

SEAN KELLY

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The Delacroix Masterpiece That Unites Picasso,
Lichtenstein, and Jose Dávila



Left: Roy Lichtenstein, *Femme d'Alger*, 1963. The Eli and Edythe Broad Collection. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein; Right: Jose Dávila, *Untitled (Femme d'Alger) V*, 2016. © Jose Dávila. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

What does a Dan Flavin sculpture look like without the fluorescent bulbs? Or a photograph from Richard Prince's "Cowboy" series, minus the titular ranch hand? Spend some time with Jose Dávila's work and you'll have your answer. Since 2008, the Mexican artist has been creating photographic cutouts in which the focal point of an image is stripped away to leave only a blank silhouette—first eliminating notable architectural sites from his own photographs, then later applying the same process to recognizable pieces of modern art.

For his upcoming show at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, Dávila turns his attention to a single work: Roy Lichtenstein's *Femme d'Alger* (1963). But in the case of this particular painting, it's not simply a work by Lichtenstein that's going under the knife—it's works by Pablo Picasso and Eugène Delacroix as well.

To understand what links these three art-historical heavyweights, we must rewind almost 200 years to 1832, when Delacroix traveled with a diplomatic convoy to north Africa. The French painter was immediately enchanted: "I am like a man in a dream, seeing things he fears will vanish from him," he wrote. Delacroix feverishly sketched the turbaned men, Jewish weddings, and harems he encountered. These travels would serve as inspiration for the rest of his life, resulting in almost 80 completed oil paintings. And it was a tour of an Algerian home, arranged by a converted Muslim who worked for the French government, that served as the source for two of the artist's most enduring works. Both were titled *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (the first version completed in 1834 and the second between 1847 and '49) and offer a rare, sumptuous glimpse into the women's quarters of a Muslim residence.

The 1834 version would set off a firestorm of lesser imitations when it was exhibited at the Salon in Paris that year, fanning the flames of orientalism in Western art. But this potency would extend far beyond Delacroix's lifetime. A century later, while living in Paris, Picasso himself began to obsess over the painting. "He had often spoken to me of making his own version of *Femmes d'Alger* and had taken me to the Louvre on an average of once a month to study it," Picasso's muse (and artist in her own right) Françoise Gilot once recalled. "I asked him how he felt about Delacroix. His eyes narrowed and he said, 'That bastard. He's really good.'"

The death of Henri Matisse in November 1954 was the push Picasso needed to finally embark on the project. In honor of his late rival and friend—a staunch admirer of orientalism in general and Delacroix in particular—Picasso ended up painting 15 versions of the *Women of Algiers* between December 13, 1954, and February 14, 1955. "When Matisse died he left me his odalisques as his legacy," the Spanish painter remarked to a friend. These canvases are designated A through O and reveal Picasso freely mixing and matching elements from both versions of Delacroix's masterpiece, all heavily filtered through a Cubist lens. Version O went on to become the most expensive work sold at auction to date when it achieved a \$179 million price tag at Christie's in May 2015.

Less than a decade after Picasso had completed the series, it would serve as fodder for a young Lichtenstein seeking work to appropriate. Similar to the way in which Picasso had deeply (albeit begrudgingly) admired Delacroix, Lichtenstein revered the Spanish painter as one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. "I think he had just more magic, more insanity, more images, more styles, greater production than many others," the Pop artist said. In an echo of Picasso and his frequent trips to the Louvre, Dorothy Lichtenstein fondly recalls attending exhibitions with her husband. "It was actually great going to a museum with Roy," she once said. "Everything was grist for his mind. He was always looking at paintings and how he might be able to transform them." Lichtenstein's 1963 interpretation of *Les femmes d'Alger* isolates a single figure, giving her an owlish face that obscures any emotion. Picasso's bold colors and forms are simplified and fractured, leaving the woman floating in an abstracted background that no longer features the lavish furnishings carried over from Delacroix's original.

When Dávila finally happened upon Lichtenstein's work, he felt a particular affinity for this inherent seriality. "It was an image that had already been interpreted by different artists on top of each other," he noted. "It's like a fractal of what happened throughout time, throughout history." Dávila's previous works touch on similar themes, including sculptures that pay tribute to painter Josef Albers and the repetitive nature of his "Homage to the Square" series. With *Femme d'Alger*, Dávila emphasizes the painting's serial nature by trying something new—this is the first time he has created multiple cutouts of the same work. The show at Sean Kelly will feature a string of 13 cutouts, each with more missing than the one before. The final cutout is nothing more than black outlines, essentially transforming the painting into a line drawing.

