ART REVIEW | 'PICASSO'S 'MARIE-THÉRÈSE'

Picasso in Lust and Ambition

Librado Romero/The New York Times

Picasso's 'Marie-Thérèse,' featuring work like "Nude on a Black Armchair" (1932) and other portraits of his muse Marie-Thérèse Walter, is at Acquavella Galleries.

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Picasso was one of 20th-century art's major makers and shapers. He was also one of its most prolific purveyors of kitsch. I would place a high percentage of his output in the kitsch category. That would include some of the dozen closely related paintings in the exhibition "Picasso's 'Marie-Thérèse' " at Acquavella Galleries, and for sure the centerpiece picture, "La Rêve" ("The Dream"), once famous for its $139 million price tag and even more famous for its ruinous run-in with a stray elbow.

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The paintings at Acquavella, all done in or around 1932, have several narratives going for them; the first and most familiar, and the one people seem to love best, is called "Picasso in Love," subtitled "Love (or Lust) as the Wellspring of Art." The erotic muse in this case was Marie-Thérèse Walter, a French teenager whom Picasso met and sweet-talked on a Paris street in 1927, when he was 45 and married. Soon they were lovers. He found himself rejuvenated, walking on air. He painted many

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Marie-Thérèse Walter at 19 with her mother's dog Dolly. The married Picasso fell for her when she was a teenager in Paris.

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Proclaiming the Picasso exhibition at Acquavella Galleries.

pictures using her as a model. Some are in the show.

The rest of the story is not so happy. In 1935 Marie-Thérèse had his child, but Picasso's attention wandered. He found other mistresses and new wives, though he kept in affectionate touch with Ms. Walter through the years. Four years after he died, she committed suicide.

Then there's another tale, less about love, more about art. In Paris in 1931 Picasso saw a retrospective of his rival Henri Matisse and instantly decided that he, too, had to have a retrospective, a big one in Paris, within a year. And it would not freeze him in the past but project him into the present as the vital, fertile, better-than-ever artist he considered himself to be.

With this promotional vision in mind, he set to work. In a matter of a few months he had whipped up all but one of the paintings in the Acquavella show. Some he apparently finished in a matter of hours. And perhaps because of the capstone role they would play in the survey, he made them crowd-pleasing as possible: alternately soft-porn sexy and sentimental, with eye-catching colors, art historical references (Ingres, Matisse, Cézanne) and enough kooky distortion to maintain an avant-garde cred.

Ms. Walter, with her blond hair, voluptuous figure and aquiline nose — there are lots of photographs of her at Acquavella — was the passive vehicle for all this. And the combination of model, well-tried formal moves and deadline adrenaline worked. The retrospective was a hit.

The Acquavella show is designed to be a hit too, which leads to a third story, about how and why it came to be. The short answer is because of "The Dream." That much-published painting belongs to Stephen A. Wynn, the Las Vegas casino czar. He bought it in 2001, reportedly for $42 million. Its previous owner had paid $48.4 million for it a few years earlier.

In 2006 Mr. Wynn decided to sell the picture through Acquavella Galleries and found a ready buyer in a fellow billionaire art accumulator, the hedge fund mogul Steven A. Cohen. They settled on a price of $139 million, the highest on record for any piece of art. Then there was a mishap.

One day, while giving some friends a tour of his collection, Mr. Wynn stopped in front of "The Dream" to say a few words and accidentally slammed his elbow through the canvas. Ouch. Naturally, the impending sale was off. Conservators were called in. Could they repair the damage? They could, and they did.

Beyond this point the tale grows a little hazy. Mr. Wynn decided he didn't want to sell

"The Dream" after all — something about his wife taking the accident as an omen. Yet here it is, in his dealer's gallery on the Upper East Side, surrounded by a king's ransom of other Marie-Thérèse paintings on loan from the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, Tate Modern and Mr. Cohen. The gallery insists that nothing in the show is for sale, that the whole thing is a kind of connoisseurial offering, no commercial strings attached.

The show — which comes with a catalog, security guards and a procession of street banners — does serve some practical purposes, though. It lets the world see, in person and up close, how successful the repair job on "The Dream" has been. (The punched hole was in the area of the Marie-Thérèse's left forearm.) You'd never guess there had been a problem. And it is probably no accident of timing that a Nov. 6 Christie's sale finds a 1934 Picasso painting of Marie-Thérèse and her sister on offer, for an estimated $18 million to $25 million.

Whatever, the show is worth a visit. Most of the paintings are more than familiar. Some, particularly those in which Picasso turns his lover into a kind of mollusk or starfish, are more interesting than others. But as the only major Picasso show in town — unless you count MoMA's collection — it's a must-see.

As for "The Dream," it's not too good because it's so ordinary. Marie-Thérèse, with large, lumpish, standard-issue Picasso limbs, sits in a chair asleep, head to one side, one breast exposed, a smile on her lipstick-red lips. It's hard not to notice that her face is split down the middle and that one half, the top, has the shape of a phallus. So she's dreaming about her terrific older lover, and that's all that's on her mind, and that makes her smile?

Please, Pablo, give us a break. This is an eroticism on the level of all those images of the artist as minotaur ravishing his models that you churned out by the thousands and that no one takes seriously any more, if anyone ever did.

Still, kitsch, once acknowledged as such, has its appeal. And despite the gallery's nothing-is-for-sale protestations and an economic crisis that deepens by the day, "The Dream" may well find its way back to the market, though who knows at what price now. Would that the economy could be restored as easily as Mr. Wynn's patched-up picture.

"Picasso's 'Marie-Thérèse' " remains at Acquavella Galleries, 18 East 79th Street, Manhattan, through Nov. 29; acquavellagalleries.com.

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