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De Kooning: Five Decades

De Kooning’s works emanate vast energy

by Tom McGlynn
JUNE 2019

It’s been 22 years since Willem de Kooning’s death at 93. His long and prodigiously productive career was lately most fully examined in a retrospective held between 2011–12 at MoMA. He may be, at this point, one of the most examined artists of the 20th century. Fortunately, his work has, for the most part, withstood the historic “seating” that such scrutiny might instruct.¹ The artist’s own phrase for the visual capture of life’s vital yet elusive moments, “slipping glimpses,” can be applied to the intransigent present his work perpetually announces. Consider this story that de Kooning was fond of relating, (one among the many idiosyncratic parables towards the oblique understanding of the painter’s attitude that he was legendary for): the vulgar expediency of a hash-slinger lining up a row of coffee cups to pour them out en masse for a hurried diner clientele. There was something about America in this gesture that fascinated de Kooning, something urgent and impatient or just a getting on with the business at hand as directly as possible. What we witness in his works is this same decision making on a dime. His paintings are, in essence, immanently fixed yet moving compositions made up of a flurry of such decisions.
The 26 works assembled for this show span a historical arc of fifty years, and offer a more digestible survey than the artist’s MoMA retrospective. His works emanate such vast energy as to almost require this type of succinct salon. Formal issues of medium, scale, color, and dialectical juxtaposition are handled with real care. The show includes works on paper and paintings in both large and small scale from successive decades of the artist’s career (194–1983) as well as three of his figurative sculptures (1972–73).

The selection of works on paper emphasize de Kooning’s “Women” series from the late 1940s to the early 1950s with a range of mediums including collage, charcoal, graphite, enamel, gouache and oil paints, and pastel. *Monumental Woman* (1954) is a charcoal drawing of the artist’s iconic woman-fetish-form dedicated to one of his critical champions Harold Rosenberg. *Woman* (1953) is composed of oil, enamel, and charcoal on paper mounted on canvas in dominant red, yellow, and blue. Its particular coloration and its inclusion of de Kooning’s wide- staring idol eyes and bared teeth—characteristic of this series —presents an entity that’s explosively aggressive in both its form and content.

Pepe Karmel, who contributes an illuminating essay to the exhibition catalogue, references the art historian Carol Duncan’s quote in which she describes the artist’s subjects in the series as potentially representing male castration anxiety. Perhaps there’s an element of truth to this thesis: the artist heroically recapturing a world-destroying goddess. One thing is eminently true: the “Women” series remains perennially challenging in its gendered subject as simultaneous figurative symbol and painterly abstraction. Perhaps their best formal description comes from the artist and writer Brian O’Doherty: “The ‘Women’ are made up of anatomical parts that resist, by a sort of metaphorical overkill, the service of representation they are performing.”²
Additionally, the hotly debated subject of the construction or deconstruction of these images of women, it could be argued, derive historically from de Kooning’s almost Oedipal relationship to the destruction and reconstruction of his father in Cubism: Picasso. In his essay, Karmel makes an interesting correlation between the Picasso etching *Woman With Tambourine* (1939) and de Kooning’s work on paper *Untitled (Three Figures)* (1947) which is represented here. Both works employ anatomical deformation towards the goal of pictorial extension and its concurrent metaphorical vitalization. There are four large-scaled paintings in the show that continue this theme. Most closely related to the works on paper is *Woman III* (1952–53). It is rather subdued in hue, being dominated by a gunmetal grey which emphasizes the cutting graphic slashes that the artist is known for. Yellow, green, red and blue traces of paint slightly accent the composition, almost as reflective afterthoughts. The later *Woman as Landscape* (1954–55) is more highly keyed in dominant contrasts of blue-green and orange-red and lapsed into an all over composition that presages such subsequent works as *Police Gazette* (1955) and *Composition* (1955). These latter two paintings, from the artist’s classic mid ’50s period, represent the remarkable synthesis that de Kooning was able to achieve in his painterly appropriation of Cubist space. What a rich experiential pleasure it is to get up close to these pictures to take in their constellation of self-cancelling gestures executed from a brush generously loaded with evasively viscous oil and enamel paints. That these images hold up to their seemingly random and chaotic micro-assemblage as structurally stable “big picture” pictures lends the overall experience a palpable “presentness.” Paintings dating from the 1960s in the show have a similar presence but with a slightly more subdued effect. *Pastorale* (1963) and *Two Women* (1964) both strike a much lighter tone due to a less saturated and more closely valued palette and also due to a slacker, less-strident brush stroke. The artist regains his classic painterly brio in the late 1970s as evidence by *Untitled XVI* (1975) and *Untitled* (1977).
In both paintings the artist’s Cubist roots are clearly showing. His brush acts as a spatial knife, vigorously cutting up and redistributing pictorial space, albeit a bit more softly, as he did in the 1950s. The last works in the exhibit are dated from 1983 and present like ghostly wraiths of the previous paintings discussed. In these spare works, it is as if de Kooning’s intimate relationship to popular culture (including advertising cut-outs for his “Women” series, most famously) seeks out an indexical shorthand in primary, triadic colors and laconic flourishes almost like Roy Lichtenstein’s parodic versions of the artist’s signature stroke. They are nevertheless poignant as masterful parting glimpses.

The three sculptures included in the show take the artist’s generous wit and humor to a physical level that he might have withheld in his maintenance of pictorial tension in his paintings. *Cross-Legged Figure* and *Clamdigger* (both 1972) were initially modeled broadly in clay and subsequently cast in bronze. Their limbs and digits exude a gnarly vitality due to the artist’s habit of rapidly squeezing out these forms between his hands and then clumping these together.

Imagine Rodin’s vital surface modelling combined with Buster Keaton’s slapstick pratfalls as shaped by a more existentially sanguine Giacometti and you have some idea of the historical and aesthetic sophistication of these almost childlike sculptures. Their presence in the overall ensemble brings the aesthetic conversation out into a realm of lived experience to which de Kooning so readily held out his hand.
Endnotes

1. “Some painters, including myself, do not care what chair they are sitting on. It does not even have to be a comfortable one. They are too nervous to find out where they ought to sit. They do not want to ‘sit in style’.” From de Kooning's comments on “What Abstract Art means to me” for the symposium “What is Abstract Art” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 5 February, 1951.


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TOM MCGLYNN is an artist, writer, and independent curator based in the N.Y.C. area. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum of the Smithsonian. He is the director of Beautiful Fields, an organization dedicated to socially-engaged curatorial projects, and is also currently a visiting lecturer at Parsons/the New School.