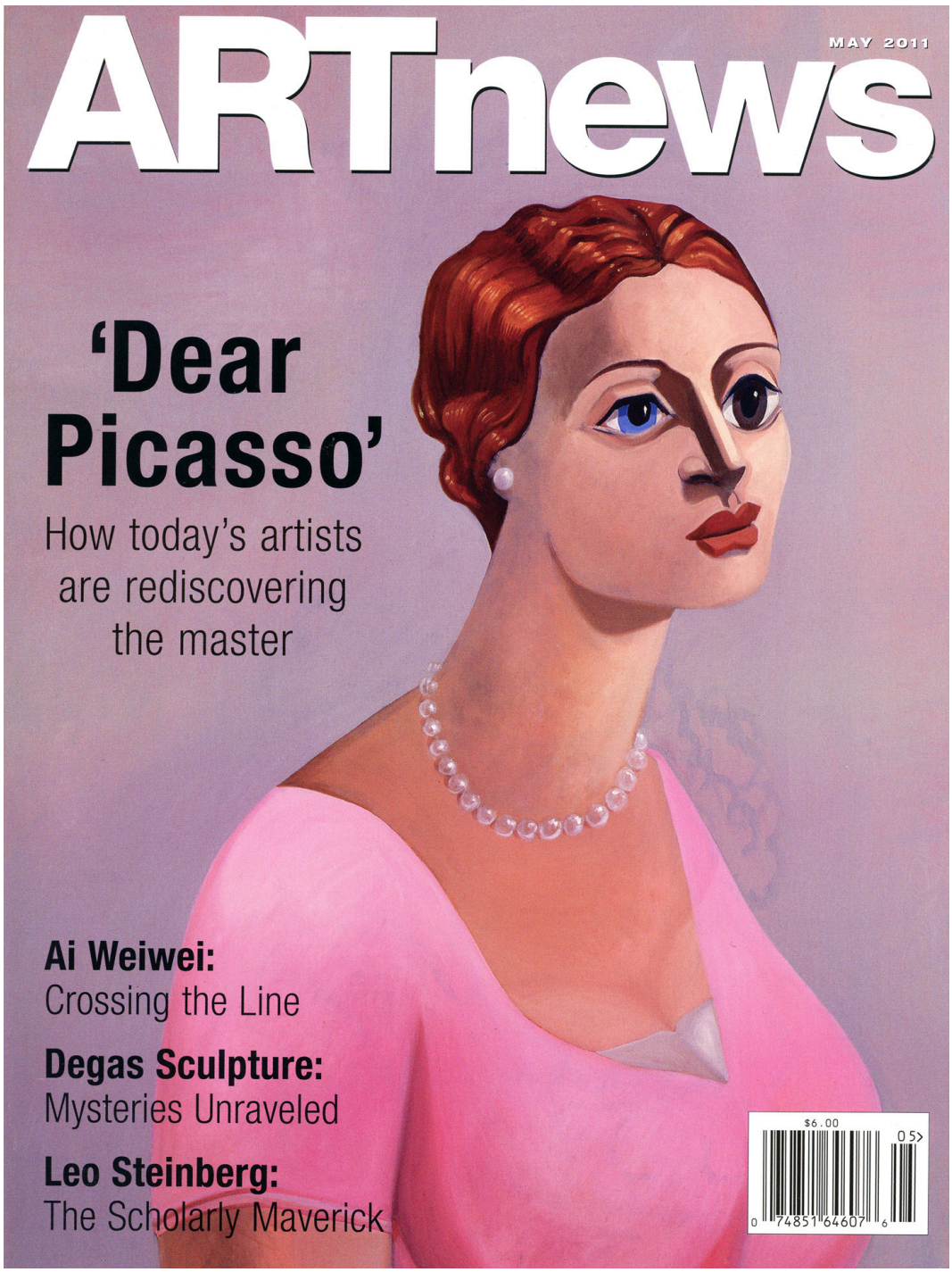
SALON 94

ARTnews, May 2011



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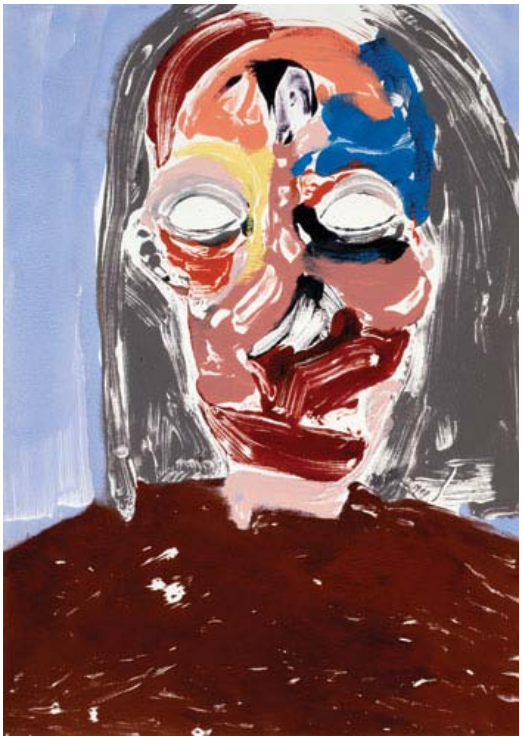
Ann Landi

Dear Picasso

Revisiting and recasting the master's work, from Cubism through Guernica to the Mosqueteros of his old age, new generations of artists are discovering Picasso all over again.



Nicola Tyson, *Portrait Head #55*, 2003. Picasso spurred Tyson «toward more self-discovery.»

LAMAY PHOTO/COURTESY FRIEDRICH PETZEL GALLERY, NEW YORK

Pablo Picasso cast a long and sometimes oppressive shadow across the landscape of 20th-century art. American artists from Max Weber to Jasper Johns absorbed his example and marveled at his virtuosity. Jackson Pollock famously declared, "That [bleeping] Picasso . . . he's done everything." (Pollock even began a 1950 drip painting with a series of Picassoid figures but obliterated them under skeins of paint.) In Europe, painters as diverse as Richard Hamilton and Martin Kippenberger paid homage to Picasso, while Pop artists in the United States, like Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein, reworked his subjects in soft fabric or Benday dots.

But what about contemporary artists—the young and those in midcareer? Does Picasso still cast any sort of spell, almost 40 years after his death? The recent retrospective of George Condo's work at the New Museum in New York drew attention to the question of how much the colossus of modernism still haunts artists in the 21st century. Condo, 55, claims to have spent two years trying to understand Picasso's language "from within," practicing what he calls "psychological Cubism." Many others of his generation have also been wrestling with the master, while a number of younger painters and sculptors are discovering him all over again.

Many artists are introduced to Picasso as students. "My art history-survey teacher basically said, 'I want to give any of you who come to this school thinking you're going to be the next Picasso a dose of reality,'" recalls Sean Landers. "'There are none of you who are artists of this caliber, or we would have known it by now.'" Landers, who shows at Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York, took that as a challenge to make ambitious paintings that borrowed heavily from Picasso. He showed them at Andrea Rosen Gallery

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in 2001. Though the results provoked a mixed reception, Landers—at least briefly—found "a vehicle to talk about myself and my own creative practice, [using] Picasso's imagery almost like an art material to make my own paintings."

Nicola Tyson, a British-born figurative painter, recalls first encountering Picasso when she was an "angry young feminist painter in the 1980s. As students, we did a *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, substituting phallic imagery in place of the prostitutes." Though her debt to him is more oblique now, Tyson, who also shows at Friedrich Petzel, concedes that Picasso is the one who "gave permission way back to represent the figure differently from the traditional academic form." His depictions of "vacant women," she adds, "worked as a spur for me toward more self-discovery—out of a kind of anger and a feeling that there was something lacking in his work, something that wasn't represented."

