

Picasso, Matisse, and Sylvette David.

I do not care about the approbation of future generations. I have dedicated my life to freedom and I want to continue being free, which means that I do not worry what will be said about me.

Picasso¹

When Sylvette and her brother were children, they lived on the île du Levant, a small island off the coast of the French riviera. On the Levant, they could be wanderers, explorers, they went out in canoes and boats, they swam and fished. They played in the rocks and the garrigue. They were young *fauves*. The children's perceptual world of familiarity became orientated towards indefinite horizons.

Sylvette particularly liked the beach of Rioufrède, with its white and pinkish pebbles. It was a beach she accessed by descending a steep path through pine trees, she has spoken of its clear azure water, and sharp light and beauty. She remembers the marine fauna, the tide-life, the lizards on the rocks. Her childhood should have been a place of total peace and freedom, but she grew up through the privations of war. Her loving mother, Honor Gell, did her best to protect her children in Heliopolis, the only village on the island. But their pre-civilized world had barbarism at its door. Now in her eighties the themes of the painter are still tidal; still ebb and flow between a *familiaris* (familiar spirit) and a *habitat*, which is accessed through a sunlit absence, an opening or path. The privileged point of access to a beach in childhood, or an opening of light and colour in painting share a communality of approach; in art and in childhood, a sense of place, as experienced on the island where all journeys were journeys out, and in their immediacies were the beginnings of all further knowledge. She was at one with the landscape, on an island paradise, where it was natural to be naked. Sylvette, now as Lydia Sylvette David still experiences space from the perspective of childhood in her

¹ Helene Parmelin, *Picasso dit...*, Éditions du Cercle d'Art, Paris, 1966

paintings. She paints what she feels with the phenomenological sense of space, how lived places co-existed and were embodied in her first circumambient island. As a child Sylvette's first desire to look, was either to the sea, or to a fragment of a shell. The ephemera of childhood were joyous but the tide wrack leaves no places for dwelling. And a sense of the unhomely, literally (*unheimlich*) is a theme in all her paintings of places. There is no parity between the sea and the land, just difference and distance. What begins as an adventure as a child, becomes an altered sense of consciousness a dream of being, or *dérive* in the art of her old age.



Climbing the rocks, île du Levant. c. 1952

Before the war, the Mediterranean coast from Collioure to Saint-Tropez had already embodied a classical Arcady for painters. Picasso in his studio at the château Grimaldi had created art throughout the summer of 1946 culminating in painting *La Joie de Vivre*. Sylvette David has assimilated her own experience of the light of the Côte d'Azur, into her paintings. Sylvette as a girl grew up warmed by the Mediterranean sun. The nymphs and fauns of Matisse's paintings enter mythic time. Matisse's paintings *Luxe, calme, Volupté* (1904-5), and *Le Bonheur de Vivre*, belong to the landscapes of the South of France. Sylvette David's childhood was visually part of a classic pastoral. There are traces of this childhood in her painterly and aesthetic sensibilities, her brushstrokes have been shaped by the memory of light, and the way it travels through the water. This dipping into the water is a motif re-enacted in her *aquarelles*. She was happiest at the shore-line on the rocks, surveying the Mediterranean. This manifests in the spontaneity of the washes, and mixes and overlayings in the subtle plays of luminescence and the surface energies of her watercolours.

In Sylvette David's oil paintings, different processes are engaged. Charcoal outlines are sketched in, then light and shade, and colour becomes form. The surface texture of any overpainting becomes 'impasted' and overlaid by a sequence of reworkings. The French word for reworking *repentir* carries with it a trace of atonement and almost regret. But the process of transformation necessitates sacrifice to reach the final state. This is an oscillation between light and form, and form and memory. The freedom to alter, to erase and paint over and to experiment is the *raison-d'être* for the painting's existence. Many of Sylvette David's recent oil paintings are studies in immanence.

