Pablo Picasso once joked that he had an eye at the end of his penis. In his multivolume Life of Picasso, the late John Richardson, Picasso’s ribald biographer, excelled at writing from this point of view. Richardson followed his subject from the studio to the bedroom and back again as the priapic Andalusian cycled through his various models, muses, and mistresses. Now at Gagosian on New York’s Upper East Side, the exhibition “Picasso’s Women: Fernande to Jacqueline” is offered up as tribute to Richardson, who died in March. The show tracks Picasso’s conquests in paint and in bed, beginning with Fernande Olivier and continuing on through his portraits of Olga Khokhlova, Marie-Thérèse Walter, Dora Maar, Françoise Gilot, Sylvette David, and Jacqueline Roque.†
Picasso’s brush ranged as widely as that famous eye. One feature of modern art is the active erosion of divisions: between realism and abstraction; figure and ground; painting and sculpture; and among portraiture, still life, and landscape. Picasso’s protean modes could be as seductive and shape shifting as his Cubist facets, endlessly folding in on their reflected selves in glimmers of recognition.

Spanning some seven decades, the thirty-five works in “Picasso’s Women,” from Cubist to classical and back again, variously drawn, painted, and sculpted, seem to share little more than the common subject of “Picasso’s women.” Without a knowledge of Picasso’s unpredictable stylistic turns, especially his classical phase following World War I, one might mistake this selection for a thematic group show of deliberately diversified talent.

“There were muses to be ground up into his artistic medium. At first they were celebrated as deities, with soft lines and swirling colors. Then, inevitably, they would be cast aside as demons, with distorted eyes, twisted breasts, and mouths cracked open in choruses of *vaginae dentatae*. Picasso made sure to destroy his women pictorially as well as emotionally. There is little biography here save for Picasso’s own.

For better or worse, Picasso never shied away from telling the story of himself through the lives of others, borrowing what he couldn’t steal from the various innovations of fellow artists and making them his own. The exhibition opens
with a pair of works that highlight this range of form. *Nue endormie*, a charcoal on gessoed canvas from 1932, offers a minimum of drawn arabesques of hand, nose, and nipple. Meanwhile a *Portrait de femme* from 1923, in an unusual media of oil and sand on canvas, could be a Botticelli goddess crossed with a mural from a Greek diner.

There are a handful of sculptures in the mix, several of them quite good, all adding to the formal complexities of the exhibition. One of the revelations of “Picasso Sculpture,” the landmark exhibition that was at the Museum of Modern Art in 2015–16, was that this famous painter who sculpted might better be regarded, in fact, as a sculptor who painted. Whether in his Cubist or classical phases, or somewhere in between, Picasso was a plastic artist by and large who unfolded three-dimensional forms in two dimensions, relying on tonal gradient rather than colored form to build his compositions.

In painted sheet metal or cast bronze, his sculptural work seems to flow effortlessly, informing his paintings in turn. The expression of the painting *Tête de femme au chignon (Fernande)* (1906) is flash-frozen in the bronze head of the same year, while *Cubist Head (Portrait of Fernande)* (1909–10) makes more pictorial sense when processed through the matching bronze of 1909. Monochrome paintings such as *La Femme-fleur* (1946) and *Portrait de femme à la queue de cheval, Sylvette* (1954) likewise convey the metallic sheen of *Tête de femme* (1931), on loan from the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, and the rubbed bronze belly of the pregnant *Femme enceinte I* (1950).

For all of his musing on his muses, Picasso largely took his subjects out of his portraits and rendered them as nameless still lifes. His figures do not come alive on the canvas so much as become hunted, ensnared, starved, and field-dressed in Picassoid symbols and forms. *Femme aux jambes croisées* (1955) is a
woman flayed on the Cubist drying rack. The face of Buste de femme (Dora Maar) (1940) looks like it busted up in the business end of a nutcracker, which may be just the point. Even in such a tender portrait as the famous La Rêve (Marie-Thérèse) (1932), some critics have pointed out that the artist inserted a phallus above the upturned profile.

While merely listed as belonging to a “private collection,” most observers will recognize this last work as the painting purchased by Steven A. Cohen in 2013 for $155 million, then the highest price ever paid for a work of art by an American collector. The transaction occurred even after the former owner Steve Wynn mistakenly knocked his elbow through the canvas, later claiming he suffers from peripheral blindness. What record prices and blind collectors say about the art market, and the enduring value of Picasso, we may only speculate. In any case, this painting is now firmly behind glass, as is Picasso’s titanic reputation.


