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JOHN MILLEI

WOMAN IN A CHAIR, 2009

EXHIBITION ON VIEW THROUGH APRIL 2010

Several years ago while in Paris, John Millei viewed a painting titled *Portrait de femme (Dora Maar)*, 1938, by Pablo Picasso in the collection of the Centre Pompidou. He bought a postcard of the painting, which has been pinned on the wall of his studio since. In the Spring of 2008 he began small studies from it, and eventually used it as inspiration for a new series of paintings titled *Woman in a Chair*. In a similar manner, the premise for his 2006 series the *Procession* paintings, was based on his encounter with Giotto's *Procession of the Nuptial Virgin*. Also referencing Giorgio Morandi, the series came after Millei visited Giotto's original Arena Chapel frescoes in Padua, Italy.

Picasso used the model of the woman in a chair as a theme throughout his long career and various stylistic periods. Millei's attraction to *Portrait de femme (Dora Maar)* proved to be an apt historical model from a most fertile period around Picasso's painting of *Guernica*. After extensive studies in watercolor and with small sized canvases, Millei was on sure footing when he gravitated toward 9ft high canvases utilizing oil and flashe. In Millei's new work, the paintings reveal a singular approach to the abstract figure, considerably altered in each using stylistic tropes from previous series within his own career; in one, reappearing as thick impasto flower 'hands' or his stenciled dots for 'eyes' in another. The paintings are individually titled rather than numbered, to break sequence, i.e. *Woman in a Chair (Blinkers)*, with only one painting which actually references Picasso in its title: *Woman in a Chair (after Picasso)*. Millei's work here mirrors Picasso's approach in that for each, the subject becomes an armature for their own sets of painterly concerns. These 'after-images' are neither about Dora as a subject nor deconstructing Picasso, but the *Woman in a Chair* as a template, abstract idea and framework, using received and known culture to reinforce Millei's individual statements.

Earlier this year and a timely coincidence, the National Gallery in London mounted an exhibition exploring Picasso's relationship to his artistic forebears in *Picasso: Challenging the Past*, as the artist pitted himself against the greatest Masters of European painting in a life-long artistic dialogue. The exhibition with an accompanying

publication explored the ways he took up the artistic concerns of the painters of the past and made audacious responses of his own. In this book, author Elizabeth Cowling relayed that Picasso explained to André Malraux, that he lived as much 'with' the painters who mattered to him, as with those with whom he shared his life, during their discussion of Malraux's conception of the imaginary 'Museum Without Walls,' a world of reproductions:

"I paint against the canvases that are important to me, but I paint in accord with *everything that's still missing* from that Museum of yours... You've got to make what doesn't exist, what has never been made before. That's painting: for a painter it means wrestling with painting." -- Picasso

Many artists have engaged their predecessors work as departure points for their own. Picasso did several renditions of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, as well as multiple versions of Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers*. While painting this series, Picasso said to his dealer Kahnweiler, "I wonder what Delacroix would say if he saw these paintings." Confident that he might understand, Picasso continued, "Yes, I think so. I'll tell him: You thought of Rubens and you made Delacroix. And I, thinking of you, I'm making something else."¹ While Manet painted from Goya's *The Execution of Maximilian*, later, Picasso also painted the subject after Manet. In Millei's paintings after painting, the territory is redefined again.

John Millei was born in 1958 in Los Angeles, California. He lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

¹ Norton Simon Museum of Art website http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_title.php

Additional reference: Elizabeth Cowling et al, *Picasso: Challenging the Past*, National Gallery London, 2009

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JOHN MILLEI: MARITIME
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Gallery Hours: Tuesday through Saturday 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM