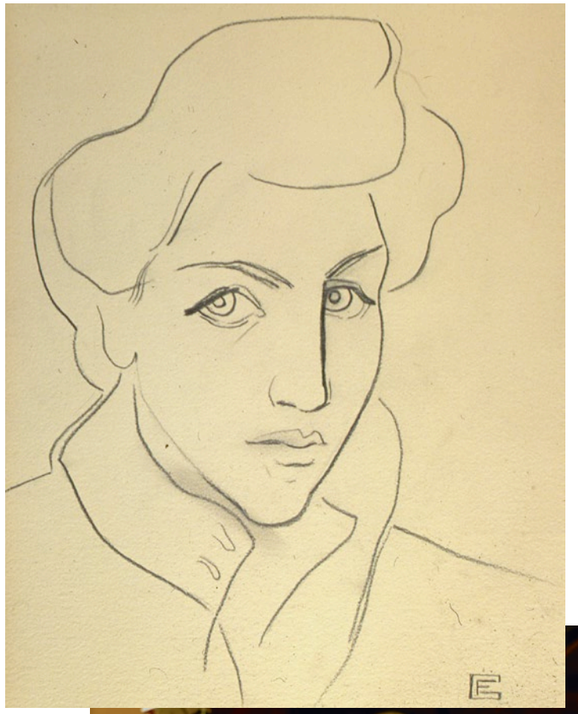
*Françoise Gilot photographed in her New York studio*

*A life in art*

# FRANÇOISE GILOT

The artist and writer talks to *Harriet Griffey* about the power of intuition, her passionate relationship with Picasso and why she still paints every day

*Photographs by* EMMA HARDY



*Clockwise from left: Françoise Gilot's 'Self-portrait (Anxious Times)' (1940). 'Space Walk' (1993). Materials in her studio*

'We always have to have the north light,' Françoise Gilot tells me, gesticulating towards the windows, her French accent resonating strongly. 'You know the reason? Because then we have the light from morning to night, but without the sunshine, which is a no-no for painting. The north light changes the least during the day.'

The room in which we sit and talk on a chilly winter's afternoon is her studio on Manhattan's Upper West Side, undeniably benefiting from the light that illuminates the multiple books on the shelves, the warm yellows of the carpet, Gilot's colourful paintings on the walls and, above the mantelpiece, a large canvas called *Cyclical Space* that she painted in London in the 1960s. Others are stacked tidily with only their backs on view, and there is a work in progress on an easel, with her paints, palette and brushes on a lidded cabinet to the side. 'I first came to this building in 1961, admired the double-height studios and promised myself that if I ever could, I would live here,' Gilot says of the 1903 purpose-built artists' co-op, which has previously been home to Marcel Duchamp and the Russian choreographer George Balanchine. She also has an atelier in Paris' 18th arrondissement, not far from the Sacré-Coeur in Montmartre.

At 97, Gilot remains as hard-working as ever. 'It's a way to be alive. As long as I am breathing, I am painting,' she says. 'I don't always have to have an idea when I start a piece; I don't always know where I want to go with it, but I know how to get there – it will emerge as I work, sometimes fast and sometimes more slowly.' The materials she uses are vital to her success. 'The paper has to be good: if you buy bad paper made of wood, it will deteriorate fast, but with cloth paper, unless you put it in water again, it will last 500 years. The better grain it has, the better the colour. With more grain, the light strikes it like a prism, so it gives more depth, more vibrancy.'

Gilot was born in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, in 1921. Her father Emile was an agronomist and her mother Madeleine, an artist. An only child, Gilot was given the same education that a son might have had. Her father hoped she would become a physicist, but they compromised on the law, which she studied for two years before concentrating solely on creative pursuits. She had a close and influential relationship with both her parents; her mother taught her about art, encouraging her to paint in watercolour and India ink rather than draw with a pencil, while she credits her father for her business sense and natural professionalism. 'I always knew I was an artist, from childhood,' she says. 'You have to be born a painter and then, after that, it takes a lot of work to get there. It's an intuitive cognisance before you have intellectual cognition, but you cannot be too intellectual. When I was young, I had an art critic on my shoulder, one who would mutter all the time in my ear, so I would play music as a distraction, because criticising what you do all the time doesn't help.'

