

Art & Object

Vito Schnabel: World-Class Art Dealer and Collector

by PAUL LASTER
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Man Ray, *Non-Abstraction*, 1947 (detail). Oil on panel. 36 1/4 x 27 1/2 inches (92.1 x 68.9 cm).

The son of one of America's most celebrated painters, Vito Schnabel grew up at the center of the international art world. He organized his first exhibitions—including a 2005 solo show of paintings by Ron Gorchov, which revitalized interest in the artist's abstraction—beginning at age sixteen in 2003. Over the decade that followed he mounted some thirty pop-up shows for the work of Rene Ricard, Terence Koh, Laurie Anderson, and other contemporary artists in New York, London, Zurich, and Los Angeles.

Opening his first New York gallery in 2013, his second earlier this year, and a European location in fashionable St. Moritz in 2015, Schnabel has established himself as not only a world-class art dealer but as a connoisseur and collector of modern and contemporary art. Currently presenting the exhibition *Man Ray & Picabia* at his West Village space in New York, the young art dealer recently sat down with *Art & Object* to discuss the making of the intimate, jewel box show and the nine powerful paintings in it.

Paul Laster: Where did the concept for this show, pairing Man Ray and Francis Picabia together, originate?

Vito Schnabel: It grew out of a personal obsession with the two artists, whom I've been collecting for some time. I had put together about six paintings by the two artists and was internally examining the dialogue between them. And when I acquired Man Ray's 1947 painting *Non-Abstraction*, it made me think of Picabia's 1930's painting *Helias*, which Francesco Clemente owns, so a show started to come together in my mind.

PL: They are two of my personal favorites, too. How long have you been interested in them?

VS: Since I started seriously looking at painting. My parents are huge Picabia fans and my sister Lola, who's five years older than me and an artist who shared the things that she found inspiring with me, has always loved Picabia. As a result, Picabia has been on my radar for a long time, but I initially only knew Man Ray as a photographer. That

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interest, however, led me to his paintings. I love how he worked in different media and made works in a variety of ways.



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PL: Once you had the idea in mind, who did you consult to formulate the show?

VS: I basically knew what I wanted to show, but I wanted someone who was knowledgeable about the work of both artists to write an essay for the show. My friend Stefan Bondell was able to connect me to Timothy Baum, a private art dealer and art historian specializing in Dada and Surrealism. He knows their work better than anyone I know.

PL: Where did you find the paintings that you are exhibiting?

VS: They come from all over the place. I bought Picabia's *Mendica* (1929-30) from a Sotheby's sale of works from the collection of David Bowie, who had owned it for nearly two decades. *Non-Abstraction* came from Asia, where it had been tucked away since the 1970s, when it had been bought from Juliet Man Ray. Francesco Clemente lent me his Picabia. Timothy Baum found the 1954 Man Ray painting, *Composition*, to go with another painting from the same year, *Peinture Feminine*, that's from my father's collection. And then there are other paintings that are also from my personal collection.



Francis Picabia, *Mendica*, c. 1929-1934. Oil on canvas. 63 1/2 x 51 1/8 inches (161.2 x 130 cm).

PL: Were there any works that you wanted but couldn't get for one reason or another?

VS: No, I wanted the show to be like a little garden and thought that I had all of the elements that I needed for it. There's a nice flow to the works and they fit together proportionally in a good way.

PL: Man Ray's 1947 canvas *Non-Abstraction* is a masterpiece from his Los Angeles period. What attracted you to it?

VS: When I first saw an image of the painting on my computer screen, I couldn't believe my eyes. I had probably seen it in a Man Ray book, but I had forgotten it. I was immediately drawn to the eyes and the lips, which were clearly from Man Ray's iconography. Some of the brighter colors made me think of Matisse, while the drawn hand brought Picabia to mind. I also liked the sculptural quality of the nose, especially in relation to the lips, which are undeniably Man Ray lips. I wasn't able to see it in person and yet I had to have it—but I had to move quickly. It was one of the greatest Man Ray paintings that I had ever seen, so I did everything I could to get it.

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PL: Equally, Francis Picabia's *Femme á la chemise bleue*, from 1942-43, is a gem. When did you first come across it and what was the initial impact that it made on you?

VS: I first came across it and saw it with more developed eyes when I was about fourteen or fifteen. I was really taken by the transparency of the fabric on the model's body. She's almost three-dimensional. Nothing is perfect, but that's about as close to perfection as I've seen, especially in terms of Francis Picabia's painted portraits. Her eyes are amazing—just two black shapes with little white dots in the middle. That's it. It's incredible how much he does with so little. She's so real. She looks as though she's in the room with us.

