



# Françoise Gilot

## Charting the path of a modern master

**G**ilot's line is the first thing you notice, her tool for expressing an image. In her portraits in pencil, the line becomes the central element, almost tattooed into the paper. In her paintings, both figurative and abstract, Gilot's line acts either as a boundary of form or as a central element or elements, weaving in and out amongst the other forms or creating complicated knots and patterns. Rosenberg & Co., in New York City, is presenting a survey of Gilot's work this spring, the first since the artist's death at age 101 a year ago. The works on view, through July 3, cover seven decades of her practice, starting with drawings and paintings from 1944, meandering through myriad works on paper, monotypes, oils, and ending with an abstract painting from 2007.

Françoise Gilot was born in 1921 in Neuilly on the outskirts of Paris. She was an only child who came from a wealthy background, one which allowed her many opportunities and much

**By William Corwin**

Opposite: *The Tree of Life*, 2002, oil on canvas, 63.8 x 52 in.

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*Incertitude*, 2003-4, oil on canvas, 9.8 x 9.8 in.

choice early on in life. Her father frequently made it clear that he had desired a son, but that being said, he then showered her (or burdened her) with all the advantages he would have given a boy, including taking her hunting. In one bizarre anecdote Gilot narrated in Malte Herwig's *The Woman Who Says No*, her father had her locked in a chimpanzee cage at the Antwerp Zoo in 1926—Gilot was five—as a kind of prank-cum-toughening-up exercise.

While her parents were supportive of her interest in art, it was

an education in law that her father wanted for his daughter. She took drawing classes at the Académie Ranson, while studying law at the Sorbonne, and had private art classes with the dashing Hungarian-Jewish artist Endre Rozsda (1913–1999), who (at that time) was a Surrealist. Through Rozsda, Gilot became familiar with the Paris art scene and began exhibiting her work in 1943 with fellow artist Geneviève Aliquot at Madeleine Decre's gallery in the Rue Boissy-d'Anglas. In February of that year, Rozsda had

to leave Paris, and Gilot's father was able to get him papers returning him safely to Budapest. A few months later, in May, Gilot was introduced to Picasso.

Gilot's book *Life with Picasso*, published in 1964, is a gem of the memoir genre. Through its meticulous recounting of conversations and encounters, the reader becomes profoundly acquainted with Gilot. As a young woman in Paris, meeting artists—mostly men—she quickly sized up the socio-sexual dynamics of the French art scene and decided that utilizing Picasso, the most famous painter in the world at that time, as a teacher, would benefit her artistic practice. In *Life with Picasso*, we are treated to many of the same lessons in composition and painting



which Gilot experienced, word-for-word. It's important to realize that Gilot kept Picasso at arm's length for many months at first, engaging him intellectually, despite his almost endless sexual harassment. For better or for worse, and Gilot is both very sanguine and romantic about her relationship with the painter, she eventually fell in love with Picasso and lived with him from 1946 to 1953. They had two children, Claude and Paloma.

In the exhibition at Rosenberg & Co., one of the earliest works is an oil painting, *Red Harbor Douarnenez* (*Le port Rhu, Douarnenez*), from 1944, in which Gilot has presented a wide harbor vista in a succinct and flat series of interlocking planes of muted color. Perhaps it was her recent interactions with



Top of page: *Self-Portrait in Front of Landscape*, 1971, India ink on paper, 26 x 20.1 in.

Immediately above: *Arvor*, 1986, monotype, 30.3 x 44.1 in.

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Above: *Bird, Butterfly and Two Oranges*, 2007, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.  
 Below: *Portrait de Pablo Picasso*, 1944, graphite on paper, 10.5 x 8.25 in.

Surrealism, through her teacher Rozsda, now transmogrified via Cubism, that led to a unique and tightly controlled manipulation of color and space. While the distant town on a far shore, the intervening water in the middle-ground, and the boats resting on the sand in the foreground are all carefully rendered, the painter has artificially reconfigured the spatial dynamics in order to create a puzzle-like interlocking of form, highlights, and shadows. This careful artificiality also manifests in a drawing of Picasso from the same year and becomes the hallmark of her pencil and line-based portraits. Space on the paper is insistently flat; the painter's face is defined purely by unshaded delineations, sometimes darkened, or empha-

“She would incise graphite lines into wet gouache. This presented line not only as a visual marker but, through the tracks left in the paint, as a three-dimensional one as well.”



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*Variation*, 2009, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in.





Above: *Chariots of Fire (Chars incandescents)*, 1991-92, color lithograph, 18 x 24 in. Below: *Red Harbor Douarnenez (Le port Rhu, Douarnenez)*, 1944, oil on canvas, 10.15 x 18 in.



sized by repeated strokes, creating a fuzzy line. Without volumetric shading, the eye immediately focuses on the darker lines, in this case the pupils, jawline, and bald pate of her 63-year-old lover. This flattening of volumes combined with a line that serves as a primary means of depicting space are two methods that Gilot will employ for the rest of her career.

