

the village **VOICE**

# Rough Sex

Willem de Kooning  
 Matthew Marks Gallery  
 522 West 22nd Street  
 Through June 30

**BY PETER  
 SCHJELDAHL**

**A**merica's greatest pure painter, Willem de Kooning was a sculptor for a few weeks in 1969 and off and on during a couple of years in the early '70s. He loved creating with wet clay, he said when I visited him in 1974. He mimed his solution to the intractability of one work, *Large Torso*: from several feet away, pitching a huge gob of the stuff with a fine overhand delivery. "Right in the kisser!"

He told another critic that, unlike a painting, a clay sculpture could never fail irretrievably. "I can take a piece of two-by-four and beat it down and it is still there ready to go."

Do these remarks disturb, as if they referred to a person, most likely a woman, infinitely game for abuse? That's de Kooning, projecting violent Eros into inert matter. The effect, in his sculptures as in his *Women* paintings, is comic because the object is made of his attacks on it, becoming more powerful with each blow. But the root anger is real enough, and roaring.

De Kooning the sculptor worked small, agreeing only later, as an afterthought, to the colossal enlargements that dominate this show. But when I talked to him about it, his ideal of sculpture was literally heroic: Augustus Saint-Gaudens's statue of General Sherman kitty-corner from the Plaza Hotel. "Saint-Gaudens is so terrific," he said. "Look at that thing sometime. He made the guy sit right on the horse. You know how hard that is?"

De Kooning foresaw a monumental project of his own: a woman's shoe six stories tall, he told me with a visionary gleam in his eye. Maybe he was kidding, but I think of it every time I pass the Plaza and the, after all, marvelous Saint-Gaudens. I picture the nonexistent shoe as a gnarled mass thrashing joyfully in space and organizing the city around itself like Wallace Stevens's jar on a hill in Tennessee.

It was like de Kooning to take inspiration from art that no self-respecting sophisticate would even look at. He admired Norman Rockwell, for instance; and I was present when he announced to his fastidious dealer, the late Xavier Fourcade, that a new sculpture had accidentally turned out to be the spitting image of Salvador Dali, in those days the per-

sonification of gross vulgarity. "Let's call it *Head of Dali!*" the artist urged. Fourcade sulked. Try to identify the piece at Marks, where it is one of four titled *Head*.

Why didn't de Kooning sculpt more? It is a puzzle, like his even briefer, fertile run as a printmaker. I explain his reluctance as a temperamental horror of other people's expectations, from which he felt safe only when painting. He famously said, "If I stretch my arms next to the rest of my self and wonder where my fingers are—that is all the space I need as a painter." The collaborative zones of printmaking and bronze-casting had to feel overcrowded to him.

At any rate, there is an out-of-character, rankling oddness to this show, which happens also to be magnificent. Arrayed in Marks's grand, white space, with Hudson River radiance pooling beneath skylights, the massive, tenderly patinated bronze blowups of de Kooning's little tussles with clay seem (as they surely are) the last word in modern-art glory. I swooned a good deal, even as I wondered at a shotgun marriage of the artist's brawling touch

with the bronzecaster's professional finesse. The blowups have the air of a man in fancy dress who is used to overalls.

The show includes bronzes of de

something similar to modeled sculpture since Bernini.

It's all there in the diminutive experiments of 1969, unfortunately sealed in a vitrine at Marks. For best re-



Memorializing de Kooning's touch: *Standing Figure* (left, 1969-84) and *Reclining Figure* (1969-82)

Kooning's whole sculptural oeuvre: less than three dozen pieces. It stars 1980s enlargements, each over 10 feet high or wide, of three tiny 1969 originals: *Seated Woman*, *Reclining Figure*, and *Standing Figure*. There is plenty to like, some of it perhaps perverse. What, besides a goof, is an apparent thumbprint as long as a forearm? You might imagine yourself as a mouse in the studio with a close-up view of gigantic hands in action: de Kooning's hands, the best in the business.

He punches and pulls, twists and kneads, slaps and gouges. The material is alive, reacting with a sort of orgasmic glee. Looking, I identify with both hand and stuff. It's like sex when the difference between oneself and the other blurs. De Kooning's sculptures picture the blur. They are pictorial, addressed frontally—extending his painting practice, as if he dug into a canvas and hauled out the yowling figure that always lurked there. The mood is abandoned, shameless, ferocious.

"Melted Picasso," Pablo Picasso commented when shown reproductions of de Kooning's abstractions of the late 1940s. Correct. The Dutchman transformed the Spaniard's dry, linear, domineering sensuality into something moist, flowing, and, though passably macho, participatory, giving and getting with the image. Performed with a brush, de Kooning's process took up and altered the tradition of Western figure painting since Titian. He needed only a few sessions with clay to do

what, they ought to be handled. If monumentality is wanted, put them on a table and stoop for a ground-level fantasy view. Blowing them up is not silly. The enlargements should work wonderfully in public sites—better, because far more actively infectious than anything by Henry Moore, say. Beyond that, if Willem de Kooning's touch doesn't merit memorializing, what does?

But the look of that touch goes haywire when removed from life-size. You don't know how to enjoy anything by de Kooning if your hand and arm don't twitch in empathy with his gestures. Tellingly, when he made biggish pieces in the early '70s, he decided that his hands were too small to leave traces in the right scale. The hands that assaulted *Large Torso* wore two pairs of regular-sized gloves and, on top, an outsized pair of workman's gloves (which ended up as the figure's clownish hands). The only measure for him was bodily.

I refer to de Kooning in the past tense. He continues his long dying, reportedly mindless, in a nursing home. While his body lasts, modern art retains a heartbeat, but "he became his admirers," as W. H. Auden wrote on the death of W. B. Yeats, years ago. Meanwhile, it is no longer too soon to declare his art immortal. Like his painting, de Kooning's sculpture will guide the imaginative bodies of endless future generations in scary, exhilarating protocols of always present-tense, rough caresses.

**THE MATERIAL**  
 is alive,  
 reacting with  
 a sort of  
 orgasmic glee.  
 Looking, I  
 identify with  
 both hand  
 and stuff.