

# PAUL STOLPER

## Dora Maar

Exhibition at Paul Stolper Gallery, 31 Museum Street, London WC1A 1LH  
22 September – 28 October 2023

Paul Stolper is pleased to announce an exhibition of photographs by Dora Maar, born Henriette Markovitch in Paris in 1907. The collection of negatives, original silver gelatin contacts and posthumous silver gelatin prints act as a comprehensive overview of her work, mostly taken during her most productive decade, the 1930's.

Dora Maar studied at the École Technique de Photographie and published her work for the first time in 1930. By 1932 she had set up a company 'Kéfer – Dora Maar', a commercial business that incorporated fashion shoots, advertising, photography for books and magazines, as well as portraits. As a radical and pioneering photographer at a time before distinctions were made between commercial and 'art' photography, and where boundaries between art, advertising and fashion were blurred, Maar produced a body of work that straddled all these media. Much of her advertisement photography fell into the realm between reality and fantasy, which allowed her to sustain both a commercial career and her involvement as an integral member of the burgeoning Surrealist movement in Paris.

The works in the exhibition span the breadth of her photographic output; pioneering street photography that Man Ray and Brassai were simultaneously practising, as exemplified in the 'Jardin des Tuileries' photograph, capturing an empty and still Paris, where the water reflects the strings of lights that run the length of the gardens, and in the two 'Cygnes Sur un Bassin', which mine the Surrealist trope of water reflected to reveal an up-ended fantastical surreal landscape, "testing the nature of the real."<sup>1</sup>

By using a Rolleiflex, first introduced in 1929, a camera which required very little setting up time, and which was light and compact, Maar could capture images almost spontaneously and experimentally. Much like the photographer Eugène Atget had before, she preferred to document the chance encounter as she journeyed through the poorest areas of the city. In 'La Zone' far from the glamour of the recently opened chic fashion boutiques and cafés that crowded G E Hausmann's ongoing re-designed modern Paris, Maar photographs a silent, barren, poverty-stricken dwelling, the washing line and Surrealist mannequin head, the only clue that people might actually live there. This contrast between the populations of the marginal and displaced, separated both physically and sociologically from the beau monde of Paris is even more dramatically heightened in 'Le Sacre-Coeur' the church as a distant beacon seen from the Northern suburb of Bidonville' obscured by a wooden and barbed-wire fence. 'Hull of the Drakkar, Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway' exemplifies the silent and empty, the dream-like; usually surrounded by tourists, in Maar's photograph the cathedral-like room is devoid of people and therefore its scale elusive, it is a masterpiece of Surrealist imagery. The shape of the hull is open to interpretation; has Maar knowingly created an optical illusion where the hull is made to look like a tiny falling tear, or a nose, this photograph taken a year before Dali's iconic portrait of Mae West, where the real and surreal co-exist? Likewise in her photograph of 'Cliffs' the craggy rocks are just that unless they depict a female torso in profile, a tattoo on her upper arm.

Dora Maar was also a gifted portraitist; in her commercial practice she had been commissioned to take photographs for erotic magazines, and privately she took personal portraits of friends and artists. The group in the exhibition illustrates her confidence in the genre, and none is stronger than the portrait of her friend and Surrealist cohort, the painter Jaqueline Lamba. She is seated naked, on the floor next to a bedstead in sharp shadow, bright natural light behind with the rest of the room in dark shadow. Maar poses Lamba much as she did Assia Granatouroff, the model who embodied the 1930's nude, in her 1934 classic erotic photograph, in stark shadow, where "Assia is not simply a nude model but rather the expression of a female sexuality in which Maar confronts the mysteries dissected or psychoanalyzed ad infinitum by the men she encountered, from Georges Bataille to Jacques Lacan."<sup>2</sup> "She belongs to a period in which the vogue for naturism and outdoor sports, coupled with a growing freedom for women after World War I and diminished prudery, made it possible for photographers to exalt the nude without mythological justification or any reference to the pictorial tradition."<sup>3</sup> All of which is equally applicable to Maar's portrait of Lamba.

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<sup>1</sup> Dawn Ades – 'Chance Encounters and the "Modern Marvelous"' - Dora Maar The J Paul Getty Museum, Tate Publishing, London, Éditions du Centre Pompidou 2019

<sup>2</sup> Alix Agret – 'The Audacity of Erotic Gazes' Dora Maar The J Paul Getty Museum, Tate Publishing, London, Éditions du Centre Pompidou 2019

<sup>3</sup> Alix Agret – 'The Audacity of Erotic Gazes' Dora Maar The J Paul Getty Museum, Tate Publishing, London, Éditions du Centre Pompidou 2019