Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

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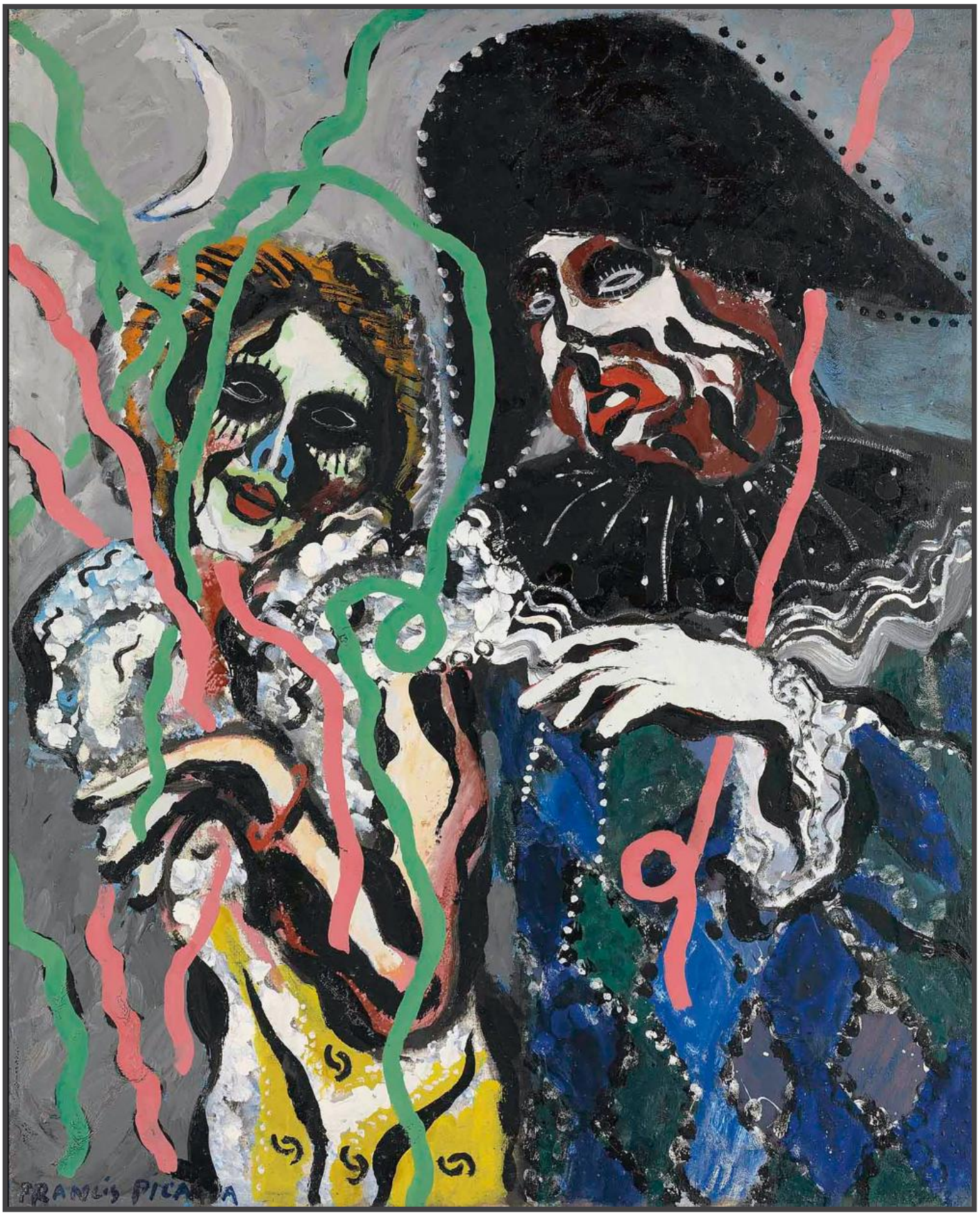
