

ART & DESIGN

'Picasso's Picassos' Unpacks Paintings From the Family Vault

Inside Art

By ROBIN POGREBIN NOV. 10, 2016

Diana Widmaier-Picasso is used to hearing that she physically resembles her grandmother Marie-Thérèse Walter, Picasso's muse and mistress.

This family connection has helped inform the scholarship that Ms. Widmaier-Picasso brings as an art historian to exhibitions like "Picasso's Picassos," a selection of works from the collection of her mother, Maya Widmaier-Picasso, which opened on Thursday at Gagosian on Madison Avenue.

"It's an occasion to engage in a dialogue with my mother," Ms. Widmaier-Picasso said in an interview at Gagosian, where she was laying out the show.

This year, Maya Widmaier-Picasso (who uses her maiden name Maya Ruiz-Picasso) was at the center of a legal fight over a Picasso bust of Marie-Thérèse Walter that was in a recent Picasso sculpture show at the Museum of Modern Art.

Walking through the gallery, where posters leaned against the walls to stand in

for the paintings in the exhibition, Diana talked about some of the works, like “Maya With Doll and Wooden Horse,” from 1938.

The severity of the painting’s figures and the acidity of its blue and green colors, she said, alludes to a point in history that inspired Picasso’s mural-size “Guernica” canvas.

“Instead of just a portrait of a child, he takes the opportunity to show how the child is engaged with the world,” Diana said of the “Maya With Doll” painting. “We have to keep in mind the context.”

Since the show draws from the period between 1931 and 1971, there was a lot of work to choose from, including paintings, drawings, sculptures and ceramics.

In connection with the exhibition — which runs through Dec. 17 — Gagosian will turn its shop into all things Picasso, including the catalog for Picasso’s first retrospective in Zurich in 1932, curated by the artist.

The sole sculpture in the show is an original plaster of a pregnant woman, “La Femme Enceinte” (1959). The original assemblage, with plaster, ceramic vessel, pottery jars and wood, was featured in MoMA’s recent Picasso sculpture show.

“It’s a moment when Picasso is starting a new experimentation in the field of sculpture,” Diana said. “It’s also one of the works which is totally timeless. She’s like a goddess of fertility.”

Guarding Calder’s Legacy

Exactly 40 years ago, on Nov. 11, Alexander Calder died unexpectedly of a heart attack in his daughter’s rowhouse on Macdougall Street, in Greenwich Village, at the age of 78.

Calder’s grandson Alexander S. C. Rower — 13 at the time — vividly remembers his mother coming into his room to tell him that his grandfather was gone.

“There was my grandfather’s dead body under a sheet, the mountainous form of his belly,” Mr. Rower recalled in an interview at the Calder Foundation’s headquarters in Chelsea. “It was a shock. This guy was vigorous. The night before he died, he was talking about books he had read in his 20s in great detail.”

Mr. Rower, 53, who goes by Sandy, has spent his professional life organizing and guarding his grandfather’s prodigious body of work as chairman and president of the Calder Foundation.

“It protects Calder’s legacy by keeping coffee mugs or fake prints off eBay, but that’s not where the fun is,” Mr. Rower said. “It has to be about staying relevant at the same time as honoring his history, back to 1898,” Calder’s birth year.

The foundation is the go-to reference center for all things Calder. Curators consult Mr. Rower on how to hang a mobile. Auction specialists call him to examine pieces that come up for sale. Each year the foundation lends about 1,500 Calder artworks and mounts about 15 Calder exhibitions.

Most recently, Mr. Rower collaborated with Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, one of Picasso’s grandsons, on “Calder and Picasso” at the Almine Rech Gallery in Manhattan, which explores the creative dialogue between the artists and runs through Dec. 17.

“We were both teenagers when our grandfathers died,” Mr. Rower said.

In 1977, one year after Calder’s death, Mr. Rower was in his grandfather’s house in France as his aunt prepared to clear away the pile of papers on the artist’s 10-foot-long table. “I said, ‘What are you doing with all those papers?’” he recalled. “‘I’m taking them to the dump,’ she said. I said, ‘No, you’re not,’ and went to the little town two miles away and got cardboard boxes.”

“I put all the papers in the cardboard boxes and shipped them back to New York — it was 14 boxes,” he added. “I put them in my mother’s house on Macdougall Street in a fourth-floor closet. And there they sat for 10 years.”

Mr. Rower established the foundation in 1987, and said it was “constantly evolving, constantly unfolding.”

Next year, Mr. Rower said, he would consider how to open to the public Calder’s studio and home in Roxbury, Conn., where the artist moved after returning from France in 1933. The studio, built in 1938, “looks like he just went off to lunch,” Mr. Rower said.

“Everything’s there,” he continued, “his tools, all the workbenches that he made himself — it just is this incredible energetic place.”

The residence, too, is just as the Calder family left it. “You open up a drawer, it’s got my grandfather’s underwear in it and his handkerchiefs — nothing’s been removed,” Mr. Rower said. “How do you present that to the public? How do you share that? I want to share it.”

Mr. Rower also said that dual exhibitions of works known as “constellations” were coming up next spring. Pace gallery will show Calder’s “Constellations” series in wood and wire, which he made in 1943, and Acquavella will show Miró’s series of 23 tempera “Constelaciones” paintings, done from 1940 to 1941 and exhibited by Miró’s dealer, Pierre Matisse, in New York in 1945.

Calder’s “Constellations” series was given its title by Marcel Duchamp (who also named the “mobiles” in 1932) and the critic James Johnson Sweeney; Miró’s were named by André Breton, the father of Surrealism.

“Both bodies were made by these two guys, but neither of them named these bodies of work ‘the constellations’ themselves — they were named by other people,” Mr. Rower said.

“If you can project yourself back in time and do this kind of in-depth research,” he continued, “you discover something that’s really quite surprising.”

Correction: November 14, 2016

An earlier version of this column referred incorrectly to the Picasso sculpture “La

Femme Enceinte,” which is in the Gagosian show. It is an original plaster work, not a plaster cast.

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