

DISCUSSION OF DRS. BLUM'S PAPERS ON PICASSO AND HIS MODELS

DESY SAFÁN-GERARD, PH. D.

PRESENTED AT LAPSI, LOS ANGELES, CA

APRIL 2002

Discussion of Drs. Blum's paper on Picasso and his Models

Desy Safán-Gerard, Ph.D.

A writing team of a psychoanalyst and an artist is ideally suited to reflect on Picasso's work and his models. I want to thank Drs. Blum for their rich and stimulating paper and Dr. Dreyfuss-Katan for offering me the opportunity to respond to it.

As Drs. Blum state at the beginning of their paper, the concept of "model" encompasses not only the external person facing the artist but also the conscious and unconscious internal representation of other people and the work of other artists. The use of harlequins, saltimbanques and circus performers during Picasso's blue and rose period was also found in the work of Cezanne, Degas, and Seurat but they may have revealed a different purpose for them. It appears that in the case of Picasso they stood as a metaphor for the life of the vagabond, living in the fringe of society. He and his friends used to frequent the circus quite often, sometimes several times a week. In several paintings of the blue and rose period Picasso chose to represent himself and his friends this way and particularly in the *Family of Saltimbanques* (a large oil 212 cm x 229 cm). Drs. Blum ask why the saltimbanques were especially salient objects for identification during this particular period 1904-1905. Picasso may have wanted to suggest that behind the colorful attires of these performers lie a life of conflict and sadness. In all

of these paintings the expression in the saltimbanques' faces is sad and distant. In the self-portrait the artist is the conscious external model but other figures are often expressions of self portraiture because the artist cannot avoid projecting aspects of himself into models, including inanimate objects. In a recent body of work I used a model moving slowly to one of Shostakovich's quartets. My aim was not to do figurative paintings but to extract from my model's movements the motion itself. I ended up using two different watercolor pencils, one on each hand working on a table with a wet on wet technique. Even though the resulting watercolors are abstract, one can discern the interplay between the scribbles of the right hand, supple and graceful and the scribbles of the left hand, jagged and messy. Is it possible that they represent my loving, reparative feelings in contrast with the aggressive, destructive ones? One is left to ponder if what I am doing in these paintings is dealing with the interaction of these opposite forces within me. I was "in love" with Sara while doing these paintings. She may have represented the beautiful mother of infancy. I want to believe that her beauty and her response to the music, which was essential for me, helped me reach some form of integration and harmony of my loving and destructive feelings.

There are unconscious motives in the artist's choice of a model. The saltimbanques may have been so chosen because of Picasso's need to project onto them conflictual aspects of himself. They may have been chosen because they represented the folly and pathos of the human condition. They lacked

roots, social status and personal as well as national identity. They may have represented the alienation Picasso probably felt after leaving Spain and his uncertainty about his new life in Paris. With their special skills and tricks, the saltimbanques replaced the often pathetic, helpless-looking models of his blue period. Through his choice of models it is easy to understand Picasso's view of his paintings as a personal diary and this may be the case for all artists. Moreover, as a representation of Picasso's internal world, Family of Saltimbanques allows the viewer to identify with the whole internal world of Picasso. This is where the gratification aspect lies for the artist, the congruence between the art work and the internal world that should explain itself and not require an exploration of the artist's life to understand it. As art critic Khuns (1983) writes, "art is not simply a working through of the artist's problems and conflicts; it is a representation of universal communal conflicts in which everyone is entangled" (p. 103). This would make any analysis of the meaning of a painting irrelevant or at least simply another exercise in applied psychoanalysis.

Another way of looking at this problem of universality of conflicts is by realizing that while at work each artist tries to get to the truth of the object, a truth that has to correspond with his internal truth (Hanna Segal). This is Bion's absolute truth or O, that cannot be known directly but that is possible through a close relationship with art in progress. In the to and fro with the work states of fusion and separation alternate and there is a constant

loosening of the boundaries between the self and the model. In this situation projections from the self flow into the object, the model. I can think of three examples. In his early paintings Lucian Freud portrays his models with big eyes. A student of his in these early days told me Freud had amazingly big eyes, which he seems to have given to his models.

An artist friend of mine represented the body of Sara, a model we share, actually my model, as much heavier than it actually was. My friend sheepishly admitted that she must have given Sara her own body. Another artist friend of mine had me sit several times for a realistic portrait but to our despair, the resulting image failed to look like me. After close examination we decided that the problem was with the nose. We scheduled another sitting to correct this and in the middle of her work she exclaimed, "I know what happened, Desy! I gave you my nose!". In a Los Angeles Time's recent write-up about a current exhibit in The Prado entitled, The Spanish Portrait: from El Greco to Picasso, Stanley Meisler argues, like many writers, that the portraits reveal as much about the painter as about the sitter. My artist friend could not help putting some of her face into my face and it is interesting to note that it needed a long sitting and careful observation for her to own up her projection.

