In the Museum of Modern Art’s fine retrospective, a picture of Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) emerges, one that defines the painter as the true abstract expressionist he was. More than the others from the New York School, de Kooning became its truest practitioner of action painting, even while creating works in figurative styles that dazzled from the start. A stowaway from Holland, perhaps America’s greatest illegal immigrant, the artist would endure lack of funds for a long time—most likely until 1948, when he had his first one-man show at Charles Egan Gallery in New York at the age of forty-four. At this point he was already a great painter—as the exhibition shows, he was a consummate artist more or less from the start of his career, forming a remarkable triumvirate with the American Jackson Pollock and the Armenian Arshile Gorky. When de Kooning is compared with the two, Pollock looks a little naïve and rather narrow, while Gorky’s surrealist flair, rooted in nature, feels a bit like it is outside the American scene at the time. In any case, de Kooning loved painting not only as a vehicle of abstraction, but also as a means of graphic figuration; the Woman series, perhaps his best-known series of paintings, shows him brilliantly working both styles in canvases that are both formidable and amusing.

Although de Kooning’s lush, heavily worked surfaces approximate the density of the human body—he famously commented that “flesh was the reason why oil paint was invented”—at the same time they are simply the product of the painter’s activities: the action of putting pigment on canvas. This emphasis on the physicality of paint as determining the processes and goals of the artist shows us that the actions of artists during this period were, on one level, performances resulting in the self-conscious awareness that the great themes of figurative art were no longer available to them as exploratory painters. Seeking both a new subject and a new self-reliance, they fought for a painting language that would be true to materials—and that would not succumb either to the five-hundred-year tradition of Western perspective or to an imagery that would as us to suspend our disbelief. De Kooning’s own work, especially the Woman series of his middle period in the 1950s, would embrace the innate expressionistic characteristics of paint, but would also struggle with an archetypal female figure, whose implications could be more than a little violent. In his battles with the eternal female, he usually included passages of abstract painting, in order to present a complex technique that stands out as a virtuoso handling of representation and nonpictorial methods.
Early Work

In another way, however, de Kooning is also a central painter in his chosen city of New York, at a time when the heroic pose of the artist was supported by the psychic aggrandizement of America’s imperium, which had saved the world from Fascism and was not yet tainted by its involvement in Vietnam. But we should not forget the fact that de Kooning was also a foreigner, studying traditional technique at night at the Rotterdam Academy from 1916 to 1924. So he brought a certain classicism to his experience in the United States. His training enabled him to draw beautifully; some of his best earlier works consist only of graphite on paper, as, for example, the small masterpiece *Self-Portrait with Imaginary Brother* (c. 1938), which consists of two young men, the young being just post-adolescent. The older brother, presumably de Kooning’s self-portrait, looks more confident in comparison with the younger brother, who seems sensitive but not yet fully a man. It is a heavily psychological portrayal of de Kooning, who may have studied from the lack of a steady father figure (1) and who, in this drawing, seems to be playing the parent to an imagined youth. The draftsmanship is exquisite and reveals the extent of both the artist’s training and innate skill.

Investigating the place of de Kooning within the larger design of American art at the time must take into consideration the way art criticism of the last forty years (or longer) has elevated the movement of abstract expressionism in general. The point has been made that as powerful as these artists were in their practice, their deification smacks of cultural chauvinism and, to some extent, imperial pride. It is just now, at this moment with a show like this in New York, that we can start to measure the true value of the movement. Indeed, it may be that abstract expressionism is more important to American cultural history than it is to painting’s narrative in general, a point made by the British critic and art historian Edward Lucie-Smith (2). De Kooning’s greatness notwithstanding, it becomes necessary to place him within the context of painting as it is known throughout Western culture. The period when American art was world-class and had few competitors can be limited to approximately a decade in time, from the 1940s through the early 1950s, a window of time during which the first generation of abstract expressionists painted at the highest level.

Black and White Paintings

For this writer, de Kooning’s greatest achievement lies in the black and white series, accomplished in the late 1940s. Although it is not true that de Kooning left the figure for a long period of time, it makes sense that he would move back and forth with work that emphasized the figure over abstraction, and then the abstraction over the figure. In the black and white paintings considered here, de Kooning turns more nearly toward abstraction, although a couple of paintings, such as *Orestes* (1947) and *Zurich* (1947) have recognizable lettering that partially spells out the titles of each. Additionally, the
works contain forms that do appear to derive from the human body, as happens in the wonderful 1947 piece simply named *Painting*. In this work, voluptuous curves, outlined in white, jostle each other; they seem to fit together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. De Kooning was working with house paints or enamels, whose longish drying time enabled him to work wet into wet: “Indeed working with still wet paint would become one of his signature techniques” (3). *Painting* is a tour de force of abstract painting, coming as it did off from the artist’s efforts in the early forties, when de Kooning was working with biomorphic abstraction and more clearly defined parts of the body.