What is striking is the wide range of Sylvette David's works and their emotional and expressive depth. Sylvette David in her visions as a spiritual artist is best seen in her watercolours with their delicacy, translucency, and that pared down balance between form and chaos, from the English tradition of David Jones, Cecil Collins, and Samuel Palmer. Amongst Sylvette David's recent oils, are gesturalist works recalling Willem de Kooning's late

paintings, in their existential import, and Sylvette David has painted some small charcoal on board self-portraits of her inner life such as 'Psyche' (figure in a mirror) which is about disappearance into the work, and *survivance*, bereft; for the mirror, sooner or later must be broken.²

There is a sincerity of intent in her works which is not forced. Sylvette David's immediacy is immersive and binding. Sylvette David is an artist who creates because she has to create. This is particularly so for those recent paintings which manifest the trauma and fragmentation wrought on her vision; not by uncontrolled apprehension, nor memory, but by time itself, and the struggle for visual coherence. Failing eyesight has not hindered, it has strengthened Sylvette David's inner vision.

Sylvette's months spent with Picasso gave her by his example, the confidence to paint. What Sylvette learnt from her time in his studio was to understand how to alter everything, to believe in spontaneity and have the freedom to do as she pleases, to experiment with life through the transformations of making.

In the self-portraits which attest to revisiting Picasso's Vallauris studio of 1954, Sylvette David is not wearing away at recurring memories, she is finding a lost reality of the place, through her act of complicity in her painting. She is finding something essentially new - in the process of painting which returns to her, with an unpreparedness as powerful as an involuntary memory.³ Painting herself, Picasso, and the place where they spent so much time together, becomes a cue and a clue, a link back to that past, without any conscious effort on her part, with a freshness and fragility that only she could suppose. *Le Fournas*, in Vallauris

² Jacques Derrida, wrote in *Inventions of the Other. Vol. 1.*: "So we see why the breaking of the mirror is still more necessary, because at the instant of death, the limit of narcissistic reappropriation becomes terribly sharp, it increases and neutralizes suffering: let us weep no longer over ourselves, alas, when we *must* no longer be concerned with anyone except the other *in ourselves*. The narcissistic wound enlarges infinitely for want of being able to be narcissistic no longer, for no longer even finding appeasement in that *Erinnerung* (memory) we call the work of mourning. Beyond internalizing memory, it is then necessary to *think*, which is another way of remembering."

³ (Henri Bergson's *Mémoire involuntaire*)

where she would meet Picasso, was a former perfume factory where Jasmin and orange blossom essences had been distilled. In a sense Picasso continued with Sylvette the art of distillation, of defining and trapping essences.

Picasso said: "All I have ever made was made for the present, and with the hope that it will always remain in the present"⁴

Picasso now has been dead for over 50 years, but the works he painted of Sylvette David, and the sculptures he created are timeless. And each year that passes, the distance between them gets closer. *La Joie de vivre* means an act of faith in life and in living it fulsomely. It does not mean hiding from the suffering of others; it is about finding meaning in the intensities of the lived life in the moment. Many of the best-known portraits of Sylvette by Picasso are in profile, now she is returning his gaze, and she is seeing too, what he could not see of her. When Sylvette David returns in her art to Picasso and Vallauris, she is painting through the symbolic. The dialogue is no longer attached to particular moments of being but their essences. It was Picasso who taught Sylvette that the line does not have to be the edge, nor the outline of an object – it can be a palimpsest between the subject or object and the space it inhabits. Picasso loved Sylvette with the gift of artistic prophesy. Once Picasso possessed her with his *mirada fuerte*, he loved her with an Andalusian gaze which was both barbarous and benign. Now she still feels the heat of that on her face.

-Lucien Berman

⁴ Pablo Picasso, Dore Ashton, ed., *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*. (New York) 1972, p.5.

Sylvette David: memories of childhood.

