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Françoise Gilot

By *Megan Kincaid*

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Françoise Gilot, *Self-Portrait in Front of Landscape*, 1971. India ink on paper, 26 x 20 1/10 inches. Courtesy Rosenberg & Co.

On View

Rosenberg & Co.

Françoise Gilot

April 3–July 3, 2024

New York

The artist Françoise Gilot (1921–2023) repeatedly advised against retrospective thinking, particularly if that exercise results in pangs of regret. Such proclamations should typically be met with skepticism: it is difficult to imagine an eye that never turns, a mind that never roams. Yet coming to the final room of Gilot's career survey at Rosenberg & Co., New York, this presentist

dogma finds firm reassurance. Made in the final decades of her life, the saturated abstractions on view possess an inviolable vitality. Inlaid geometric planes, sinuous and curved, glide past each other and press against the surface. Seemingly non-referential shapes web together and splay apart to offer tectonic landscapes and expansive vistas, along with the more latently implied still life and winged figure. With resolute flatness, the paintings occupy a concise, contained pictorial space. Here, Gilot does not saunter into her alluring past to siphon either strength or significance.

Prior sections of the exhibition confirm the reasons this artist is so frequently read through her own history. In 1943, having thwarted her father's expectation that she complete a law degree, Gilot began taking art classes at the Académie Julien and received her first show that May. A daring activist, Gilot had earlier been arrested for participating in an anti-war demonstration against the French Occupation. During this period of professional achievement, familial autonomy, and political resistance, she met Pablo Picasso, forty years her senior. In the annals of art history, their relationship remains Gilot's most prominent accolade and albatross.

There is no denying the elder artist's presence in Gilot's life. Their children, friends, and residences were her subjects throughout their decade together. Picasso served as *her* occasional muse as he feverishly twisted her visage around his own painterly tropes. Two drawings in the survey take Picasso's portrait. *Portrait de Pablo* and *Pablo with Red Background (Les yeux basilic)*, both of 1944, relay the unerring frontality established between the interchangeable sitter-subjects and recollect their shared use of cryptic symbolism. *Self-Portrait in Front of Landscape* (1971), displayed alongside the portraits of Picasso, conveys Gilot's attention to his persistent figurations of her youth and charms thirty years earlier (in numerous studies of Gilot, Picasso replaced her tumbling black mane, and sometimes entire body, with greenery). This self-portrait transposes the motif: a vegetal curl at her hairline, three leaves dangling above head, a throng of plants populating the background, even the organic pattern of her dress. The overabundance of decoration and natural imagery indicates Gilot's awareness of the way her by-then-former partner's portrayals essentialized her gender and conscripted her to a perpetual bloom.



Françoise Gilot, *Harlequin at Rest*, 1956. Pastel on paper, 28 3/4 x 35 inches. Courtesy Rosenberg & Co.

Gilot's early work suggests other chronological inversions. While an avowed participant in Paris's vanguard abstract movement, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Gilot instead appears consumed by a genealogy of French modernist painting—moving through representational genres that harken to the sun-soaked environs of Pierre Bonnard or the dappled floral arrangements of Odilon Redon. Gilot seems less indebted to Picasso than to his peers. Delicate graphite line drawings like *Joy (VIII)* (1946) betray a greater kinship with the simultaneous simplicity and lusciousness of Henri Matisse's arabesques (note the titular citation of his 1905 Fauvist manifesto *Bonheur de Vivre [Joy of Life]*). A rather eccentric compendium, the embryonic experiments nevertheless evidence a keen stylistic sampler and capable critic. For instance, *Harlequin at Rest* (1956) confronts Picasso's depictions of the subaltern figure. Solicitous and spritely, a female harlequin reclines on a daybed with excess pillows—supplanting Picasso's despondent men purportedly rocked by unrequited love. By the time of this painting, Gilot had already left Picasso.

As the exhibition advances beyond Gilot's knotted Parisian chapter, the work lurches towards maturation marked by a fascinating selection of the artist's experiments in printmaking (honed at Fernand Mourlot's Atelier in Paris and the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in California) and her

responses to new environments spanning London, San Diego, and New York. Two monotypes, *Arvor* (1986) and *Incoming Tide* (1987) build subaqueous landscapes—towering walls of water bracketed by seafloor and cliffs textured by fragments of paper and doilies that she often included in her prints (the most palpable nod to Picasso via Synthetic Cubism to be found across the thirty-six works on view). Yet, with only a sliver of sky visible at the top of each composition, Gilot pushes the horizon line nearly out of sight—inaugurating a spatial compression that submits her own revisions to the modernist conventions of pictorial flatness and deconstructed perspective.



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

In compositions from the final decades of Gilot's life (she painted until her death), a period when she found her surest footing, themes of errancy and flight permeate. The recurrence of birds, explained by the painter's daughter Aurelia Engel as Gilot's *animus*, captures this paradox: where crowded planes of color collide, they open onto an unencumbered, weightless expanse; isolated ovular shapes and cut-off tubes are injected with scattered seeds primed for dispersal, a connective fiber promising relation and regeneration. Across these paintings, flying figures and anonymous travelers emblemize Gilot perhaps more ably than did any paean of her beauty by Picasso. Both symbolically and structurally, limning the dialectical tension between confinement and release, obligation and liberation.

Contributor

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