
H-France Review Vol. 20 (October 2020), No. 192

Brigitte Benkamoun. *Finding Dora Maar: An Artist, an Address Book, a Life*. Trans. Jody Gladding. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2020. 216 pp. Notes and translator's note. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-60606-659-1; \$24.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-60606-660-7.

Review by Eilene Hoft-March, Lawrence University.

Dora Maar's identity has often been distilled down to her status as Picasso's mistress (1936-45), his model for countless portraits of the "weeping woman," and, in later assessments, the intellectual muse who encouraged and documented him in the creation of "Guernica," the celebrated mural protesting the German bombardment of a village in the Spanish Civil War. In her lifetime, Maar's independent renown as a visual artist dwindled in the postwar--and post-Picasso--years. Benkemoun's book, while tracing Maar's early itinerary from art school up through her death, focuses on a constellation of relationships she maintained particularly in 1951, for reasons that will soon become clear.

The book opens with the author's anecdote of having replaced her husband's lost Hermès datebook with a vintage leather agenda purchased online through an auction house. Tucked in its pocket is a filled-in address book complete with its upcoming 1952 calendar. The book thus begins with a modern variation on the romantic conceit of the mysterious manuscript found in the trunk. Benkemoun's quick perusal of the address book confirms that its former owner knew some of the most celebrated people in the French art world of the last century. On an intuition that the book belonged to Maar, Benkemoun has it authenticated by the art dealer Marcel Fleiss, who knew Maar in her later years. Curiosity moves the author from merely decrypting entries into writing a narrative both about the people she can identify and about her own research into their connections to Maar.

Fortunately for readers, Benkemoun decides against a methodical plod through the alphabetized entries, though her preferred, aleatory method (eyes closed, finger pointing) is used to initiate her research. Of course, the author can revel in the serendipity of the first name so chosen: André Breton. Doubtless, he would have approved of creating art from "found objects," a Surrealist practice (p. 27). Thereafter, Benkemoun establishes a chronology for each chapter she writes based on earliest made acquaintance to latest. This gives some semblance of historical order, from Maar's closest friend at Paris's *École des Arts Décoratifs*, Jacqueline Lamba, to the confessor and "moral guide" of her later years, Dom Jean de Monléon. In between those entries, we have the likes of Brassai, Éluard, Cocteau, Lacan, and Sarraute, to name some of the best known. The author admits to having eliminated other celebrities--"Aragon, Hugnet, Deharme, Braque, Giacometti" (p. 201)--whose trails in Maar's direction went cold before 1951. And of course, the

one name that doesn't figure in her address book—either because Maar knew his contact information by heart or because she couldn't bear to give it place among her friends—was Picasso's. Nevertheless, every other story recounted in this volume has links to Picasso precisely because he and Maar moved in the same circles long after their separation. Benkemoun thus reinstates him as the penultimate name in her book, Dora's being, appropriately, the last.

Included in this volume are events that have been covered elsewhere: Maar's alleged affair with erotic extremist, Georges Bataille; her contact with the Surrealist circle, through which Maar developed as an experimental photographer; her staged performance of mumbly-peg to attract the interest of Picasso; the turbulent years with Picasso, especially aggravated under German Occupation; Maar's psychological collapse and analytical work under the aegis of Jacques Lacan; and her slow rebuilding of a life independent of Picasso. Additionally, and through careful scrutiny of available documents, the author also corrects certain errors. For example, the oft-reported story that Lacan committed Maar to the Hôpital Sainte-Anne, an old-fashioned psychiatric asylum, is almost certainly not true. The author finds a hospital bill from Saint-Mandé for ten days of special care and treatment (insulin "cure" or electric shock were the only possibilities for treatment). This would explain Maar's weakened and disoriented condition upon her return home. Benkemoun also teases out a number of interesting threads, one of them being Maar's possible response to her childlessness. On multiple occasions over the years, Maar requested the privilege of being a godmother, although her only approximation of serving in that capacity was with Anne de Staël (daughter of painter Nicolas), to whom she gave encouragement to write poetry. A more unfortunate element of Maar's character was a pronounced antisemitism, which she didn't hesitate to display. Benkemoun charitably assumes that this unsavory development (Maar had been fiercely leftist in her youth) only appeared much later in her life when, as a solitary, elderly woman, she closed her door to most visitors and limited her outings to the two Catholic churches near her Paris apartment.