Sylvette David's paintings are both celebrations of being in the present, but also work upon the unconscious, the irrational, the supernatural of others as much as the religious, and the spiritual. Interlocatedness in the work is a presence in many of the paintings. Her inward *Joie de vivre* is mediated by a landscape through which touches both memories; *calme, luxe, volupté* of childhood; the rocks and the sea; but, also the childhood house on the Mediterranean island where in the Unoccupied Zone, she and her younger brother were sheltered from the war with her mother living under a false identity. In these late paintings there is always a narration of a shared intimacy and her works are deeply absorbed by history and tradition, and whilst she paints without any need for conscious specific recollection, all her paintings own their own past. Lydia Corbett understands what Simone Weil meant when she said the present is something that binds us. We create the future in our imagination. The past is the only pure reality.

Sylvette David does not often speak of the Occupation of France, only if asked, and then obliquely. Her concerns as a child of the Second World War were complex as they were for all children. The period of Arcady on the island was short-lived for her, but it did exist. Her mother had the foresight to bring her children to a place of naturalness and innocence when all around was brutality and the knowledge of the worst things that people could do. On the Island, her own *joie de vivre* was experienced in a visual immediacy and mediated by the air she breathed, the light she saw, the smells, the sounds, the silences, the people around her childhood. Her childhood and early girlhood were mediated by the exterior. She was in a state of immanence, of being-in-the-world. The photographs of Sylvette with her little brother capture this period of time. The photographs of herself as a mermaid, show the serious face

of an adolescent girl, full of life, fresh and healthy, fearless in her regard. The Sylvette portraits Picasso painted and her own later self-portraits show a more complicated movement into womanhood. They are as multifarious as her changing moods. Her different ages are not part of a single articulation, she seemed destined to be as she grew older, still in the process of becoming. Her being, her inner being is perpetually remaking herself and rediscovering herself; as if her appearance was a mere snag upon which her deeper sense of self attached itself. Sylvette was destined to become an artist under the *aegis* of another world, a past.

Gaston Bachelard wrote some words in *The Poetics of Space* that could have been written for Sylvette David: "Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly. Indeed, every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special colour. Consequently, it is not until late in life that we really revere an image, when we discover that its roots plunge well beyond the history that is fixed in our memories. In the realm of absolute imagination, we remain young late in life. But we must lose our earthly paradise in order to actually live it, to experience it in the reality of its images, in the absolute sublimation that transcends all passion."⁵

Matisse painted *Luxe, calme et volupté* In Saint-Tropez in the summer of 1904; he learnt the theory of Neo-Impressionism from Paul Signac. Sylvette David / Lydia Corbett has reclaimed something of Matisse in her paintings of 2015 to 2025. Both have practiced a divided brushstroke technique, both extemporized, and for Lydia Corbett it has developed into a new style of painting interior portraits of luminosity and contrast of colour. Soon Matisse was painting with more uniform colour – the beginnings of Fauvism. *Luxe, calme et volupté* is a classicized rendition evokes Matisse's favoured theme of the Golden Age, and its rich artistic heritage recalls as the poems of Ovid, his old friend Aristide Maillol and Manet's *Déjeuner sur*

⁵ *La Poétique de l'Espace* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958).

l'herbe. From Poussin to Cézanne's *Baigneuses* to the Symbolist frescoes of Puvis de Chavannes, one senses Matisse is looking for a way through emotion to a freedom in colour. The following year (1905) Matisse would be considered amongst *les Fauves*, it was a trial by fire (Derain's phrase), by fusion, in the crucible of light and colour. *Le retour aux sources* exemplified in these late humanist paintings of Sylvette David / Lydia Corbett are not an anachronistic or atavistic fantasy, it was her childhood and formative reality. It is the paradox of her childhood that Sylvette managed to find peace in the middle of the Second World war.

It is a testament to her avant-garde risk-taking mother, who managed to protect her young children by finding faraway places in what was at first the Unoccupied Zone of France, and when it was in turn occupied by the Italians, to move the children to Dieu-Le-Fit in the Rhone-Alpes. For the French tourists of the 1930s the fauve paintings of the south of France had already shaped and informed how they saw the landscape when they visited it. Sylvette's mother had initially gone south, in the 1930s to the island to live a balanced life and to be at one with her nature.