*Dark Pond* (1948) presents another masterful composition for the viewer. In a manner a bit like that seen in *Painting*, the mostly black *Dark Pond* is carved up into different sections by white lines. Traces of figural forms remain, so that we might imagine a reclining figure on the bottom of the painting, or another figure above it. The work looks very much like a nocturne of real elegance, while the white lines, varied in width, establish lyrical phrases on top of the black background of the painting. It is a commonplace that de Kooning never fully left figuration, as so many of the later, more nonobjective works establish volumetric curves that suggest the curves of the body. Thus, in these paintings a palpable tension exists between the shapes of figurative form and the passages of lyrical abstraction, which both concur with each other and establish an opposition out of which a high lyric structure is formed. It is the principle of equal opposition that de Kooning works with, so that our reading of these black paintings must establish a dual perception—of flesh as well as abstraction. Unlike Gorky, who was a close friend and who died in 1948, around the time the black paintings were made, de Kooning did not sexualize nature in a manner akin to surrealism. Instead, he relied on the eroticism of the figure as he knew it. His figurative mastery came from his long apprenticeship as a night student at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts and Techniques, while his abstraction was more the result of his stay in the New World.

**Women**

The outrageousness of the Women paintings, which followed close on the heels of the black paintings, could easily be regarded as misogyny; however, we should remind ourselves that these images are developed at least partially as a parody, and are painted with a strong sense of humor. Even so, that does not in the least change the unsettling grimace of the Women, whose mouths often feel like a contemporary emanation of the vagina dentata. Somehow, though, the breezy paintings, half figurative and half abstract, embody eroticism’s flaring obsessiveness, in ways that incorporate both humor and anxiety. The eyes of *Woman I* (1950-52) are gigantic and easily capable of inspiring fear, and her mountainous bare breasts also seem as if they are meant to overwhelm. Additionally, the figure’s mouth is frozen in a grin that looks like a snarl. All around her are brilliant passages of abstraction, in pinks and greens and yellow, whose
expressiveness serves to cage in the dominating energy of the figure. This picture would serve as a turning point for the next few years of the artist’s career.

A disbeliever in de Kooning would surely ask why the Women are so grotesque, and one might answer that they are a kind of archetype, an earth mother close to frenzy. There is something truly primal about these paintings. They communicate their energies roughly and spontaneously, with an emphasis on raw energy. Indeed, the abstract treatment circling the figure in *Woman IV* (1952-53) shows us that de Kooning actually needed to contain, or even cage, the powerful person he was portraying. If the portraits are meant to be erotic, they are so in ways that engender disquiet, and have met with strong feelings on the part of viewers and commentators. My own sense is that de Kooning was partly making fun of his own tendency to make a myth of the female, as if she were an eternal beneficial, or perhaps more likely destructive, muse. He is most likely depicting intense but contradictory emotions, which find their outlet in the heavy application of paint.

The brutality of *Woman IV* shows us that de Kooning was hardly an esthete, someone who gives too much attention to his own desires and longings. The intensity is ferocious and borders, compositionally speaking, on the absurd. We know that the appreciation of the absurd is a contemporary experience, addressed in literary works and essays by the French writer Albert Camus; de Kooning is in no manner a literary or philosophical artist, but when he develops the Women imagery in ways that emphasize the unreasonable, a kind of modern myth-making takes over, leaving the viewer in a quandary that may well be similar to his own. The conflicting contents of the imagery, its hilarity and unveiled menace, show us the absurdity of myth, its penchant for the sometimes embarrassingly grandiose, in addition to its larger-than-life personae.

The orange-reds that make up the color of the skin of *Woman V* (1952-53) emphasize passion, even as the face comes close to caricature. At the same time, the areas encircling her body look like beautiful swathes of abstract art. De Kooning shows us that the figure itself, in its raging eroticism, is of course unreal and an arbitrary, artificial construct. It is a psychological portrait, as all the Women are; but it also applies to myth on both a personal and private level. The outlandishly large eyes of *Woman I* are repeated here, as are the heavy arms and powerful torso. The image comes quite close to caricature, yet de Kooning never loses control of the composition, either thematically or formally. Here the female is poised on a balance between absurdist parody and ferocious authenticity, with de Kooning judging the two aspects as equally important. At the same time, it is clear that he is committed to the luscious viscosity of paint, which becomes a goal of its own despite the fact that a figure has been painted. His Women are both terrifying and funny, but they are also an excuse for making an oil painting rife with the kinds of decisions only a painter of de Kooning’s caliber would be able to make. De Kooning would go on to make further versions of his Women for some time, through the 1960s. It was a subject that obsessed him and resulted in a number of major paintings.
Later Works

