

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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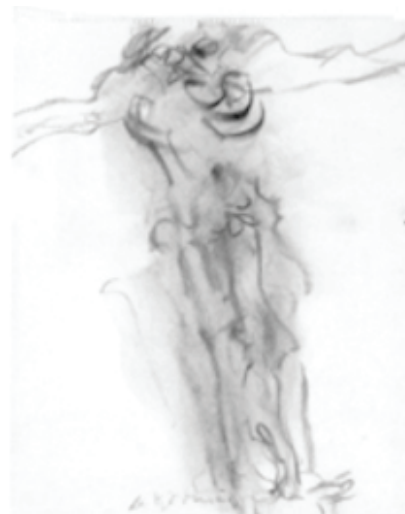
ARTFORUM

Willem de Kooning

DRAWING CENTER / MATTHEW MARKS
GALLERY / MITCHELL-INNES & NASH /
PUBLIC ART FUND

The coincident scheduling of Rothko and Pollock exhibitions in New York this fall provided a great opening for three de Kooning shows, as well as the Public Art Fund's display of two large sculptures in Central and Bryant Parks. Seeing AbEx "all over" New York, it was obvious that de Kooning alone managed at once to reinvent and to remain himself—to have the second act most American artists don't get. While the black-and-white enamels of the '40s and the women and landscapes of the '50s continue to be classic, the underrated work of the '60s and '70s equally challenges and rewards sustained viewing.

Here, as always, are figures, landscape elements, and abstractions in varying combinations, but de Kooning loosens his line. The exhibits offered the opportunity to see an amazing range of marks, images, and techniques from these decades: thick and soft, sharp and jabbing, vellum tracings, elegant series in ink, apparently offhand works penciled on notepads. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to refer to figures alone, without adding landscape and abstractions. Most of the works—maybe all—hinge on the figure; men and women slapstick their way around with physical humor. Even the crucified figures (for some reviewers, signs of de Kooning's inner torment) mug cartoonishly as they grimace in holy agony; one seems to sport a little Dutch girl's cap. In *Untitled*, ca. 1970–75, a female figure on a crucifix moves her legs one degree beyond crossed,



Willem de Kooning, *untitled*, ca. 1966,
charcoal on paper, 17 x 14", from "Drawing
Seeing/Seeing Drawing," at the Drawing Center.

morphing from martyr into chorus girl. From work to work, a woman's breasts become ribs, then the ribs of a rowboat. A woman on a beach towel becomes a woman on a chaise longue becomes a woman in a rowboat. These drawings, particularly the series of twenty-four tightly hung on the Drawing Center's long wall, act like frames in a film sequence—"De Kooning Draws a Drawing"—depicting a single shifting body.

De Kooning's bodies are infinitely mobile, plastic in the old-fashioned Kandinsky-and-Mondrian sense. Arms open and close, knees cross and knock; de Kooning was in the habit of erasing himself before Rauschenberg ever thought of it. The ebb and flow of the rippling figures beats against, is contained by, the oblique geometry of rowboats, beach towels, and crucifixes. Just as nudes are nudier with a little bit of clothing, freedom is sweeter with a little bit of resistance. These pictures don't espouse the absolute, existential freedom of Harold

Rosenberg's '40s and '50s, but the freedom of "the '60s" as it might have appeared to an older, foreign-born man: exuberant and exhibitionist, topless and short-skirted, like the figure in *Untitled*, 1966, at the Drawing Center. Yippies and feminists and Herbert Marcuse didn't invent bodily expression, but their version of physicality obviously amused de Kooning.

All this nubility and facility can efface the density of bodies, a quality restored in de Kooning's sculpture (seen at Matthew Marks Gallery, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, and the two city parks). These figures are constrained not by boundaries or frames but by their own materiality: They weigh themselves down, as in the elongated arms of the *Clamdigger*, 1972. De Kooning prods and squeezes clay and plaster, material that is unwieldy but ultimately not intractable. The bumps and lumps are particularly irresistible when scaled up in his monumental (and oddly titled) *Standing Figure*, 1969–84, which seems to expose itself, spread-legged, to the out-of-town shoppers teeming around the Plaza.

When we think of the art-historically championed rupture of the barrier between art and life, what comes to mind is "real life" (in the peculiar person of a stuffed goat) butting into art. But de Kooning's life was rather filled and measured by his art. There is something profoundly lovely about these drawings and sculpture and what they reveal—not in dissecting the artist's inner psyche, but simply by marking how he spent his days. If there is a body documented here, it is really de Kooning's. This is the story of his life.

—Katy Siegel