Like Landers, an artist might choose to do an apprenticeship with Picasso before moving on to other turf. Mike Bidlo, one of the original appropriation artists of the 1980s, spent the middle part of that decade pursuing what he describes as an "indentured servitude" to the artist. Bidlo, who shows at Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York, created his own versions of the *Demoiselles* and *Guernica* and painted 80 canvases of Picasso's women. "You would never mistake a Bidlo for a Picasso," he admits, but those years he spent "engaging and dialoguing with him" opened up many doors. "You never really drop an artist of his stature," he adds, "because he then becomes part of your DNA."

Since Picasso's output was so prodigious and multi-faceted, an artist can engage with only selected aspects of his explosive creativity. Ray Smith, for instance, has returned to *Guernica* several times, often recycling it for satiric ends. After then-Secretary of State Colin Powell gave a speech at the United Nations in 2003 announcing that the United States would start bombing Iraq, he answered questions from the audience while standing in front of a tapestry based on *Guernica*, a painting that denounced the aerial devastation of a small Basque village during the Spanish Civil War. Smith took a photo of the reflection of the tapestry on the room's marble floor and fed it through a filter in Photoshop that reads temperatures in lines and colors. The result is a painted, 24-foot-long melting-and-swirling distortion of the original.

"If a guy is standing in front of a replica of *Guernica* and talking about weapons of mass destruction," Smith asks, "what the hell does this painting mean?" We have to wonder. Smith, who shows at Dorfman Projects in New York, has also made fruitful use of this and other Picasso imagery in his series of "Exquisite Corpse" paintings that mix and match his interpretations of the master.

For British artist Richard Patterson, who now lives and works in Dallas, it was Picasso's portrayal of himself as the mythical Minotaur that resonated most. Throughout his life, but especially in the "Vollard Suite" of the 1930s, Picasso presented the Minotaur as an alternately loving and rapacious beast, who, in the words of biographer John Richardson, "would maneuver the woman he loved into sacrificing . . . her body and her will." But that creature—half-man, half-bull—has also been seen by many as alluding to a defenseless tenderness in the artist's psyche. When Patterson, who shows at James Cohan Gallery in New York, found a child's rubber toy in the shape of the Minotaur, he used it as a surrogate for his attitudes toward his own art in a series of paintings in the late 1990s.

"I blew the toy up to life-size, so it's slightly a child but also a kind of monster," he explains. "It was painted in such a way that you can't see the individual brushstrokes, dispelling the notion of the authentic mark." Like Picasso's protagonists, he adds, "It has a sort of tragicomic aspect to it. It was presenting

a certain image of maleness, but it was also about being vulnerable."

Toby Kamps, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Menil Collection in Houston, also sees similarities between Patterson and Picasso, in both their training and their versatility. Patterson "experiments with different styles of painting, as did Picasso, and like Picasso he had a terrific academic training, where he got tight so he could get loose later," Kamps says. "You see more and more artists now who learn how to do things in the traditional manner, so they have that bedrock to work from, as did Picasso when he was a student in the 19th-century academies. Whereas the old model used to be you start out loose so that you can get looser."

Kamps also cites the German artist Anton Henning as following in Picasso's footsteps. "He's gone back and re-invented a 20th-century avant-garde movement he calls Curvism," Kamps says. "Instead of the fractured, largely geometric aspects of Cubism, he does sinuous lines running through things." Unlike the pioneering efforts of Braque and Picasso, however, Henning's "movement" does not appear to have attracted any followers. But Kamps notes that "he toggles in and out of realism, in the same way as Picasso." And Henning, who shows at Zach Feuer in New York, himself admits that he goes back to the master over and over again.

"Initially, when I began to paint, I was fascinated by his early works, then by the last paintings and especially by the portraits of the 1930s and '40s," Henning says. "Some are so good that I kind of forget the image but always recall the energy I got looking at them. Picasso proved that it doesn't matter what you paint, but how you paint it."
Kamps speculates that many younger artists may be dialing into the zeitgeist the way members of the avant-garde did early in the 20th century. "A lot of people hypothesize that Picasso and Braque were osmotically in touch with the great advances in science and physics at the time, so they intuited Einstein's Theory of Relativity and the new conceptions of time and space, and through Cubism gave those physical form," he says. "Every young artist now has the Internet pipeline coming into his or her studio, and they're gorging on news and information. They want to move through art and life the way Picasso did."

