

Jason Farago, Will Heinrich, Roberta Smith, and Yinka Elujoba, "10 Artists on Picasso's Enduring, Confounding Influence," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2023.

The New York Times

10 Artists on Picasso's Enduring, Confounding Influence

Beyond simple hero and villain stories, Picasso is a fact of life 50 years after his death. We all swim in a visual world he helped constitute.



Clockwise from top left: Faith Ringgold; Derrick Adams; Mickalene Thomas; George Condo; Victor Ehikhamenor; Al Freeman; Didier William; Alexi Worth; Nicola Tyson. (Not shown: Rachel Harrison.) Credit... Clockwise from top left: Meron Tekie Menghistab for The New York Times; via Derrick Adams Studio; Photo by Emil Horowitz; Mickalene Thomas; via George Condo and Hauser & Wirth; Photo by Michael Avedon; via Gagosian; Photo by Jake Green; Al Freeman; via Didier William and James Fuentes; Erika Belsey Worth; via Nicola Tyson and Petzel, New York

By Jason Farago, Will Heinrich, Roberta Smith and Yinka Elujoba

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11 MIN READ

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Georges Braque, in 1907, looked at his Spanish friend’s new painting, “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon,” and felt “as if someone had drunk kerosene to spit fire.” Henri Matisse said he and his friendly rival from Málaga were “as different as the North Pole is from the South Pole.” Pablo Picasso has been getting artists talking since those first days in Montmartre, and even 50 years after his death, they are still coming to terms with his influence — positive and malign, indelible either way — on what art looks like and how we talk about those who make it.

With the push to Cubism in 1909-1910, Picasso and Braque effected the greatest break in the rules of Western painting in 500 years, and artists in the postwar era often spoke of their own breakthroughs as a ritualized exit from his shadow. Later the Picasso inheritance grew knottier, with feminist historians and scholars of African and Oceanic art revealing the oversights and injuries of his omnivorous visual appetite.

Picasso has come down to human scale in the 21st century — and yet his influence lingers everywhere, from the fractured forms of contemporary portraiture to the digital collages of TikTok. I and my fellow critics Roberta Smith, Will Heinrich and Yinka Elujoba called up 10 artists to discuss how Picasso has been metabolized and reimagined today. These are edited excerpts from our conversations. JASON FARAGO

Rachel Harrison

Her inventive sculptures incorporate found objects and carefully modeled forms; in a 2011-2012 drawing series, she forced Picasso into a face-off with the British singer Amy Winehouse. J.F.



Rachel Harrison, “Untitled,” 2012, colored pencil on paper. Credit...via Rachel Harrison and Greene Naftali, New York

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Picasso’s “Nude Standing by the Sea” (1929), oil on canvas. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Part of Picasso’s fluidity was his ability to go back and forth: between media, to shift between painting and sculpture, but also within his approach to painting — from Cubist to realism and back again. In the 1920s and ’30s he made a wonderfully weird series of paintings [including “Nude Standing by the Sea”] with a limited palette and a lot of modeling. These works look like paintings of nonexistent sculptures: heavy, awkwardly contorted bathers. It’s a completely different approach to space than the heightened flatness of those colorful pictures of naked women sitting in chairs with thick black outlines. They’re the ones that interest me lately, sort of menacing and unlikable.

Picasso’s detractors (or even supporters) have charged him with overproduction, but it never read that way to me. He had a need to make. The way production works today, artists might be full-time socialites with teams making their work for them. But Picasso constantly drew. He was so fluent with his hands as well as his mind, and maybe part of the “overproduction” rap is that the studies came so easily to him that they could be done in paint as well as pencil.

