

PICASSO

The Vollard Suite

A National Gallery of Australia
travelling exhibition

Picasso and #metoo

The #metoo movement first gained momentum in late 2017 via social media, initially drawing attention to the widespread phenomenon of the sexual harassment of women in the workplace, in particular in North America's entertainment industry. Since that time this grassroots movement has evolved to encompass a wider critique, now including the ethics of art museums who show work by artists accused of sexual harassment.¹ The sensational popularity and wide dissemination of Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* has seen the discussion turn to Picasso and his treatment of women. We wished to examine this issue in the Art Gallery of South Australia's presentation of *Picasso: The Vollard Suite*, a travelling exhibition from the National Gallery of Australia, by providing some additional resource materials, which include the film of the Gadsby performance and a reading list. These resources have been conceived as an additional interpretive tool, a means by which to frame some of the issues raised in response to the exhibition of Picasso's Vollard Suite.

Gadsby's stand-up performance of *Nanette*, a contemplation on her experiences of homophobia and abuse and given at the Sydney Opera House in 2017, was both shocking and exhilarating. In her performance, which also acts as a meta criticism of the genre of comedy, Gadsby examines the cultural norms and gender conditioning that enable such behaviour to flourish. During the performance, Gadsby, an art history graduate, reflects on the 'blindness' of art historians to the misogyny implicit in Picasso's art, as well as his disturbing relationship with the seventeen-year-old Marie-Thérèse Walter, whom Picasso met in 1927, aged forty-five. Gadsby's critique of Picasso is expressed as rage – rage against men who do not comprehend the destructive nature of the power imbalance in a sexual relationship between a mature man and a teenage girl, in this instance, one aged a mere seventeen years. In her performance piece Gadsby eloquently communicates the vulnerability inherent in a person of this age and vividly expresses how personhood is affected by an abuse of power at this stage of life. Her insights transcend the scholarly – and by implication the impersonal and emotion-free – language of art history and demand that we wrestle with the implications of this context in our reception of the Vollard Suite (1930–37).

The very strong resemblance between the images in the Vollard Suite and Picasso's young lover and model Marie-Thérèse Walter invites an autobiographical reading of the prints. In the series Picasso depicts her as his muse, lover, victim, and ultimately his salvation. At the core of the Vollard Suite's complex iconography is Picasso's depiction of an artist in his studio, the artist's relationship with his model and their shared appraisal of his evolving works of art. The artist's creativity is expressed in libidinal terms, with the art emerging as a consequence of the artist's erotic relationship with his model. Picasso draws on tropes from Greek mythology to express this creative association – the artist as Zeus; the myth of Pygmalion, whereby the sculptor becomes so enamoured with his own creation that the figure through the intervention of the goddess of love eventually comes to life; and the Minotaur, the half-man and half-bull. Picasso's adept application of several powerful mythologies serves to temper the reality of the violence and rape that the artist, in the guise of the Minotaur, perpetrates on his model.

The articles and blog posts given in the resources presented below engage with the question of the representation of power in Picasso's art, perceived by some commentators as an expression of misogyny, while others, such as Memory Holloway and T.J. Clark, read Picasso's work in less literal terms and offer a close analysis of Picasso's layered art.

The Art Gallery of South Australia will host a forum on Picasso and #metoo on Friday 1 February 2019 at 6pm, with lectures by Professor Meaghan Morris, Department of Cultural and Gender Studies, University of Sydney, and Emerita Professor Memory Holloway, Department of Art History, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth.

Maria Zagala,

Associate Curator, Prints, Drawings and Photographs,
Art Gallery of South Australia

Selected viewing and reading list

Hannah Gadsby: *Nanette*, 2018, directors:
Jon Olb 8 Madelaine Parry, 1 h, 9 mins,
accessible on Netflix.

T.J. Clark, "'I am a woman': The Spring Nudes",
in *Picasso 1932: love fame tragedy*, Achim
Borchardt-Hume & Nancy Ireson (eds), exh. cat.,
Tate Modern, Tate Publishing, London, 2018,
pp. 87–76.

Memory Holloway, 'Eroticism, myth and the
bullfight: Picasso's *Femme Torero I* and *Corrida*',
NGV Art Journal, 1982, 22, <<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/eroticism-myth-and-the-bullfight-picassos-femme-torero-i-and-corrida/>>.

Memory Holloway, 'Picasso and women: painting
as if to possess', *Picasso*, exh. cat. National
Gallery of Victoria, Patrick McCaughey & Judith
Ryan (eds), International Cultural Corporation of
Australia, Melbourne, 1984, pp. 43–225.

Ksenia M. Soboleva, 'Why I did not see the
Picasso show at the Tate Modern', *Hypoallergic*,
29 August 2018, <<https://hyperallergic.com/457905/why-i-did-not-see-the-picasso-show-at-the-tate-modern/>>.

Shannon Lee, 'The Picasso problem: why we
shouldn't separate the art from the artist's
misogyny', *Artspace*, 22 November 2017,
<https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/art-politics/the-picasso_problem_why_we_shouldnt_separate_the_art_from_the_artists_misogyny55120->.

Jonathan Jones, 'Was Picasso a misogynist?',
The Guardian, 21 May 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/21/was-picasso-misogynist-lee-miller-gertrude-stein-women-relationships>>.

¹ Nadja Sayej, 'Chuck Close: how to deal with an artist accused of sexual harassment', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/feb/15/chuck-close-art-sexual-harassment-pafa>>.