

Reviews

Picasso Peace and Freedom

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In February 1939, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was exhibited in a car showroom on Victoria Street in Manchester, before it was shipped to the United States. Over the summer of 2010, the north of England was again host to Pablo Picasso's political art with Tate Liverpool's 'Picasso: Peace and Freedom', although this time the iconic and now fragile *Guernica* remained in Madrid.

'Picasso: Peace and Freedom' was curated by Lynda Morris,¹ with Tate Liverpool director Christoph Grunenberg. It was a project that Morris had been working towards for almost thirty years, with the intention of changing our view of Picasso's later work by shedding new light on the extent of his political commitment. Concurrently, the Gagosian gallery in London brought us a very different angle with 'Picasso: The Mediterranean Years', curated by John Richardson, a close friend of Picasso during the years in question, and Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, the artist's grandson. Timed to coincide with the Tate exhibition, this selection of the artist's late works set out to show his 'private face', and confirmed the view that the playful aspect of his work dominated his output by this stage. The catalogue essay by Richardson is emphatic in portraying Picasso as a charismatic Odysseus of shifting allegiances, 'as generous as he was manipulative', who answered to no one but himself, in pointed contrast to the account given at Tate of an earnest political Picasso, dedicated to Communism, pacifism and women's liberation.

Did Lynda Morris's family history of leftist activism, which goes back three generations, provide to a large degree the motive force for her reassessment?

My grandmother had a room in her house in Tottenham in London in the 1930s for men going to fight in Spain. She was one of the safe houses. She was in Wal Hannington's Unemployed Workers'

Movement. And Uncle Freddy... tore his trousers at the anti-Moseley demonstration in Cable Street. He was working as a runner for the Spanish Civil War Association. It was something that my family talked about. So when I found out about Picasso and Spain it all clicked and I wanted to know more.²

As a girl she felt the tension of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation keenly – 'my father was in civil defence, going on exercises, because he was really worried about nuclear war' – a fear only exacerbated for her when a school friend worked as an extra in Peter Watkins's (still shocking) film *The War Game* (1965) and was coated in Rice Krispies® and chocolate to simulate radiation burns. So while Morris agrees that Picasso was never cut out to be a doctrinaire Communist, she says, 'my commitment to Picasso is one of pacifism rather than Communism. Pacifism was the key to it all.'

Picasso's belief, in the aftermath of a series of conflicts culminating in the Second World War, and having lived under Nazi occupation, that Communism was the best available option to build a more just and peaceful world, was relatively uncontroversial at the time, even conventional in the circles in which he moved. Moreover, his formative years of intense social contact and argument with his peers at the Els Quatre Gats café in Barcelona and Le Bateau Lavoir in Paris being over, he felt that in joining the Communist Party, as he did in 1944, he would once more be part of a band with a common interest, not just, as Timothy Hilton has it, an 'ageing millionaire' increasingly isolated from ordinary society.³ He set aside his aversion to travel to attend the Wrocław and Sheffield Peace Congresses, he maintained a wide-ranging correspondence with figures on the Left and made generous donations of money, drawings and prints, activities documented in the photographs, posters and newspapers displayed in the exhibition.

But how does this political commitment translate into the work? Critical response to 'Picasso: Peace and Freedom' has been largely unimpressed by the overtly political work, and it is hard to disagree. The strengths of this exhibition bore only occasional relation to the curators' intentions. *Guernica* was absent, of course, as was the notorious *Massacre in Korea* (1951), leaving *The Charnel House* (1944–



Charnel House, Paris 1944–1945, oil and charcoal on canvas, 199.8 × 250.1 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, Mrs Sam A Lewishon Bequest (by exchange), and Mrs Marya Bernard Fund in memory of her husband Dr Bernard Bernard and anonymous funds, © Succession Picasso/DACS 2010, © 2009 digital image, The Museum of Modern Art New York/Scala, Florence

1945) and *Monument to the Spaniards who Died for France* (1945–1947) as the main clearly political paintings on show, and the focus of the first part of the exhibition.

Morris says of *The Charnel House*, executed in near-monochrome, and based on a film about the killing of a Spanish Republican family in their kitchen, ‘Picasso already had his eye on the relationship between painting and the mass media. He predates Warhol in his awareness.’ Perhaps this channelling of the image through a mass medium distanced the artist a step too far from the subject; here Picasso’s attempt to encapsulate or stir outrage ends in bathos, confronting us instead with a curiously unmoving image. *Guernica*, it is worth remembering, had its roots in the imagery of the *Vollard Suite* (1933–1937) and, most obviously, the *Minotauremachie* etchings; images in

which the mythological bulls and minotaurs, stumbling blindly, carousing and raping, clearly have their origins in the artist’s perception of his own erotic life. That is to say it sprang from a set of images both highly personal and mythological, which lends it a depth and an ambiguity, particularly of identification, absent from *The Charnel House*. *The Charnel House* draws instead on politically committed reaction to a particular event, somewhat shallow soil in this case, and the result is Cubism-by-numbers, jumbled and flat in every sense of the word, its harrowing subject emptied.