The German occupation of Paris during the war made life difficult for Gilot: on one occasion, she was detained by the French police for laying flowers on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and marked out as a political agitator. But by the age of 21, she was already making a name for herself as an artist. One night in May 1943, while dining with the actor Alain Cuny and a fellow artist (and close friend), Geneviève Aliquot, at Le Catalan bistro on the Left Bank, where they were celebrating the opening of their joint exhibition, she met the then 61-year-old Pablo Picasso. He was at a neighbouring table and, knowing Cuny, approached their group with a bowl of cherries, asking for an introduction to the two young women. The next day, Picasso visited their exhibition and invited them to come to his atelier at 7 Rue des Grands-Augustins. This first meeting led, eventually, to a relationship between Gilot and Picasso that would last 10 years and produce two children, Claude and Paloma.

One story that speaks volumes about the stormy side of the couple's relationship comes from early in their life together, when Gilot was staying and working in Golfe-Juan on the French Riviera. On hearing of her plans to visit the studio of the artist Pierre Bonnard at Le Cannet, Picasso took exception. 'It provoked a great argument between us,' Gilot tells me, laughing at the memory. 'Pablo said he hated Bonnard – hated him! – and did not want me to visit. I replied that I could, of course, do what I liked without his permission, but the argument was heated, and in the end I declined to go. When he realised how irrational he had been, he said he would take me to visit his friend Matisse – whose work I liked even more than Bonnard's – at Villa le Rêve in Vence, a short drive


*Works in Gilot's studio. Opposite: 'Joueuse de Mandoline' (1953)*

*Clockwise from left: Gilot with her children Claude and Paloma, photographed by Lee Miller in France in 1953. 'Geometry' (2012). Gilot with her 1991 artwork 'Mountain Range'*





*Left: 'Cyclical Space' (1966). Bottom: 'Paloma Asleep' (1950)*

away. I knew it was a sort of trade-off to appease me, but I accepted.'

It was a good decision: Gilot and Matisse immediately got on well – partly, she says, because they were both from the north of France and understood each other. Of Matisse and Picasso's friendship, she says: 'I thought it was interesting that the critics like to make out as if they were almost enemies. They were rivals in art, yes, but they were friends in life. Matisse was 12 years older and had a kind of parental attitude towards Pablo – I was always amused by this – as if Picasso were the bad boy, and Matisse the nice parent.'

Gilot is, of course, the one woman who had the audacity to walk away from Picasso. She has said in the past that it was perhaps an intellectual love, and certainly physical, but never sentimental. As she puts it: 'It was love because we had good reason, each of us, to admire each other.' When she decided to leave him, he apparently told her, 'Nobody leaves a man like me.' Her response? 'We'll see.'

In 1954, having ended the relationship, Gilot was forced to continue her work elsewhere. 'I knew Paris was no longer the centre, but I hesitated between London and New York. There were two galleries in London that were holding my work because in France things had got rather difficult for me – leaving Picasso was seen as a big crime and I was no longer welcome,' she recalls. 'During the Sixties, I had a studio in Chelsea, given to me on the recommendation of the director of the Tate, but I always had more collectors in the United States than anywhere else, so it made sense to relocate here for work.' Today, the permanent collections of both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as institutions in Washington DC, Tel Aviv, Paris and Antibes, include Gilot's artworks. In 2010, she was made an Officer of the Légion d'Honneur, the French government's highest honour for those working in the arts.

Known as an intellectual painter, Gilot has authored multiple acclaimed books, including the bestselling – and newly reissued – *Life with Picasso* (whose original publication Picasso tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent in 1964) and a 1976 poetry collection called *The Fugitive Eye*. These have all been written in English – a habit that she picked up in her youth, when she wanted to hide the content of her early texts from her father. 'The act of creation is just one thing, whether I'm speaking, writing or painting,' she says. 'I can write in English, French, it doesn't matter. I don't write for communication, I write for myself, mostly.' Last year, Gilot published a set of travel notebooks full of sketches from trips made to Venice, Senegal and India with her late husband Dr Jonas Salk (a pioneer of the polio vaccine). Deeply personal and delightfully evocative, they show evidence of a creative compulsion to recall and reflect on what she has seen, as well as being sensual works of art in their own right. 'I notice what I feel, not what is there,' she says. 'Art doesn't come from what is around you, but from what is inside you.'

Gilot recognises that no artist has total control over the work they produce, herself included. 'When it goes well and it's good, bravo, *tant mieux*, and when it goes badly, *tant pis*: you have to accept this. You aren't completely responsible for what's going on,' she says. Currently preparing for the opening of an exhibition in New York of paintings unified by her favourite colour, red, she seems unperturbed by what people will think. 'Art is not meant to please,' she says firmly. 'It is about trying to get to the truth of something.' □

*Gilot's exhibition 'RED: 1960 to the Present' is at the Elkon Gallery (www.elkongallery.com) in New York from 24 October until 20 December.*