

REVIEW

MASTERPIECE: 'WOMAN WITH LEAVES' (1934) BY PABLO PICASSO

Making And Looking

BY CHARLES RAY

I RECENTLY VISITED "Picasso Sculpture" at the Museum of Modern Art and was surprised by how taken I was with "Woman With Leaves" (1934). It's a small figurative work, and it easily could be overlooked in the exhibition, as it's placed in a room full of larger and more imposing sculptures. It's a scrappy little piece made of dingy cast-plaster forms assembled and stacked into a figure of a woman. At first glance it is so Picassoesque that you almost need go no further: Assembled forms becoming parts of another whole. The relation of one to the other is charming and easily understood. But if you stop and look, this sculpture's stack of plaster shapes and forms becomes a precariously balanced and dynamic event.

By "precariously balanced" I don't mean that it's about to fall apart before our eyes. Rather, it is possessed of a quality that keeps the viewer intimately engaged by forcing him to juggle dual perceptions simultaneously. "Woman With Leaves" holds together both as a physical object and as an image. At the same time, part of the visual experience of the sculpture is its clearly visible separate sections.

The sculpture reads to me as an essay centered on the human act of making. As you walk around it, decisions Picasso made when casting and imparting forms in plaster become apparent. These seem both technical and intuitive. The process of making small impromptu molds from cardboard, filling them with wet plaster, stacking the resulting forms, and imprinting garden textures and shapes of leaves in the plaster itself gives this sculpture a fluid physicality that creates

a complex narrative of art-making and sculptural becoming.

The viewer perceives the scale of "Woman With Leaves" as that of a figurine. Out of wet plaster, a matchbox-size rectangle with round holes for eyes forms the figure's head. The corrugated cardboard becomes drapery in folds, an abstract garment. Leaves fully imprinted

A complex narrative of art-making and sculptural becoming.

in plaster create the image of the mythic Daphne becoming a tree—or, if one moves around the axis of the sculpture, the imprinted forms become like wings. Around again, and they remind one of an ancient figure holding a docile animal. These shifting associations are not occurring from one stationary view, but appear because you are drawn into and around the small figure.

But soon the viewer is returned to the real world of masking tape, razor knives and the construction of the sculpture. Image recedes and Picasso's hands emerge, so evident in the process. This shifting back and forth between elements and processes of construction, then giving way to rendered images—form and content—vibrates and dances, with neither one dominating.

The creative process here is not simply a means to an end. This little sculpture is not just made of stuff from the world filtered into the art by artist and studio—impressions of cardboard molds, leaf forms, and an armature

of Greek myth, all juxtaposed, stacked and composed until an image appears. It is also "made" as the viewer is brought into and around the work in the act of visual investigation that the elements and evidence of its construction invite.



AS YOU WALK around it, Picasso's creative decisions become apparent.

The magic of the sculpture is how the artist and the viewer join their intuitions. Picasso used his in the construction of the sculpture, and the sculpture is understood only through an intuitive method of looking. This relationship of making and looking is what makes the sculpture.

The most electric and energetic force field of creativity arises in this small yet powerful artwork that cannot be separated from the space and time of its own making. This experience does not come from a reading of the image or the process by itself, but from an engagement with the dynamic of becoming. This little sculpture stood its ground. Picasso's hand was everywhere in it, and as he seemed to be present in the making, I became present in the viewing. This, I think, is how a good sculpture can steal an exhibition even when surrounded by rooms of greater art.

Mr. Ray, a sculptor who lives and works in Los Angeles, recently had an 18-year retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago and Kunstmuseum Basel.

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