In 1963, de Kooning left New York for eastern Long Island, whose flat landscape and effusive light mimicked similar conditions in Holland. At the end of the 1960s, he became interested in sculpture and printmaking, concentrating on them as outlets instead of painting (4). Interestingly enough, his sculptures were bronze casts of modeled clay figures; it has been pointed out that, at the time, no one ambitious in sculpture was working in clay, preferring welded steel instead. De Kooning’s own work is very expressionist; his series of clam diggers, hostesses, and seated women are built up by the hand, which actively works the surface of the clay, pressing the malleable material inward to differentiate the head, torso, and limbs. Nearly human in size, they enact an idiosyncratic energy, rough and tumbling in their heavily imprinted bodies. When compared to the flat geometric planes David Smith built his later works with, it becomes clear that de Kooning’s sculptures are about approximating the human form in what can be called the roughest way possible. In some aspects they resemble the surface treatment of Giacometti’s sculptures; however, de Kooning remains throughout an artist and not an illustrator of ideas.

The sculptures were followed by big, messy passages of paint in purely abstract language. Color is introduced into preceding color; de Kooning worked wet on wet to gain some of the translucent, fluid hues he was interested in. With *Screams of Children Come from Seagulls* (1975), we find lighter colors—whites, light blues, yellows, pinks, and reds—that build a crazy quilt of individual hues, expressed in a way one might normally expect from a small child. But that was de Kooning’s greatness on show: his ability to remain childlike as a painter even into the mid-1970s. … *Whose Name Was Writ in Water* (1975) is similar in feeling to *Screams of Children*; however, the colors are darker: maroon, orange, dark blue, some black. The tones, relatively muted in comparison to those in the earlier painting, show a certain gravitas bordering on melancholy—this despite the fact that the artist suffered from none of the depressions that plagued Pollock and Gorky. In *Untitled XI* (1975), we see a magnificent jumble of a painting, with splottes and brush marks stumbling into each other’s territory. Boundaries are few in de Kooning’s art, which suggests that the artist had a process and not a product in mind while he worked.

The last works, from the early 1980s, were undertaken after de Kooning had been diagnosed as having Alzheimer’s disease. At first when these paintings were shown, critics questioned the artist’s ability to make compelling art while he was under the duress of his condition. Indeed, it was easy to liken the white spaces in the paintings to the white space in de Kooning’s mind. More recently, there seems to be a consensus that the work represents a culmination of more than a half-century of painting on de Kooning’s part; the paintings have a marvelous freedom to them. Ribbons of color cascade across and down the canvas, usually against a white background. Nearly calligraphic in their form, the
lines mark out a graceful expressiveness that appears to be pure abstraction. Gone is the heavy impasto; instead, what you see is a thin application of paint that emphasizes the linear aspects of the composition. This group of paintings is so different from the wet-in-wet, heavily impastoed early work, it seems to have been accomplished by someone other than de Kooning. Yet they are a triumph of decades of consolidated effort.

The remarkable oil on canvas *Untitled V* (1983) consists of broad bands and ribbons of color, with reds and yellows predominating, accompanied by strokes of blue. As expressive as the painting is, there is something restrained, even classical in its elegant unification of forms. The colors are fluid and establish relations between their organic forms; a big yellow passage sits in the middle and lower right of the painting; beneath it is an organic patch of red that supports the yellow hue. White is found beneath the colors, neutralizing space where the ribbons have not covered it. A painting from 1984 without a title shows us that even using a minimum of strokes, de Kooning makes the composition work as a field, in which certain linear values develop relations among themselves and a few blotches of red. After decades of expressionism, de Kooning arrives at a new style, alluring in its classical austerity. The curving lines are spare but lyrical, forming a kind of dictionary of minimalist forms. De Kooning is usually at his strongest when smashing one colored passage into the one next to it, but in this work we can see a relatively independent syntax, with the individual elements remaining mostly isolated from, rather than mixed in with, each other.

De Kooning’s greatness is ongoing in the sense that his painterly explorations mostly limited themselves to a tactile and physical, as opposed to an intellectual and conceptual, understanding of painting. Always an intuitive painter, he elevated his hunches about the nature of paint and what an artist might do with it. Because he was classically trained in Rotterdam, he never left the figure for very long; his abstractions seem to have derived from his interactions with other painters of the New York School. It is hard to imagine a career today that would so brilliantly maintain an allegiance to painting for its own sake. As time continues, de Kooning’s achievement looks more and more like a mixture of European and American art influences. The former’s high culture forms one of the artist’s supports, while American pragmatism may be said to connect the artist’s own down-to-earth sense of the problems he faced in painting. It is unfair to compare de Kooning to the others of abstract expressionism’s great triumvirate, Pollock and Gorky—each achieved greatness in his own way—but it seems to me that de Kooning was cultured in ways Pollock was not, and that he was not as psychological or tormented as Gorky. De Kooning made great paintings because several types of history converged within him—the past of Holland’s great art, and the contemporary, often pioneering life of the painter in New York. It is likely the future will commit de Kooning to an apotheosis; he certainly deserves the considerable acclaim and attention paid to him during his life and now after his death.
Footnotes:


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