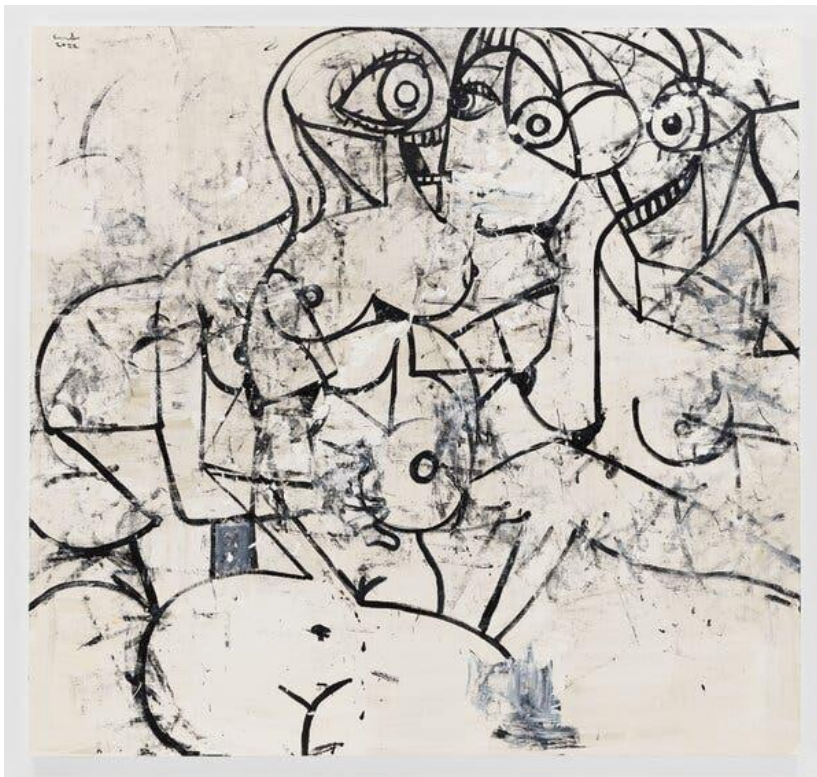
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With my Amy Winehouse drawings, I was channeling the worst of Picasso: Picasso the celebrity, painting his muses. The interpretation of his work has leaned too heavily on biography. That’s boring. It might have been at MoMA’s “Picasso and Portraiture” exhibition, in 1996, that I overheard a viewer look at one of the Marie-Thérèse pictures and say something like, “He really loved her the most.” And it hit me hard; it’s just wrong to think about Picasso’s love objects as the driving force in his evolution. Whether he’s painting a fork or painting a lover, it’s all the same to him: it’s form. And all the emotion that he conveys doesn’t come from who he’s painting. It’s to do with his ideas and feelings being unearthed in form, and feeling pain like the rest of us.

George Condo

His distorted, frequently comic paintings exhibit a deep engagement with art history. Picasso became a particular influence for him when he lived in Paris in the 1980s. J.F.



George Condo’s “Interaction” (2022), oil on linen. Credit...via George Condo and Hauser & Wirth; Photo by Thomas Barratt

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Picasso’s painting “Las Meninas,” Cannes, 1957, reinterprets the masterwork by Diego Velázquez. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid; via Museu Picasso, Barcelona; Photo by Fotogassull

Everything that came before him is in his work at all times. I feel that he was the painter who gave me the freedom to let go of the idea you might take from Barnett Newman or Rothko — as much as I love them — that nothing that came before you should be seen in your work. Picasso included art history all through his life, from the French academic tradition and African sculpture up to the late works after [Velázquez’s] “Las Meninas” and [Manet’s] “Déjeuner Sur L’Herbe.” I think he looked at art that he himself loved and wanted to know how it functioned — and to be able to transform it into his own. As much as we can see this or that influence, the final artwork outweighs the references. I wanted to be able to put Franz Kline and Frans Hals in the same painting, and Picasso gave me that freedom.

My work has been, to a certain degree, mischaracterized as “Picasso-esque.” And I’ve been to people’s houses, I’ve seen a Picasso on one wall and one of mine on another wall, and they just don’t look anything alike! My figures are imaginary beings, coming from an image in my mind that I’m transcribing. But in his portraits of Marie-Thérèse or Dora Maar or Jacqueline, he’s actually working from life, remembering what he’s looking at, so that he can transform it into something almost imaginary. People look at him and focus on, “Well, he must have been very misogynistic.” For a guy who spent his

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life painting women, he couldn’t possibly have been. I think what he wanted was a template through which he could abstract and expand his own language, and the template that he used was 98 percent the female form.

