the missing Surrealist

Much more than Picasso's onetime companion, Dora Maar produced a diverse range of highly imaginative artworks over seven decades.

By Richard Kalina

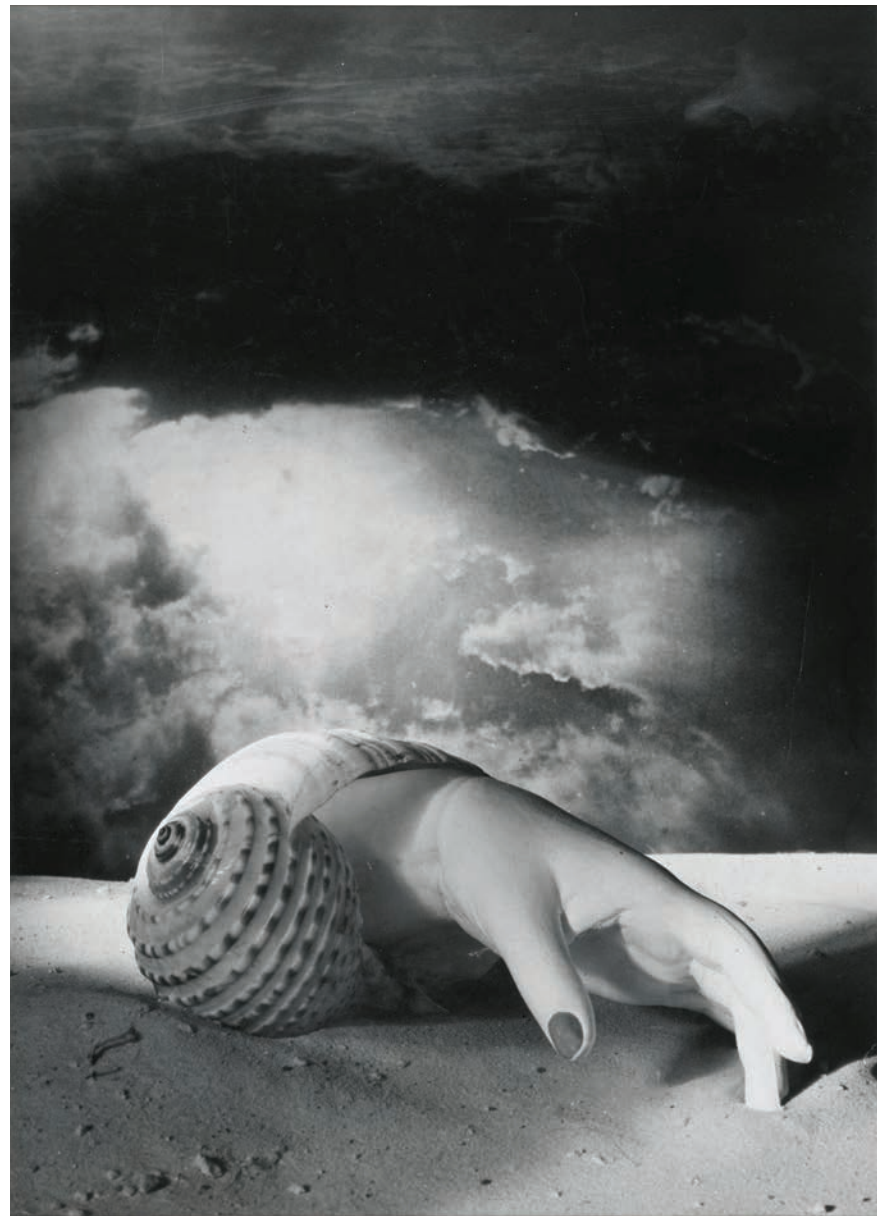
Musée national Picasso, Paris. © Estate Brassaï – RMN-Grand Palais.

