

Time Out

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P R E V I E W

A R T

New reviews by Robert Macdonald

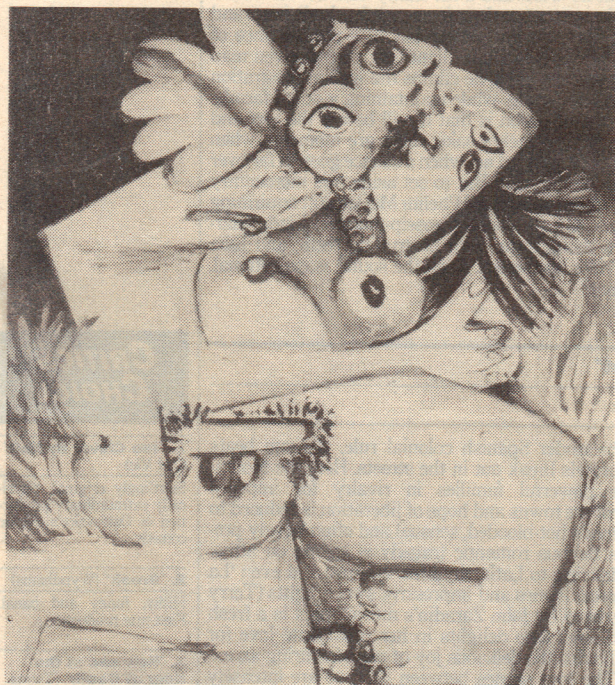


SARAH

KENT

On pricks and Picasso

the wife whose naked body features in so many of the last works and who was with him from 1954 until his death 20 years later at 93. 'Late Picasso' at the Tate is a joyous celebration in paintings, sculptures and graphics of masculine lust — make sure that you don't miss the prints on show separately downstairs, which are more tender, wittier, sadder and also more explicit than the paintings. The potential tedium offered by the spectacle of endless embracing couples and huge reclining nudes is alleviated by Picasso's wickedly self-deprecatory humour, his unflagging formal inventiveness and his marvellous painterly exuberance.



Picasso pointed out that his bullfights were mainly painted on Sundays as compensation for not being able to attend the actual corrida. By the same token, John Richardson argues in his excellent catalogue essay, these late erotic paintings were expressions of a desire that could no longer be fulfilled. The artist who takes possession of his model, both in body and in image, may appear as a virile youth but frequently he is an ageing jester and, especially in the etchings, the couple's antics are often observed by a gnome-like old fool peeping from behind a curtain, clearly a self-portrait. 'In front of the copper plate you are always the voyeur,' remarked Picasso. 'That is why I have engraved so many embracing couples... whereas painting, that is actual love-making.'

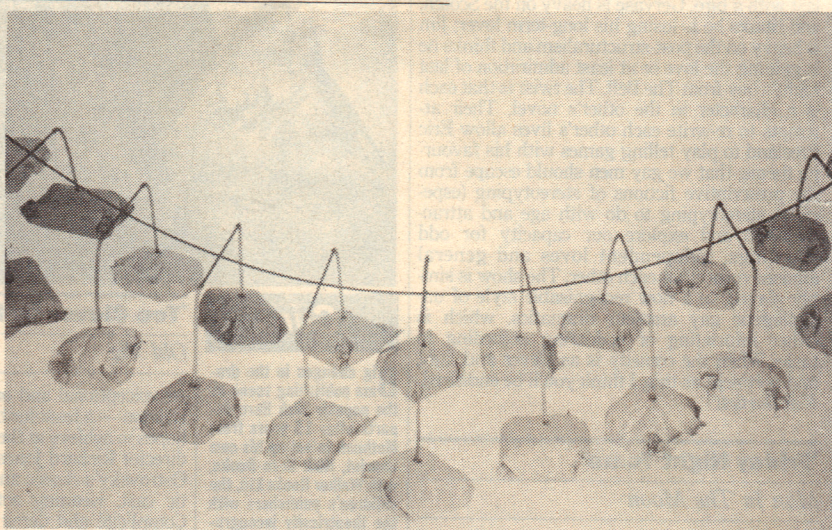
While Picasso endlessly worked, Jacqueline watched television. In the pictures, the artist's thumb stuck through the palette is playfully transformed into a sexual gesture. The painter works, the voyeur watches as the characters which he draws — the artist and his wife — indulge in the love-making which in reality he is denied. The two activities become metaphors for one another.

Yet these pictures are not the lugubrious slobberings of a jaded or self-pitying impotent. It's the vigour and irrepressible buoyancy of his salaciousness that makes Picasso's last pictures read as a joyful proclamation of life and of unflagging energy — in terms of the canvas, if not the sheets.

My embargo still holds — only the Picassos qualify for exemption.