Monument to the Spaniards who Died for France is equally disconcerting in the mismatch between apparent intention and actual effect. Picasso takes on neo-classical tradition to make his sombre tribute, assembling a laurel-crowned bust on

a draped plinth, a military bugle bearing the French colours, memento mori skull and bones, and, oddly, a couple of pot plants. Translated into the vocabulary of an ossifying Cubism, the effect veers dangerously, if unintentionally, close to caricature, as though to prick the pomposity of neo-classical conventions, but deflating the tribute to his compatriots simultaneously.

To look at this painting is to be reminded powerfully of the view that the explosively political moment in Picasso's career had been and gone by the time he painted it. The Cubist revolution initially sparked in 1907 by his contact with African and Iberian sculpture, and worked through in tandem with Georges Braque until 1914, lay not in assembling a particular array of objects but in the transformation of the manner of observing and representing any object at all. The shattering of viewpoint was political in the most potent sense of the word and prefigured key developments in the century ahead. But by the end of the Second World War Picasso had been rehearsing this vocabulary for almost forty years, and the language was no longer one of urgent enquiry.

The following room held a series of still lifes and vanitas compositions – human skulls alongside lamps, books or sea urchins – made in the gloom of the postwar period and engaging with European tradition as Picasso was to do repeatedly for the remainder of his life. But rather than the paintings it was the aquatints of flayed goat skulls, which hinted at ghastly remnants of life in the butchered animal, and the inhuman decay of the bronze and copper *Death's Head* (1943), made the year before the liberation of Paris, that conveyed the darkness of the times with most immediacy.

With *Guernica*, Picasso's doves of peace are his most widely recognised political contribution, regardless of the fact he found them quarrelsome creatures. They must have reminded him both of his father (who specialised in painting them) and of his lifelong rivalry with Henri Matisse who made him a gift of one. Nevertheless, he allowed the original lithograph, the white bird luminously soft against a dark background, to be adopted for a Peace Congress poster, and went on to create numerous variations, some of them comically stout and unflightworthy, or so elaborately befeathered they resemble a pantomime disguise.

Here the dove in its various incarnations shared a room with views through studio windows powerfully – perhaps intentionally – reminiscent of the work of Matisse. If these speak of a yearning for peace, presumably the reason for their inclusion, it might be for the singleminded seclusion of the older artist's relatively conventional existence, his undistracted dedication to his art.

The second half of 'Picasso: Peace and Freedom' was devoted largely to historical paintings revisiting the work of Eugène Delacroix, Edouard Manet, Jacques-Louis David and Nicolas Poussin. This list of Great Painters alerts us to Picasso's primary concerns in making them; formal painterly concerns in taking on and reworking the compositions of acknowledged masters, and a preoccupation with his own place among them. They were included here on the basis of parallels with concurrent world events posited by the curators: we are told Picasso was stirred to paint his variations on *The Women of Algiers* by the 1954 Nationalist uprising in Algeria; *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1960/1961) is a comment on the sexual revolution; the violence of his *The Rape of the Sabine Women* was a reaction to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Four variations on *The Rape of the Sabine Women* were exhibited. As in their violent originals, these are scenes of women and children suffering at the hands of men of war. For Morris they are an expression of empathy made in response to the threat of nuclear annihilation, which had been brought into sudden focus by the Cuban missile crisis. But if we wonder where else we have seen these flailing limbs and helpless bodies, once again the *Minotauremachie* springs to mind. For a man brought up in nineteenth-century Málaga the language of sex translated easily into that of conquest and war. Suffering and surrender are female for Picasso, an association reinforced by Catholicism, and if he almost invariably chooses women to fulfil this role in his paintings it is hard to believe it was purely for reasons of empathy. Picasso could clearly imagine himself as a minotaur, but one suspects he stopped short of imagining himself as one of his dreaming or struggling nudes tumbled on their backs.

Morris describes the tension of the Cuban missile crisis in vivid terms, and there is no reason to doubt that Picasso felt it too. But the conclusion that this translated straight onto the canvas, that it was this event and not Picasso's wish to take on Poussin and David that prompted the painting, is unconvincing. Would Picasso have painted *The Rape of the Sabine Women* if there had been no missile crisis? Very probably.