LARGE-SCALE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITIONS at major venues generally serve to cement a leading artist's place even more firmly in the canon, but they rarely change people's minds. The recent Andy Warhol exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York or the Joan Miró show at the Grand Palais in Paris, for example, basically gave a certain amount of shading and definition to a well-known body of work, while affirming for a wider audience the artists' ongoing importance. Surveys of less familiar but still well-established figures like Francis Picabia or Simon Hantaï (at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Centre Pompidou, Paris, respectively) have taken pains to highlight unexpected facets of their oeuvres, so that we say, "I didn't know they did that." And finally, certain monographic shows, driven by the efforts of an important critical thinker—scholar and curator Kirk Varnedoe on behalf of Gustave Caillebotte, for example, or biographer Hayden Herrera for Frida Kahlo—have resulted in an artist long considered second-tier being vaulted into prominence, their work suddenly aligned with the contemporary zeitgeist.

The case of Dora Maar, however, is intriguingly different. The subject last summer of a full-scale Centre Pompidou survey that is now at Tate Modern in London and will travel this spring to the Getty Center in Los Angeles, Maar, for contemporary audiences, especially non-French ones, was until recently virtually unknown as an artist. If remembered at all, she was thought of as one of Picasso's longer-lasting love interests, slotted in between Marie-Thérèse Walter and Françoise Gilot, or maybe as the subject of Picasso's famous 1937 series "Weeping Woman," but scarcely as an important artist in her own right. Yet to see her simply as Picasso's muse is to sell her seriously short.

The traveling exhibition—titled simply "Dora Maar" and featuring well over four hundred works and documents—puts that error to right, offering us an in-depth examination of a productive and multifaceted artist, a photographer and painter of real interest and complexity.[1] In addition, the catalogue and various responding articles open up an expanded view of the Surrealist enterprise and of the French art world of the late 1920s through the 1940s. These texts bring into focus not just Maar's considerable contributions but also those of a network of women friends—including Jacqueline Lamba, Nusch Éluard, Lee Miller, Claude Cahun, Rogi André, and Lise Deharme—all of whom were part of the Surrealist circle.

Maar (1907–1997) led a long and complex life. She was born Henriette Théodora Markovitch (Dora was a childhood nickname) in Paris to a French Catholic mother and a Croatian architect father who was quite possibly Jewish—although Dora, a fervent Catholic from the mid-'40s onward, denied it.[2] She spent her early years in Buenos Aires, where her father went to practice. Fluent in both French and Spanish, she traveled back and forth between Paris and Buenos Aires, going to school in both places, until she returned to France permanently with her mother in 1920. In 1923 Markovitch (as she was then still known) began her art studies at the Union centrale des Arts décoratifs, a school that prepared young women for careers in



Dora Maar: *Untitled (Hand-Shell)*, 1934, gelatin silver print, 15¾ by 11⅞ inches.

***Model in Swimsuit*, 1936,** gelatin silver print, 7¾ by 6½ inches.

Opposite, Brassaï: *Dora Maar in her rue de Savoie studio*, 1943, gelatin silver print, 9 by 11¾ inches.

Hand-Shell: Centre Pompidou, Paris. *Swimsuit*: J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. All Maar artwork this article © ADAGP, Paris/DACS, London/ARS, New York.

the decorative arts. There she became involved in the city's cultural scene and met a lifelong friend, the painter Jacqueline Lamba, who was to become the second wife of André Breton, the acknowledged leader (and gatekeeper) of the Surrealists. Following her graduation, Markovitch attended classes at the Académie Julian and at the atelier of the painter André Lhote. At Lhote's studio, she got to know Henri Cartier-Bresson, then still determined to be a painter. Urged by her friend the art critic Marcel Zahar, Markovitch enrolled in the École technique de photographie et de cinematographie. In 1927 she took the advice of Emmanuel Sougez, the photography director of the magazine *L'Illustration*, and abandoned painting to pursue photography.