A highly praised show at Gagosian Gallery in 2009, "Picasso: Mosqueteros," brought renewed attention to the artist's late works, which many had previously dismissed as a decline into self-indulgent kitsch. Critics praised the works for their emotional intensity and their pictorial inventiveness. "People have tended, in recent years, because of the renewed interest in the late paintings, to imagine that that's the most generative aspect of Picasso's legacy at the moment, and to connect that with artists like Dana Schutz and George Condo," says Scott Rothkopf, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. But in the works of other artists—Josh Smith, Kelley Walker, and Richard Aldrich, for example—he sees the earlier collage esthetic finding a contemporary incarnation.

"The interest that Picasso had in using in collage a lot of different printed mediums—like trompe l'oeil woodgrain and newsprint—connects up to younger artists who are looking into print at a digital moment, combining different materials on the surface of their paintings," Rothkopf says. Aldrich, he notes, "sees the picture plane as a repository for different materials that come from different parts of our lives, and that's something Picasso was investigating early in the last century."

Walker himself says that he's "interested in the way Picasso created an image that had to be resolved by the viewer, using materials that call attention to the world around us and negative space to hold the work together."

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Beyond collage, he adds, there are other aspects of Picasso's life and work that intrigue him. "He's a scanner, and I'm a scanner myself," says Walker, who shows at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. "He could look at something and make a perfect outline of it and then put it right back into his own artwork."

Francesca DiMattio, whose work is also oriented toward collage, says she "gravitates to Picasso's sense of public/private and inside/outside." She looked at Cubism early on and admired its way of breaking down hierarchies, showing an object that is simultaneously a body part or a face and incorporating high and low references. Picasso "starts with everyday objects but presents them in such a way that they become anxiety-provoking," says DiMattio, who shows at Salon 94 in New York.

For many artists, in fact, Picasso was all about anxiety, especially for the earlier generations that included Pollock and Hamilton, and perhaps Landers and Condo as well. For a show called "Influence, Anxiety, and Gratitude" at the List Visual Arts Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003, curator Bill Arning, now director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, showed Hamilton's 1973 mixed-media drawing Picasso's *Meninas*, which substitutes Picassoid figures for Velázquez's characters and depicts the 20th-century master taking his illustrious forebear's place at the easel.

Arning also included an audiotape of Sean Landers reading aloud his "Dear Picasso," a letter beseeching the master's blessing, and one of his takes on *Guernica*. Both Landers and Hamilton, Arning notes, "showed us a Picasso who must have shared their self-doubt in order to be a great artist."

For many younger artists, though, Picasso seems a far less fraught and intimidating figure. Amy Bessone, who shows at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, says, "When I was in school in the '80s, it was pretty uncool to look at Picasso or to admit that you'd looked at Picasso, because he was so ingrained in the popular culture. But I feel like I have a much more relaxed and comfortable relationship with modernism than the preceding generation." Her works, she says, "are both an homage and a love song" to the artist.

For German artist Corinna Heumann, who ransacks the imagery of recent artists—juxtaposing a Picasso-like figure against a Warholian camouflage background, for example—Picasso represented a way around the almost stifling heritage of artists in her own country: Richter, Kiefer, Baselitz, Polke, and the rest. Heumann, who shows at Dorfman Projects in New York, says, "My work investigates questions of originality and what makes people creative. I like Picasso because for me painting is about thinking with my hands. And in a way, repainting Picasso is like rethinking all of art history."

Far from fading into irrelevance or inspiring contempt, as has been the lot of certain great artists in the past (one thinks of Caravaggio or Rodin), Picasso still seems very much with us, an inspiration for both the way he lived and the works he made. Even the outsize aspects of his personality can be captivating.

"I'm from Wisconsin, so a little grandiosity and pretension have tremendous appeal to me," says Kamps. "When you get an artist in his studio and he goes 'Yo, Picasso!' my hat's off to him. I think more artists should aspire to that model, to having your name be 'Picassoid.' After all, how many people get that honorific?"

Ann Landi is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

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