

CANADIANART

Francis Picabia: Postmodern Predictor

by David Balzer

Looking at the exhibition of select late works by Francis Picabia currently on view at Michael Werner's New York gallery, it is difficult to believe he is not considered more of a modern master. Perhaps best known for his forays into Dadaism and surrealism—ones which suggest affiliations with trickery and anti-art—Picabia was also a draughtsman and painter. His privileged background might also be said to dovetail with his genre-bouncing—in his early career, from impressionism to cubism—but there is little dilettantism to Picabia. Indeed, as his late paintings especially suggest, Picabia's eye and hand were sharp. He was both a formalist and, when he wanted to be, an artist of themes and narratives. It all adds up to some heavy, uncanny augury. Did any 20th-century artist better predict the direction postmodern painting would take? Picasso is now rarely emulated. One cannot, however, imagine many artists, from Clemente to Currin, without Picabia's precedent.



Francis Picabia, *Printemps* 1942-3, Courtesy
Michael Werner Gallery, New York

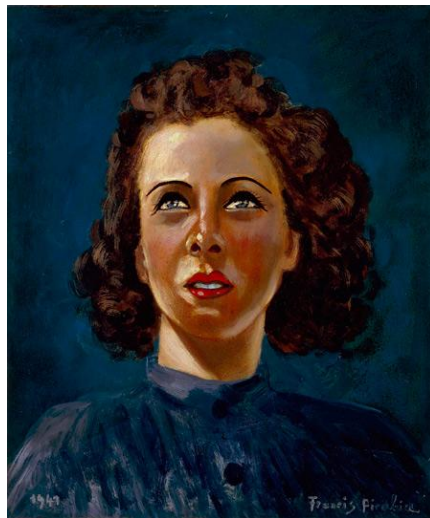
Picabia was one of the first major artists to experiment deliberately with what has become known as kitsch. The artist's sources for these paintings were, in part, girlie and movie magazines, such widespread present-day inspirations that it is strange to think of them being used incipiently. But this Picabia did, and through World War II no less. The remarkable *Printemps* from 1942–43, part of the Michael Werner exhibition, thus becomes a fantastic puzzle. Is it cynical frivolity? Is it an unlikely exercise in form, its fluid, undulating lines and figural positioning making for a perfectly balanced composition? Is it a sincere attempt to inject a modern sensibility into the pastoral tradition? Is it, with its idealized couple, fascist or eugenicist?



Francis Picabia, *Deux Personnages transparents*, ca. 1925-30. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York

Late Picabia also consists of abstract works, which, at first blush, seem to have nothing to do with the kitsch paintings. Included in this exhibition, however, are a few of the artist's "transparencies," for which he overlaid imagery in a manner typical of photographic or filmic multiple exposures. Although there is no strict chronological trajectory, such paintings provide a bridge between his aggressive abstraction and that figurative kitsch. These paintings also, arguably, beat cubism at its own game. Consummately composed, works such as *Deux Personnages transparents* and *Edulis* move and vibrate as few paintings do; they are also brilliant imagistic hybrids, using modes from the history of art to create something entirely unique. They are, perhaps, the first instance of painting-as-remix. You can get entirely, deliriously lost in them.

The fully abstract paintings, from the 1930s and 40s, can be brutalist. Some suggest Paul Klee; some look forward to abstract expressionism (in a manner similar to his contemporary, Arshile Gorky). Does Picabia have a style? He is perhaps, above all, an experimenter—in the best sense, of wanting to push things forward, to solicit reactions. The startling nature of his work—whether extremely, almost idiotically pretty or, conversely, ugly—suggests his key disposition as a renegade, bravely committed to lavish and extreme gestures. That he technically mastered almost every form he attempted makes each of these gestures dazzling to behold.



Francis Picabia, *Portrait de Suzanne*, 1941
Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York