This was both a practical decision and an artistically fruitful one. Although she was to shift her focus away from photography in the later '30s to return to painting, the camera allowed Maar to fully hone her technical skills and develop the wide-ranging aesthetic that gives her work a strong claim on our attention today. Painters of any stripe had a hard time making a go of it in interwar Paris, and women faced additional obstacles. But photography, being a more multivalent enterprise in which the line between the artistic and the commercial was hazy, provided ambitious women with a better chance of finding a place in the creative world and earning a living from their work. The medium scarcely challenged painting or sculpture for preeminence, and this enabled women photographers like Maar and her friends to get past the defenses of men who were artists themselves or who wrote about them. In addition, photography carried with it a strong sense of the fashionable and sexy—something that the Surrealists were especially keen to cultivate. In this exhibition, photography's relationship with Surrealism (seemingly obvious now, but not so earlier on) is clearly and thought-provokingly evident.[3]

***Untitled (Seated model in profile in evening dress and jacket),* 1932–35,** hand-colored gelatin silver print, 11¾ by 9⅜ inches.

Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris.

IN THE LATE '20S AND '30S THERE WERE NOT the same clear-cut divisions between photographic disciplines that came later. Maar could, at roughly the same time, produce high-end fashion photographs, artful advertising pictures, flattering studio portraits, figure studies, soft-core pornography for a "charm magazine," gritty street scenes, documentary shots, politically inflected images, rigorous formal compositions, and the complex, disturbing, and beautifully crafted Surrealist photomontages that are her most memorable creations. When she returned to art photography later in life, she investigated direct gestural manipulation of the negative, producing striking work that is entirely abstract.

Maar approached the craft of photography carefully and deliberately, picking up technical expertise and cultivating the sort of contacts that she would need. She met Brassaï as he was starting out on his career in photography and shared a studio with him in Montparnasse. She also became friendly with Man Ray, who offered his help and advice, and with his then lover Lee Miller. She worked as the assistant to a successful fashion photographer, Harry Ossip Meerson, whose studio was on the same street as Ray's. In 1931 she formed a professional partnership with Pierre Kéfer, a film-set designer, and they opened a studio. At that point, she changed her professional name to Dora Maar—a shortening of Markovitch—and for a number of years her photographs were stamped with "Kéfer-Dora Maar," although she likely did almost all the actual photography.

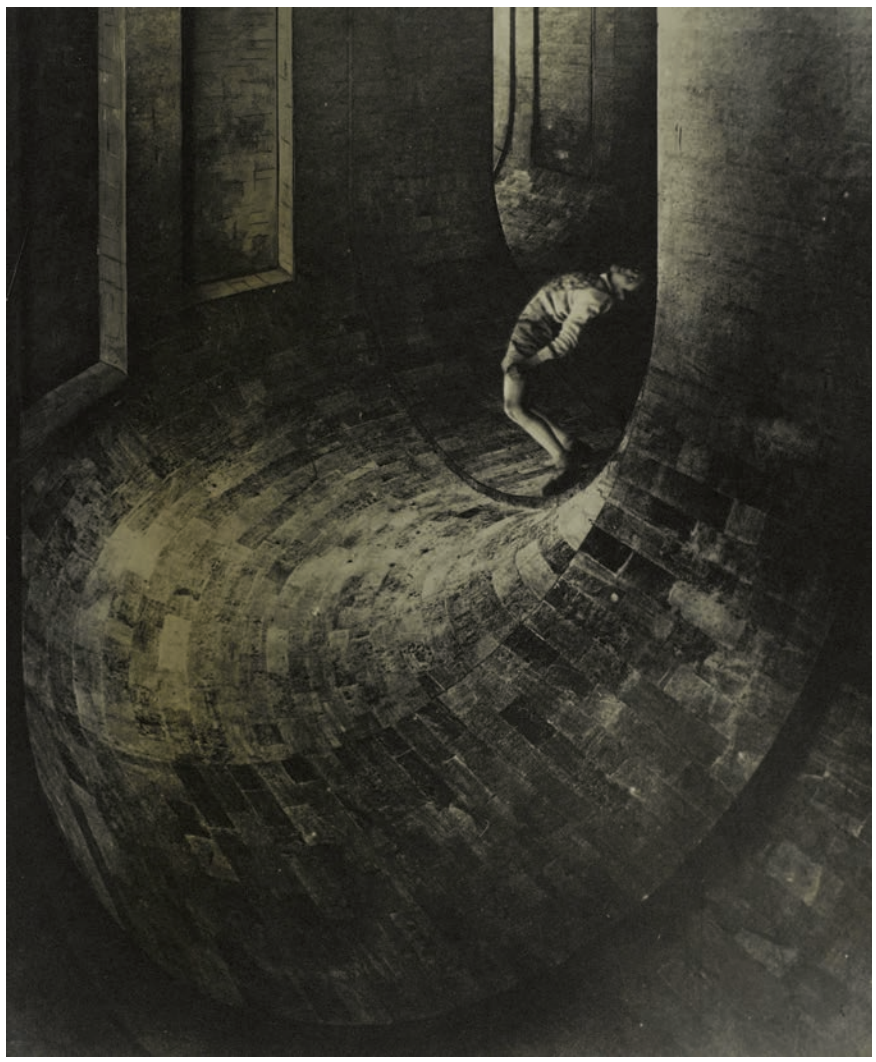
Maar's fashion and advertising photography feels remarkably advanced, subordinating obvious glamour to Surrealist-inspired invention. *Les années vous guettent* (The Years Lie in Wait for You), ca. 1935, probably used in an advertisement for an anti-aging cream, shows a spider and its web superimposed in white over the beautiful, pensive face of Maar's close friend Nusch Éluard, wife of the Surrealist poet Paul Éluard. Nusch's face is placed above the centerline of the frame, and to the left, with the spider set directly between her eyes. The lighting (a specialty of Maar's) is both soft and highly contrasted. It is a strange and compelling image, and if we were not aware that this was an advertising picture, we would see it as a successful artistic photograph in its own right.

