



Francis Picabia, “Late Paintings”

By Anne Doran

The late paintings of Marcel Duchamp’s friend and fellow Dadaist Francis Picabia (1879-1953) are resurrected every few decades as harbingers of the newest trends in art. Derided in their day, in the 1970s they caught the attention of Pop Art impresario Lawrence Alloway. By the 1980s, Picabia’s layered compositions and deployment of kitsch were an inspiration of David Salle and Sigmar Polke. Twenty years further on, his de-skilled technique and swipes at high-art pretensions prompted comparisons to the work of Martin Kippenberger and John Currin. At the moment, Picabia’s eccentric abstractions, with their uglified surfaces, seem as though they would fit into the programs of any number of young galleries of New York’s Lower East Side.

Late is something of a misnomer for a period that spans almost 30 years. The exhibition currently on view at Werner begins with Picabia’s “transparencies” — faces and figures, often taken from art history books, drawn one over the other — made from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s. (An especially wonderful example incorporates three delicate renderings of black women’s faces.) From the early 1940s are images appropriated from such magazines as *Paris Sex Appeal*, executed in an amateurish style copied from how-to-paint books. By the end of the decade, Picabia was producing bizarre abstract and semiabstract works, such as the contemporary-looking *Suzanne* from 1946, with its biomorphic central figure and spray-painted blotches.

Whether horrendous or divine — and there are both in this show — Picabia’s later works make a lot of new art seem either rigidly correct or provocative to no real purpose. Perhaps what the art world needs today is a salutary dose of his genuine brand of anarchism.