Faith Ringgold

“Faith Ringgold: Black is Beautiful,” currently at the Musée Picasso Paris, extends her 2022 retrospective at the New Museum in New York. WILL HEINRICH



Faith Ringgold’s “American People Series #20: Die,” 1967, a mural-sized canvas that takes contemporary violence as its subject, and depicts its participants as members of a well-off professional class. Credit...via The Museum of Modern Art



Picasso’s “Guernica” (1937) depicts the terrible suffering after the aerial bombing of a Basque village. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Sucesión Pablo Picasso; VEGAP; via Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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Picasso is my hero. My hero, yes, because I love him! I don’t try to pick him apart. I don’t think he’s perfect in every way. But his art is, as far as I’m concerned. Well, he learned from the best, didn’t he? That was very smart for him to use African imagery, because it has a depth of feeling, and he knew to get it. And he did the right thing in that. Because it’s like the beginnings of art. It’s like the beginning of what Picasso went on with.

I wouldn’t accuse him of any kind of deliberate racism in his work. He was painting pictures. And he knows that he was inspired, and he used it the way he wanted to use it. And if you could see it, fine. And if you couldn’t, that’s OK, too — but I could see it. He left himself open to be inspired by art from any other culture. And that’s the thing that attracted me to him right away.

Nicola Tyson

Best known as a painter, in 2011 she compiled a series of satirical letters to famous male artists, including Picasso, as a limited edition book called “Dead Letter Men.” W.H



Nicola Tyson’s “Self-Portrait: Red Tie” (2016), oil on canvas. Credit...via Nicola Tyson and Petzel, New York

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Picasso’s “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. K. G.),” 1907. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via The Museum of Modern Art

In “Dear Picasso” (in my book “Dead Letter Men”) I wrote, “A journalist recently asked me if, as a female figurative painter, I’d been influenced by you, which I thought was a bit like asking if my diet had been influenced by Monsanto. Unavoidable.” He kind of personified how it was impossible to be a great woman artist in the 20th century. He defined the whole thing; it was a man’s game.

But “Les Femmes d’Alger,” of course, as an art student — and still — it makes me so excited. It’s a painting that always makes me want to paint when I see it. It just brings you in and says, Yes, let’s make, let’s create, let’s break the rules. A lot of his work got too closed down and formulaic. There’s not a lot of interiority or nuance or feeling; it’s all this sort of demonstration of vitality, or probably, he would think, virility. But in a painting like “Femmes d’Alger,” you’re invited inside. It really makes you feel like, I want to do that, I want to get into that argument, I want to try out some stuff, too.

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Al Freeman

Al Freeman makes soft sculptures of everyday objects. Her photo collage “comparisons” series juxtaposes well-known art works — most notably Picasso’s “Les Femmes d’Alger” — with similarly composed, more or less shocking photographs from the internet. W.H.



Al Freeman’s “Soft Back of Painting (Landscape),” 2021, vinyl and polyfil. Credit...via Al Freeman and 56 Henry, New York

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Picasso’s “Guitar,” Paris, October-December 1912; paperboard, paper, thread, string, twine and coated wire. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via The Museum of Modern Art

In terms of Picasso still being an influence, I feel like it’s completely undeniable. I don’t even know if Warhol could have existed without Picasso. He made being a celebrity artist a thing. People kind of credit Dalí with doing that, but I feel like Picasso did it first.

One of the first experiences I had that was a real game-changer was seeing the guitar sculptures. Bringing the collages into 3-D space, making a flat thing into a 3-D thing, is very close to what I do in my work now. It was the sensibility of that work that I responded to, because it was just so rough and ready, and so fun, you know, and silly.

At this point, though, when I think of Picasso, I kind of just think of money. You know, the writer Naomi Fry was at Larry Gagosian’s house for a party, and she said that the number of Picassos on the wall was like a fist to the face. It’s almost like hanging five million dollars on your wall. I wanted to make a sculpture of one of Larry’s Picassos.