The same might be said for *Shampooing,* or *Femme aux cheveux avec savon* (Shampoo, or Woman's Hair with Soap), 1934, an elongated horizontal image, which consists of a woman's head in profile, her hair whitened with soap and flying out straight in front of her. Hands push at the back of her scalp, seemingly setting the hair in motion. The image looks like a Greek or Roman bust, but an extraordinarily strange one.

Even the more straightforward fashion pictures, like a 1935 image of a model in a white satin dress, are imbued with individuality and invention. The photograph was shot from a low angle, the model's body canted, her head in the corner of the frame, and her long gloved arm set at an angle to the body's tilt. The photo features full Caravaggio-style chiaroscuro, and the model's smoothly crimped blond hair and impassive face again bring to mind Classical statuary seen

William Talbott Hillman Collection.

***The years lie in wait for you*, ca. 1935,** gelatin silver print, 13 by 10 inches.



***The Pretender,* 1935,** gelatin silver print, 19 by 13¾ inches.

Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris.

through a Surrealist lens. Moreover, the dress with its stiffened, vaguely fleur-de-lis bodice is odd but completely gorgeous. It is, of course, much easier to see these photographs as art when they are taken out of the context of advertisements, framed and printed on good paper, isolated and stripped of their utility and ready recognizability by both the passage of time and the removal of text.

Advertising photography at the time set its sights on the expanding women's market, promoting the idea of the modern woman as independent, adventurous, and athletic. This was largely an alluring commercial fiction. Most women—bound to the home, shop, or factory—did not enjoy that degree of liberty, but Maar and her friends actually lived such lives. And they put their exceptional autonomy to use. Even while Maar did work for hire that highlighted glamour and fashion, she was actively engaged with the political left, associating herself with the agitprop theater company Groupe Octobre, joining the anti-fascist group Contre-Attaque (founded by Georges Bataille and Breton), signing petitions, and participating in explicitly partisan exhibitions and projects. In line with her social convictions, she traveled to London and Barcelona to photograph, quite sensitively, working-class people.