Lynda Morris, wishing to challenge the stereotype of the older Picasso as the playboy of Provence, has given us instead a man with a purity of intention and a political dedication that it is hard to reconcile with accounts that have emerged in recent years. John Richardson, in the catalogue to 'The Mediterranean Years', says 'Picasso's relationships with the powers that be in Spain were closer and more complex than anyone imagined', and goes on to describe negotiations conducted by Picasso with the Franco regime in the hope of exhibiting his work in the Prado, alongside that of Velázquez and Goya –



Monument to the Spaniards who died for France (Monument aux espagnols morts pour la France), Paris, late 1945 to 31 January 1947, oil on canvas, 195 × 120 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, © Succession Picasso/DACS 2010



The Rape of the Sabine Women (after David), Mougins, 2–4 November 1962, oil on canvas, 161.5 × 130 cm, Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, © Succession Picasso/DACS 2010, photo: Robert Bayer, Basel

negotiations abandoned by Picasso only after dissuasion by his friends.

The crux of the matter is that Picasso's political beliefs, however sincere, were more or less incidental to his art, and secondary to his preoccupation with his place in art history. Among the papers that Lynda Morris has unearthed in the Picasso Archives in Paris is correspondence with the *Présence Africaine* journal in Paris and with the Negritude poet Aimé Césaire, an area of interest for the light it sheds on Picasso's relationship to the struggle against racism and to Africa. In 1965 John Berger's *Success and Failure of Picasso* framed this connection in different terms, contrasting the urgent power of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* with an absence of conviction in Picasso's late work.⁴ A comparison not altogether fair, but telling nevertheless; while the catalogue to 'Peace and Freedom' repeatedly tells us what Picasso's paintings 'represent' politically, Césaire's poem requires no intercession, the cumulative momentum of one line rolling into the next, driven forward by the author's personal experience, political vision and total engagement with the tool of language – by the coincidence of those three elements. For Césaire politics and poetry spring from the same source; Picasso's drive to create is an unruly daemon not suited to agitprop.

This is borne out by the moments of pleasure afforded by 'Picasso: Peace and Freedom'. A dark corner reflected in a mirror, its depth in strange contrast to the otherwise flattened composition of *Still Life with Guitar* (1942); the messy confrontation of *Lobster and Cat* (1965); or the cloistered heat of *The Studio* (1955). These moments of direct engagement are unpredictable, personal to each viewer. To a certain extent their power depends on a complexity in the work at odds with political intention. They speak rather of Picasso's enduring preoccupation with a psychological manifestation of his immediate world, in comparison with which the 'political' feels like an opportunistic adjunct.

'Picasso: Peace and Freedom', Tate Liverpool, 21 May–30 August 2010

NOTES

1. Lynda Morris is AHRC Research Fellow, Curator for EAST International and Professor of Curation at Norwich University College of Arts. She was responsible for the first UK exhibitions of Agnes Martin (1974), Bernd and Hilla Becher (1974–1975), and Gerhard Richter (1977).
2. Lynda Morris, interview with the author, 19 May 2010
3. Timothy Hilton, *Picasso*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1975

4. John Berger, *Success and Failure of Picasso*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966

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Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men*

Haim Bresheeth

For those acquainted with Shirin Neshat's oeuvre, the appearance of her first feature film, *Women Without Men* (2009) made with Shoja Azari, her usual collaborator since 1998, is a special and exciting occasion. The major video installations she has mounted since 1998 – such as the trilogy *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000) – were all structured as two screens facing each other, with the audience ensconced in between the screens, and between the men and women who people the screens holding a tense dialogue through speech, singing and movement. The confrontational simplicity of the video installations allowed Neshat to produce powerful effects on audiences in many parts of the world who came to share her vision. The placing of the audience in between the screens and the genders also meant that we all had to work out our positioning constantly, repeatedly repositioning ourselves mentally and intellectually vis-à-vis the conceptual projections that we faced on the screens as mirrors of difference rather than of similarities. Structuring such dialogical and dialectical discourse is very different from the main thrust in a feature film, as is admitted by Neshat: 'I describe the difference between artists and film-makers – artists are really concerned with ideas and concepts, film-makers are really concerned with telling stories.'¹

In selecting the literary basis of her first feature film, she was careful to remain sensitive to the conceptual; she describes the novel by the same name,² written by Shahrnush Parsipur, as 'very conceptual', hence making her choice easier. Parsipur's novel is in fact a modern classic in Iran, where its writer spent five years incarcerated as a political prisoner, and where the novel was (and remains) banned. The novel, originally five short stories about five different women, already had the structural simplicity for which Neshat has become known through her own art practice, and so offered itself to her working method. But there is a more important reason for this choice. Not only is

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