

Nushin Elahi's London Letter



Picasso and British Art at Tate Britain until 15 July is an extensive and scholarly study of Picasso and his influence on modern British artists. It explores the rather chilly reception Picasso received in Britain, while looking at seven key British artists for whom he was an important stimulus, among them David Hockney, Henry Moore and Francis Bacon.

Picasso defied labels. The only consistent theme through his work was power and vitality, but seeing the sweeping range of his art is almost like seeing a group exhibition. It was "life from a constantly changing viewpoint" as one of the 1930s magazines put it. His work may be rooted in tradition and history, but above all, he was a radical artist searching out new experiences.

There is some irony in the fact that Hockney remembers queuing for the Tate's great 1960 Picasso exhibition, which half a million people attended. Today, the long lines in London have been at the Royal Academy for Hockney's own exhibition, rather than this Spanish artist whose infinitely varied responses to life inspired Hockney to constantly open himself to fresh ideas. The fact that the exhibition isn't drawing the hordes simply means a much more pleasant opportunity to assess this giant of the twentieth century. At the same time it is the history of British collectors and collections, charting how Picasso's work came to these shores, from early advocates such as Roger Fry to the Tate's own purchase of *The Three Dancers* in 1965 from the artist himself, a work he considered one of his two greatest (the other being MOMA's *Les Femmes d'Alger*).

It is not an exhibition that blows you away at the outset. Instead, it takes you through the myriad stages of Picasso's development, with some pairings that are perhaps tenuous, but others that jolt you into a new appreciation of both artists. There is a wonderful symmetry in Hockney's reprise of Picasso's costume designs, Henry Moore's large reclining nudes and Picasso's monumental classical women, Francis Bacon's distorted and anguished figures and Picasso's darker images of the human body. The range of Picasso's work is impressive: early waif-like figures, signature Cubist constructions and paintings, loving portraits of Marie-Therese, drawings of *Guernica*, the *Weeping Woman* series and two Cubist interpretations of old masters. Alongside that are seldom seen British works, such as early Bacons, Moore maquettes and stunning Ben Nicholson oils. This is an exhibition which demands intense viewing, but rewards you with a new insight into the unfolding history of British art and collecting.

Ben Nicholson may have connected Picasso's Cubist period with their coded images of their lovers, but he was even more taken with the abstraction of Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, as a small show at the **Courtauld** (until 20 May) reveals. **Mondrian | Nicholson: In Parallel** looks at their friendship during the unsettled decade before the war. They met in Paris when Nicholson was a rising star of modern British art, and twenty years his senior, Mondrian was well-established. The serenity of their work contrasts with the turbulence of the era, which they tried to counter with their art. Although always two artists exploring their own

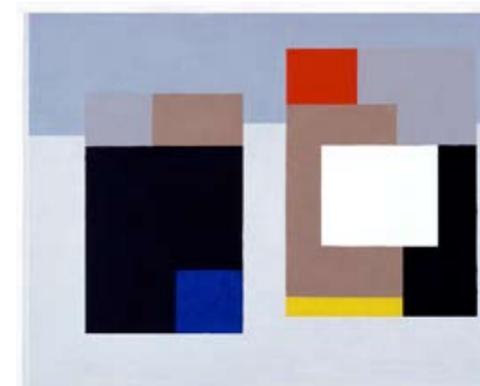
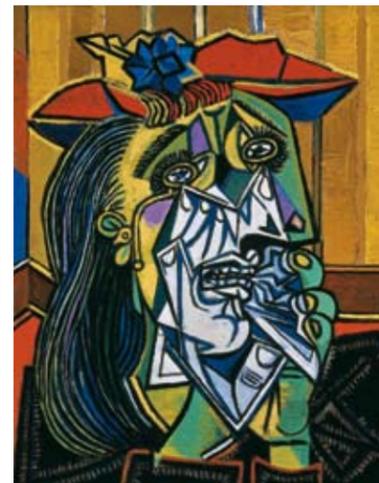
creativity, at times their work follows a similar visual vocabulary, such as the blocks of lines and colour which Nicholson used centrally and Mondrian on the edge of a canvas. By the time the war drove Mondrian to New York and his friend to St Ives those intersecting lines had parted, but their work forms a tranquil oasis in the chaos of war.

A major retrospective of Italian artist **Alighiero Boetti: Game Plan** is on at the **Tate Modern** until 27 May. Like his compatriot Burri, he is associated with the Arte Povera movement and the show opens with work he made from everyday objects in the late Sixties. He was soon exploring other ideas in his art, one of them being the image of the artist as divine shaman and public showman, but that duality inspired him to reach beyond his immediate world. The element of playfulness, of order and disorder, of patterns, time and language are themes that constantly run through his work. There are huge beautiful blue biro drawings which may display a consummate waste of time, but are also incredibly textual; tapestries made up of the names of the longest rivers which demonstrate the absurdities of classification and a series of postal works which play on colours of stamps and return-to-senders. Throughout his life Boetti collaborated with other artists, many of them Afghan weavers who added their own voice to the maps he made of the changing world. From the randomness of a light that switches on for 11 seconds a year, and no-one knows when, to the marks on a tapestry that represent the chimes of a church clock, or a counting game, this is an artist who challenges the viewer to participate and the more you understand the rules of the games he is playing the more you will enjoy them.

Jeremy Deller's art doesn't fit easily into an art gallery. In 2004 he won the Turner Prize for his quite extraordinary project of re-enacting one of the bloodiest battles during the miners' strike of the 80s, something he had seen as a teenager on telly. *The Battle of Orgreave, or A Blow to One is a Blow to All* is one of the chief exhibits on this retrospective at the **Hayward Gallery, Joy to the People** (until 13 May). Deller sees himself as a storyteller, celebrating the element of surprise in experience, rather than a creator of objects. This fascination with the quirky side of humanity has led to the intriguing projects on show, from an early exhibition in his bedroom as a schoolboy, to a film on the infinite variety of fans of the band Depeche Mode, a garden project in Germany, a discussion tour of America with a car wrecked in an Iraqi suicide bomb attack and a film on bats. It seems he has an insatiable appetite for capturing the pulse of a culture. It may be hard to experience the full impact of one of his projects in a gallery, but Deller puts performance art on a remarkable plane.

Cartoonist **David Shrigley's Brain Activity** upstairs at the Hayward (until 13 May) is altogether a different matter: quirky it may be, but so slight as to be entirely missable.

Far more interesting is **Johan Zoffany – Society Observed** at the Royal Academy until 10 June. An outsider whose penetrating view of Georgian society included not only royalty and the court, but actors and artists, his detailed canvasses are full of wry humour and meticulous observation.



Images: Left to Right T-B

- Jeremy Deller, *Battle of Orgreave*
- Jeremy Deller, *Joy in People* banner
- Alighiero Boetti: *Aerei* 1989
- Pablo Picasso: *Weeping Woman (Femme en pleurs)* 1937
- Alighiero Boetti: *Mappa*
- Pablo Picasso: *Nude Woman in a Red Armchair* 1932
- Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is* (2009)
- Ben Nicholson (1894-1982): 1940-43 (two forms)
- Pablo Picasso: *Study for Guernica* 2 May 1937