Untitled (Blind street peddler, Barcelona), 1933, shows a man dressed in a white smock sitting on a chair in front of a closed, corrugated storefront gate, his head tilted slightly to the side and up. Impassive and unsmiling, he presents a kind of internal stare, cradling a rounded, cloth-wrapped object in his left arm while delicately gripping a white bowl in his right. His scuffed-up white cane is hooked over his left thigh and under his right. The subtle play of diagonals—the angle of his head, the counterbalanced slant of his shoulders, the differing tilt of the objects he is holding—creates an image that combines stillness with the potential for movement. More than anything, the pose evokes in the quietest of ways a Madonna and child or a pietà.

Balancing the somber feeling of that photograph is the jolly picture of four laughing people at la Boquería, Barcelona's lively (and still active) food market. Caught in a geometric composition, they all apparently work at a charcuterie stand, amid a welter of hanging scales, meat on hooks, and assorted lights, chains, and wires. One of the women rubs or playfully covers one eye with her hand; another has placed a hand on her forehead. The four are clearly chummy, working hard but enjoying themselves. Maar's photographs of laborers, the unemployed, and the marginalized are never sentimental or condescending, and never overtly ideological. Taken in the midst of the Depression, the pictures capture, above all, their subjects' humanity. In the process Maar creates images of real compositional and tonal complexity, imbued with the same technical expertise and idiosyncratic formal sensibility that characterize her other photographic work.

MAAR'S SURREALIST PHOTOS, HER BEST-KNOWN work, use the full range of her skills—especially darkroom techniques—combined with the new freedom of imagination and the loosened expectation of logical causality that Surrealism allowed its practitioners. Most of the examples are collages, re-photographed to remove them from the realm of handiwork. This gives the pictures a smooth, distanced surface, drawing on photography's implied verisimilitude to convey a dreamlike uncanniness, a cognitive ambiguity.

One of Maar's most affecting reshot photo-collages is *Le Simulateur* (The Pretender), 1935. To create it, she used one of her Barcelona street photos, which features three young boys hanging out on the street. One of them—bent sharply backward, feet over head, but supported upright somehow—seems to be walking up a wall. For the new photograph Maar excises this figure and places his feet on the ground in a torqued, claustrophobic stone hallway. The architectural structure is a detail from an old photographic print of the Palace of Versailles, and the mood evoked is one of barely contained hysteria. "Hysteria" is no longer used as a term for a specific psychiatric condition, but the Surrealists were especially fond of the concept—seeing it as a useful tool (rather like automatism or dreaming) and a portal to another state of

reality. Hysteria was, for them, something to be cultivated rather than cured.

Maar's single most famous Surrealist picture, *Portrait d'Ubu* (1936), is a straight photograph, but a deeply strange one. Softly lit, closely cropped, it depicts a not immediately recognizable creature (in all likelihood an armadillo or an armadillo fetus) set against a dark background. The subject is scaly, rubbery, and clawed, with a bulbous head, a long snout, and darkened partially hooded eyes (only one of which is turned to the lens). It gazes at us with indifference mingled with menace, and the image speaks of the irony-tinged cruelty that so fascinated the Surrealists. The title of the photograph is to the point. Père Ubu, the kingly character created at the end of the nineteenth century by the playwright Alfred Jarry, was a favorite of the Surrealists (who also esteemed the Marquis de Sade). Ubu is funny, absurd, ridiculously

In 1937, the French magazine *Cahiers d'art* commissioned Maar to photograph Picasso's painting-in-progress, *Guernica*, in his studio on Rue des Grands-Augustins, Paris, gelatin silver prints, approx. 7⅞ by 11¾ inches each.

as any contemporary artist in France. Although he famously possessed a forceful character, Maar was a formidable and independent woman and could well hold her own—in the early part of their relationship, at least. Maar and Picasso worked closely together, she giving him technical advice and helping with photographically related prints, he inspiring her art.