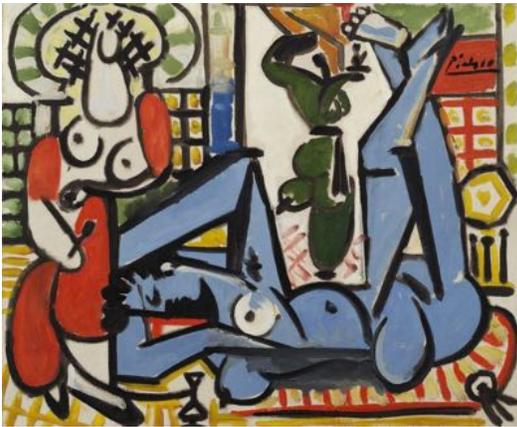
This, says Dávila, is his contribution to this string of interpretations—an experiment in medium. Shifting between different modes of representation has been on his mind since his early days in the darkroom. "I always wondered why there was this pristine usage of photography without a notion of photography in physical terms, in terms of the paper itself," he said. "I wanted to make a twilight zone between a two-dimensional work and a three-dimensional work, between a sculpture and representation."

And with his "Femme d'Alger" series, that dichotomy begins to blur. "The more paper you cut out of an image, the more the paper starts to react physically to the fact that there are holes in it," Dávila said. "The more I cut out of the paper, the more it reacts and twists. I want the paper to behave as a physical object, as a sculpture itself, rather than just a vehicle to carry an image."

"Jose Dávila: Stones Don't Move" is on view at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Oct. 28–Dec. 3, 2016.

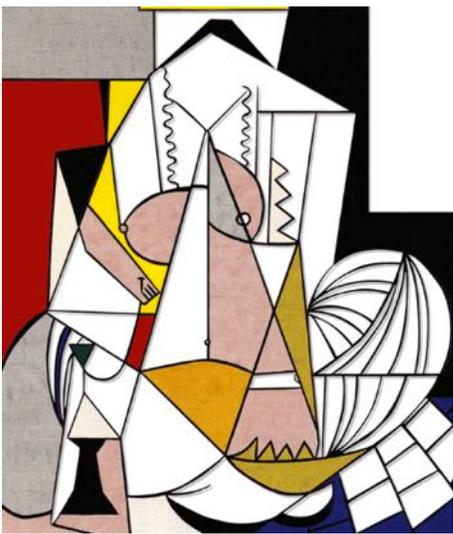
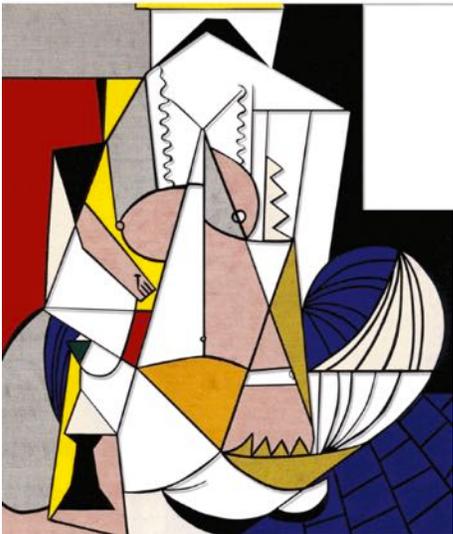


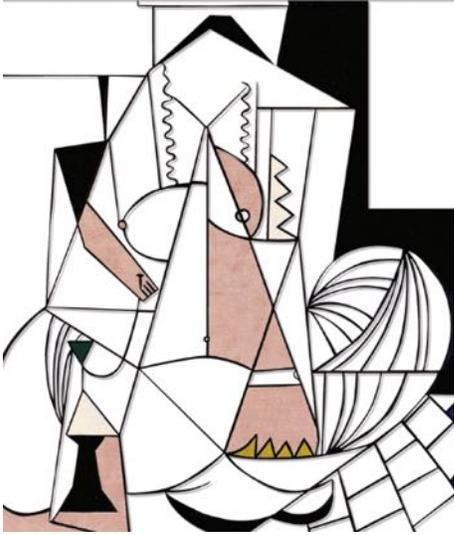
Eugène Delacroix, *The Women of Algiers*, 1834. Collection of the Louvre. Image via Wikimedia Commons.



Left: Pablo Picasso, *Les femmes d'Alger (Women of Algiers)*, 1955, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) Right: Pablo Picasso, *Les femmes d'Alger (Version 'O')*, 1955, Christie's







1: Roy Lichtenstein, *Femme d'Alger*, 1963. The Eli and Edythe Broad Collection. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. 2: Jose Dávila, *Untitled (Femme d'Alger) XI*, 2016; 3: Jose Dávila, *Untitled (Femme d'Alger) IX*, 2016; 4: Jose Dávila, *Untitled (Femme d'Alger) VII*, 2016; 5: Jose Dávila, *Untitled (Femme d'Alger) V*, 2016; 6: Jose Dávila, *Untitled (Femme d'Alger) III*, 2016. Works © Jose Dávila. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.