

In the Name of Picasso

Exhibit A: Picasso's *Seated Bather*, 1930. Against an azure wall of water, fragments of bone and bleached carapace assemble the monumental image of isolated, predatory woman. Woman-as-insect, with great mandibles in place of mouth evoking more effectively than any Masson or Miró the threat of the *vagina dentata*, this painting has functioned for years as a major emblem of Picasso's affinities with surrealism, as it has also established his preoccupation with an especially surrealizing notion of metamorphosis. The Museum of Modern Art showed the picture in 1939, and then again in 1946, at both major Picasso exhibitions. Thereafter it entered the collection to be placed on permanent view and to be installed—permanently it had seemed—within a particular “view” of the 1930s Picasso. This was a notion of a metamorphic “style” concerned with the body as a loose assembly or construction of parts often suggestive of found objects. This style was fundamental to the early sculpture of David Smith, as it was to the early painting of Gorky and de Kooning. They understood it as a mode or manner having a rather general application: that of biomorphic construction to create an image of transmutation. Not only artists, but generations of students imbibed this conception of the Picasso of the '30s and this particular style.

Exhibit B: Picasso's *Bather with Beach Ball*, 1932. Against a pale cobalt sea and sky, the monumental form of female adolescence is assembled from a collection of pneumatic parts: bulbous bones so pumped with air that the figure appears to float. As a pendant to the *Seated Bather*, this work displays a contrary mood, a lugubrious sense of play instead of the earlier image's desicated wrath. But in all those conditions that we would call style the paintings are nearly twins. Both exploit a simple backdrop to force a sculptural experience of their theatrically isolated forms. Both conceive the figure as constructed out of parts whose provisional coherence effects a transformation from one thing (bone, balloon) to another (pelvis, breast).

Exhibit C: At a lecture this fall at the Baltimore Museum of Art, William Rubin, one of the leading Picasso scholars, showed both paintings.¹ With these

1. The lecture was presented on October 12, 1980, at a symposium on the cubist legacy in twentieth-century sculpture.