

ALBERT SERRA & PABLO PICASSO 11.02-22.02.25

The King & The Musketeer: the persistence of the performative body



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MAYORAL

ALBERT SERRA & PABLO PICASSO. 11.02 – 22.02.2025

“The King & The Musketeer: the persistence of the performative body” is an exhibition in which the musketeer and the king remind us that the body is always a cultural construction: theatre, spectacle, fragility. Pablo Picasso and Albert Serra share a fundamental intuition: that in the repetition of gestures, the exaggeration of the human, it is possible to discern the essence of what we are and, at the same time, what we can never be.

The musketeer in Pablo Picasso’s *Homme à la pipe assis* (*Seated Musketeer Smoking a Pipe*) (1969) and the agonized figure of Louis XIV in Albert Serra’s *Roi Soleil* (*Sun King*) (2018) are separated by era and idiom, but united by the artists’ choice to uphold the corporal body as a site where power and vulnerability intersect. They share a common quest to explore the depth of meaning to be found in gesture, in theatricality and in the relationship between the body and time. Both Picasso’s musketeer and Serra’s Louis XIV represent characters weighted with cultural heritage and symbols laid out for the audience to decodify. They embody the dualities of decadence and vanity, symbolism and power, the pathetic and the sublime, functioning as both classical allegory as well as on a higher macro plane. In their choice of these specific performative “bodies”, the artists thus present us with an imperfect tonal mix, pitting innate tensions and opposites together, allowing the stress of their juxtaposition to expand and shade their original meanings.

The energy of Picasso’s mark-making — using newly-invented felt-tip pens — breaks with any pretension towards naturalistic representation: this figure springs from imagination, invented and charged with irony and wit. A body which defies classical order and moves effortlessly between the past and present. When Picasso began to experiment with the courtly musketeer as a psychosocial avatar in 1967, he was convalescing from illness and, bedridden, had picked up Alexandre Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers*. Aging, and quite literally facing his own mortality, the choice of the flamboyant and virile bonvivant, who was more likely to brandish a smoking pipe and playing cards than a sword was charged: a reminder of the preeminence of creation over destruction, perhaps, or that each of these is a prerequisite of the other? “I have less and less time and I have more and more to say” he said, in 1971, in discussing the work of his later years which is dominated by this character.

In *Roi Soleil*, Albert Serra elevates this exploration to a radical performative dimension. The director has said that, to him, film represents a tool “which can make the limit of the absurd believable in the most organic way possible”. Seen through this lens, film shares with painting the



Pablo Picasso
Homme à la pipe assis
(1969)
Felt-tip pen on board
28 x 11 cm
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© Sucesión Pablo Picasso,
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“Albert Serra never ceases to question the effects of decadence and chaos on historical figures or fictional figures [...] *Roi Soleil* is the representation of an aristocracy in agony but also the staging of waiting, suspense, a repetitive ritual. It is the confrontation of the public image and the private image that is at stake, the Sun King being represented here in a moment of pure intimacy that the filmmaker exhibits.”

Pascale Cassagnau

advantage of being able to present the viewer with an experience that is almost physical, that is *hyper* realistic. It is important to note that Serra’s films are improvised and filmed in long sequences that necessitate the maintaining of his actors’ innocence, but the suspension of that of his audience. Performed by his friend, Lluís Serrat, the agonising death of the Sun King takes place in a modern, ahistorical setting: an art gallery in Lisbon, empty at first before the public gradually arrive. Abandoned, alone, in a room bereft of comforts, the king’s agony is a slow, minimalist choreography, a spectacle of the symbolic dismemberment of power. The king’s body is no longer a glorious symbol, but a dense mass that struggles against collapse, which evidences the passage of time as an insurmountable presence. The film becomes a painting in motion, a living installation that dialogues with the cyclic nature of history and of art and with the idea of authority as artifice.