In our hypersensitive age, de Kooning’s mid-century “women” paintings can seem like windows onto a prehistoric era, when subjects could become objects and artists were not just allowed, but encouraged, to do anything and anyone. De Kooning was himself a genre-bending modernist, a supremely gifted and classically trained draftsman who became a conjurer in paint as well as a philanderer in the sack. As de Kooning said of Picasso, “He’s the guy to beat.” Indeed. While Picasso drowned his women in the depths of abstraction, de Kooning wiped away the abstract froth to reveal the women hidden just below his surfaces.
I have always been partial to that moment just before de Kooning’s seismic revelation, when his figures were active but still sublimated in mysterious forms, such as in MOMA’s famous black-and-white *Painting* of 1948 and the Art Institute of Chicago’s *Excavation* of 1950. The women that came forward in de Kooning’s compositions for a brief, furious period in the 1950s receded just as quickly as they appeared. In the 1960s they were diving deep into the waves of increasingly aqueous abstractions. By the 1980s they had dissolved into the gentle fog of de Kooning’s diminishing mental acuity.

There are several smaller works on paper here, many of them on loan from the Glenstone Museum in Potomac, Maryland, that locate de Kooning’s “woman” breakthrough between 1948 and 1954. They reveal how de Kooning was working through the tension between figuration and abstraction even before he began to extract the breasts and teeth of his women from his abstract forms.

Among the painters of the New York School, de Kooning was especially sensitive to surface treatment. His wet-on-wet application conveys a sensuously felt form. In paintings such as *Woman III* (1952–53) and *Woman as Landscape* (1954–55), the apparent manhandling of his crude female forms, up close, can seem like an embrace of color-rich oils and enamels. Once revealed, it may be impossible to see these abstractions any other way.

The waters off Long Island helped de Kooning cool these heated works. Following his move to East Hampton in 1963, both his palette and his paint handling began to chill. *Two Women* (1964) and *Woman and Child* (1967) have loosened their grip on de Kooning’s abstract surfaces. The “Untitled” paintings here from the 1970s feel like a refreshing swim in the hot Hampton sun.
Further bending his creative focus, de Kooning produced during this period a suite of watery clay figures, cast in bronze, most famously his *Clamdigger* (1972). As sculptures that seem to defy solid form, these are powerful works, crude from afar, like those “women,” but supremely tactile up close, imbued with the artist’s hand in their squished and pinched material. These are wet, sun-drenched visions, at the same time intimately felt and distantly perceived across the tidal flats.

For de Kooning, these figures may signal a long withdrawal into the recesses of cognition. A victim of Alzheimer’s who died at age ninety-two in 1997, de Kooning continued to paint into the 1980s, even as his compositions became more simple. There is long debate as to what exactly de Kooning painted himself during this period, and which compositions were driven by assistants. Nevertheless, forms from decades before remain as vestigial visions. *Untitled III* (1983) reads like a memory of 1950’s *Excavation*, with its evocations of lips and eyes, while *Untitled XLII* (1983) is mere ribbons of red and blue paint over light ground. As de Kooning’s forms dissolve into light, all that remains is the whiff of feeling.

Not since Rubens has a painter been so focused on the amplitude of the nude as Lucian Freud. The English grandson of Sigmund, Lucian made a fetish out of flesh, surveying the landscapes of his mottled figures through a favorite selection of subjects. Last month at Acquavella, a loan exhibition brought together thirteen of Freud’s major paintings, curated by the artist’s studio assistant, David Dawson.
There is, of course, a long tradition of English landscape painting, and Lucian Freud is not the only English modernist to treat the figure as another landscape view. The focus of landscape, especially in the English mode, is all-
over, taking it all in, with a predilection for Saxon fact over Gallic fancy. Freud was a precocious draftsman. In 1943, just in his early twenties, he made a drawing of Loch Ness from Drumnadrochit that seems to account for every leaf and stone in pen and ink. His landscape drawings remain a high point in their astonishing detail.

As he turned to the figure, Freud applied this same precision, increasingly recording the marshlands and bogs of the flesh with unsentimental determination. By the time we get to the “monumental,” with the well-known portraits painted from the 1990s to Freud’s death at age eighty-eight in 2011, which were on display at Acquavella, this mode has become a manner. Going for the monumental in both the scale of his canvases and the size of his chosen subjects, most notably Leigh Bowery and “Big Sue,” Freud indulged in the landscapes of the flesh and exaggerated their ample vistas in paint. In *Leigh Bowery (Seated)* (1990), the perspective begins at groin level before turning to survey Bowery’s hills and dales in widening angles of view. There may be truths in these unflattering figures, but photographs reveal how Freud packed on the pounds and roughed up the flesh. In *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995), he added his own crags and mudslides to the human landscape for dramatic effect. These paintings may shock, but the results replace English fact with modernist fiction.

---

1 “Picasso’s Women: Fernande to Jacqueline” opened at Gagosian, New York, on May 3 and remains on view through June 22, 2019.

2 “De Kooning: Five Decades” opened at Mnuchin Gallery, New York, on April 19 and remains on view through June 15, 2019.

3 “Lucian Freud: Monumental” was on view at Acquavella Galleries, New York, from April 5 through May 24, 2019.
James Panero is the Executive Editor of *The New Criterion*.