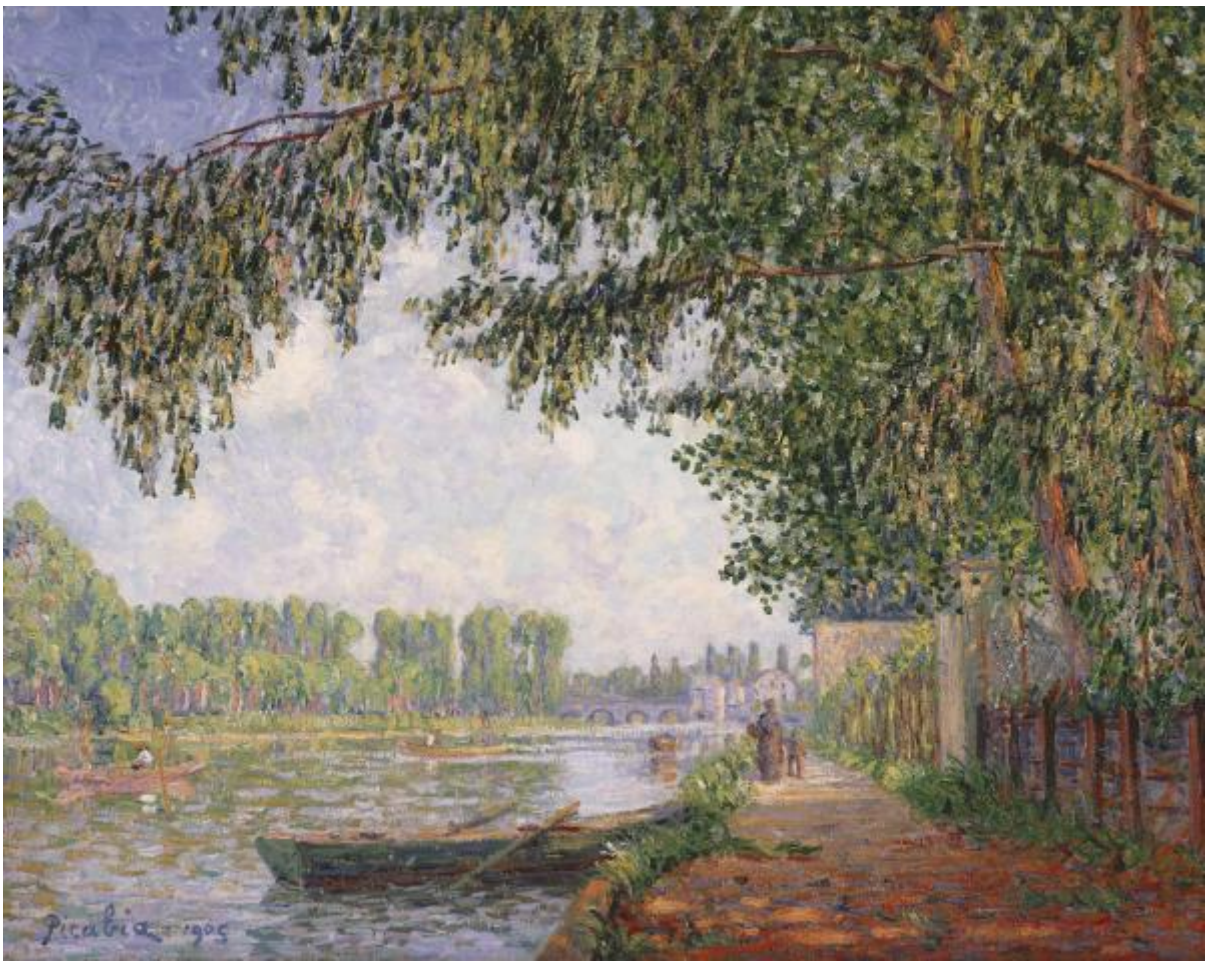
Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round So Our Thoughts Can Change Direction