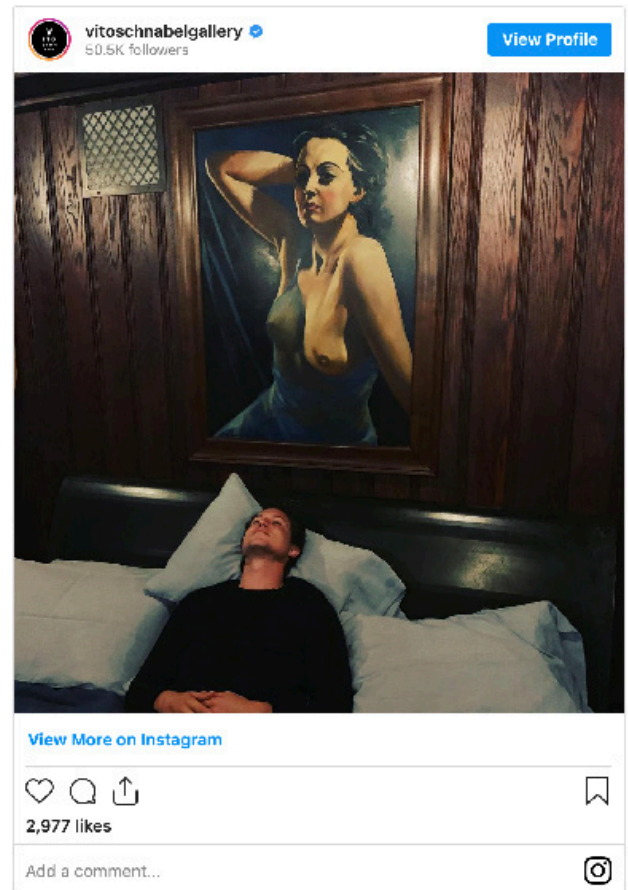


Francis Picabia, *Femme á la chemise bleue*, 1942-1943. Oil on board. 40 3/8 x 29 1/2 inches (102.6 x 74.93 cm).

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PL: There's a picture of you lying on a bed below this painting on Instagram from March of 2019. Where was it shot?

VS: In my bedroom.

PL: When you posted it you said, "I missed her." Is she yours?

VS: Yes, and I had been going through some relationship issues when I posted the photo. And I was really genuinely happy to get back home and see the painting.

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PL: This painting brought to mind Picabia's *Femme au bull-dog*, from the same period, which was in his 2016 MoMA retrospective. Why do you think these paintings were so influential on later artists, like Sigmar Polke, Albert Oehlen, and David Salle?

VS: Yeah, and to my father and Francesco Clemente. Picabia's paintings don't look like anything that came before them or after. He pushed the boundaries.

PL: Picabia's *Mendica*, from 1929 to '34, is also an impressive painting from the artist's coveted *Transparence* series. Did you ever see it hanging in David Bowie's place or talk to him about Picabia's art?

VS: No, but I spoke to Iman about the painting. She told me how much he loved it and that he always paused to gaze upon it. It does have the quality of being a living thing. No matter what light it's in, it's always changing. It becomes lighter, then darker, and the faces that come in and out of it never stop moving. There are very few paintings that can do that. I was recently watching the Clyfford Still documentary *Lifeline*, and in it, he said, "Turn the lights off. My paintings have their own fire." And I feel that way about this painting by Picabia.



Man Ray, *The Tortoise*, 1944. Oil on canvas. 20 x 24 inches (50.8 x 61 cm).

PL: Man Ray's 1944 painting *The Tortoise* is also fascinating to me because it was exhibited in his 1948 Los Angeles show at Copley Galleries, which was owned artist William Copley, who was a friend of Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealists, and a marvelous painter in his own right. What was your first impression in first seeing it?

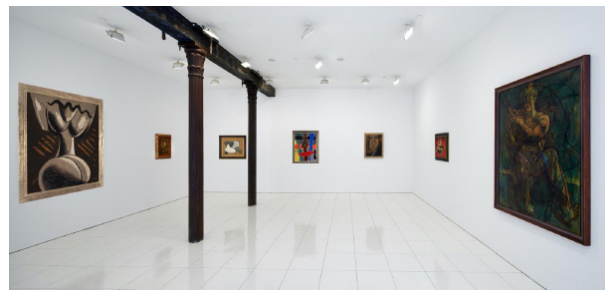
VS: I immediately thought of Ron Gorchov, a friend and artist who I had shown and who recently died, but that was a personal response. As far as the painting itself, I was fascinated with how delicate it seemed while still being able to convey a sense of weight. I recalled seeing it in the installation photo from Copley Galleries, where it seemed like a breath of fresh air between two larger canvases. It's a very curious painting. I wondered if he had made those forms and then call it *The Tortoise*?

