

# De Kooning Is De King

Two *Voice* critics tackle the painter's big MOMA retrospective

**E**ven after the carnage of World War II, Europe still looked down on their boisterous American savior as culturally backward. But Abstract Expressionism demolished that notion, and even in today's fragmented art world, New York remains a painter's town. With a major retrospective of Willem de Kooning (1904–97) colonizing the Museum of Modern Art's sixth floor, *Voice* critics Martha Schwendener and R.C. Baker discuss why this Dutch immigrant—who once said, “Art never seems to make me peaceful or pure”—still matters.

**Schwendener:** Most obviously, de Kooning is the original painter's painter in America. Even at the beginning of the New York School, they all knew: *This was the guy.* De Kooning said Pollock “broke the ice”—which meant either that he showed where painting could go from there or that he was the first American painter of international renown—but everyone in New York knew that de Kooning had already been in his studio for 15 years—

**Baker:** Slugging it out.

**Schwendener:** Yeah. De Kooning biographer Mark Stevens said something along the lines that de Kooning was the most famous painter who threw everything away in the '40s.

**Baker:** Exactly—to find something new in painting by expanding Europe's classical, figurative space into abstraction and creating something meatier than the Cubists did. And you can say Pollock was great, but his work is sort of a painterly dead end—his dancing around the canvas ultimately became performance art. Same with Rothko leading to color-field painting, another dead end, or Johns to a dry conceptualism. But de Kooning is an open door that painters as disparate as Amy Sillman, Mary Heilmann, Terry Winters, and Joyce Pensato have all walked through looking for new painting.

**Schwendener:** And if you look at the history of painting as a narrative, it's de Kooning who bridges America and Europe. In the MOMA catalog, they show the progression from a Poussin bacchanal through a version by Picasso that's looser to de Kooning's *Attic* [1949].

**Baker:** De Kooning shatters Poussin's crowd of figures into a large-scale, corporeal abstraction.

**Schwendener:** But although it's true that Americans were looking for the big car and long canvas, de Kooning never felt the need to blow things up to mural size like Barnett Newman or Pollock.

**Baker:** Because of his supreme confidence. It's like you said—he's in his studio



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in the early '40s consciously working toward a breakthrough way down the road. I picture a football team grinding it out on the ground until they make that spectacular pass into the end zone.

**Schwendener:** De Kooning has his first show when he's 43 in 1948, and there's a maturity and sophistication there. In a sense, he has been test-driving painting. He has really put it through its paces.

**Baker:** Those are the black-and-white paintings, and they are technical tours de force. He creates contours simply by varying viscosities of paint—mixing enamel and oil paint—and it's like he's pouring light. I've never seen so much

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## Art

patience and contemplation applied to something that comes across as so fast and furious.

**Schwendener:** It's athleticism. You train and train, and then you can do the perfect golf stroke, say.

**Baker:** Sure—muscle memory. You don't think, because if you think while you're doing the stroke, it's too late. So he would sit in a chair and study the canvas, and then after he saw the move he wanted to make, it would involve his whole body, from his toes up through his torso and shoulder down to the fingers holding the brush—and when he makes those sweeping gestures, the viewer feels it. But he wasn't thinking in an “action painter” sort of way, more: How *do* I walk this tightrope between representation and abstraction? Rothko was off in his luminous contemplation of the Void, Newman was running for

mayor of New York, Pollock was creating an alternate nature, but de Kooning was still based in our real, visceral world. Maybe that's why he caused such uproar with his “Woman” paintings—that famous “melodrama of vulgarity.”

**Schwendener:** I grew up as an undergraduate, reading Carol Duncan's *MOMA's Hot Mamas*, but as I get older, de Kooning seems a response to the way women were being commodified by the culture, like movie promotions and advertisements—you're being attacked everywhere, in every public space, by beautiful women. You have this European transplanted to New York, awash in all this imagery, and you get *Carole Lombard* [a small 1947 painting of a curvaceous gray blob rising against a black background]. It might be the first moment where painters actually have to compete with this onslaught of really seductive imagery. And the human figure was a problem in general: Are you going to be a figurative painter, or are you going to get on board with Clement Greenberg's abstraction? MOMA curator John Elderfield seems to say that he's painting the women figuratively, but I think the women are a perverse solution to combining figure and abstraction—he's using an old art-historical trope, the female nude (although I wouldn't say his “Women” are categorically nudes), and trying to tease out a way to do both.

**Baker:** It gave him the visual grit to push his abstractions. It's why I can never find the offense in those paintings—they're formal devices.

**Schwendener:** But women might not want to be formal devices. Today, with John Currin or Richard Prince, because they're trying specifically to be politically incorrect and take that as an artistic stance, that's more problematic.

**Baker:** That's frat-boy thinking, and although Currin can certainly paint, Prince's beaver-shot knockoffs of de Kooning are just overblown titillations.

**Schwendener:** By opening with two figure paintings—one of them is *Seated Figure (Classic Male)* [1941/43]—MOMA is making the argument that this is very much a figurative painter. Wouldn't it be better to open with one of those alongside something more *Attic*-like? Plus, this show is definitely overhung. If there's an argument for painting, it's that we want to slow down and look at it, but the walls are crowded.

**Baker:** I would definitely have liked to see one of those early enamel-on-white-paper paintings—which are all about figure and ground relationships—paired with one of the very late paintings, where he's suffering from Alzheimer's. The last works have the contours and gradations that we're used to, but he carves those initial broad brushstrokes down with flat white paint. It's as if he's taking the blank canvas that every painter has to face and pulling it up from the depths, making it the subject—it's becoming everything, as if he's consciously taking a step into the light. It's where the gut is every bit as intelligent as the brain.

**Schwendener:** Exactly. And that's what painting is about.