October 20, 2011

Stealing the Show

By CAROL VOGEL

She's almost 90 and still living very much in the present, quietly painting every day in her West Side studio. Yet Françoise Gilot — Picasso's muse and lover and the mother of two of his children — is about to revisit her past.

In May, John Richardson, Picasso's biographer, together with Valentina Castellani, a director of the Gagosian Gallery, will present an exhibition that chronicles the years when Ms. Gilot and Picasso were together — from roughly 1943 through 1952 — living in Vallauris, a small hillside town near Cannes in the south of France. It will be the gallery's fourth Picasso exhibition and will include paintings, sculptures, drawings, pottery and prints.

Ms. Gilot doesn't mind dredging up what must seem like many lifetimes ago. "When you are old your life has different chapters," she said the other day, standing near a colorful abstract painting perched on an easel.

"I was an artist before I ever met Picasso," she emphatically explained. Yet those years "are very much a part of my life."

Like other blockbuster shows that are proliferating among some of today's most prosperous galleries, Mr. Richardson believes the exhibition will be an eye-opener because "nobody realizes the tremendous importance of Françoise to Picasso during that whole period."

The show, which will open at Gagosian's newly renovated Madison Avenue gallery, is poised to generate as much excitement as the other Picasso shows that Mr. Richardson has masterminded. (The first, "Picasso: Mosqueteros," in 2009 drew more than 100,000 visitors, a figure more normally associated with a museum exhibition.)

And the show, like all the others, will be a costly undertaking that involves getting loans from museums, publishing a lavish catalog with scholarly essays and bringing in an architect to redesign the gallery. It's a lot of work and expense. Often dealers say nothing is for sale; generally, however, one or two works are available — at the right price — making these shows profitable after all.

Larry Gagosian says he believes that either way, the headaches were worth it. "Now we get offered all kinds of Picassos," he said. "Everything from a print worth $4,000 to, well, the sky's the limit."

With his network of 11 galleries around the world, Mr. Gagosian is by far the most visible of all the dealers presenting these kinds of crowd-pleasing shows. But other blue-chip galleries including Acquavella and Pace have been presenting them on and off for decades. "I'll never forget in the early '70s when we had a Matisse show," William Acquavella recalled. "We had people waiting on line in the pouring rain."

His gallery, just two blocks north of Gagosian's Madison Avenue headquarters, is attracting crowds right now with "Georges Braque: Pioneer of Modernism," which opened on Oct. 12. The show, which was organized by Dieter Buchhart, an Austrian curator, includes 42 paintings, many on loan from museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Tate in London. "It's good advertising," Mr. Acquavella said. "Braque is an amazing artist and hasn't really gotten his due."

This fall, with the exception of the giant de Kooning retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art — an exhibition that was six years in the making — and "Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921: Reinventing Tradition," at the Frick Collection, there are few museum exhibitions generating the same kind of excitement. Museums made their 2011-12 schedules in 2008, when the economy turned bleak and many were pulling back, which explains the proliferation of the permanent collection shows.

The prosperous, blue-chip galleries have the financial muscle to fill that void, often asking art historians and curators to help organize shows for them and write essays for the catalogs. But it is not only content that attracts visitors. The gallery shows are free and museums are not. (An adult who is not a member but wants to visit the Museum of Modern Art, for instance, has to pay $25 admission.)

“Galleries have more flexibility and can work on far shorter deadlines,” said John Wilmerding, an American art scholar and art history professor at Princeton, who is organizing two coming shows for the Acquavella Galleries. “Museums are laden down with timetables and bureaucracy. And a lot of dealers have the resources to put together serious shows. They’re willing to do all the things you have to do — line up the loans, pay the insurance, get reproduction rights, publish scholarly catalogs. It’s all very time-consuming.”

Mr. Wilmerding, who sits on the boards of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and the National Gallery of Art, among others, has also noticed a sea change in museums’ attitudes toward lending works from their collections to galleries. “It used to be that the National Gallery wouldn’t lend to dealers shows, but now that’s loosened up considerably,” Mr. Wilmerding said.

It was 20 years ago, when he first joined the Guggenheim board, that loan requests started coming from dealers, he recalled. “Now, not a meeting goes by when there’s not a request.” And the requests are taken more seriously as these gallery exhibitions have become more and more scholarly. In addition, most of the big dealers are generous supporters of the major museums and have private collections with works they gladly lend when asked.

Sometimes a show turns into an accidental blockbuster. At the Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea last winter, as word spread of Christian Marclay’s “The Clock,” a 24-hour montage of clips from movies and television that depict particular minutes in the day, synchronized with the moment they are shown, the audience kept building. Visitors of all ages found themselves glued to the video, not just because of its intrinsic charm but because it kept viewers on their toes as they tried to identify where the clips were from.

