

News

Hybrid bodies & Curatorial Excellence

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Photo provided

Entering “Canvas and Paper” in Ojai for the first time a few weeks ago, I’d had the chance, a week earlier, to look at dozens of Picassos in a LACMA room dedicated to the cubist pioneer.

Seeing a solitary sketch by the painter occupy an entire wall and not have to compete with others of his works however, allowed my curiosity new spaciousness.

The sketch, dubbed “nu couch endormi”, grants us a closer encounter with Picasso’s explorations. Visitors can see the remains of pencil erasures. These are the painter’s literal attempts at deconstructing and reimagining perspective. One of six versions drawn on the same day, this is the only one with visible graphite “scars”. Whereas the nude’s torso shows no signs of revision, the head, initially looking upwards, was then flipped to rest on the arms. The legs, closer to each other at first, grow bigger, further, and stretch the waist and the buttocks. The figure is more foetal as a result. The whole is soft and calm.

The reclining sleeping nude portrays more than the endearing vulnerability of the figure however. The erasures Picasso leaves behind are a vulnerable portrayal of the painter’s own cubist transformation. Indeed, the piece is a Rosetta Stone of sorts: A tablet expressing reality in two different languages and hence enabling us to better understand cubist dialect. Viewers can see Picasso’s eyes slowly embrace cubism.

Taking Picasso’s piece in on a Sunday afternoon, the sexual aggressiveness of his late work (see “Man and Woman”, 1969, LACMA) made more sense. Cubism itself took another significance, not only as a cerebral rebellion against perspective but the manifestation of a primal hunger to gobble in more of reality simultaneously. As if Picasso was demanding “everything” and “right now”, his paintings a retelling of a spatio-temporal insatiability. Cubism a form of hunger. Maybe gluttony.

Nearby, in a skillful curatorial balance, a sketch by Henry Moore and a collage by Barbara Hepworth, two contemporaries and friendly rivals, speak of smoothness and comfort less literally. Moore’s semi-abstract sculptures are visual pacifiers, even when sketched in pencil and charcoal. Hepworth’s fully abstract forms dialogue through overlap: The collage seems a loud dinner conversation, though the diners are all mute.

Both artists borrow from nature to portray novel bodies. Moore’s sculptures are cyborgs or Frankensteinian creations in that they recompose and represent the human body through alien forms and invite foreign technologies in: pebbles, bones, trees etc. Hepworth, who pioneered the pierced form, furthers these hybrid bodies. By reducing them to a formal essence, she hints at the kinship these have with nature, specifically with landscape. The hollow space her pierced forms introduce in the midst of a smoother whole echoes a tree bark’s imperfection, water’s relentless shaping of rock and some human bodies’ belly buttons.

Canvas and Paper’s curatorial prowess is to have given ample space not to investigations of one vessel of beauty – mostly female figures in this case – but to 3 radically different approximations of it. Hybridising, essentializing or depriving bodies of perspective are as many venues for the visiting minds to journey and essential rekindling of our sensual hunger. This art reviewer is very much looking forward to their next exhibit covering Cornelis Kick, William Scott, Louis Valtat and starting March 3rd.

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