Henri Matisse - from *La joie de vivre* the titled painting of 1906 when he was 35 to the *papier découpés* when he was 82, continued to explore what it was to be alive through the creation of works of harmony, tranquility and calm, that pass-through conflict, war, and dispossession. Matisse used this technique of paper-cut-outs, for his book *Jazz*, in 1947, and later on in 1952 for the decoration of the Chapel of the Rosary at Vence, where paper motifs were cut to actual size. Matisse cut the forms with scissors which had previously been painted with goache. This simple technique enabled him to draw in colour. The eternal conflict between colour and line was resolved and the expressive powers of colour and line strengthened each other.⁶ Henri Matisse in the last period of his life, remained, as his friend

⁶ *vide*. Pieters, Din. (Ed.) Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. *A Survey of the Collection* (1997) *Matisse and Picasso*, pp 120-125

Picasso, faithful to figurative art, although they both brought to it, great innovations which seemed out of favour with their contemporaries in the 1950s, would continue to inspire future generations. *The Parakeet and the Mermaid* of 1952, by Matisse, belongs to the series of *papiers découpés* - paper cut outs that he made in the last two years of his life. In this single work a hundred and fifty cut paper motifs are distributed over a white surface nearly eight metres wide and over three metres high. At this time Henri Matisse was bed-bound with cancer, so he had his assistant pins the individual motifs on the walls of his room. Five basic forms can be distinguished; two different kinds of leaves, pomegranates, a parakeet and a mermaid. The most significant colours are blue, dark and light green, yellow, orange and pink. The whole composition with the arabesques of coloured, cut paper contrasting with the white background, evokes the atmosphere of a paradisaal garden.

The photographs of Sylvette on the beach at île de Levant, as a mermaid, and playing naked on the rocks with her brother attest how much of what was a dream for Matisse was to be a reality for Sylvette. For Sylvette David every work of art is a transposition, in her lived experience of *Joie de Vivre*, one might recall the lines from Novalis's *The Disciples at Sais*: "Everywhere rise flames of life [...] old times are renewed, and history becomes the dream of an endless present as far as the eye can see." Sylvette David/Lydia Corbett sketches directly on to the canvas, not sketching from life, but from the mind or the imagination. Sometimes the sketches work as finished works in their own right and she has no wish to add colour or more to them, at other times they are the beginnings of a process of change and light and colour. The contents of her paintings are not simply what they represent, they are of an expressionist leaning, the paintings themselves bear agency, and the paintings take over from the artist at some point, as if they have been free to develop almost independently and have their own mode of being, regardless of the artist's intentions.

-Lucien Berman

Picasso and Sylvette - socio-historical background: France in the early 1950s

When Sylvette David was nineteen, innocence was not a position of youth. There was no Blakean or visionary wistfulness in the young in France. Innocence belonged to the old, and it was highly politicized. "Innocence" was the dominant proclamation of the ex-Vichy State functionaries. Many *collabos* claimed "innocence" as a strategy of political and artistic defence. The word "innocence" is defined in contrast. It is understood by its antonyms, "not guilty" of the reprehensible acts committed in the period of Nazi collaboration. The collaborators wanted to be blameless and *inculpable*, neither guilty nor responsible. Claiming innocence for a politician or an artist is asking for an immediate revision of the verdict of history. The discovery of the Nazi camps should have made it impossible for political stances grounded in ideologies; such as racism, respect for Law and Order, anti-foreigners, etc. be accredited after the war.⁷ Sylvette David was not naïve then, in 1954, nor is she naïve now. David is not undergoing a second childhood in her paintings. Her self-portraits and Picasso's portraits of her differ also in their difficulties. Whereas Picasso put himself, as in *Guernica* at the service of those who made history, Sylvette David sees herself in the service of those who are subject to it. Her vision is of the individual's alienation from historical processes, her timeless works are visually attentive and self-reflective. In any case it was still tough to be a young woman in France in the early 1950s. As Guy Debord wrote at the time, "Young people everywhere have been allowed to choose between love and a garbage disposal unit." It is also tough enough to be an artist in her old age.