Importantly, Maar documented the painting of Picasso's mural *Guernica*, from May 11, 1937 (shortly after its beginning on May 1), to its completion on June 4. Photographing such a huge painting was a technically daunting job, made more difficult by the studio's poor lighting, and required extensive darkroom work. The visual record was commissioned by Christian Zervos for his journal *Cahiers d'art*. Maar's eight pictures show a fascinating evolution, highlighting Picasso's concentration on the interplay of light and dark and reinforcing the black-and-white

Musée national Picasso, Paris. Photos © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource.

arbitrary and impulsive, but also cowardly, cruel, grasping, and vicious—a concoction of pure id.

In the mid-'30s, Surrealism was well entrenched in the French cultural scene. Its combination of transgression, mystery, eroticism, and political engagement, along with a call for total personal freedom, proved irresistible to many—among them, not surprisingly, Picasso. The Surrealists were a tightly knit group, so once he became associated with the movement, it was inevitable that he would cross paths with Maar. They first met, according to Brassaï, in late 1935, and drew closer to each other in 1936. They became a couple, but their relationship was fatally damaged by Picasso's affair with Françoise Gilot, whom he met in 1943 and became seriously involved with the following year. Maar and Picasso broke up completely in 1946.

But back when they originally got together, Picasso was already in his mid-fifties, more than twenty-five years older than Maar, and as renowned

painting's connection with photography. Not only was Picasso intimately involved with a photographer who was a darkroom expert and thus keenly aware of the emergence and control of tones, but the images of devastation that inspired the painting were black-and-white shots from newspapers and the newsreels that Picasso, a regular moviegoer, in all likelihood saw. While infused with a host of art historical references, *Guernica*, shown at the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 Paris International Exposition and used to generate support for the embattled Republican government, was also intensely of its moment—something that its photographic connection clearly reinforced.

In the summer of 1937, evidently under Picasso's influence, Maar returned to painting. Her artistic production during their relationship was closely attuned to his. The lively, colorful Cubist work from the late '30s, seen to good effect in two nicely articulated pastel portraits of Picasso, is skillfully executed and well-composed, but the paintings of the war years,

Top, *Untitled (Pablo Picasso)*, 1936, pastel on paper, 22⅝ by 17¾ inches.

Middle, *Untitled (Still life)*, 1941, oil on canvas, 19¾ by 24 inches.

Bottom, *Untitled (Luberon landscape)*, 1950s, oil on canvas, 21⅝ by 18 inches.

including various fully recognizable still lifes along with more abstracted images like *La Cage* (1943) and *Les Quais de la Seine* (1944), touch us more directly. Like Picasso's works from the same period, they use a subdued and darkened palette and employ a limited set of objects and forms. They are quiet, somber works, imbued with the air of sadness and fear that pervaded occupied France.

In the immediate postwar years, Maar, although embarked on a promising painting career, withdrew from the world of exhibitions. She continued to work on her own, but the momentum was broken. Those times were difficult for Maar. She suffered a nervous breakdown in 1945, and was hospitalized and treated with electroshock therapy (by Jacques Lacan). In 1946, her old friend Nusch Éluard collapsed and died from a cerebral hemorrhage while they were having lunch together. Soon thereafter, her relationship with Picasso came to a definitive end. These were real blows, but Maar was, as ever, determined and resourceful. Fortified by her religious faith, she persevered. Before her split from Picasso, she had—with his help—bought a house in the southern French town of Ménerbes, where she would spend part of the year for the rest of her life. She had many friends there, including the painter Nicolas de Staël, and maintained an active social—and, to a certain extent, professional—life in Paris and Provence for a number of years.

Maar continued painting, producing a wide range of works, from portraiture to semi-abstract landscapes to gestural works to complex geometric constructions. None of her postwar works remotely resembled Picasso's. She also resumed her photographic investigations, moving away from easily read imagery to photograms and abstract manipulated prints and negatives. The late works are technically and conceptually adventurous, and in the case of some of the untitled hand-colored negatives from the 1980s, ravishingly beautiful. One particularly appealing image features a diagonal wave of color, rising from left to right, held in check by a transparent linear geometric form that picks up the swoop of the wave, but transforms its colors into bright reds, lavenders, and yellow-oranges.