Eva Kenny

Someone I met in Berlin a little while ago said he couldn't wait for the Biennale to end so that people could finally start talking about something else. The shock of the summer in this city was that Manifesta 11 wasn't the big talking point after all, but that the excellent retrospective of Francis Picabia at the Kunsthaus Zürich was. In fact, these two exhibitions had more in common than just their dates; while DIS used to concern themselves primarily with visual tropes of 21st century work (the theme Manifesta chose as its subject matter), the Picabia show and the DIS Biennale engage much more with questions of artistic authenticity, sincerity and political responsibility.


FRANCIS PICABIA

A common charge levelled at young contemporary artists is that their work appropriates style without content, and that a superficial familiarity with countless individual art objects and movements, achieved through online image searches, leaves them with a top-down approach to production, inhabiting only the *look* of art rather than excavating its motives or developing new concepts. It has the appearance of, but not the innovation and development of a real artistic practice. These works address only the surface and don't provide or represent a «deep» understanding of the artistic or cultural stakes involved; when referring to painting, this is often called Zombie Formalism, but it's an argument that can be read anywhere. This runs counter to a different argument, which is that young artists fall prey too quickly to the repetition and crystallization of an idiosyncratic style for the purposes of personal brand recognizability and marketability, churning out, particularly in painting, artworks that are consistent with or at least not challenging enough to ideas of mastery and signature, the authorial brushstroke and the indivisible relationship between subject and art object. In other words, one argument says they have no signature, the other that they have only signature. But get you an artist who can do both! Both of these two observations or accusations can be historicized and contextualized by the Picabia retrospective at the Kunsthaus, which depicts the artist, from the beginning, as a stylist in painting. Picabia, born in 1879 in Paris, has so far been received in the US mainly as a Dada artist whose kitschy paintings, later in his life, happened to influence Martin Kippenberger and a whole generation of self-styled Bad Painters. The retrospective, which now travels to New York to open at the MoMA in November 2016, identifies him primarily as a painter and more broadly as an artist whose exploration of the concepts of style, originality and influence needs urgent reinvestigation.



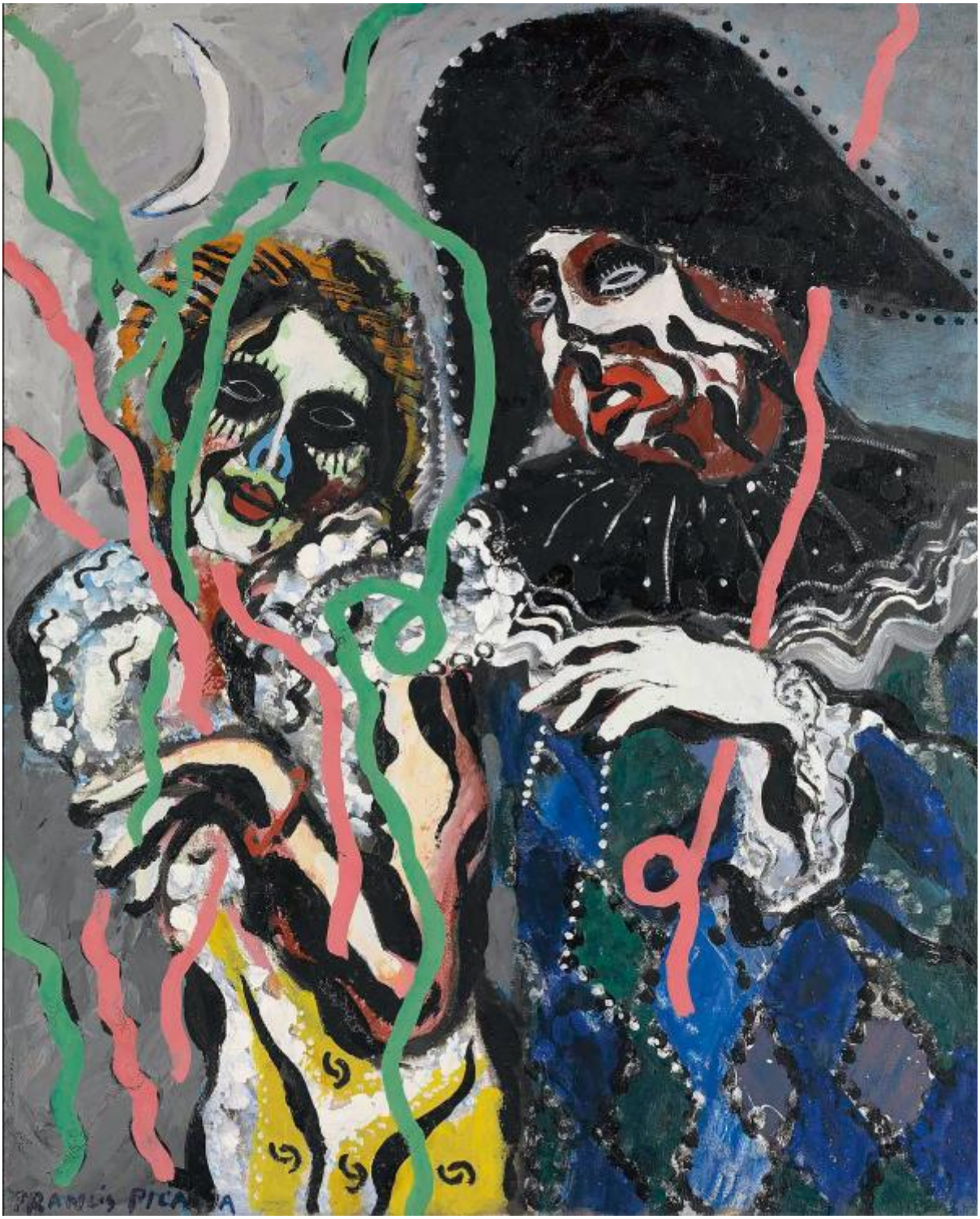
Francis Picabia, *Effet de soleil sur le bord du Loing, Moret (The Effect of Sunlight on the Banks of the Loing at Moret)*, 1905, Oil on canvas, 73.2 x 92.4 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Gertrude Schemm Binder Collection, 1951

