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Beyond perfection: The de Kooning Retrospective at MoMA

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"Pink Angels," c. 1945 (Photos courtesy of MOMA)

When 22- year-old Willem de Kooning arrived in New York Harbor in 1926 as a stowaway on the SS Shelley, he came with academic training in commercial and fine art from his native Netherlands as well as a ferocious hunger to discover America. What he could not have known at the time was that he was to show America how to see itself as it never had before.

In a landmark retrospective of his art, magisterially curated by John Elderfield and on view through Jan. 9, 2012, the Museum of Modern Art in New York is offering visitors an unprecedented opportunity to see de Kooning's career in depth and as a whole.

With 200 paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints from the early 1930s to the mid-1980s, many of them masterpieces and all of them masterly, a career unfolds that far outstrips the usual notions of "action painting" or "abstract expressionism."

De Kooning appears, rather, as a painter who kept reaching beyond his every achievement, concerned not with "how to make a good painting ... a perfect work ... but to see how far one could go." ("A polished figure of perfect proportions made him 'nauseous,'" report his great biographers Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan.) "Epic" is not too large a word for what the show reveals: an artist working through the heart of the 20th century both figuratively and abstractly, sometimes sequentially, sometimes simultaneously, and finding continuity in continual change, permanence through the permutations of figuration and abstraction.

Early on in New York, de Kooning was impressed by Henri Matisse and Giorgio de Chirico. In the mid-1930s,

he became close to the artists Stuart Davis, John Graham and, especially, Arshile Gorky, whose innate understanding of painting and art de Kooning greatly admired. His earliest attempts at abstraction, made while working in the mural division of the Federal Art Project (part of the Works Project Administration) were delightfully playful studies in primary colors that echoed Picasso and Gorky. (One evokes a tipsy Piet Mondrian.) He went on to paint working men and clowns, haunting portraits of seated figures such as the classical male nude and the pensive woman who stunningly open the Modern's show, and made exquisite small drawings of himself and "his imaginary brother" as well as of Elaine Fried, whom he met in 1938 and would marry in 1943.

Working with oil but also charcoal and allowing his revisions to pulse over the canvas, de Kooning's first series of Woman paintings climaxed with "Pink Angels" (c. 1945), as fine a painting as any that year. With its freely floating, biomorphic pink forms swimming in, through and around a central charcoal square, the painting signaled a radical new direction. The artist had found a dynamic equilibrium of forms and lines rising and falling, emerging and disappearing, darting about yet also standing still.

He was to go much further. In the next several years, he made abstract interiors, painted the apocalyptic "Judgment Day" (1946), which he enlarged as a huge backdrop for a dance performance "Labyrinth" -- and drew whenever he reached an apparent impasse in painting. (Later he would say that he did not "know the difference between painting and drawing.")

In 1947, he embarked on a series of black and white paintings that caused a sensation when they were shown in his first solo exhibition at the Charles Egan Gallery in New York in 1948. The combinations of dramatically reduced palette and fecundity of form are still stirring. How, for example, with just black and white can the Modern's own "Painting" (1948) have such paired energy and vitality? Its dance of full, rounded black forms float in a space they create rather than are contained by, refusing to be resolved and yet perfectly balanced.

While teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the summer of 1948, the artist returned to New York, producing further abstract canvases and beginning a second series of Woman paintings, this time in a more grotesque and confrontational mode. But the single painting toward which he was moving was "Excavation" (1950), the largest easel painting of his career and a treasure of the Art Institute of Chicago that looks more resplendent than ever in the third gallery of the Modern's show. De Kooning began the work as an interior scene with human figures but then, as often in the rest of his career, broke them into swooping, interlocked bodily forms in shifting planes.

In one sense, "Excavation" is an all-over painting. Yet it seems to have a center -- and presents itself as a dismembered, fractured world, at one moment emerging, then converging -- an abstract yet humanly rooted exploration of primordial forms one can experience as either creation or completion.

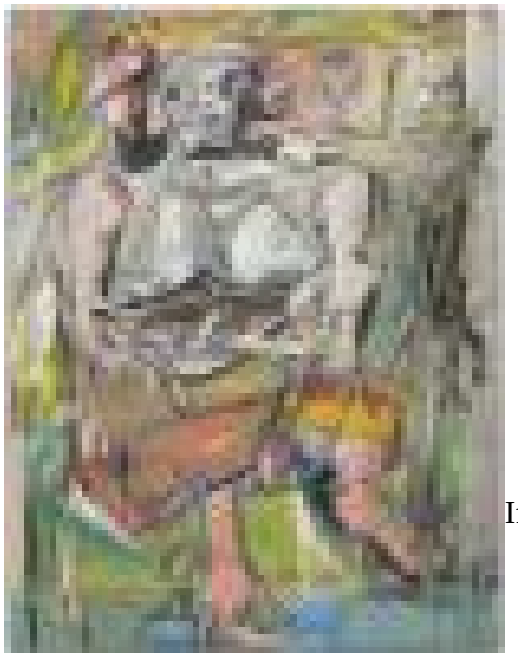
"I paint this way," de Kooning said, "because I can keep putting more and more things in -- drama, anger, pain, love, a figure, a horse, my ideas about space."