“We had no idea it would be so popular,” said Steven P. Henry, director of the gallery. “It became its own kind of happening. We had people waiting on line three or four hours in the bitter cold.”

“The first couple of weeks attendance was normal, a couple of hundred people a day, perhaps 300 on a Saturday,” he recalled. But as word spread, that figure doubled and finally tripled. “We had to let people stay as long as they wanted,” he said. On weekends the gallery was kept open for 24 hours.

“People stayed for multiple hours,” Mr. Henry said. “I don’t know of anyone who saw the whole thing.”

The video was a big hit this summer at the Venice Biennale, where Mr. Marclay won the prize for best artist. Not surprising then that it has been sold to several museums, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art. (The asking price was $550,000.)

“People started bonding as they waited on line,” Mr. Henry said. His gallery knows of three “Missed Connections” postings on Craigslist. In one, a woman wrote: “We made eye contact in the two-hour line outside the Paula Cooper Gallery today. You wore a black Tribeca bag and had bike clips on your jeans. I meant to say hello, but found myself too shy. ... ”

“It was a real New York moment,” Mr. Henry said.

The attention-getting, high-impact exhibitions on gallery schedules continue unabated. Expensive to produce and labor-intensive, they are generally organized by galleries with an international network of contacts, deep pockets and multiple spaces.

At the Pace Gallery, its chairman, Arne Glimcher, said: “We’ve always done these sorts of exhibitions. When we had a Bonnard/Rothko show in 1997, on the last day we had a line down to Park Avenue and had to stay open later.” It is the scholarship that Mr. Glimcher said he enjoyed the most. And the public seems to respond. Among the earliest blockbusters

that Pace presented was “Piet Mondrian: The Process Works,” in 1970. Over the years the gallery has organized shows pairing artists like Barnett Newman and Rothko, Dubuffet and de Kooning. Standouts included “The Women of Giacometti,” in 2005 and “Picasso, Braque and Early Film in Cubism,” in 2007.

On Friday, the gallery opened “Calder 1941,” at its 57th Street gallery. The show explores an important year in Calder’s career when the sculptor was beginning to make ever-more-sophisticated mobiles and stabiles. Fifteen examples of these works are on view, many of which have not been publicly exhibited for decades.

In February, Pace will also present a retrospective of the famous Happenings, those fleeting performances, primarily from the 1950s and ’60s, that are considered classics of the genre today. The exhibition will include work by the main participants, including Jim Dine, Simone Forti, Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Whitman, Red Grooms, Carolee Schneemann and Lucas Samaras.

With its large staff and multiple outlets around the world, Gagosian organizes more shows than any other gallery. In the months leading up to the Picasso/Françoise Gilot exhibition opening in May, there are several other big shows in the works. Among them is “The Private Collection of Robert Rauschenberg,” opening Nov. 3 on Madison Avenue, which will give visitors an inside peek at the art that Rauschenberg lived with, both in Manhattan and at his home and studio on Captiva Island in Florida. There will be examples of work by some of his old friends, including John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly as well as others he collected over the decades by Magritte, Robert Mapplethorpe and Brice Marden.

In January, in every Gagosian Gallery around the world, Damien Hirst will be showing “The Complete Spot Paintings 1986-2011.” On view will be a total of about 300 works, many on loan from major museums around the world.

And in April, Gagosian’s 24th Street gallery will be devoted to the work of Lucio Fontana, an artist who has long been popular in Europe but has only recently been gathering a fan base of collectors in the United States. Organized by the curator Germano Celant, in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan and Ms. Castellani from Gagosian, the show is called “Lucio Fontana: Environmental Spaces,” and will include a group of installations never shown in the United States before — a group of room-size environments, along with drawings, sketches and paintings made at the same time. In one environment there is a giant amoeba shape suspended in a darkened room illuminated by neon light. These works have an ephemeral quality to them, but were reconstructed for this exhibition using documents provided by the foundation that include the artist’s drawings, photographs and other archival material.

The Acquavella Galleries have just signed on to represent the California artist Wayne Thiebaud, who turns 91 next month, in the United States. A year from now it will present a show of his work organized by Mr. Wilmerding, the art historian and Princeton professor. It will be a kind of retrospective of the painter’s work, with examples from his entire career that Mr. Thiebaud has kept in his studio.

Mr. Wilmerding is also working on an exhibition about the still-life tradition in Pop Art, scheduled for the spring of 2013. “The still life has often been the stepchild to landscape, history and figurative painting,” he said. By examining themes like food and drink, household objects, flowers, trees and body parts, he explained, he hopes to “slice and dice Pop in a different way.”