The author has clearly conducted deep research for this book. She consults the writings of artists in Picasso's and Maar's circle (for example, Breton, Duhamel, Brassai, Éluard, Cocteau, and Leiris). She also cites from memoirs such as James Lord's *Picasso and Dora* (Lord was an admirer of the first and friend of the second) and biographies such as art historian Mary Ann Caws' excellent *Picasso's Weeping Woman*.^[1] She combs through exhibition catalogs and pertinent archives, including that of Dora Maar. While she constructs much of her narrative from these elements, she does manage to discover several new sources of information. A trained journalist, she conducts her own investigative reporting, mostly with the children and grandchildren of the address book's characters. This becomes part of the "search" narrative concurrent with Maar's history. Thus, the author obtains André Marchand's 1953 calendar through his niece. She hunts down Natalie Sarraute's daughter who, being over ninety years old, can only surmise the nature of her mother's and Maar's acquaintance. An interview with Claude Picasso, the artist's son by Françoise Gilot, causes the author to revise her interpretation of Maar's reconnection with Claude after his father's death. Benkemoun imagines that Maar might have felt a sympathetic bond with him (his father rejected her in 1964 for not having prevented the publication of Gilot's unvarnished account). Claude reports otherwise about Maar's attention: "she was not very interested in me ... [s]he was only interested in business matters, concerning the value of her Picassos" (p. 143).

Benkemoun does not observe the objective distance of a classic biographer toward her subject. At times, the search for Maar is staged as an extremely personal and erratic affair: "I began to

love Dora” (p. 166); the author sees her mother’s face in Dora’s portrait; “I did not even want to understand what she was thinking anymore: she disgusted me” (p. 189). But in the penultimate chapter, the relationship “resolves” with the author’s meditation at Maar’s grave. Some readers may not appreciate the occasional excursions into the mundane and the capricious. She includes chapters on a plumber’s address, a pretext to discuss the installation at Maar’s behest of a full bath in Picasso’s studio; a chapter on two graphologists, who “confirm” Maar’s character; one on her Russian manicurist (Maar took pride in her exquisite hands); and one on her cat Moumoune, a gift of dubious intention from Picasso. The author also indulges on rare occasions in pure speculation, as when she invents an entire narrative to explain the provenance of graffiti (Dora Maa, sic.) on an old pillar in an Arlesian quay. On the other hand, Benkamoun asserts that she has maintained a principled approach to the project: “I left [sensational details] out when they were only gossip. I do not believe I betrayed her” (p. 204).

As an investigation of the company Maar kept when she was still in her prime (forty-four years old), the book convincingly portrays a vigorous, uncompromising, and independent artist, still recognizably intelligent, mercurial, and aloof, but certainly not the miserable and isolated discard of a great man. In these middle years, Maar continued to produce paintings and confer with artists and gallery owners. In scrutinizing the addresses, Benkamoun realizes that Maar had a particular affinity with poets: Éluard, Ponge, Jouve, Léger, and du Bouchet. In fact, she maintained a close friendship with du Bouchet with whom she shared long country walks and conversations on religious faith, and with whom she collaborated to produce an illustrated volume of poetry. Benkamoun admits to wanting to claim 1951 as the year Dora became herself. “That would give my address book meaning. ... She had managed to survive six years without Picasso. She was coming out of her depression. God, Lacan, and painting were the three pillars of an undoubtedly fragile equilibrium that nevertheless let her claim, ‘My destiny is magnificent whatever it seems. In the past I used to say my destiny is very hard whatever it seems’” (p. 184). Most certainly, Benkamoun’s patient sleuthing of the leads furnished by an otherwise diminutive document convinces the reader that Maar’s universe was complex and stimulating and that art remained for her—and for some time—a means of direct engagement with her world.

NOTES

[1] James Lord, *Picasso and Dora: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993); Mary Ann Caws, *Picasso’s Weeping Woman: The Life and Art of Dora Maar* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000).

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ISSN 1553-9172