Maar's life and art encapsulate a most interesting set of concerns and problems. Chief among them is the place of a varied oeuvre. A wide-ranging practice is fine if you are, say, Gerhard Richter or Picasso—artists not just of great material, stylistic, and formal variety, but of immense productivity. It has traditionally been a harder struggle, however, for women who have moved between mediums to convince the world that they are suitably focused and serious. Being associated, as Maar was, with a much better-known male artist (a vexed status shared with her contemporary, the brilliantly inventive Sophie Taeuber-Arp) makes that problem all the more difficult. Maar's overall career amply illustrates the importance of luck, persistence, and a long-sustained presence in the art world. It also exposes the double-edged nature of fashionability (what is most au courant—as certain aspects of Surrealism once were—inevitably falls quite out of favor in due

Top: Collection Yann Panier, courtesy Galerie Brame & Lorenceau. Middle: Galerie Makassar-France, Paris. Bottom: Collection Nancy B. Negley.

time), as well as the iffy-ness of a career push offered by a romantic association with a powerful artist—a real plus (especially at the beginning) but one that comes at a high reputational price.

We are fortunate that the curators—two photography specialists from the Pompidou and one from the Getty—put this thorough and well-researched exhibition into play now. The times are ripe for a deepened appreciation of the role of photography in early to mid-twentieth-century art, particularly in relation to Surrealism, and it is now accepted that stylistic and material diversity in a larger oeuvre is not a negative. But most of all, there is a consensus, many years in the making, that women have been seriously underrepresented, that the history of modernism is not a closed book nor a zero-sum game, and that women need to be given their due. Maar's well-deserved ascendance from obscurity to serious institutional acceptance does nothing to diminish the accomplishments of others, but rather gives added resonance to a period of great aesthetic, social, intellectual, and political interest, showing us in the process a very fine artist at work. ●

[1] The ground for this retrospective was prepared by four smaller museum exhibitions that originated in Europe between 1997 and 2014. (See the "Chronology" section of Damarice Amao, Amanda Maddox, and Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska, eds, Dora Maar, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019, p. 191.) Previously, Maar was very much under the radar. When she died in 1997, her art was auctioned off, most of it in barely documented lots. The sale did generate a good deal of public interest, but only because it included several Picassos that Maar had owned.

[2] Having Jewish roots in France during the war put you at considerable risk. While Maar stayed in France with Picasso, her father returned to the safety of Buenos Aires shortly after France was occupied.

[3] Surrealist photography—that is, work that is Surrealist in itself rather than depicting Surrealist art—occupied a relatively small place in the movement's major exhibitions, which concentrated on objects and paintings. Photography was more commonly included in publications connected to Surrealism. The current reevaluation of Surrealism's relation to photography started in earnest with "Photographic Surrealism" (1979) at the New Gallery (now the Museum) of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, and gathered momentum in the early '80s. Today it would be scarcely thinkable to have a broadly based Surrealist show without a sizable photographic presence.

