

Life With Françoise Gilot

The 98-year-old artist, who had two children with Pablo Picasso and later went on to marry Jonas Salk, still paints every day in her Upper West Side apartment.

BY WENDY GOODMAN

THERE ARE SOME PAINTERS who paint for the public. I don't," Françoise Gilot says, sitting on the sofa in her cozy living room with its barrel-vaulted exposed-brick ceiling. "I paint for myself, basically. If people like it, bravo; if they don't, I don't care. I don't really care at all. Sometimes it's better because then I get to keep it." From where I'm sitting, I can see into her double-height studio, where she still, at 98, paints every day, working on at least two canvases at once, an easel on each end of the space. She looks at me with her piercing blue-gray eyes and has a little smile as she answers questions about her art and her extraordinary life. Or lives: She rebelled against her strict parents' ambitions for her and quit law school to be an artist in Paris, where Pablo Picasso fell for her in 1943. They spent ten years together, never married, but had two children, Claude and Paloma. Then she left him—the only woman who ever did. He wasn't very gallant about it or about her brief marriage in 1955 to painter Luc Simon, with whom she had a daughter, Aurélia, the next year. After that, she once wrote, "Pablo Picasso declared open war on me."

So she left Paris for London, where the Tate gave her a studio, then came to New York in 1961. She traveled widely,

→ The Living Room

The original barrel-vaulted exposed-brick ceiling adds to the intimacy of the room. The walls are hung with Gilot's own paintings, a Georges Braque (not seen), and a painting by her friend and mentor Endre Rozsda. Gilot brought the chairs with her from Europe, but when asked about the décor, she says, "You know I don't pay attention to that type of thing."



Françoise Gilot
photographed in
her studio.
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Family Portraits

Above, Gilot and her daughter Paloma Picasso in the south of France in the early '50s. Below, Gilot's self-portrait with her son, *Maternity, Françoise and Claude* (1953).

later renting a loft on lower Fifth Avenue. In 1990, she bought this apartment—its magnificent studio has north-facing light and a fireplace—in a 1902 building on the Upper West Side that was originally built for artists. Her unsparing 1964 memoir, *Life With Picasso*, which was reissued this year, is not only a vivid account of her life with him but an intimate panorama of life in Paris during and after the German occupation, a Paris populated by Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, Alberto Giacometti, and Gertrude Stein, among others. Last year, Taschen published her illustrated travel notebooks from her trips to Venice, Senegal, and India with her late husband the polio-vaccine pioneer Dr. Jonas Salk, whom she married in 1970. (Another life she led!) When I visit, her friend Dorothea Elkon is also there, on the other end of the sofa. Gilot has a show at Elkon's gallery on East 81st Street through December 20 featuring works old and new, many of which were made in this apartment. While we talk, Ana Maria Dimoulis, Gilot's housekeeper for the past 25 years, enters with a neat tray of demitasse cups of espresso and a plate of biscuits. Elkon mentions that Gilot's father had really wanted a boy when she was born. "Oh, what does it matter?," Gilot retorts. But then she adds, "On top of it all, they never had another child! I don't know why?" How did she know they wanted a boy? "Because I was dressed as a boy, and I had to do everything like a boy. Unless I was very stupid, I could not have missed it." But it wasn't a problem for her. "It fit me very well to be a boy. I thought it was more convenient because you were entitled to do more things. *Girls, don't do this, don't do that. Boys, go ahead!*" When asked how this worked after puberty set in, Gilot says, "Ah, that was okay because then I became beautiful. So that was another way of getting to where I wanted."

By her own account, Gilot was always precocious: She could read and write by the time she was 3, she is ambidextrous, and she has always painted well. "I am the same artist I was at 12 years old," she says. "I was already very good." And her father pushed her and she attended law school as he wished, before dropping out to pursue painting. "I can have fear like anybody else, but if you have fear, you have to overcome it." Gilot was just 19 when the Nazis invaded Paris. The night she met Picasso at Le Catalan restaurant on the Left Bank, she and her artist friend Geneviève Aliquot were celebrating the opening of their art show together. And Gilot wasn't afraid of Picasso. "Pablo had a temper much like my father, so it was a continuation," she says. "Oh yes, I could say yes or no, but I knew exactly what it was all about." She knew full well what



PHOTOGRAPHS: © BORIS LIPNITZKI/STUDIO LIPNITZKI/ROGER-VIOLETT (GILOT WITH PALOMA PICASSO); COURTESY OF ELKON GALLERY (MATERNITY, FRANÇOISE AND CLAUDE)





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The Kitchen

Like the living room, it has a vaulted ceiling and south-facing windows.

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The Studio

"I have two easels here," Gilot says. "Those are with me a good part of my life. I have two paintings going on at the same time but sometimes maybe more. Sometimes five at the same time." The three shown here are by Gilot.

she was getting herself into, and when it was time to go, she got out of it.

As for the apartment, which feels more like Paris or London, she says she isn't one for renovations. "Don't count on me to change anything!" she says. "I may like it or not like it, but I am not going to change anything." She mentions the difficulty of signing a painting, saying her signature changes depending on the shape and size of the canvas. "Signature placement," she says, "can destroy a painting. Ah, it's a nightmare!" The work in her current show was selected with Elkon by going through canvases stored in her studio. "We did not research," Gilot says. "It was not very intellectual. I am not for that anyway. It is better to do it spontaneously." When the subject of Giacometti's work comes up, Gilot mentions their friendship and her frequent visits to his studio on Rue Hippolyte-Maindron, saying, "Giacometti was interested in the singular in the person, and that I am not interested in at all."

Later, she muses, "I mean, it's very funny also that in France people didn't like me." When asked why, she answers, "They did not like me because I was too bright, too smart, and I had a tendency to be first in school."

At the end of the afternoon, just before we stopped our conversation, Gilot is asked about the dark painting on the wall by the sofa, one Elkon mentions she had never seen before of a lone figure with arms stretched out in a desolate canyon. "Well, as you can see, it is a very desperate type of place," Gilot says, "a woman alone in a place which is not very friendly. But she's all right there. Maybe it's me because it means I don't need to be in friendliness. I don't mind. It's okay." ■

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