THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Man Ray & Picabia

By Robert C. Morgan
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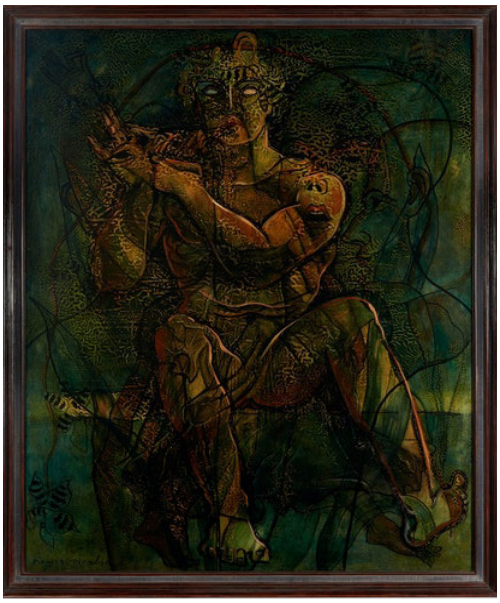
Left: Francis Picabia, *Femme à la chemise bleue*, 1942-43. Oil on board, 40 3/8 x 29 1/2 inches (102.6 x 74.93 cm). Right: Man Ray, *Peinture Feminine*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 50 x 43 3/4 inches (127 x 111.1 cm). © Man Ray 2015 Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / ADAGP, Paris 2021.

Historically speaking, some observers would argue that Man Ray and Picabia, the subjects of a joint show currently on view at Vito Schnabel, became important because Dada made them important. But this is not altogether true. The more accurate version is that they were brilliant artists who sought out connections with Marcel Duchamp, each on a different occasion. There is little doubt that Duchamp felt a strong connection with them on both a deeply personal and an artistic level. While interesting from a modernist point of view, however, such academic arguments are ultimately secondary to the actual work these artists produced—art for the cultural benefit of generations to come. The paintings of Man Ray and Picabia functioned parallel to the work of progressive anti-artists in Zurich, and later Paris, Cologne, and New York. But they would insist on their own independence to a degree that many at the time would never have dreamed possible.

Because neither Man Ray nor Picabia were in Zurich at the origins of Dada in 1915–16, they were able to avoid the premeditated intentions that sometimes governed participation in Dadaism proper. Inadvertently, this absence gave their work a longevity and depth of experience that would only gradually come into focus some years later. While Man Ray may have spent time enjoying the company of his Dadaist friends, he never became an official Dadaist—or, for that matter, an official Surrealist. On the other hand, Picabia, who entertained the possibility of joining the Dada cult, eventually declined in a fit of rage, angry that he had been so easily seduced.

In contrast to the power-mongering of Tristan Tzara and André Breton, the aspirations of Picabia and Man Ray took on a different character. While each of these artists had a strong connection to Duchamp, their relationship

Man Ray, *Non-Abstraction*, 1947. Oil on panel, 36 1/4 x 27 1/2 inches (92.1 x 68.9 cm). © Man Ray 2015 Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / ADAGP, Paris 2021.



Francis Picabia, *Mendica*, ca. 1929–34. Oil on canvas, 63 1/2 x 51 1/8 inches (161.2 x 130 cm). © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

with one another remained stealthily cordial and relatively indeterminate. Their point of agreement was based on a mutual desire to work independently and position aesthetics as a less-than-primary concern. "Art must be unaesthetic in the extreme," announced Picabia, "useless and impossible to justify." Other than their meetings with Duchamp, this impulse was essentially what the two artists had in common, although not without equivocation. The concerns of Picabia, in particular, raise the question: will the tight focus on one's own imagination so privileged by Dada and Surrealism ultimately offer the content necessary to experience art on a higher level? Picabia's investigation of this question suggests a cognitive counterpoint to the automatist values of his colleagues. Furthermore, both artists were committed to the medium of painting, despite Man Ray's inadvertent, if not accidental, identity as a photographer and Picabia's sometime reputation as a central figure among the European social elite.

Vito Schnabel's West Village exhibition makes it clear from the beginning that the nine remarkable paintings on view—five by Man Ray, four by Francis Picabia—serve as a way to reconsider the role of the imagination in art. In Man Ray's abstract figurations, such as *Non-Abstraction* (1947) and *Peinture Feminine* (1954), there is a tendency to transform our awareness away from previous aesthetic assumptions by moving it more in the direction of an interior mystery, something that speaks to the artist's own particular autosymbolic world. In contrast, one might consider the paintings of Picabia as coming from the opposite direction. Here, the artist's story appears visually clear at the outset, only to transform itself into an abstraction through erotic fantasy. Picabia's women, such as *Femme á la chemise bleue* (1942–43), as well as more androgynous figures like *Helias* (ca. 1930), represent partially conflicted realities from which the artist struggles to remain exempt. They are implicated in what we might describe, in Freudian terms, as a sublimation of the artist's own inner conflict, eventually discovering an erotic means to represent itself in the imaginative, unabashed figures of Picabia's paintings.

The independent state of mind shared by Man Ray and Picabia holds its presence throughout this exhibition. There is little doubt as to the significance of these paintings: the early 20th-century breakthrough of the artist's imagination appears with remarkable consistency here. To engage with the paintings of these intensely creative spirits is to move through them as if they were a chasm of visual utterances. What makes an exhibition of this order exceptional is found in a painting with the force of Picabia's *Mendica* (ca. 1929–34), a painting that redefines the power of human ascension, that knows the radical limits of painting—a work, in other words, that invokes an image from the exact moment of its completion. Finally, even as we see these works today, the collective conscience desired by Man Ray and Picabia comes to the foreground, fully embodied in their quest for truth.