The confidence with which Gilot transitioned back and forth between realistic depictions and abstraction is emphasized in the Rosenberg survey. Two drawings from 1947, both titled *White and Red Still Life*, focus entirely on line, and as Matthew Holman, in his catalog essay from the show, "What Freedom Means, In the Present Tense," explains, Gilot pioneered a method of drawing. She would incise graphite lines into wet gouache. This presented line not only as a visual marker but, through the tracks left in the paint, as a three-dimensional one as well. Thus, in one, *White and Red Still Life*, we sense a set of objects on a table—largely by virtue of the cadmium red background meticulously inserted around the edges of the drawn



objects. But we mostly allow our eyes to trace the languorous path of Gilot's pencil. In the other drawing of the same title, the artist has affixed two pieces of red-checked brown paper. In between these collaged bits, two ribbon-like abstract forms, one solid black and the other drawn in pencil, engage with the foreign objects. Both drawings flirt with reference to objects. Other paintings are much more realistic, but still Gilot uses her line as a means of insisting that the imagery be viewed through the lens of abstraction.

After their breakup, Gilot faced a profoundly unfair backlash from Picasso and found herself blacklisted in the French art world, though she did show her work at the Parisian Galerie Coard (where she exhibited until 1975) after being unceremoniously dropped from the Kahnweiler Gallery. This perhaps prompted the artist to exhibit more widely, having shows in London and New York. *Claude and Paloma dans le grenier en Bretagne* (1958) is a small domestic scene in oil depicting the painter's children reading on a settee in an attic apartment while a breeze blows in through the dormer window. Gilot has chosen to be parsimonious with her color, relying mostly on grays (her favorite color) and beiges, with gentle inflections of green, yellow, and red, a Cubist gesture, but also keeping in mind Cézanne. The youngster seated on the couch and the open window become the nodes of interest in the painting

Clockwise from above left: *Dog Days II*, 1991-92, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in.; *Sunflowers*, 1958, oil on canvas, 37 x 29 in.; *Claude et Paloma dans le grenier en Bretagne*, 1958, oil on canvas, 21.6 x 18.1 in.



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Clockwise from below: *August Stillness*, 1997, oil on canvas, 31.9 x 39.4 in.;  
*White and Red Still Life*, 1947, pencil on paper, 26 x 20 in.;  
*Still Life with Toy Monkey*, 1957, oil on canvas, 18.3 x 12.2 in.



because of the artist's thickly laid down lines. Again, this gesture knocks the image askew, giving the sensibility of a topographical survey as opposed to a comfortable interior scene. The much more colorful *Sunflowers* (1958), overwhelmingly yellow and a nod to Van Gogh in her brushy textured renderings of the flowers, also

plays with abstract imbalance; Gilot carefully delineates the edges of the petals and leaves, as well as what seem to be shadows on the table, choosing to make the volume of the room and the window in the background very flat.

Gilot's style can be quite graphic and as in an architectural drawing she relies on line weight to supply information about her image. In an ink-on-paper, *Self-Portrait in Front of Landscape* (1971), we see a newly empowered artist, having remarried and relocated to the West Coast of the United States. What Gilot chooses to emphasize in the Lautrec-ian drawing are, as always, her eyes, and then the vegetal patterns of her dress and the leaves and trees (or cacti) through the window in front of which she stands. Gilot accepted a teaching position at the University of Southern California where she taught until 1983. In the late '60s Gilot was invited to make prints at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in California, and her interest in printing, which seemed



Clockwise from below: *Convergences*, 1997, oil on canvas, 9.45 x 7.5 in.; *Genealogies*, 1989, monotype, 41 x 29 in.;  
*Paula*, 1960, oil on canvas, 10.75 x 8.75 in.

a perfect match for the artist aesthetically, is well-represented in the current show in New York.


In *Arvor* (1986) Gilot returns to the seascape model of *Red Harbor Douarnenez*. An outline of a distant landmass is separated from the viewer by a body of water indicated by a frothy sheet of Japanese art paper, and we are made aware of the foreground by crashing waves. The artist is still obsessed by flatness, but she insinuates an abstraction of glistening light on the rocks or perhaps vegetation through snippets of red, yellow, and gold paper. There is little line here, but the artist presents the landscape almost as a chart of different materials, secondarily yielding an image.

Gilot embarked on a collaboration with printmaker Judith Solodkin of SOLO Impression in New York in 1989 which lasted until 2017. In the exhibition catalog, Solodkin reminiscences about the artist's voracious desire to experiment with media, creating a uniquely hybrid form of monotype which employed collage almost as much as printing.

In her late paintings, Gilot's fascination with an Asian aesthetic is not relegated simply to the ecstatic papers in her collages and monotypes. She is obsessed with the color

red, so important in Chinese decorative arts, and here finds an intersection between the deeply organic interweavings of Celtic knots, as well as the sinuous curves of the worm-like Asian dragon. A dragon's head appears in *Dog Days II* (1991-92), merrily looming over a series of deep red triangles, and the entire painting is set against a red background.

In *August Stillness* (1997), the literal reference to the dragon is gone. This is a sparse red landscape with a blue basin-like body of water in the distance. The trees in the foreground gently undulate upwards off the canvas. We feel like we are looking at an Art Nouveau stained glass window—Gilot's line sets off the forms in her composition so heavily that it might as well be the lead in between carefully cut polychromatic glass segments. There is a unity of forms in *August Stillness*, one feeding into the next, corralled by line, which achieves its apotheosis in *The Tree of Life* (2002). In *Tree of Life*, the lines become the painting: red, blue, black, and white lines are knitted together to create a cruciform shape.

Starting with her early portraits crafted in precise maps of indelible lines and leading up to these red abstractions referencing the twisting tendrils of life itself, Gilot never let go of her unique thread. 



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