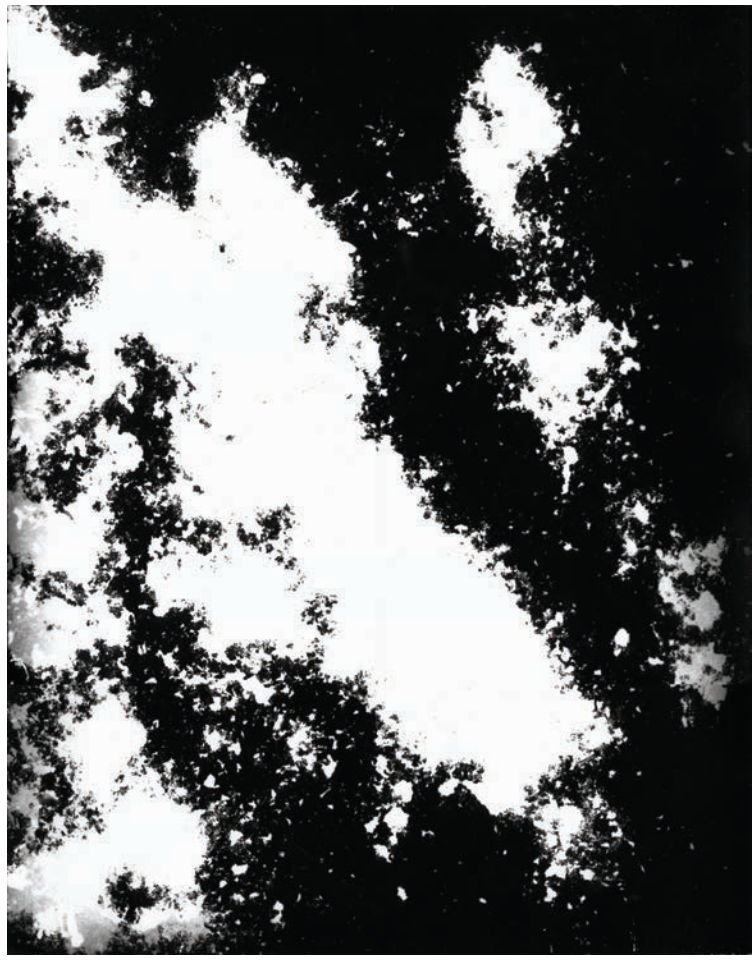
RICHARD KALINA, a New York-based artist and critic, recently curated the group show "The Unusual Suspects: A View of Abstraction" at DC Moore Gallery.

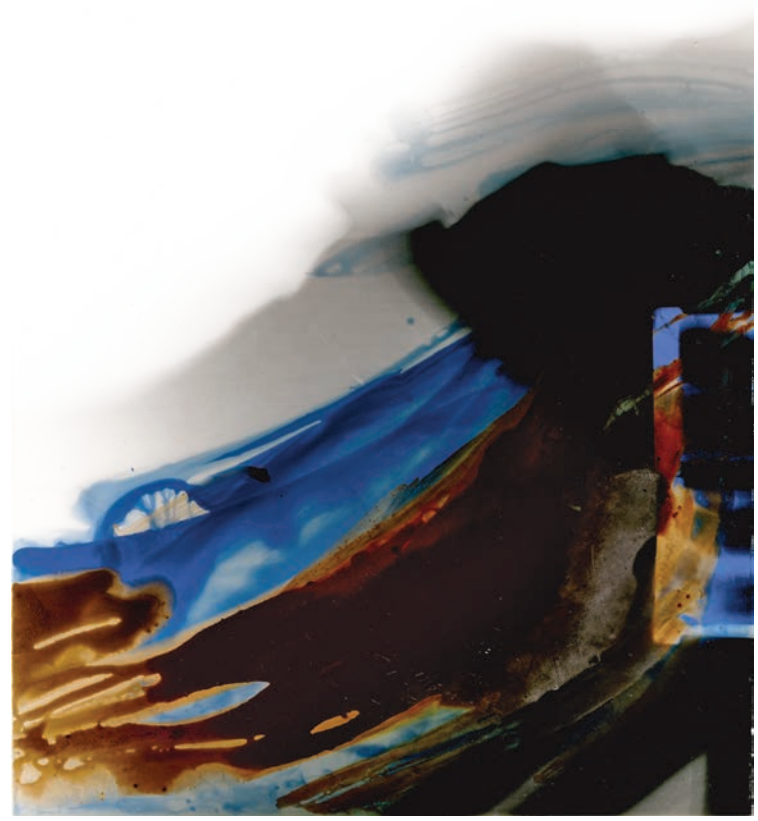
CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Dora Maar," at Tate Modern, London, through Mar. 15. The show will subsequently appear at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Apr. 21–July 26.

Below left, Untitled, ca. 1980, gelatin silver print, 11¾ by 9¼ inches

Below right, Untitled, ca. 1980, hand-colored gelatin silver print, 9½ by 7 inches.





Galerie Michèle Chomette, Paris.