

## The New York Times

ART REVIEW

# Outlines of Energy Define de Kooning

By HOLLAND COTTER

In a nice piece of timing, three substantial gallery exhibitions of drawings by Willem de Kooning — at the Drawing Center in SoHo, Matthew Marks in Chelsea and Mitchell-Innes & Nash on Madison Avenue — have coincided with the enthralling Jackson Pollock retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

The two men were friends and peers, but are very different artists. Pollock, deeply and irrevocably mythologized, has taken on the aura of an E.T. who briefly streaked in from another universe and out again. The tirelessly productive de Kooning (1904-97) had both feet on earth, and that's where the clamorous, humming energy of his painting seems to come from.

The same energy is evident in his drawings. The three shows (two of which also include sculptures) don't pretend to add up to a survey; they include nothing at all from the pivotal 1940's or early 50's. But the later work that they do have is protean stuff. It includes high-spirited warm-ups for paintings, ultra-refined finished pieces and all manner of glorified doodles, which together illuminate a career.

In shaping that career, de Kooning found ways to reign in his natural facility as a draftsman in order to sharpen his pictorial game. Some of those strategies can be seen in the four series in the Drawing Center exhibition, organized by Klaus Ker-  
tess.

The earliest pieces, dated 1958, are studio exercises of the "write a sonnet about that chair" variety, self-assigned tasks set to keep the mind and eye alert. Titled "Folded Shirt on

Laundry Paper," they are what they say they are: quick ink-and-brush sketches of shirts.

In de Kooning's hands, the results are almost absurdly virtuosic, a witty, effortless dance between abstraction and depiction. On the one hand, the shirts are distilled to pictographs; on the other, they assume anatomical life as stout upright phal-luses or rectangular torsos topped by plump breasts.

The human body, particularly the female body, was at the center of almost everything he did. And it is the subject of a group of charcoal

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**Crucified figures offer complex riddles. Parody or pain? The viewer must work it out.**

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drawings from 1966, all of which he executed with his eyes closed, a Surrealist technique designed to tickle the subconscious into action. (He also cooked up his own variation on this device, which involved drawing with his left hand while watching television.)

In this period he was painting hot-pink nudes: Rubensian good-time girls whose robust bodies ripple and blur as if reflected in water. But the figures in the drawings are their opposites: stooped hags with long arms, spindly legs and haunted eyes. Any attempts to figure out de Kooning's "real" attitude toward women

through his art (a vain endeavor, surely) must take both sets of images into account.

Also in the mid-60's, he returned to the male figure in a series of Crucifixion drawings; some two dozen are in the show. Barnett Newman was painting his "Stations of the Cross" then, and Mark Rothko his murals for the de Menil chapel in Houston, so something was in the air. But exactly what prompted de Kooning's drawings is uncertain.

Most of the crucified figures are nudes, with prominent genitals and outstretched arms, though they rarely assume the spread-eagle pose of sexual availability routinely found in his images of women. The bodies are often framed by the lines of the cross itself. The faces are tangles of lines, and some have cartoonish features, with a sharp nose and bulging, for-

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*"Willem de Kooning: Drawing Seeing/Seeing Drawing" remains at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo, through Dec. 19. The exhibition, sponsored by the Robert Lehman Foundation, travels to the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., Jan. 16 through March 28, and to the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in Columbus, May 15 through Aug. 15. "Willem de Kooning: Drawings and Sculpture" remains at Matthew Marks Gallery, 523 West 24th Street, Chelsea, and at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 1018 Madison Avenue, near 79th Street, through Dec. 19. A bronze sculpture by de Kooning, at Doris C. Freedman Plaza, Fifth Avenue at 60th Street, remains through March 31; another, in Bryant Park, at 42d Street and Avenue of the Americas, is on view through Jan. 31.*



Willem de Kooning Revocable Trust

**Glorified doodling:** An untitled Crucifixion drawing by Willem de Kooning from 1966, at the Drawing Center in SoHo.

lorn eyes.

De Kooning riffed on this motif for years. A scratchy 1969 pencil drawing of the Crucifixion carries the hand-lettered title "Charleston Pose" and includes a demure woman with long eyelashes and a kneeling or splayed figure with what appear to be Philip Guston-eque hairy legs. And an oil and ink-wash series from 1972, "For Santa Emilia: Six Tears for Six Saints," turns the crucified figure into spare, androgynous icons.

Mr. Kertess proposes that the crucified men are self-portraits. In any case, their emotional ambiguity is of interest.

Are they intended to be tragically expressive or merely klutzy? Parodies of suffering, emblems of the real thing, or both? Here, as usual, de Kooning took pains to complicate his work enough to put it beyond easy grasp.

His complications were also formal, as suggested by the large-scale charcoal and oil on vellum pieces that close the Drawing Center show. They were created not as stand-alone works but as means of tracing and transferring images from paintings he had finished to others still in progress.

This process was clearly intended to interrupt the smooth flow of the act of painting, to keep art itself impure; de Kooning used other methods to do the same thing, like collage and techniques that combined newsprint and paint.

Examples of work using newsprint are at Matthew Marks and Mitchell-Innes & Nash. In one oil sketch done on a page from a 1977 copy of *The New York Times*, a snarling, bug-eyed painted face can be read as a response to a grisly headline and as a hilarious counterpart to two suave models in an advertisement, who themselves look pretty freakish in the context.

Neither of the gallery shows has the thematic coherence of the Drawing Center presentation, but they are full of good things and make some astute points. An ink drawing of a head at Marks really could be a candidate for a self-portrait. And an oil-and-gouache figure of a woman at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, just a twist of flesh pink and lipstick red, distills the tradition of Baroque mythological painting that was in de Kooning's blood.

Both shows make useful links between drawings and sculptures. At Mitchell-Innes & Nash, a jittery "Clamdigger" sketch, circa 1972, appears in the company of a plaster version of the sculpture of that title, on loan from the Nasher Collection in Dallas.

(Two big de Kooning bronze sculptures, incidentally, are on temporary outdoor view in Manhattan under the auspices of the Public Art Fund, one at Doris C. Freedman Plaza, the other in Bryant Park.)

The Pollock retrospective at the Modern includes drawings along with the paintings, a good idea. The major de Kooning exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington in 1994 did not, and we're still waiting for the show that will integrate such materials — the inner mechanics of a career, what makes it tick — into a comprehensive survey of his work.

But then, de Kooning is an odd case in postwar art. He's so huge — in the senses of being both ambitious and prolix — that he's elusive; so monumental that he can almost be ignored.

Contemporary art history hasn't really begun to tackle him. Theory-minded scholars, who find much to say about Pollock, so far seem little attracted to de Kooning. And a lot of critical writing on him is gushy, still in the adoring, star-struck stage.

This will probably change as de Kooning, who was still hard at work just over a decade ago, gradually moves out of the present and into history.

He has certainly left future historians plenty to work with, and the drawings in these three shows add a provocative dollop to that dauntingly generous mix.