

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

In the development of Cubism, Georges Braque said that he and Picasso were like “two mountain climbers roped together.” Braque should have cut the cord when he had the chance. For a century, Braque has been bound up in the pictorial innovations he developed with Picasso. Even today, the association is hard to shake.

While there have been plenty of joint Picasso-Braque exhibitions, over twenty years have passed since the last major Braque-only retrospective in a U.S. museum. That one was at the Guggenheim in 1988, but don't look for a museum today to make up for lost time. “Georges Braque: Pioneer of Modernism,” an exhibition of forty paintings and *papiers collés* now on view at Acquavella, is a product of the commercial gallery system.¹ It is also a triumph. Free to the public, this museum-quality show is the best argument going that one does not have to pay the outrageous admission charges of today's museums to see great art in New York.

“People were happy to be consumed,” Paloma Picasso once claimed of her father. “They thought it was a privilege.” In their climb up Parnassus during those heady years before the outbreak of World War I, Braque was the brains behind Cubism's pictorial innovation, and Picasso ate those brains for lunch. Picasso's appetites have always dominated the narrative. His bed games have become even more legendary than the paintings, thanks to the multi-volume

biography by John Richardson. It is from Richardson, for example, that we learn Picasso once claimed to have an eye at the end of his penis.

While Braque was nearly killed at the Front, Picasso lived it up during the war years. After the war, the priapic Andalusian further indulged his cravings. “For the rest of Picasso's life sex would permeate his work almost as Cubism did,” Richardson claims, and Picasso and Braque went their separate ways. So while Picasso painted from his trousers, Braque turned somewhere else. Braque looked to convention, and in particular to still life. He dedicated his artistic practice to the radical conventions of modernism first uncovered by Cézanne and further developed through analytic and synthetic Cubism. “All of us come from Cézanne,” Braque said. “Cézanne has overthrown centuries of painting.”

The Acquavella show demonstrates the rigor of Braque's career-long look into the nature of representation. The exhibition begins with Braque's exploration of Fauvist color that he developed soon after observing Henri Matisse and André Derain at the Salon d'Automne in 1905. In works like *L'Estaque* (1906), which rivaled anything the other Fauves could do, Braque's interest in flatness is readily apparent. The eye-popping scene of a curving waterfront and hillside appears to come out of the painting as much as it recedes from view.

The curator Dieter Buchart has done a masterly job of selecting and hanging this exhibition, with works on loan from both major museums and private collections. For example, between *Landscape at L'Estaque* (1906) and

¹ “Georges Braque: Pioneer of Modernism” opened at Acquavella Galleries, New York, on October 12 and remains on view through November 30, 2011.

Houses at L'Estaque (1907), two works side-by-side and of similar scenes, Braque's transition from Fauvist color to Cubist facet is unmistakable. In the exhibition's second room, Braque's move between 1911 and 1912 from the paintings of analytic Cubism to the collages of synthetic Cubism is also easy to see, if not necessarily to comprehend. The exhibition's catalogue offers some explanation, especially the revealing essay by Richard Shiff of the University of Texas on Braque's mind-bending ideas of what it means to paint objects in space.

From Fauvism forward, Braque sought "to touch the thing and not only to see it," as he once said of representation. (He almost always spoke in aphorisms.) In developing Cubism, a movement derisively coined by the critic Louis Vauxcelles after seeing one of Braque's paintings in 1908 and declaring it to be full of little cubes, Braque painted "from the background planes forward." He built his scenes out from the picture plane rather than in. Shiff calls this "planar projection—a kind of perspective in reverse." Braque gave special consideration to touch and the relationship among objects. "I do not believe in things; I believe only in their relationship," he claimed. "For things to exist, there must first come into being a relationship between you and the things, or between the things themselves."

Unlike Futurism, which often depicted movement inside a picture, Braque's still lifes stay still while the viewing perspective moves around them. *We* become animated rather than the objects inside the frame. Something similar occurs in the collage of synthetic Cubism, another Braque innovation. "I brought sculpture into the canvas," he said of pasting newspaper, fake wood grain, and corrugated cardboard in his compositions. These additional layers pushed further into viewer space, confounding our distinctions between what is depicted and what is real.

Braque certainly shines on his own. Yet for all of Picasso's welcome absence from this survey, one last comparison between the artists may be in order. With "Mosqueteros," the exhibition held at Gagosian gallery in 2009, Picasso's late paintings, long dismissed, received new and widespread attention. While Acquavella has

not billed "Pioneer of Modernism" as a late-period show, this exhibition appears to come out of a similar strategy. Of the four exhibition rooms, the two on the main floor are dedicated to Braque's later work from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. The start of the exhibition, in fact, begins upstairs. Part of this may be due to size. Braque's later canvases are generally larger and show better in the ground-floor rooms. But the preponderance of later work also calls out for our attention and reevaluation.

Certainly Braque's later still lifes are more lyrical and less exacting than the work from the 1900s and 1910s. Yet the show wisely places them in line with his earlier innovations. Touch is still at the forefront. Over several years after World War I, even as modern art retreated from the rapid changes of the pre-war years, Braque soldiered on with innovation, mixing sand and charcoal into his oils to give his surfaces greater tactility. Here objects appear to fly out of the picture plane. *Studio V* (1949–50) looks like an oncoming picket line of palettes and easels, although a central bird figure, a recurring motif that he later used when commissioned to paint a ceiling at the Louvre, oddly resembles roadkill. *Still Life with Guitar I (Red Tablecloth)* (1936), one of the most compelling from this period, has everything coming forward: the wainscotings on the walls, the patterns of the wallpaper, the table surface, the tipped bottles and fruit dishes. And there's color—reds, greens, yellows—a taste of those bold colors Braque deployed as a Fauve.

Is it enough? Probably not. Braque took a lifetime exploring paint. It will take a generation more dedicated to painting than ours to rediscover it.

What does it mean when the best work in an exhibition is the smallest but also the latest? In the case of Ronnie Landfield, a "lyrical abstractionist" whose paintings were recently on view at Stephen Haller Gallery, it means clearing out outmoded ideas in favor of new clarity and focus.² Like the sculptor

2 "Ronnie Landfield: Structure and Color" was on view at Stephen Haller Gallery, New York, from September 8 through October 15, 2011.