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Willem De Kooning
SIDNEY JANIS GALLERY

Willem De Kooning's paintings of 1970–72 on view at the Sidney Janis Gallery continue the series of figures in landscapes that he initiated in 1963 when he moved from Manhattan to The Springs on Long Island. The particular importance of this exhibition is the debut of de Kooning as a sculptor. It is in the light of this new development that we must reevaluate his recent paintings. The American master at merging figure and background into holistic unities has suddenly, at the age of 68, presented his familiar figures to us as solid, clearly-defined entities. The ambiance or setting so vital to his painted figures—windowed studio wall before his move to Long Island, and sunny country landscape thereafter—has necessarily been abandoned. His solution has been to fragment the silhouette into such a jagged, active, shifting line that it becomes extremely difficult to read the sculpture in terms of distinguishable three-dimensional form.

De Kooning models clay the way he handles oil paint—with speed, facility, roughness, and informality. The sculptures (three large and many small bronzes) give off an aura of life and immediacy; one feels that strong hands have pushed, pulled, ripped, jabbed, and torn into the clay with ferocious assurance to bring them into being. One is reminded, of course, of Ruben Nakian, but Nakian never seemed to have the kind of New York School violence and energy recorded here. There never really was any sculptural equivalent for de Kooning's kind of Abstract Expressionism.

De Kooning's traditionalist attitude toward drawing and painterliness emerges clearly in his sculpture. He has used clay and bronze for the same reasons that he uses oil on canvas in easel-sized figure or landscape paintings. His particular brilliance has always been in his ability to use traditional materials and attitudes unconventionally; to invent forms and techniques. (The way he can manipulate oil paint, for instance, makes current "lyrical abstractionist" handling of the much more versatile medium of acrylic look like child's play.) As opposed to Rodin, de Kooning throws the modernist literal attitude toward materials into full relief. Rodin manipulated his clay to give particular illusions—to render his subject descriptively. De Kooning uses clay for its marvelous tractability. He squishes it and squeezes it. He pokes holes into it, slaps it into slabs and swipes across his forms to a point where his figures are barely recognizable as such, much less as symbolic characters carrying messages with meaning.

De Kooning's figures have no specificity like Picasso's *Man Carrying a Lamb*, and like that work they are anachronistic in a time of post-Minimal, body, kinetic, Conceptual, computer, Process, and antiform sculpture. Unlike Picasso's sculpture, de Kooning's work seems to make no directly symbolic or iconographic references. One of the problems of the *Clam Digger*, for example, lies in its lack of balance and stability. Its knees are weak—expressively reduced to spindliness by the space invading them. The figure seems to stand by dint of a miracle, not by virtue of logical, skeletal construction. In his *Seated Figure* the implications of stability and of support for the weight of the torso are rendered literally and the figure seems to "work" much more efficiently, as a result.

It is this “invading negative space” that aligns de Kooning’s sculpture with that of Giacometti, whose figures also seem to be eaten by the surrounding atmosphere. Concavities, perforations, and depressions into solid forms are a few of the hallmarks of 20th-century sculpture which differentiate it from previous convex, massive, whole sculpture that protruded out into and displaced space in a very positive way. Giacometti’s figures fail to resist this invasion of space very effectively, and in this contrast lies the basic achievement of de Kooning’s sculptures. They are in a tense, tenuous relationship with surrounding space. Invaded in one place, they push out forcefully in another. Giant feet take firm possession of a bit of territory; enormous, weaponlike hands grasp hunks of space as if it were cotton candy. In a constant struggle with their environment, they both devour and are devoured.

The organic multiplicity and simultaneity of de Kooning defies a linear transcription into words. He is essentially contradictory. The structure of any one of his paintings at Janis is virtually impossible to diagram. A line can be just a line, or it can be a shape. It can be an object—a finger, an arm, or a branch—or just the outline around another, larger object. Or, it may be only a direction, a velocity, a time/space indicator having no specificity. But, in fact, it is all these things at once.

Any given 2" x 2" section of one of de Kooning’s paintings will contain pigment of a fairly specific hue. But that hue will be under a challenge from its neighbors and from the overall hotness, pinkness, redness, or glaring yellowness of the painting. And the figure itself—perceived at the moment when a positive reading of its shape is possible—what is its emotional content? This is almost impossible to measure, since de Kooning encompasses almost every emotional possibility. In these recent paintings, it is as if de Kooning’s experience of dwelling, at last, idyllically, within a summer landscape, had been entered into with such headlong passion that the results seem anguished and distraught, as well as beautiful.

—April Kingsley