cm), private collection (courtesy Galerie Michael Werner, Märkisch Wilmersdorf, Cologne and New York, © 2016 Artist Rights Society, ARS, New York/ADAGP, Paris; photo courtesy Galerie Michael Werner)

But that is exactly the lesson that viewing Picabia teaches. Meaning in painting isn't fixed, but contingent and constantly reinvented. Painting is an invitation for viewers to feel complicated emotions, create their own understanding, question their preconceptions, and explore the decisions an artist has made to keep meaning from becoming stagnant and determined. At the end of his life, Picabia switched to biomorphic abstraction and then finished by painting dots on colored fields. Never relinquishing his desire for change, Picabia created work that, in its unfathomablenesss, forces viewers to confront the mechanisms of ambivalence and confusion that lie at the heart of our confrontations with the world.

Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction *continues at the Museum of Modern Art (11 W 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through March 19.*

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Dennis Kardon

Dennis Kardon is a painter and writer living and working in New York. A show of his recent paintings, Reflections on the Surface, can be seen at Valentine Gallery. Work and writing can be seen at denniskardon.com. More by Dennis Kardon

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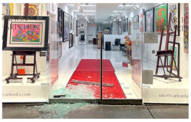

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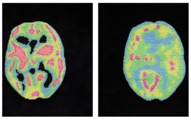

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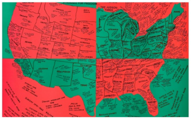

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Alexis Clements

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