PL: And what about Man Rays painting *The Tempest*? It's from his Shakespearean Equations series, where the paintings are based on mathematical models that he photographed in his earlier years. Man Ray famously said, "I paint what I can't photograph and photograph what I can't paint," which makes it seem as though he got a lot out of those models, right?

VS: Yeah, I had to double-check the year when I first saw it. I was thinking about Cubism and then Surrealism, but it's a later painting. I was taken by the polluted red sky and this mechanical, futuristic figure that almost looks like he's serving something—but then it bounces back into abstraction.

PL: Picabia's 1932 painting *Stanhopea Martiana*, which is a portrait of a man overlaid with the outline of an orchid, looks like a self-portrait to me. There's a portrait that Man Ray made of him from a few years earlier where he was behind the wheel of a moving car with his hair flowing in a similar way. What are your thoughts?

VS: That was my consideration, too. The more that I see pictures of him the more that I think it might be a self-portrait. I see it as a representation of him, but similar to how I see Robert Nava's *Angels*, or even Mark Grotjahn's *Face Paintings*, as reflections of emotions when the artists were making the works. I don't know what he was thinking when painting it, but it's a powerful picture. There's something very angelic about it, which reminds me of Renaissance painting.



Installation view: *Man Ray & Picabia*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, New York, March 25 - May 15, 2021.

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PL: Man Ray's 1954 *Peinture Feminine* is an abstracted bust or torso that somehow seems related to the mathematical models. What have you found out about this painting through your research?

VS: I know that Andy Warhol had it hanging in his bedroom. It now belongs to my father. When I look at it, I think of Arp, De Chirico, and Max Ernst. Even though the title implies that it's representational, I've always seen it as pure abstraction. I understand that the forms might be a bust or a torso, but for some reason, my mind doesn't really let me go there.



Man Ray *Peinture Feminine*, 1954. Oil on canvas. 50 x 43 3/4 inches (127 x 111.1 cm).

PL: To me, it's informed by the mathematical models, where a bust of a woman has been woven into a mathematical model, so that it blurs the boundary between figuration and abstraction. And from another point of view, it looks like a torso. Can you see what I'm saying?

VS: Sure, it's that line between figuration and abstraction, abstraction and figuration—that's always been of interest to me, and to artists like Albert Oehlen, Sigmar Polke, or Cecily Brown. This painting encapsulates that kind of thinking.

PL: And, even though it looks totally abstract, the 1954 Man Ray painting *Composition*, has the title that suggests it's abstract, but it has the look of a geometric portrait with the face of a proud figure, as seen from below with its head somewhat in the clouds, like a figure carrying himself with dignity. Where did you find this painting?

VS: Timothy Baum found it in France. I got an email with an image stating, "an unexpected visitor." It's nice to have his three painting paintings from the 1940s, when Man Ray was in Los Angeles, with two from the 1950s, after he had returned to Paris.

PL: Back to Picabia, his painting *Helias*, from the 1930s, is so playful, with the male and female faces, and a woman's hands layered over an ancient lyre. I read it as a relationship between a couple, where the woman is responsible for making the music. What's your take on it?

VS: That's interesting. I've always seen the overlaid figure's face in profile as an Egyptian woman with a Picassoesque nose. She's playing the harp, wooing him. He looks pretty heavy-eyed. I like your explanation of it. It's like what are you doing to me right now? She has a more assertive look—she's in control. The painting has a wonderful atmosphere. It's an idyllic painting.

PL: Picabia was born rich. Do you think having money gave him artistic freedom—freedom to make the type of work that he wanted to make, whether it sold or not?

VS: It definitely gave him artistic freedom, yet I don't think it hurt the respect he had from his fellow artists. From everything I've read, he seemed pretty comfortable in his own skin—pretty sure of his practice and his capabilities

PL: Do you think Man Ray has the place in history that he deserves?

VS: No, I think he's underrated in the overall scope of things. He's well represented in MoMA's collection and the Whitney has quite a few works, but he was born in New York and deserves a retrospective at the Whitney Museum, with his photography, painting, and sculptures. It could even be Man Ray and friends, but I think he's definitely deserving of it and I look forward to seeing it.