The show reads as a painting wonk's manual of styles. Proceeding through the ten rooms of the exhibition, one can see a version of almost every style of every major and not so major artist of the twentieth century. The show opens with the Picassoid *La Source* and *Danses à la Source* of 1912, immediately indicating Picabia's debt to Picasso. Although not the oldest works by the artist, they are recognizable enough in style and their reference pointed enough to set the tone for the rooms to follow. The exhibition proceeds through Picabia's Impressionist and post-Impressionist works of 1906 to 1910, turning up the tack value in touristy chocolate-box paintings with a rather more effluvial than ethereal quality, complete with nameplates on ornate frames. From the outset, it seems, Picabia painted in the style of the greats without trying to develop a signature style of his own: he had a practice, not a style. Each of the *plein air-esque* paintings he produced was in fact painted from a photograph in the studio; his works were thought to be «like» Sisley or «like» Signac, and this room is subtitled «Impressionism, pointillism and fauvism as lucrative styles of painting.» It may be no coincidence that nearly every one of these works is in a private collection, i.e., sold. The rest of the show will demonstrate how Picabia found ways, through Dada, of making this retroactive parody/homage dynamic the subject of his practice.

The only point of consistency over the course of the next dozen works, from Picabia's Toulouse-Lautrec-inspired portrait, to Fauvism, to his flirtations with orphic abstraction, to his mechanomorphic painting works of the 1913 Armory Show in New York, where he stayed for months with Duchamp, is the signature that adorns the front of every canvas. This signature itself may be lifted in part from Picasso, but in Picabia's case it is really necessary to indicate that the works were actually his. Picasso, Guston, Polke, Kippenberger etc: many artists have worked exclusively in styles and series, making abrupt or radical departures from one series to the next or eschewing a signature style, and this is one extremely important reason to examine Picabia now. But none of these artists so explicitly made a feature out of copying the styles of his peers or near-peers. Torn as he was between Picasso and Duchamp, as the art historian George Baker, amongst others, has noted, Picabia made an icon out of the signature and posited painting as a readymade.