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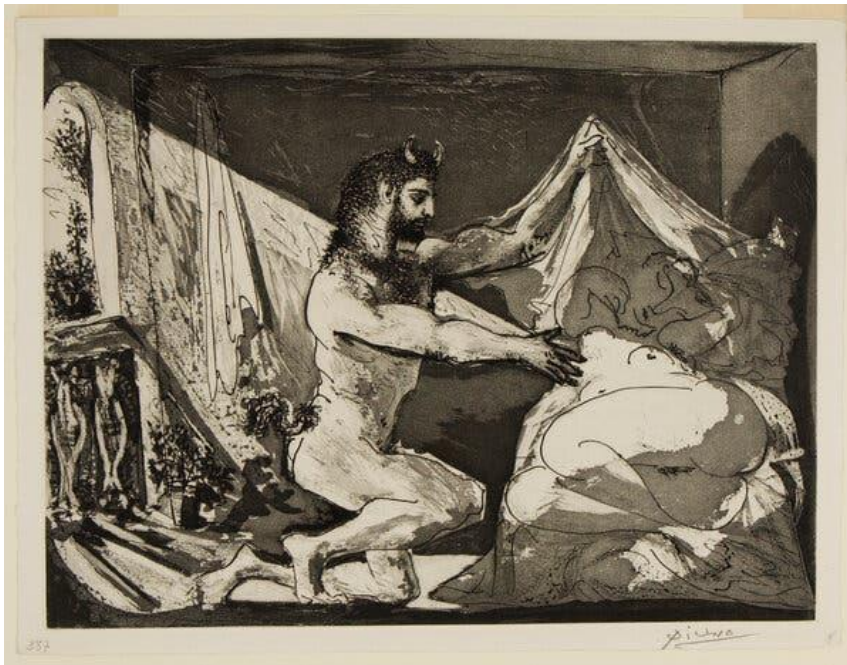
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Didier William

Didier William, an assistant professor of printmaking at Rutgers, draws on Haitian history and mythology in his bold mixed-media paintings, prints and collages. W.H.



Didier William’s “BedRest: New Arrival,” 2022; acrylic, wood carving, ink on panel. Credit...via Didier William and James Fuentes; Constance Mensh



Picasso’s “Satyr Unveiling a Woman” (1936), etching and aquatint. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Harvard Art Museums, M13164

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The word that I'm trying not to say is "thief." I think there's a certain amount of theft of African art that is specific and deliberate, that we've all had to come to grips with in Picasso's work. But on the other hand I think there's something inherent in the actual act of looking that we also have to come to terms with. And perhaps Picasso was most honest about it, and most vulgar about it.

One piece I've always loved is a lesser-known sugar-lift aquatint that I show my students, called "Satyr Unveiling a Woman." It's this really beautiful print of a horned figure pulling back the covers on a kind of odalisque. It becomes this powerful piece about the complexity of looking and being looked at, and the inherent threat of that condition — evident in the power dynamic between the Satyr and the reclining nude. That piece for me has always been a key to Picasso's work.

Mickalene Thomas

For several years, the artist has taken on modern masters very directly — Picasso lately, and previously Matisse — with collage paintings that can involve sequins and sparkles. ROBERTA SMITH



Mickalene Thomas's "The Charnel House (Resist #5)" from 2021 updates Picasso's original composition of piled bodies — his protest against war — in her protest against racism. Credit...Mickalene Thomas

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Picasso’s other great antiwar masterpiece, “The Charnel House,” 1944-45, oil and charcoal on canvas. The jumble of dead figures might suggest the piles of corpses discovered in concentration camps upon their liberation. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via The Museum of Modern Art

I think of my engagement with the privileged, prolific and complicated Picasso as a way to dismantle the modernist “boys club” and also the artistic colonialism, derived from contact with Africa, that inspired or discovered Cubism.

I’m fascinated with Picasso’s ability to create works about controversial sociopolitical issues, while also depicting abstracted portraits of seated or reclining women.

My first deep dive into his world began while I was a student at Pratt Institute and I encountered a reproduction of a painting by the Cuban modernist, Wifredo Lam, and soon learned that Picasso was both Lam’s friend and an inspiration. This gave me a kind of permission to do whatever I wanted with Picasso.