A five-year ban should be placed on the female nude and heavy fines imposed on all masculine transgressors — women being exempt from my prohibition, since it is their right to reclaim their sexuality and to restate it in their own terms. Touring round the galleries, I get increasingly impatient at the endless assertions of masculine egotism that I encounter and the confident flaunting of their sexual prowess. In the era of Thatcher's autocracy, women are still portrayed as the passive receivers of masculine attention, men as the thinkers and achievers.

This speculation brings me, of course, to Picasso's long last romp, dubbed in the catalogue as 'l'époque Jacqueline' in honour of



Joanna Sands

(Diorama)

Joanna Sands uses found materials from builders' yards and scrap merchants to make sculptures whose unexpected delicacy and humour belies their origins. A grid of reinforcing wire forms the skeleton of a boat. Draped in a fishing net it reminds one of a lobster pot and suggests a trap as much as a vessel, too insubstantial for escape. Cylindrical sash-weights dance up and down on rubber strings through rusted steel discs, their gyrations mimicking the movements both of engine-parts and of copulating couples. Inflated paper bags attached to a metal skeleton are like the padded feet of an absurd centipede. The Diorama is an awkward space for work that declares itself with modesty, but this exhibition is worth an effort of the imagination.

CRITICS' CHOICE

1. Late Picasso (Tate Gallery)

The artist ogles his model in these hedonistic celebrations of art, sex and the art of sex.

2. Art of Nature (Barbican)

Twentieth-century French photography viewed through a handful of big names. Feast your eyes on pictures by Brassai, Man Ray, Atget, Bresson and Kertész and catch up on interesting new developments: gourmet pleasures.

3. Saatchi Collection

The Saatchis converted this disused paint factory to show their collection — what a joy to find good contemporary art presented with love and respect in a superb space. On view are the three Americans, Golub, Guston and Shapiro and the German painter Sigmar Polke.

4. Master Paintings from the Phillips Collection, Washington (Hayward)

If this show were at the Academy it would be inundated, but the Hayward, it seems, does not attract the crowds. Starting with Goya, Constable and Daumier the collection trips through European painting then crosses the Atlantic to culminate with Americans like Rothko. The implied lineage may be dubious, but gorgeous pictures take your mind off the underlying message.

5. Prints and Drawings of the Weimar Republic (Camden Arts Centre)

Camden is the ideal London venue for this show, earlier seen at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, which assembles the graphic works of Weimar artists such as Otto Dix and George Grosz and many lesser-known Germans. A bitter distillation of the spirit of those times, relevant perhaps today?

Paintings of the Dreaming

(Rebecca Hossack)

I've never seen anything quite as depressing as an aboriginal settlement in central Australia. After driving uneventfully for days on dirt roads across desert scrub, the appearance of junked cars, beer cans and assorted debris announces the approach to a compound. These jerry-built settlements look like army camps but the filthy, blank-eyed people and snottosed children have the listless inertia of refugees who have long since lost all hope of returning home. Numerous schemes have been tried to encourage aboriginal enterprise but, to date, most have failed because they were so alien to the traditional lifestyle and values. As part of one such programme the art teacher, Geoff Bardon, arrived some 15 years ago in Papunya. His attempts to encourage the children to paint were met with resistance until some of the adults began to experiment with the materials. Painting has always been an integral part of aboriginal culture, pictures being made by the men on rocky overhangs or in the sand as part of religious ceremonies — hence the children's inhibition. Techniques were soon developed for adapting traditional motifs and working in acrylic, first on card, later on canvas. Unlike other schemes, this project has continued to flourish. Some 40 artists now work in the settlement and a co-op has been established to market their pictures, now sought after by wealthy collectors such as Alastair McAlpine and the Holmes a Courts — Australia's equivalents to the Saatchis. Aerial perspective is the key to paintings which are like traces of events that have traversed the surface of the earth. Dots painted onto a brown, grey or buff ground map out in diagrammatic form stories of 'the Dreaming', which include Creation myths and narratives about various ancestor spirits — a cross between the Bible, Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' and Grimm's fairy tales. The older artists employ rhythmic repeating patterns mainly in ochres and earth colours that, at their simplest, remind one of woven mats. The most celebrated of these is Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, whose stunning geometric designs were recently on show at the ICA. Circular motifs recur in all the work on show to represent anything from a well, hill or campsite to a breast, stone or fruit. Women are now also allowed to take part and Pansy Napagati shows a marvellously subtle painting that records the search for a delicious wild food, represented by spider-like shapes from which emanate insistent ripples of coloured dots. Maxie Tjampitjinpa introduces a wider range of colour, especially a deep crimson, and employs infill to dramatic effect so that a painting which charts thunder storms and bush fires reads like a mosaic. At the moment the paintings are a curious blend of naivety and sophistication. The strength of Aboriginal abstraction lies in the fact that their designs are based on pre-established symbols and a narrative content. If the market gets too greedy, though, their work may quickly lose its meaning and degenerate into mass-production kitsch. It will take a steely determination to resist absorption so as to continue to develop a confident assertion of difference.