



RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.

Beckmann, 'Stilleben mit plastik' (1936), left. Pablo Picasso, 'Femme au petit chapeau rond, assise' (1942), right.

By LANCE ESPLUND
 Compared to the protean talents of Picasso, most 20th-century artists cannot hold their own, neither novators nor as imitators. The artist Max Beckmann (1884-1950), 15 years Picasso's junior, is no exception. Yet a wonderful show at Richard L. Feigen & Co. Gallery, "Beckmann-Picasso/Picasso-Beckmann," which pairs the two artists side by side, offers an instructive

BECKMANN-PICASSO/PICASSO-BECKMANN
 Richard L. Feigen & Co.

into their relationship as painters brings us works — some not so well known, some masterpieces — we do not get the chance to see. Usually, this kind of man-to-man exhibition match is a recipe for disaster. Much as I love Picasso, I was purposefully avoiding it. But this show, which illuminates the work of both artists, is a surprising exception. It demonstrates that Beckmann, a German, and Picasso, a Spaniard but a member of the School of Paris, at times much in common when it comes to painting on canvas. Both artists were favored (Picasso, occasionally; Beckmann, almost exclusively) in a mode I can only describe as "restrained expressionism." And each respected work of the other. Beckmann was continuing in the tradition that goes all the way back to Schongauer, Holbein, and Hans Memling, but like most 20th-century painters, he saw Picasso as competition. On the other hand, Picasso — who stole but almost never followed — regarded Beckmann and Klee as two of the very few modern German painters he admired. (Both artists saw each other's works in the early 1930s.) The difference between Beckmann and Picasso, as is made clear by this show's coupling, is that Picasso had a

breadth, inventiveness, and range, even in his least successful paintings, that outmaneuver and outshine the narrow scope of the heavy-footed Beckmann at his best. Two-person shows should never be about winners and losers. Art is not a competition. But one cannot help but see, in their interrelatedness, how Beckmann and Picasso measure up.

It is not that every Picasso in the show is better than every Beckmann. Far from it. It is, rather, that even when Picasso fails, he wins. His bravado, confidence, and fearlessness out of the gate — the very ease with which he takes heroic risks — make everything Beckmann does feel safe by comparison. While Picasso is on the high wire or shooting himself out of cannons, Beckmann runs around the center ring like a one-trick pony.

Most of the some 50 paintings, sculptures, and prints in the show verge on being monochromatic. The paintings, many of which incorporate black, either as line or color, are graphic in feel, which seems to be one of the main criteria for their inclusion in the exhibition. Picasso often has been wrongly accused of being more a graphic artist, or draftsman, than a colorist. And Beckmann's colored forms are traditionally held within black line, his color often contained in his paintings like pieces of stained glass within leading.

Pitting their use of black against each other demonstrates how each artist was able to move it from the graphic realm to the realm of color. Black is one of the most difficult colors to use. It muddies paint and tends to drop back rather than hold the surface of the plane. Renoir, late in his life, famously remarked to the younger Matisse that, although he did not understand or even particularly like his painting, he knew Matisse was definitely a great painter because he could use black as a color and get it to maintain the plane.

When Beckmann uses black, it has the tendency to condense, restrain, merely set off, or muddy the colors it outlines, rather than allow those colors to breathe. When Picasso uses black, he varies it in weight, density, and transparency. He is able to keep it active and interactive with the colors. Beckmann's blacks are beautiful, but they tend to hammer out the same note again and again. They can become mere armature. They can

Two-person shows should never be about winners and losers. But one cannot help see, in their interrelatedness, how Beckmann and Picasso measure up.

close down the expansiveness of color. Picasso gets light in his blacks, so that black is fluid not just as line or depth but as a buoyant force — an expansive, paradoxical foil to the other colors surrounding and mixing with it.

In Picasso's "Femme Dormeuse" (Sleeping Woman, 1937), faint black lines move through a range of soft, breezy yellows, greens, and reddish-gray browns, like the activity of dreams. In his monochromatic "Palette et tête de taureau" ("Palette With Head of a Bull," 1938), he is able to seemingly toss off a washy, milky gray painting that, while never quite reaching black, maintains unbelievable tension. His "Femme assise en robe grise" ("Sitting Woman in a Grey Dress," 1943) mixes black with soft pinks, blues. Black swims through the color like swelling emotion. And in the amazing "Femme au petit cha-

peau rond, assise" ("Sitting Woman with a Small Round Hat," 1942), in which a woman is held to a black ground like a Byzantine Madonna, black is solid, liquid, and open space all at once.

In some of Picasso's paintings, the surprise is that that he gets away with it — the color works. Astringent yellows, ochres, yellow-greens, mauves, and muddy browns are mixed with black as in a child's finger painting; and yet he gets the color to sing, to rise triumphantly out of the mud. He transforms ugliness into complexity, buoyancy, a sweet, veiled light.

Beckmann's best works in the show are small. His "Artist at the Beach" and his "Crouching Woman" (both 1930) are compact and fresh — as solid as sculpture. Black line does not control the forms but intermingles with them. He is best when he gives himself over to black, as in "Stilleben mit Plastik" ("Still Life With Sculpture," 1936) or "Stilleben mit Paletten" ("Still Life With Palettes," 1944), in which very bright colors or the rustling of a bouquet are used as stark contrasts to the inky darkness.

This show also contains some masterpieces of printmaking and sculpture. Picasso's "Femme debout" ("Standing Woman," 1930), in gilded bronze, a magical, slender maiden, fluid and demure yet dignified as a bullfighter, is breathtaking. Beckmann's bronze "Adam and Eve" (1936), of a seated, open-mouthed Adam holding Eve, as small as a fruit, in his hand as the snake wraps around him, conveys the suddenness of Adam's dumb-foundedness.

The look on Adam's face mirrored my own when I realized that I should not have avoided this show, which is full of riches.

Until January 31 (34 E. 69th Street, between Madison and Park Avenues, 212-628-0700).

Sch
 45 EAST
 TUESDAY-S

A
 Mitchell-Innes

Fine Estate Proper
 45 Gramercy Park

SA
 181

Fine Antique And F
 Tables With Chair
 Period/Style Bedr
 Fauteuils. Selecti

DETAIL: WATERFORD S
 Orient

Old And Modern I
 Sculpture Signed
 Blaustein, H. Che

EXHIBITI
 K. HUTTER, M. DRAZEN
 Charles Cordier
 (1827-1905) believ
 the diverse beauty
 of humanity and
 it in various stone
 metal finishes. Th
 Museum of Art is
 to be the only US
 to present over si
 sculptures—man