The only work, as far as I could see, that didn't bear this solo signatory mark was a painting from the very end of Picabia's Dada period, *L'Oeil Cacodylate* (1921), a collective artwork made and signed by «everyone in Paris» while Picabia was suffering from an eye infection. Dada is situated in this show as the lynchpin of Picabia's career, radicalizing him even as it appears as an aberration from painting, and this work is the lynchpin of the Dada section. The interwar artistic moment has long been the primary lens through which to view Picabia: because of this, and coming at the end of the centenary year of Zürich Dada and a summer of exhibitions on the subject, this is the most familiar material. But the exhibition also puts Dada into the context of his overall practice, crucially showing how much Picabia was already undermining and rejecting the signature of the artist and the exaltation of individual, expressive touch before he was associated with the other members of the group. His split with Dada meant a full return to painting, but, as Briony Fer points out in her essay in the accompanying catalogue, in the manic phase of a melancholic detachment from Dada and the Parisian art world. Picabia's version of the European cultural retour *à l'ordre* was with a new sense of what painting could be, opening it for him in terms of materials – his large works of these years are done in macaroni, matchsticks, wood and Ripolin, an industrial paint – and technique: after *L'Oeil Cacodylate* his painting always combined two or more styles rather than the pastiche of one, and his pre-war mocking attempts at mastery turned into an outright attack on the idea of singular authority in painting. The *Espagnolles* produced after his retreat to the South of France are bizarre combinations of the styles of Chagall, Picasso, velvet flamenco paintings and Mexican day-of-the-dead couture; sometimes generic pan-Spanish culture and sometimes what looks like a sketched portrait of Picasso wearing a matador hat.

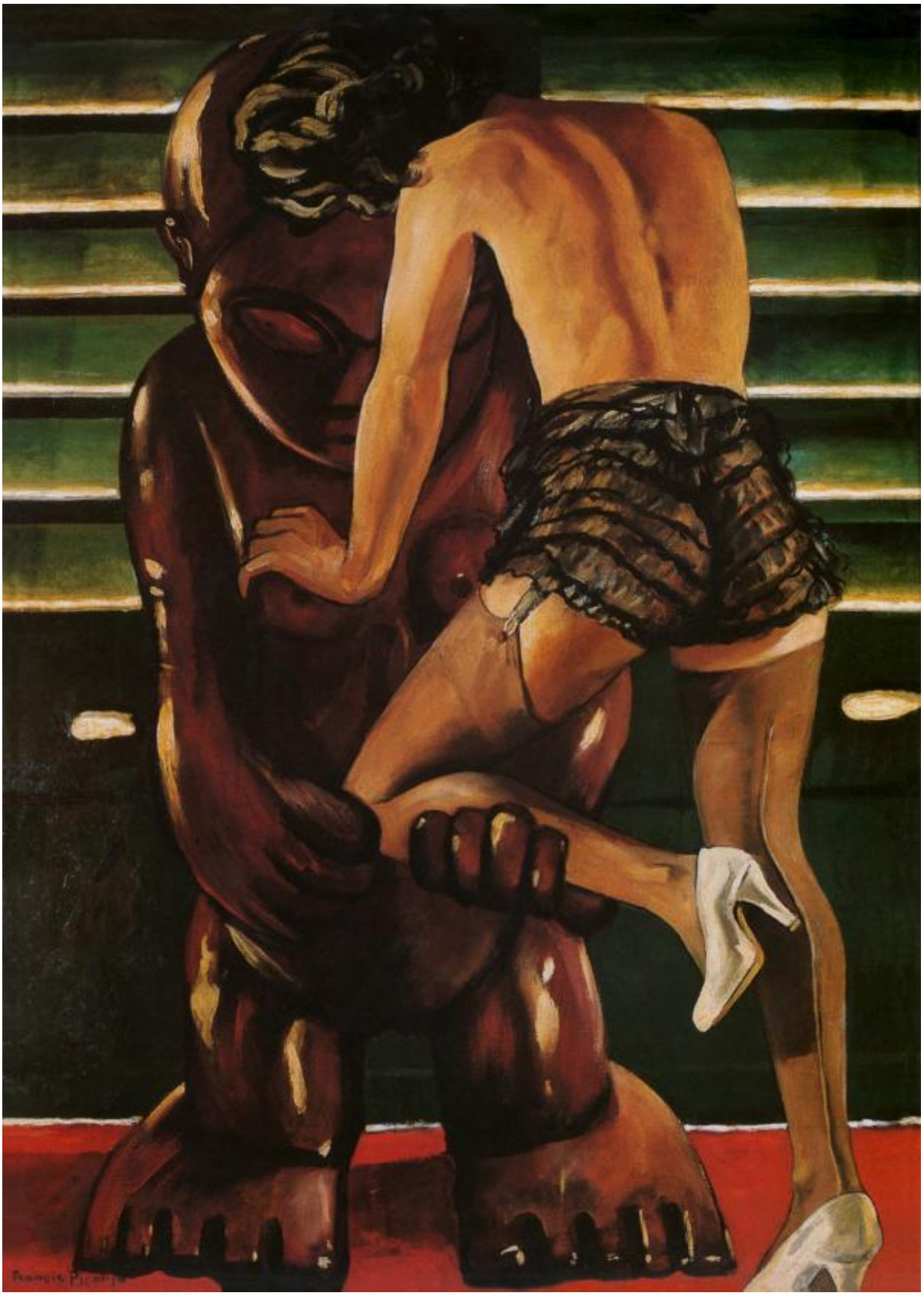
In the *Transparencies* works of the 1920s, his process is narrated very literally by showing the accretion of styles, with Victorian soap advert faces mixed in with naïve Byzantine figures all layered up in the same painting, even as this complicates any narratological function that might accompany formal analysis. By the 1930s, this technique had become even more extreme as the works consist of patches of paintings collaged together side by side. One poignant gesture from these years, it seems, was to cover hideously ugly canvases with painted flowers, to deflect criticism when the artist felt vulnerable.



