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ENCLAVE REVIEW

De Kooning: A Retrospective
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Ed Krčma

Even more than is usual with such blockbuster exhibitions, the enlarged images and wall text introducing *De Kooning: A Retrospective* presented a powerful rhetoric. They urged us to sense all the gestures, the doubt, the intensity of the artist at work behind the paintings. A massive image to the left showed de Kooning crouching, charcoal in hand, before a large drawing being made in preparation for the infamous *Woman I* (1950-2). To the right, six similarly enlarged photographs of that iconic painting, taken at various stages during what Thomas Hess would call the 'voyage' of its production, were testament to the throes of de Kooning's sustained and dramatic re-workings. The accompanying wall text declared the artist's fundamental stance to be one of non-conformity: 'De Kooning never followed any single, narrowly-defined path'; he was never (quoting the artist) 'interested in how to make a good painting… but to see how far one could go'; and, the major claim alongside de Kooning's own that 'flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented', was that the artist 'repudiated the modernist view of art developing toward an increasingly refined, allover abstraction and found continuity in continual change'.

This introduction signaled important aspects of the curatorial agenda: to keep the focus upon a demonstration of the aesthetic potency of de Kooning's work; to convey the complexity of his production processes as crucial to the works' meanings; and to represent the variety of his pictorial 'modes' – his ongoing and seamless oscillations between abstraction and figuration, his resistance to the conformity of styles, groups and '–isms'. There was something of the emblem of American freedom in this: the poor immigrant from Europe who achieves artistic brilliance and public success by dint of a relentless work-rate, unique individual vision, and extraordinary skill.

The first actual works of art the viewer encountered, on a wall facing us as we entered the first room, introduced another kind of dynamic. To the left was the artist's *Seated Figure (Classic Male),* c.1941-3, and to the right *Woman Sitting*, 1943-4. The two figures angled toward each other: a naked, Herculean male torso rendered in a striking hot pink (hotter and redder when ambiguously describing genitalia), and a seated woman, head resting in hand, wearing a low-cut dress from which slips a provocatively luminous pink nipple. The question of sexuality was raised insistently by the work shown throughout this exhibition, and it is an issue that has attracted the attention of numerous de Kooning scholars. While the curatorial framing does not prioritize that aspect (the opposite is more true), the exhibition delivers de Kooning's oeuvre to us with such potency that the sheer intensity, carnality and energetic ambivalence

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of the work powerfully dramatizes painting's relationship with the body and its pleasures, desires, aggressiveness and excess.

This exhibition, curated by John Elderfield, was the first major retrospective of de Kooning's work since the artist's death in 1997. Its almost 200 artworks (paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures) were arranged into seven chronological sections, constituting a kind of cradle-to-grave narrative, from the artist's juvenilia and early encounters with European Modernism during the 1910s and '20s, right through to his late, spare, precarious abstractions from the 1980s. While the exhibition was not exhaustive, the selection was superb, with the museum having had the resources to borrow almost all the key works they desired. All the major statements were represented here: the seated figures from the early 1940s, testament to de Kooning's nuanced and powerful draughtsmanship (and his debt to Picasso); the black and white calligraphic abstractions of the late 1940s, with which he attracted the admiration of the likes of Clement Greenberg; the compositional complexity and corporeal energy of *Attic* and *Excavation* (1949 and 1950 respectively); the striking gestural force and chromatic intensity of the 'Woman' pictures shown at Sidney Janis in 1953 (although one of these was missing here); the brimming, voracious confidence of the large 'full arm sweeps' and 'abstract urban landscapes' from the mid-late 1950s; two paired, lambent pastel-coloured Arcadian abstractions (*Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*, 1963, and *Door to the River*, 1960); the spilling, leaking, unsublimated eroticism of his *Women* from the mid-60s; and, a final triumph, a series of abstract canvases of uniform dimensions (196 x 223cm), titled poetically and possessing the saturated yet composed pleasure of a painter so in control of his medium as to have been able not only to seize upon the surprise gifts of a fast process, but also to have secured for them a potent structural force that strengthens their affective impact.

These much-celebrated high-points were accompanied by a selection of less familiar drawings, many of which, especially those from the early 1950s, were equally (if differently) impressive visually. Others, and this went for some of the paintings from the mid-1940s also, seemed selected for the revelations they offered regarding process rather than their specifically visual rewards. Some prints were also included, as well as two mono-prints on newspaper, which were made from the sheets the artist used to keep the surface of his paintings from drying out. De Kooning did not take up sculpture until the 1960s, but Elderfield's selection shows an unprecious, ribald and subversive plastic imagination, anticipating the low pleasures and slapstick grotesquery of Paul McCarthy, for example.

