

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



79. *Charleston Pose*, by Willem de Kooning. 1969. Pencil on paper, 45.7 by 61cm. (Willem de Kooning Revocable Trust/Artists Rights Society, New York; exh. Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus).

New York and Columbus Willem de Kooning

The Willem de Kooning of the 1950s is the most famous one. He created *Excavation* (1950), a grand summation of gestural abstraction, then immediately turned to *Woman I* (1950–52), an equally imposing representational work, all the more striking for its having challenged the commitment to abstraction prevailing among the artist's supporters. Yet, later in the decade he returned to large abstractions. Some were angular and disjointed (*Easter Monday*, 1955–56), others sweeping and fluid to an extent without precedent (*Suburb in Havana*, 1958). De Kooning was proud of his ability to 'change over-night', as he told an interviewer in 1968.¹ Then aged 64, he was still changing. In fact, during the 1960s and 70s, he was all the more protean.

This was as much the case for de Kooning the draughtsman as it was for the painter, perhaps even more so, as is demonstrated by a concise, intense exhibition *Willem de Kooning: Drawing Seeing/Seeing Drawing* curated by Klaus Kertess for the **Drawing Center, New York** (now at the **Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus**, 15th May to 15th August). All works are on paper or vellum and are of modest size, with the exception of three large oil-and-charcoal drawings, double-sided vellum tracings which de Kooning used to transfer linear motifs from one painting to another. The catalogue² reproduces recto and verso of these vellums on facing pages, so that the pairings appear to reflect each other. Perhaps reflections on each other would better state the case since the rectos and versos vary. They trace and mirror each other imperfectly, because de Kooning when repeating himself was always changing, 'overnight'.

The exhibition consists of four groups or series. First come 'Folded Shirt on Laundry Paper Drawings' (1958; Fig.82). These eleven ink drawings might be regarded as abstractions were their motif of shirt-and-collar not known. Combining breast-like and boxy forms, they are hard to decipher, like so many of de Kooning's half-abstract, half-figural images. They were probably sketched



80. <no title>, by Willem de Kooning. c.1970–80. Charcoal and oil on vellum, 133.4 by 107 cm. (Willem de Kooning Revocable Trust/ Artists Rights Society, New York; exh. Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus).

very rapidly, with the artist taking advantage of the fact that an inked brush can be converted from wet to dry in a stroke – either because the ink runs out or because the artist wilfully turns his wrist, altering the flow. The second group comprises ‘Drawings with Eyes Closed’ (1966). These twenty-four untitled charcoal drawings were united into a set by de Kooning himself who stated, deadpan: ‘I found that closing the eyes was very helpful to me’.³ Some look as if the artist may have returned to the sheet with eyes open, adding a few heavier, projective strokes and rubbing other areas into recessive submission. Strangely, these blind figure-drawings are entirely *observant*. De Kooning fully internalised the bodies of the women and men he viewed around him by concentrating on his own physical sensations in an act of imitation that was a gesture of both body and medium. He would ‘measure’ an observed body by concentrating on the analogous parts of his own, feeling the proper distances. Proportion became more feel than measure. He could thus reiterate his observations kinaesthetically – no need to deploy the eye, the hand alone was adequate.

The third series are the ‘Crucifixion Drawings’ (c.1964–75). These thirty-two works around the theme of a figure on a cross or a cross-like figure (not always male, not always nailed) include a number of common de Kooning poses, otherwise not likely to be linked conceptually to the Cross. Finally, there are the three ‘Large Drawings on Vellum’ (c.1970–80; Fig.80), already mentioned.

Part of the artist’s brilliance – resulting in the curatorial success of the exhibition – lies in the extent to which his thematic inventions (the poses) appear to transform themselves before the viewer’s eyes, along with the flow of linear markings. Without being didactic, the exhibition establishes relations between the themes. I have in mind the Crucifixions, the ‘Charleston’ dancer drawings, and the image of a woman in a rowboat,



81. *Untitled*, by Willem de Kooning. 1966. Charcoal on paper, 25.4 by 20.3 cm. (Willem de Kooning Revocable Trust/Artists Rights Society, New York; exh. Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus).



82. *Folded Shirt on Laundry Paper*, by Willem de Kooning. 1958. Ink on paper, 43.2 by 35.2 cm. (Willem de Kooning Revocable Trust/Artists Rights Society, New York; exh. Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus).

which are linked in ways that Kertess's selection reveals and perhaps even enhances.

De Kooning was fascinated by kitsch and the vernacular as much as by imagery from the Old Masters. Crucifixions belong to both categories. They are also male. Although the artist's interest in the male body should not be underplayed – the 'Eyes Closed' and 'Crucifixion' drawings come detailed with male genitalia – his involvement with the female body was surely greater. As much by fashion as anything organic, that body changes. During the 1960s, de Kooning was living among affluent young women of Eastern Long Island who sported the era's skimpy clothing – very short skirts, open, high-heeled shoes, revealing fabrics. His images often exploit aspects of this clothing, articulating it in such a way that it can be mistaken for the body itself, which his viewers sometimes imagine as nude. To a visual artist, clothing and skin are equally corporeal. The curving horizontal bands that describe the torsos of many of de Kooning's women can be arms folded across, legs raised and crossed, or hints of ribs (Fig.81); but just as often they can be the layered folds, creases, and ribbings of a sweater or skirt.

De Kooning's drawings synthesise his diverse observations of religious imagery (some from Long Island lawn decorations), beach scenes (women reclining, women in boats), and parties (women sitting, standing, dancing). The prominent ribs and crossed ankles of a crucified man might generate some visual thinking about the ribbing of

a boat or a chaise longue and the crossed legs of a woman lying in that boat, that beach chair, or seated in some other chair. Thoughts turn to the crossed arms of a Charleston dancer, who might as well be a woman in a chair, with torso and limbs twisted youthfully, fashionably. One drawing in particular – called *Charleston Pose* because of the artist's inscription – tells a remarkable story (Fig.79). Underneath the inscription is another, erased but still visible as 'Fox Trot Pose'. This may indicate that, initially at least, the Charleston was not de Kooning's own understanding of his image, but a misunderstood, then corrected, suggestion from a friend. The posture may derive instead from a type of seated woman who fascinated the artist: arms crossed, knees together, feet apart (corporeally antithetical to the crucifixion pose).

De Kooning at the Drawing Center was generously supplemented in New York by another exhibition of the artist's drawings from the 1960s and 70s, organised jointly by **Matthew Marks Gallery** and **Mitchell-Innes & Nash** (closed 19th December 1998). Here de Kooning's familiar themes – Crucifixion, Charleston Pose, Woman in a Rowboat – appeared again, with a number of impressive sculptural works added, most of them small, like drawings. De Kooning sculpted as he drew, imitating the feel of bodies by gesturing in character with the specific physicality of his medium. Working with clay or plaster (later cast in bronze) he could subtract as much as add, changing the form by penetrating into

it – by feel, perhaps blindly. He made sculpture intimate.

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¹BIBB: 'Willem de Kooning' (interview), *Vrij Nederland* (Amsterdam) [5th October 1968], p.3.

²*Willem de Kooning: Drawing Seeing/Seeing Drawing*. By Klaus Kertess. 128 pp. with 74 col. pls. (The Drawing Center and Arena Editions, New York, 1998), \$40. ISBN 1-892041-03-0.

³*De Kooning Drawings*, New York [1967], unpaginated.