Around this time I was also delving into Matisse. My work has always been a simultaneous exploration of genres and the formal aspects of painting. I collage together various styles and images, adding certain nuances to each work.

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In my most recent “Resist” series of paintings, I borrowed from Picasso’s wartime canvases with their mix of dead bodies and still lifes, specifically in my pieces “The Charnel House (Resist #5)” from 2021 and “Pitcher and Skeleton (Resist #8)” from 2022. For me, these works sharpen the meaning of one of my favorite James Baldwin quotes: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Alexi Worth

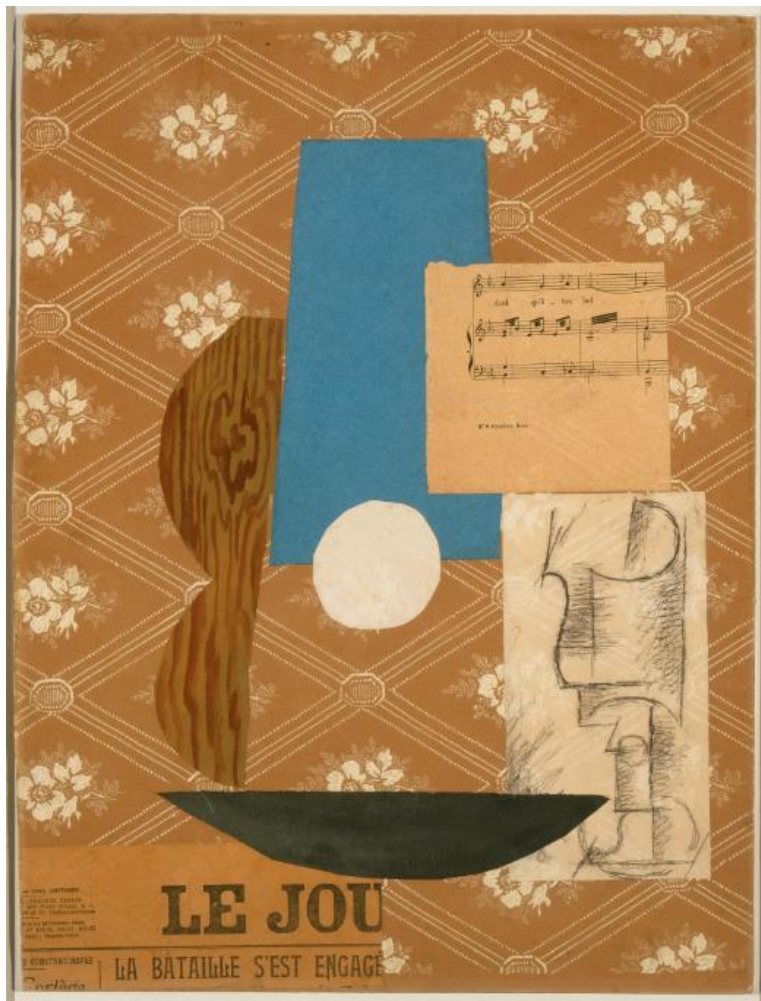
His paintings of figures and household objects deal with transparency, fragmentation and flatness — partly inspired by Analytic Cubism. R.S.



Alexi Worth’s “Tilt” (2021), mixed media on mesh’ layered forms suggest Cubism’s flat style. Credit...via DC Moore Gallery

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Picasso's "Guitar and Wine Glass," 1912, collage and charcoal on board. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Collection of the McNay Art Museum, Bequest of Marion Koogler McNay

As a teenager, I was obsessed with Picasso. My father mildly disapproved. "Picasso was a very bad man," he would occasionally remark. This sounded to me like classic parental cluelessness. But if you've read Françoise Gilot's memoir, "Life With Picasso," you know that he was basically right. By the time he hit his 50s, Picasso was a whiny, tiny monster, almost comically self-centered and petty, casually abusive with his family, friends, employees and sycophants. But he was much worse with posterity. His whole career seems to have been a deliberate effort to starve his successors, to claim every imaginable sub-style before future painters could. Like a solo conquistador, he planted stakes all over the landscape of Modernism: Mine, Mine, Mine.