Back to Picasso's painting. The Family of Saltimbanques brings to mind a painting by Max Beckmann done 12 years later than Picasso's (1918) called Family Scene in which his wife Minna, his son Peter and his mother in law

are in the front plane while he seems unengaged in the background and in a world of his own, pretty much like the characters in Picasso's painting. In *Family Portrait* (1920) two years later, Beckmann also appears uninvolved in the action while he seems to project his narcissism onto his wife who is looking at herself in the mirror, her back to the viewer. In *Before the Mascarade* (1922) another family painting 2 years later he is the only one looking at the viewer, reflecting perhaps a more direct preoccupation with himself rather than projecting this onto other members of the family. The reason these paintings are brought to mind is because in *Family of Saltimbanques* neither of the figures is making eye contact. All the characters appear distant, sad and uninvolved. As Drs. Blum have pointed out, the first figure to the left seems to be representing Picasso himself. He is holding the hand of a little girl, apparently the daughter of the concierge in the building. Is she standing for the little Picasso? The heavy set character may have been the poet Apollinaire or, Don Pepe, another one of his friends. The younger figure next to him may be his friend Max Jacob and may be standing for the younger Picasso and the woman sitting looking at the viewer seems to stand for Ferdinand, his lover. It is interesting that a version of this painting in watercolor and ink done a year earlier does not have Ferdinand in it but a vague allusion to horses running in the same right hand corner of the canvas. This may be alluding to Rosa, the horse rider, Picasso's earliest lover. By the time he did *Family of Saltimbanques* Rosa has been deleted and replaced by

his current lover, Ferdinand. But even in the earlier painting Rosa may be simply represented by the running horses who stand for her.

Let us go back to the projections now. I have been often surprised at the projections viewers engage in when responding to a painting. Years ago I had an exhibit in Palo Alto. One of my colleagues, a well known psychiatrist wanted to have me walk him through it. There was an abstract watercolor and he told me it was very scary. To him it looked like a big mouth out to devour him, something that was not at all in my conscious mind while painting it. He seemed surprised at my ignorance: his interpretation was the only one possible for him. Another colleague, an American Indian anthropologist, came subsequently to the same painting and told me that, for him, the lighter area in the center of the canvas represented a wonderful space that he would like to get lost in for ever and ever. Jokingly I told my friends about the different responses that a Jewish psychiatrist and an American Indian anthropologist would have based on the kinds of mothers they may have had.

Art historians and critics are not exempt from these projections. Years ago I was amazed at the art historians' assessment of Beckmann's paintings and more recently at the response of art critics to the major retrospective of Lucien Freud's paintings at MOCA. In this latter case two critics described a self portrait in which Lucien Freud stands naked in front of the viewer with a

palette in one hand and a palette knife in the other. One of the critics saw him as a fallen God, a pathetic figure, whereas another saw him as menacing and dangerous. All of this suggests that we seem to encounter layers and layers of projections from the artist himself or herself when he chooses a model and later on when he or she engages in an interaction with the work whereby aspects of the self slip in. But all this is done while painting and the artist is seldom aware of what he or she is projecting into the work in progress. Lucien Freud is not alone in claiming that every painting is a self portrait. “Everything is autobiographical, and everything is a portrait – even if it is a chair”, he has said recently. The artist tries to get to the truth of the object by being it. In one of his paintings Lucian painted himself next to a plant. Subsequently he didn’t need to represent himself and painted just the plant or just the chair. He was the plant, he was the chair. Like Picasso, his self-portraits constitute a compelling and intimate exploration of the truth in himself. Apparently Lucian Freud’s choice of sitters reveals a talent for discovering a sense of incipient madness in them that that may have reflected his own. Picasso used his friends as sitters in a similar way. The artist may want to be truly objective and depict the truth of the object, but the object’s truth and the artist’s own truth become indistinguishable.

There are layers and layers of projections when the viewer interacts with the work, irrespective of the amount of knowledge he or she might have about a particular art form and about that particular artist. We can surmise, with Drs.

Blum, that Family of Saltimbanques depicts Picasso at various stages in his development or that the figures stand for Picasso's internal representation of his family, his internal family. We can join Drs. Blum in observing that the figures don't seem to be relating to each other and we can deduce a kind of splitting between different aspects of himself. However, what layer of projection are we dealing with here? If projections are ubiquitous, is it possible to be really objective when it comes to an assessment of a painting? I don't believe we can extricate ourselves from our projections and perhaps the only path available to us psychoanalysts is to recognize them and to be extremely tentative in our "readings". Or to engage in our interpretations - after all this is what has taken us years to learn - while we constantly ask the question, who is projecting here? Or what is being projected here?

Just as it must have done for him Picasso's Family of Saltimbanques gives us a chance to project unwanted and split off aspects of ourselves. Taking back from the work in a conscious level that which has been projected into it on an unconscious level represents the most fruitful and painful result of creativity not only for the artist but also for the viewer. Even when these projections may constitute instances of 'projections into reality', they can be, if we can take them back, the opportunity that artists such as Picasso, Beckmann, or Lucian Freud offer us the viewers towards a new appreciation and acceptance of all aspects of ourselves.