Clamdigger, 1972



This installation of recent works by Willem de Kooning—coupled with a related de Kooning drawing from the University Art Museum's permanent collection—suggests that the artist, now in his early seventies, continues to create complex and powerful images, at times savage in their intensity.

The most unexpected development in de Kooning's late career has been his new interest in sculpture. In 1969 the artist was in Italy and visited a friend who had a small foundry. He was invited to try his hand with sculpture. The result was thirteen "Little Pieces" as they are now sometimes called. Each is only five to seven inches high.

It is not likely that he would have pursued this casual encounter with the medium had not Henry Moore, on a visit to New York the following year, admired these initial efforts and encouraged him to explore sculpture on a larger scale. Clamdigger, on view in MATRIX, was his first major piece.

De Kooning was one of a handful of influential abstract expressionists whom the critic Harold Rosenberg called "Action Painters." Rosenberg later said that de Kooning's improvisations provided the model for the concept of "Action Painting." Loosely speaking, these phrases were meant to designate their common interests in the act of painting and to pinpoint the drama of those highly charged moments when the artist confronts the canvas.

The artist's manipulation of the paint was a focal point for these artists. This is important to recall because the primacy of the artist's touch—de Kooning's distinctly tactile assault upon the clay—is key to the evocative strength of his sculpture.

Another influential aspect of de Kooning's work over the decades has been his ability to explore abstract forms in some works while, at the same time, exploring frankly figurative or landscape motifs in other works. The recent canvas, (Untitled XVII, 1977) painted last year, does not represent a major change in direction for de Kooning. Rather it stands as a rich variation on his continuing interest in high-keyed color abstractions in which the paint is furiously manipulated and willfully re-worked. The result of all this activity is a diversity of surface tectures. The paint appears variously pitted, matted and wrinkled, swirled, dripped and raked.

It is important to the artist that in the intentional ambiguity of his abstract forms lurk chance reminders of human figures, animals and landscapes. Says de Kooning, "Even abstract shapes must have a likeness."

Willem de Kooning was born in Rotterdam in 1904. When he was twelve he was apprenticed to a firm of commercial artists and decorators and shortly thereafter began eight years of conventional training in night classes at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts and Techniques. In 1926 he came to the United States as a stowaway aboard a Holland-America liner. For many years he worked as a house painter and window display designer. In 1935 he spent a year with the Federal Arts Project (W.P.A.) and for the first time was able to paint fulltime. Although he had to resign because of his alien status, the experience was responsible for his decision to devote total energies to his painting. By the end of the forties, he was well-known as one of the founders of abstract expressionism.

Willem de Kooning lives in The Springs, Long Island and is represented by Xavier Fourcade Gallery in New York. City.

AMK

This MATRIX unit was originally organized for MATRIX/HARTFORD of the Wadsworth Atheneum by Andrea Miller-Keller who has written the above essay. This essay and Artist's Sheet has been adapted for the MATRIX/BERKELEY presentation.

Works in MATRIX:

Untitled XVII, 1977, Oil on canvas, 60" x 54". Lent by James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles/Xavier Fourcade Inc., New York.

Untitled IV, 1977, Oil on canvas, 70" x 80". Lent by James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles/Xavier Fourcade Inc., New York.

Figure Studies, 1960, Charcoal on paper, 23 3/4" x 18 3/4". Collection University Art Museum, Berkeley; Gift of Julian J. Aberbsch, New York and Jerry Ganz, Chicago.

Clamdigger, 1972, Bronze, height 57½". Lent by James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles/ Xavier Fourcade Inc., New York.

Seated Woman on a Bench, 1972, Bronze, height 38". Lent by James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles/Xavier Fourcade Inc., New York.

Other works by de Kooning currently on exhibition in the University Art Museum's Gallery 4:

The Marshes, 1947, Charcoal and oil on composition board, 30 7/8" x 23 1/4". Collection University Art Museum, Berkeley Gift of Julian J. and Joachim Jean Aberbach, New York.

(An) air of ambivalence and profundity surrounds the Clamdigger, a stolid, glowering figure of Neanderthaloid maleness. De Kooning recounts that the idea for this work came to him while he was bicycling near the beach at Montauk, Long Island. In the distance, lit from behind by a bright sun, he saw men with clamdigging tools standing in the shallows. The hulking torso and spindly limbs of the Clamdigger thus reproduce the effect of a figure viewed against a harsh back-light. But this vision does not account for the massive genitals and extremities, which, taken together with the relatively feebleseeming arms and legs, have a strong symbolic overtone. They suggest a kind of basic incapacity compensated for by a potential for unthinking violence; the Clamdigger

may be seen as an avatar of dumb rage. But, again, it would be a mistake to think that any single exegesis could exhaust the meanings of an image so rich in content.

Peter Schjeldahl De Kooning drawings/sculpture

Selected one-person exhibitions: Egan, NYC '48; Boston Museum School, de Kooning Retrospective '53; Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Willem de-Kooning '68; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '78 (also to Tate Gallery, London; Stedilijk Museum, Amsterdam; Art Institute of Chicago; Los Angeles County Museum of Art); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, de Kooning drawings/sculpture '74 (travelled extensively).

Hundreds of books, catalogues, articles and reviews have been written about Willem de Kooning and his work.

The following books are the standard references on his work to date. All include comprehensive bibliographies about de Kooning as well as listings of the artist's own published letters, interviews, statements and writings.

Selected bibliography about de Kooning:

Hess, Thomas. Willem de Kooning (New York: George Braziller '60).

Janis, Harriet and Rudi Blesh. De Kooning (New York: Grove Press '60).

Hess, Thomas. Willem de Kooning (New York: Museum of Modern Art '68).

Rosenberg, Harold. Willem de Kooning (New York: Harry N. Abrams '73).

Larson, Philip and Peter Schjeldahl. De Kooning draw-ings/sculpture (New York: E.P. Dutton '74).

Waldman, Diane. Willem de Kooning in East Hampton (New York: Solomon R. Gug-genheim Museum '78).

Selected group exhibitions: Museum of Modern Art, NYC, New Horizons in American Art '36; Venice XXV Biennale '50; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, The Art of Assemblage '61; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, Continuity and Change '62; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York School: The First Generation. Paintings of the 1940s and 1950s '65; Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-70 '69.

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