⁷ As now in Europe, these positions are all still too familiar, and chauvinist nationalism is on the rise in the 21st century.

In 1954, the 27th Venice Biennial saw Francis Bacon (1909 - 1992), Lucian Freud (1922 - 2011) and Ben Nicolson (1914 - 1978) representing Great Britain. La Belle France was still reeling from the national identity crises of being a collaborationist and defeated nation. In France, the cultural threat of American hegemony was being taken seriously, and it was difficult for serious French artists and French critics to take some sort of stand. Post-war art criticism saw Michel Tapié de Celeyran, advocating Dubuffet and the antiformal *l'art autre*; whilst Michel Ragon supported the lyrical abstractionists: Soulages, Hartung, and the CoBra group. The influential French art critic of the post-war years, and mentor of *l'abstraction lyrique* - La Seconde École de Paris, Charles Estienne, found the new American art invidious. Guy Debord⁸, famed for his theory of the *dérive* and 'the society of the spectacle', declared the end of art as a bourgeois practise. In fact, across the arts, it was very much "out with the old, in with the new". In 1954, in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, André Bazin's young *protégé* François Truffaut compared a rejected scenario of *Diary of a Country Priest*⁹ with a film made by Robert Bresson, and he concludes "Of what value is an anti-bourgeois film made by a bourgeois for the Bourgeoisie?".

After World War II, the French automobile industry launched the *quatre chevaux* in 1946, and Citroën the 2 CV ("*deux chevaux*"), or *Deudeuche*. Whilst neither car was aesthetically lovely, nor fast or even comfortable, they did what they said on the can, sold on the promise of being elsewhere, mass escape for the masses. For Guy Debord the workers only wanted cars to ape the rich, who were happy because they drove cars.

César (César Baldaccini) too was interested in cars as art. He first exhibited expressionistic sculptures in rusty welded car parts in 1954,¹⁰ César altered direction when he saw a car crusher machine in operation in a scrap yard near Paris, giving birth to his

⁸ Guy Louis Debord (1931-1994) French Marxist theorist, philosopher, and founding member of the Situationist International.

⁹ Adapted from Georges Bernanos's work.

¹⁰ Such as "Torso" (1952)

"*Compressions dirigées*". César eventually exhibited a sculptural triptych of contorted metal from crushed car carcasses, each weighed in at a ton. The publicity of this Salon de Mai event made César celebrated. He soon would join the *nouveau réalistes* group, which included Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, Raymond Hains, Arman, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Christo, under the curatorship and support of the haute-bohème art critic, Pierre Restany¹¹.

Picasso was a *chiffonnier-extraordinaire* of municipal rubbish tips for junk he could use for his sculpture. He picked up the junk in his Hispano-Suiza. Picasso remained above all the partisan squabbles of the art world. He created what he wanted, as he had been doing all his life. Picasso's ready-mades- unlike Duchamp's Bottle-rack – still had to be made. Picasso's "Bull's Head" (1942) the bicycle seat and handlebars welded in a flash in his mind and their transformation into art allows both to co-exist; the bicycles past on the road and future in the museum.

Between the Liberation, in 1944, and the Evian accords between France and the provisional government of Algeria in 1962, a difficult social landscape evolved in France, in contrast to the myth of stability and the French tendency towards *Immobilisme*, that existed in spite of social, political and artistic enthusiasm and ferment for change.

-Lucien Berman

¹¹ In 1963, Restany edited the art and architectural magazine *Domus* and divided his time between Montparnasse, Paris and Milan, eventually becoming a regular contributor to the magazine until 2003