Indeed, de Kooning remains a fecund artist for today, more so in some ways than his now more celebrated contemporaries Pollock or Rothko. His work is not only able to survive a variety of critiques leveled against it (or against 'Action Painting' less specifically), but also to respond to and even align with some of these newer priorities and tendencies. In 1953 Robert Rauschenberg, a great admirer of de Kooning, erased one of his drawings and later exhibited it as his own work; but de Kooning's own drawings were already dense palimpsests of erasures. Pop Art critiqued the emphasis upon privacy and authenticity in Abstract Expressionism, as against the surfaces and spectacles of the commodity and the mass media; but de Kooning himself famously used a smiling mouth cut from a cigarette advert as the fulcrum for his *Woman I*, and already by 1955 (*Gotham News*, 1955; *Easter Monday*, 1955-6) he was including transfers from newspaper pages on the surfaces of his paintings.

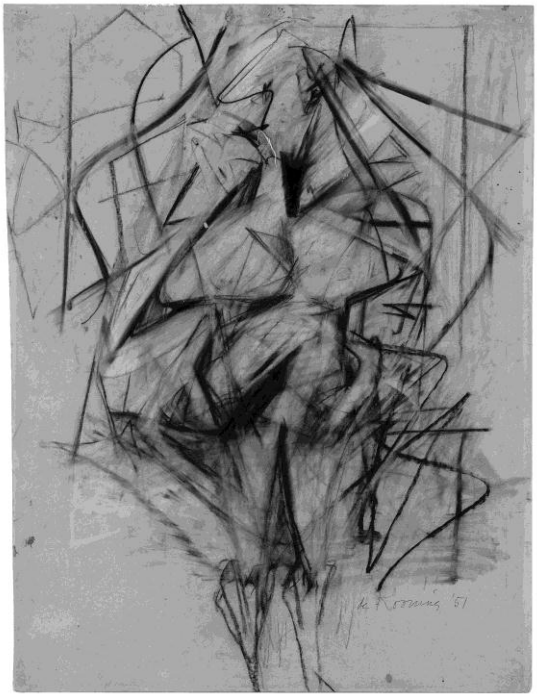
This is not to reduce the profound differences between the neo-avant-garde and de Kooning's modes. Perhaps most importantly, de Kooning interrogated painting from within, not from without: there is never a sense that he questions the value of painting as such, or large-scale gestural painting in particular. The

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extraordinary amount of time de Kooning spent in the studio is testament to his profound existential connection with the activity of painting: while not wishing to hyperbolize, it does seem accurate to say that he devoted his life to it. But for many such an artistic idiom has long been saturated and claims for de Kooning's continuing relevance will not convince everyone. He was unorthodox even as a Modernist painter, but he wasn't an avant-gardist at all (in the sense of employing art, often against itself, to overthrow existing economic, political and institutional structures).

The status of de Kooning's achievement with regards to the politics of gender and sexuality is much harder to determine. Neither the exhibition wall texts nor the substantial, beautifully illustrated catalogue will help very much in developing a concern with these issues. The curatorial frame of the exhibition was conservative in this respect. The French feminist philosopher and theorist Julia Kristeva once described de Kooning's *Women* as a 'massacre' on the canvas. While this is not perhaps the most subtle reading of the paintings themselves, the terms that Kristeva had already developed to theorize poetic language do prove useful here.

Kristeva's concept of the 'semiotic' designates aspects of a poetic text (inclusive of painting) that evidence a kind of revenge of the drives upon the conventional structures of language necessary to produce properly socialized subjects. For Kristeva, a poetic space is one where, once these symbolic structures have been mastered and internalized, the unruly, gestural, rhythmic, frequently destructive energy of the drives re-asserts itself. This makes contact with infantile experience in the



Willem de Kooning: *Woman* (1951 Charcoal and pastel on paper 21 1/2 x 16" (54.6 x 40.6 cm) Private collection © 2011 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

sense that it brings into visibility aspects of the subject which have had to be silenced or repressed in the process of socialization, but Kristeva was adamant that for poetic language to have any real significance required a sustained *going through* and not an abandonment of the symbolic order. De Kooning was of course the master draughtsman, by far the best trained and most gifted of his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries in this respect. He had fully mastered the conventions of academic picture making, but subsequently strove to disable, dismantle or bypass the easy satisfactions of the exercise of such facility in favour of something more surprising and unruly. Many of de Kooning's mature paintings present an overpowering mixture of bodily expenditure and unedited pleasure, sustained by a dense, rich, wet material ground. They are both striking and sustaining in their formal potency and sophistication, but the oddly unsublimated, truant and open quality of their energy (which might usefully be thought of in terms of the drives) means that their structural coherence is never fully divorcable from a 'semiotic' excess.

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Elderfield is rightly skeptical of commentators who read de Kooning's art as symptoms of a personal misogyny; but the case for the artist's condition of freedom or his 'poetic' experimentations might be interestingly complicated by a more sustained exploration of the formation of subjectivity itself.

Ed Krčma is Lecturer in History of Art at University College Cork, and is founding editor of *Enclave Review*. *De Kooning: A Retrospective* was on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 18 September 2011 – 9 January 2012.

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