

*Taste is tiresome, like good company.*

—Francis Picabia, from “American Saliva,” 1918

*I am interested in desire and consumer happiness. When I started out, I wanted to paint like the artists who did the illustrations for pulp paperbacks—of romance, passion, love—to reject the avant garde, all the posing and the phoniness.*

—Walter Robinson, 2014

The resurgence of figurative art in the 1980s, along with the Pictures Generation artists’ critique of authenticity and originality, reignited interest in Francis Picabia’s post-Dada work—particularly his multilayered Transparencies (1927-1932) and controversial 1940s “kitsch” paintings. Picabia, the trickster of modernism, was a perennial provocateur who declared, “If you want to have clean ideas, change them as often as your shirts.” Marcel Duchamp described his colleague’s tireless style-shifting as a “kaleidoscopic series of art experiences.”

While Picabia has been paired with contemporary artists such as Sigmar Polke, David Salle, and John Currin, this exhibition is the first to foreground the formal and conceptual parallels between Picabia’s drawings of women and Walter Robinson’s romance paintings. Seen together, their work invites reflection on the artists’ shared engagement with mass-produced imagery, the use of language, and the exploration of eroticism and desire.

Picabia and Robinson were both inveterate image scavengers, mining commercial source material with deliberate indifference to hierarchies of taste. Picabia, whose grandfather, Alphonse Davanne, pioneered photomechanical processes, was among the first artists to work extensively from reproductions. He brazenly copied his Impressionist landscapes from postcards, derived his Dadaist “mechanomorphs” (erotic machines) from technical illustrations, based his 1920s Monsters on romantic postcards, and sourced his 1940s nudes—condemned in their day as regressive and badly painted—from magazines such as *Mon Paris* and *Paris Sex Appeal*.

Decades later, Robinson treated pulp paperback covers, film posters, advertisements, and merchandizing circulars as a repository of collective desire. By “side-stepping the need for a personal, original style,” he sought to “focus attention away from formalist issues and onto questions of content.” Working in a darkened studio illuminated only by a projected slide, Robinson painted directly from his ephemeral “model,” foregoing preparatory sketches or outlines. His work is unabashedly derived from vintage illustrations, but the dynamic cropping, succinct brushwork, and heightened palette—blue and green hair included—are unmistakably his own.

Romance in Robinson’s paintings is never benign. His lovers teeter on the brink of danger or violence, echoing the lurid narratives of mid-century pulp fiction, where passion often unfolds under the shadow of a revolver. André Breton’s notion of *l’amour fou*—and its corollary, *la beauté convulsive*—looms large, as does the visual language of film noir, with its femme fatales embodied by Barbara Stanwyck or Ava Gardner.

Robinson's *The Eager Ones* (2025) revisits one of his earliest paintings, based on the embracing couple on the cover of John Barton Thompson's 1960 paperback about "a smoldering rural town—and the love-crime that had to happen." Cropped tightly, the entwined figures nearly burst beyond the canvas's edges, the woman's blonde hair cascading in a torrent of desire and peril. Though rooted in cliché, Robinson's painting reads as intimate. As critic Carlo McCormick observed, he imbued his work with a "devious sense of irony done with incredible sincerity."

A related tension animates Picabia's Surrealist drawings. In *J'interroge le sphinx—il me dit avoir inventé le désert* (1927), the heads of the male and female figures are conjoined, yet the scene appears dreamlike and detached. Where Robinson's lovers compress into a single volatile mass, Picabia's figures—linked by the arc of a mermaid's tail and a swirling cloud of smoke—appear to conjure one another, creating an eroticism that is cool, uncanny, and impersonal. Similarly, in *Untitled (transparence, visage)* (1928), the male head and female figure are entangled yet weightlessly estranged.

The coiffed glamour and parted lips of Robinson's women mirror those in Picabia's head-shot drawing, *Portrait de femme de trois quart* (1940-42). Stripped from its original movie-magazine context and rendered in faux-amateurish style, Picabia's model appears ghostly—an already fading image of desire. Robinson's paintings are thrice removed from their sources—paintings of printed copies of illustrations created during his childhood—yet their archetypes are so deeply embedded in collective memory that they continue to glow.

The two artists are united in their refusal to stay still. Just as Picabia rode ramshackle through movements from Impressionism to Surrealism, Robinson jumped between subjects—from pulp to pharmaceuticals, spin art to pornography, normcore fashion to hamburgers. At intervals, he subversively made near-identical copies of his own work.

Language, too, is central to both practices. Picabia, an innovative graphic designer and prolific poet, imbedded typeset and block-lettered titles or handwritten phrases into his compositions, from *L'Enfant Carburateur* to the absurdist scrawl of *Je vous envoie les cils de la chèvre* ("I'm sending you the goat's eyelashes"). Robinson's approach was slyly conceptual: in an act of double theft, he lifted his paintings' titles directly from the paperback covers he appropriated (*Fear Is the Same, Love the Hour*). In recent years, he extended this logic by using AI text-to-image generators as a new source of mediated visuals, entering prompts like "old man self-portrait painter" for a series of late works.

Picabia published the Dadaist journal, *391* (1917-24), a brilliantly designed platform for manifestos, experimental art, and verse—including reams of his own poetry, considered to be early examples of automatic writing. Robinson, a celebrated art critic and editor, co-founded *Art-Rite* (1973-1978) a shoestring chronicle of contemporary art, music, and performance, whose covers and portfolio pages were designed by prominent contemporary artists. Coincidentally, both journals ran for nineteen issues.

Walter Robinson died in the winter of 2025 at the age of seventy-four—the same age as Picabia at his death in 1953. For more than four decades, Robinson’s paintings have asserted themselves quietly amid the din of an increasingly commercialized, social-mediated art world. By pairing him with an artist who pioneered strategies he later embraced, this exhibition is both a tribute and a provocation. Together, the two artists probe the unstable boundaries between desire and display, reframing mass-produced images of love and glamour through the distinct lenses of Picabia’s cool detachment and Robinson’s “sincere irony.”