

ArtSeen

## Françoise Gilot

By Jillian Russo



Françoise Gilot, *Variation*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches. Courtesy Rosenberg & Co.

The women artists in Picasso's life have typically been treated as supporting characters in his story, fascinating muses who inspired an artistic genius. Until recently, Françoise Gilot, who had a relationship with Picasso from 1943 until 1953, was more renowned for her bestselling memoir, *Life with Picasso*, than her painting (Picasso was infuriated when the book was published in 1961 despite his lawsuits intended to stop its release). A survey of thirty-

ON VIEW  
Rosenberg & Co.  
*Françoise Gilot*  
April 3–July 3, 2024  
New York

pointy leaves are oranges. In *Smiling Dover Sole*, the adorable fish is garnished with a lemon slice, and served on a scalloped-edged (silver) platter on a (red and white) checkered table-cloth. During this period, Gilot also produced abstract drawings that incorporated color such as *White and Red Still Life*, in which she introduced cadmium red. It would become a signature hue that she used throughout her career.

Painted in the years following her separation from Picasso, *Harlequin at Rest* (1956) and *Sunflowers* (1958) show us an artist coming into her own. Picasso did everything he could to isolate Gilot from the Parisian art world, including convincing Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler to terminate her contract. “From that moment on,” she wrote, “he burned all bridges that connected me to the past I shared with him. But in doing so he forced me to discover myself and thus to survive. I shall never cease being grateful to him for that.” In *Harlequin at Rest*, Gilot transforms Picasso’s pensive harlequin, a favorite subject of his early work, into a reclining female figure. A critique of the nineteenth-century *odalisque*, the woman’s clothed body appears boyish and somewhat awkward. She is not arranged for the male gaze, but appears in command of her own sensuality. By the end of the decade, color began to play a more central role in Gilot’s work. In *Sunflowers* she saturates the canvas with shades of primary yellow and marigold balanced by swatches of red, brown, and blue. She returned to this palette once again in the 1990s and 2000s.

The career Gilot forged after 1960 is in some respects even more fascinating than her involvement with the School of Paris. She traveled extensively, including frequent visits to Greece, which had a longstanding influence on her work, visible in the prints *Sense of Taste*



Françoise Gilot, *Incoming Tide*, 1987. Monotype, 30.25 x 44 inches. Courtesy Rosenberg & Co.

eight works by Gilot at Rosenberg & Co., however, uncovers a spirited, poetic, and cosmopolitan artist, whose paintings, drawings, and prints created between 1944 and 2009 offer a fresh perspective on the legacy of French Modernism.

The exhibition opens with *Variation* (2009), a striking crimson-hued biomorphic abstraction that establishes Gilot as a masterful colorist. Throughout her early career she corresponded frequently with Matisse, but we will never get to read the letters because Picasso disposed of them after she separated from him. At the center of the canvas, two curvilinear rectangles with thick white borders overlap at right angles. The effect is a play of interlocking parts reminiscent of Fernand Léger's machine age aesthetic, but softer. Inside these capsule forms, strips of red, sandy peach, and seafoam hues create a push-pull effect. Where the rectangles intersect, the color fragments become more painterly and spill into one another. This unexpected connection between the shapes is evocative both of Gilot's refusal to be hemmed in and her interest in creative exchange: in addition to Picasso, she collaborated with June Wayne at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop and Judith Solodkin at SOLO Press on Park Avenue South.



Installation view: *Françoise Gilot*, Rosenberg & Co., New York, 2024. Courtesy Rosenberg & Co.

When Gilot met Picasso in 1943, she was twenty-two and had just opened her first exhibition at a Paris gallery owned by fashion designer Madeleine Decré. She explained in *Life with Picasso* that when their relationship began, she turned to drawing as a means to develop her creative independence by focusing on the “structural qualities” of line. Two graphite drawings from the late 1940s, *Joy (VIII)* and *Smiling Dover Sole and Flowers*, are playful and vivid tabletop still lifes. Although Gilot uses line economically, she gives the viewer just enough visual cues to imaginatively fill in the color. In *Joy (VIII)*, two birds meet each other behind a bowl of fruit, which we know from their

(1985) and *Flower Shield* (1975). In 1969, June Wayne invited her to Tamarind to create lithographs, and during her stay she was introduced to Dr. Jonas Salk, creator of the Polio vaccine. They married the following year and Gilot moved to California, where she expanded her lithography practice and learned monotype in collaboration with master printer Judith Solodkin. Building upon earlier mixed-media work, such as the collage *White and Red Still Life* (1947), she incorporated decorative paper into the printing process. The result was delightfully patterned and textured monotypes such as *Arvor* (1986) and *Incoming Tide* (1987), which reference the coastal California landscape.

Drawn from a singular collection, the Rosenberg & Co. exhibition is the first solo presentation of Gilot's work in New York since her death in 2023. Her career spanned nearly eight decades bridging the circle of Gertrude Stein, post-war California, and late twentieth-century New York. Her oeuvre is diverse and nuanced, and I left the gallery inspired by Gilot's commitment to her own artistic voice. As part of its recent reopening, Musée Picasso has installed a year-long one-room exhibition devoted to her work, but hopefully more comprehensive retrospectives will follow. Gilot deserves her place in history as a protagonist of twentieth-century art.

---

### **Contributor**

#### **Jillian Russo**

**Jillian Russo** is a Brooklyn-based curator and art historian.