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So most young artists, after a period of infatuation, try to avoid Picasso. But I’m thinking about him. In my work I’m interested in desktop space, with its bright sliding rectangles and drop shadows — it’s weirdly similar to Cubist space. Cubism itself, the historical style, has been ruined by reverence. But its shallowness — its compression of space, depth deliberately eliminated — interests me. Something about our lives — our ever-enhanced, tech-rich, daily experience — may be making us thinner, less substantial, flatter. Artists work by intuitions, and I hope you’ll forgive my putting this one very simply: Flat painting might be a way to talk about what we have, and what we’re missing.

Derrick Adams

A multidisciplinary artist, he is well known for stylized paintings that mix figuration and abstraction in vivacious, accessible ways and emphasize the joys of Black life. R.S.



Derrick Adams’s “Style Variation 42” (2021). A mannequin bust and wig form a powerful portrait of today’s woman, painted over a digital inkjet photograph. Credit...via Derrick Adams Studio

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Picasso’s “Portrait of Françoise, May 20, 1946,” colored pencil, lead pencil, and charcoal on paper. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY

When I was introduced to Picasso in Art History 101, my freshman year at Pratt Institute, I felt an immediate connection to the formal structure and visual language of Cubist painting and Cubist collage. During this time, an Intro to African Art course taught me about the origin of these appropriated forms Picasso was so fixated on, and I came to understand how influential African Art is to our modern era.

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Studying his work and sources I began to think about combining figuration and abstraction, and melding manipulated planes and organic shapes. You can see this in my series “Live and In Color” (2014) with its polygonal heads. The figures became more naturalistic yet still Cubistic in my series, “Motion Picture Paintings,” recently on view at Flag Art Foundation.

And newer works continue in that direction. They dwell on Black life itself rather than illustrating trauma or struggle. I want the next generation to see their lives as unlimited. I show this with a certain formal harmony between the figures and their surroundings, which originates, in part, in Cubism.

I’m just making work and Picasso happens to be in my psyche — sometimes I wish he wasn’t but I can’t remove him.

Victor Ehikhamenor

One of three artists representing Nigeria at the 2017 Venice Biennale, he is best known for multidisciplinary works that engage with Africa’s cultural heritage and Roman Catholic symbols. YINKA ELUJOBA



Victor Ehikhamenor’s “Struggle for Big Afro Mama,” 2014, which is a large drawing of intertwined bodies supporting a fallen woman, depicting the colonial struggle to divide Africa. Credit...Victor Ehikhamenor

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Picasso’s “Guernica,” 1937. Credit...Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Sucesión Pablo Picasso; VEGAP; via Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

My ancestors “initiated” Picasso from afar when he visited the Ethnographic Museum of the Trocadéro in Paris at age 25. They also made him an “ambassador,” otherwise those African masks would never have revealed themselves to him, in such career-shifting deepness, which allowed him to carry on their legacy. I had already experienced these things — carved ancestral totems, etchings on walls and communal masquerades — at the age of 5 when I entered the spiritual sanctuaries of my grandfather’s house in the village of Udomi-Uwessan in Nigeria. In that sense, Picasso didn’t creatively influence me — what he borrowed from my ancestors was innate in me.

I share his obsessive need to make art, to create something from anything, from everything: He was possessed by a stubborn spirit to compulsively make art, as a form of exorcism. One can never stop learning from such a cerebral artist.

“Guernica” is where his understanding of African art reached its peak. It shows that a work of art can be a devastating bomb in the heart of oppression. I referenced a similarly horrendous history in “Struggle for Big Afro Mama” (2014), which is a large, landscape drawing of intertwined bodies supporting a fallen woman, depicting the colonial struggle to divide Africa. The physical violence in the painting is palpable, like in “Guernica.”

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Jason Farago, critic at large for The Times, writes about art and culture in the U.S. and abroad. In 2022 he was awarded one of the inaugural Silvers-Dudley Prizes for criticism and journalism. @jsf

Will Heinrich writes about new developments in contemporary art, and has previously been a critic for The New Yorker and The New York Observer. @willvheinrich

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art. @robertasmithnyt

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