The result stands to his career as "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" does to Picasso's and "Bathers by a River" to Matisse's -- and bears comparison to them in terms of achievement.

The pivotal moment in de Kooning's work came immediately after this when, still in 1950, he began work on a monumental Woman figure that was to occupy him for the next two and a half years. Two other companion paintings, "Woman II" and "Woman III," were finished before it, and three others followed. When all six were shown together at the Sidney Janis Galley in 1953, de Kooning was fiercely attacked by some for misogyny and by others for abandoning the pure abstraction that led the critic Clement Greenberg practically to canonize him.

Today it is not just "Woman I" (still the most controversial painting in the history of American art) but the ensemble that commands attention -- and admiration. Seen with the many preparatory drawings and oil sketches (in some of which the woman is positively doe-eyed), the work recalls the artist's statement that "women are the symbol of civilization" and also his claim to find joy and humor in the grotesque.

The technical achievement also becomes clearer. In most of the series, the great seated figure fills almost the whole canvas, so that figure and ground are one. "Woman II" is softer; "Woman III" downright funny, close to caricature; "Woman IV" summery, perhaps surprised; "Woman V" the most vividly colored, the least assertive, most conversational in the series; and the giddy, blousy "Woman with a Bicycle" just about hilarious.

 If "Woman I," which de Kooning at first discarded, is easily the fiercest figure, caught in what seems a moment of ferocious, sneering confrontation, she is also a part of carnal nature, and nature -- evolutionary nature -- is a carnal, conflictual struggle. Embattled and defensive, she is a figure at once of terror and compassion -- and a painting of extraordinary honesty.

"Woman VI" (1953) shows an at first scarcely discernible figure still more strongly united with her natural environment and painted with freer, broader brushstrokes that inevitably suggest landscape. Which is just what de Kooning turned to next, first in a series that the critic Thomas Hess called his "abstract urban landscapes" (1955-56), then in a series of "abstract parkway landscapes" (1957-59) in natural blues, browns, yellows and greens. These latter paintings were a major success, selling 19 of 22 works on the first morning of their exhibition at Sidney Janis in 1959.

Attracted by the light and the nearby sea, de Kooning moved to Springs, a working-class town near East Hampton, Long Island, in 1963 and built a large new studio. There, recalling once again his famous statement of 1950 that "flesh is the reason why oil paint was invented," he painted an erotic new Woman series that included the Gibson-girl like "Clam Diggers" and a gorgeous run of landscapes evocative of Montauk Point. Happening to meet an old friend, the sculptor Herzl Emanuel in Rome, he also experimented with rambunctious clay figures that would be cast in bronze and look in three dimensions remarkably like his paintings in two.

Nobody could have predicted, however, the flood of creativity the artist experienced in the mid-'70s. In what the critic David Sylvester called "landscapes of the body," de Kooning again combined abstraction, aspects of the female body and landscape, but now with a newly gleaming, luscious palette in vibrating, perfectly balanced spaces. Five of these on a single wall in the next to the last gallery of the exhibition are simply intoxicating. (The poetic titles of some -- "Screams of Children Come from Seagulls," for example, or "?Whose Name Was Write in Water" -- came not from the artist but from a dealer or friend.) Like other late style paintings from Titian onward, the work is marked by great expressive freedom and utterly confident craftsmanship. But it stands out for its jubilant vitality, the succulent luxury of its colors and the way its fluid forms and line flex and swerve across the canvas. With Matisse dead for more than two decades and Picasso since 1973, the case could be made that de Kooning in these years was proving himself the greatest living painter.

In the '80s, the consequences of de Kooning's years of heavy drinking and the onset of dementia gradually decreased his productivity. In 1989, he was declared unable to manage his own affairs, and he stopped painting entirely in 1990. He died in 1997.

But for most of the decade, "the habit of art" was still masterfully his, and he made several series of increasingly spare, lyrical paintings in which skeining ribbons of blue, red and yellow carve wonderful white spaces into monuments of simplicity. (In the magisterial catalogue for the show, John Elderfield discerns at least four stages of the artist's development in these years.) Don't be surprised to hear the word "sublime" murmured around you if you linger in the show's last gallery.

At a time in the art world when market seems to trump merit at every turn and when video, installation and performance regularly displace painting, it is restorative to see a painter in his full glory whom people still remember personally. The praise has been of the highest order. (Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker*: "I rate him the greatest of American painters, and lesser only than Picasso and Matisse among all artists of the twentieth century.")

And for visitors with a sacramental imagination, "De Kooning: A Retrospective" has an added, imperative resonance. *This*, it shows at every turn, is how our material, inhabited, mysterious world can today be seen: plural, fragmented, foolish and often conflictual. But also fecund, abundant, delicate -- glorious. If contemporary life seldom allows one to stand in any one place for very long, if a sense for wholeness is a rare and fleeting thing, then stand before a painting by Bill de Kooning, almost any painting in this exhibition, and feel revived by seeing it.

You might also remember John Henry Newman in his essay on the development of Christian doctrine: "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

For more on the exhibit, go to the Museum of Modern Art's website. [1]

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