Francis Picabia, *Mi-Carême (Mid-Lent)*, c. 1924-1926, Oil and synthetic resin on canvas, 100.4 x 81 cm
Jeff and Mei Sze Greene Collection© 2016 ProLitteris, Zürich

«These dates are all wrong!» my companion screamed on our first trip to the show, because Picabia was constantly playing with dates: some paintings are dated wrongly on purpose,

others are striking in the distinct lag between works by the original proponents of a style, and Picabia's version. His works are always the best when they force a disjoint in reception through belated practice or, in other words, make anachronistic demands on criticism. Coming on the heels of whatever the predominant preceding practice was, they demand to know if this is *still good* and if the criticism still obtains without the guarantee of artistic authenticity or integrity. The exhibition, therefore, is most problematic in the rooms that show Picabia's artistic contribution to painting in the 1940s, where programmatic anachronism and ironic distance run out of steam and, suddenly, appear frictionless and expedient vis-à-vis the Nazi occupation of France. A question posed by the DIS Bienniale was «Why should fascists have all the fun?» This was clearly a question for Picabia too. What he parodied during these years was not artistic innovation as in the case of Picasso or Cousteau, but was already kitsch posed against Degenerate Art, and by targeting it in the same way he doesn't undermine its artistic authority, because it was already fairly debased, but seems to reinforce it. Picabia was always contra-temps in his deployment of styles, his timing always off very slightly, but when he falls into step, in these works, it's into a goosestep. Although the accompanying material posits these as his parodic interpretation of the artistic taste of the Third Reich, the risk of this presentation is that fascism is just interpreted as one acceptable style of art amongst others, or as a type of severely bad taste as opposed to something more; i.e., simply an aesthetic problem. Impressionism, Fauvism, etc. are styles; for Picabia to add fascism or Nazism to this range of indistinguishable Oedipal poles seems dangerously facile. Furthermore, just because Picabia sounded and acted and worked like a reactionary bourgeois doesn't mean that he *wasn't* a reactionary bourgeois, one with fascistic aesthetic tendencies at that, and this is an assumption, however warped, that the exhibition depends a little too much on.



Francis Picabia, *Femme à l'idole (Woman with Idol)*, c. 1940–1943, Oil on cardboard, 105.4 x 74.8 cm, Private collection, © 2016 ProLitteris, Zürich

Hannah Black recently wrote that Simon Denny and Linda Kantchev's contribution to the Berlin Bienniale «splits the difference between irony and celebration,» in a brilliant one-line summation of the aesthetic around which the bienniale was organized. The exhibitions located around the German capital this summer showed a group of artists whose work, in its best moments, proceeds by spiritedly rehashing the best / worst of the immediately preceding decade and laughing at its naïveté whilst performing its tropes in a decidedly less optimistic

cultural climate. The same could be said of the Picabia show in the moments where he takes his painting to a place beyond caustic mimesis, and these occur largely closer to his post-Dada years, where ironic distance at least crosses paths with critical distance. Perhaps the frustration with Picabia's work of the 1940s is that we are offered ironic distance with no criticality, which, like criticism without any appreciation of irony or humor, falls wide of the mark both politically and aesthetically.

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doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930406