

# BORDER CROSSINGS



**CECILY BROWN / APRIL GORNIK / MONICA TAP**  
on **WILLEM de KOONING**

*de Kooning*

Absalon  
Family Podeswa  
Mia Feuer

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*all cover*



## Monica TAP PAINTING'S COURTNEANCE

MONICA TAP: My first encounter with de Kooning was my being very soundly admonished as an undergraduate for spouting off that he was a misogynist. I was told, in no uncertain terms, that I knew absolutely nothing and should cease making judgments. I later saw the work on trips to New York as part of my undergraduate education, and I was always taken with the expressionist part of his language. The fluidity of the mark-making was something that I especially responded to. But I have to say that before this

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show, I don't think I had a grasp of the arc of his career, or an appreciation of the simultaneity of the different ways in which he worked. Conventionally, these ways of working are labelled abstraction and representation, but he seemed not to want to use those terms. He saw them as just being painting, which they very legitimately are.

**BORDER CROSSINGS:** So was the exhibition a surprise?



2

1. Willem de Kooning, *Montauk I*, 1969, oil on canvas, 88 x 77". Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund. © 2011 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

2. Monica Tap, *Tangling with Ghosts*, 2011, oil on canvas, 36 x 54". Courtesy the artist and Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto.

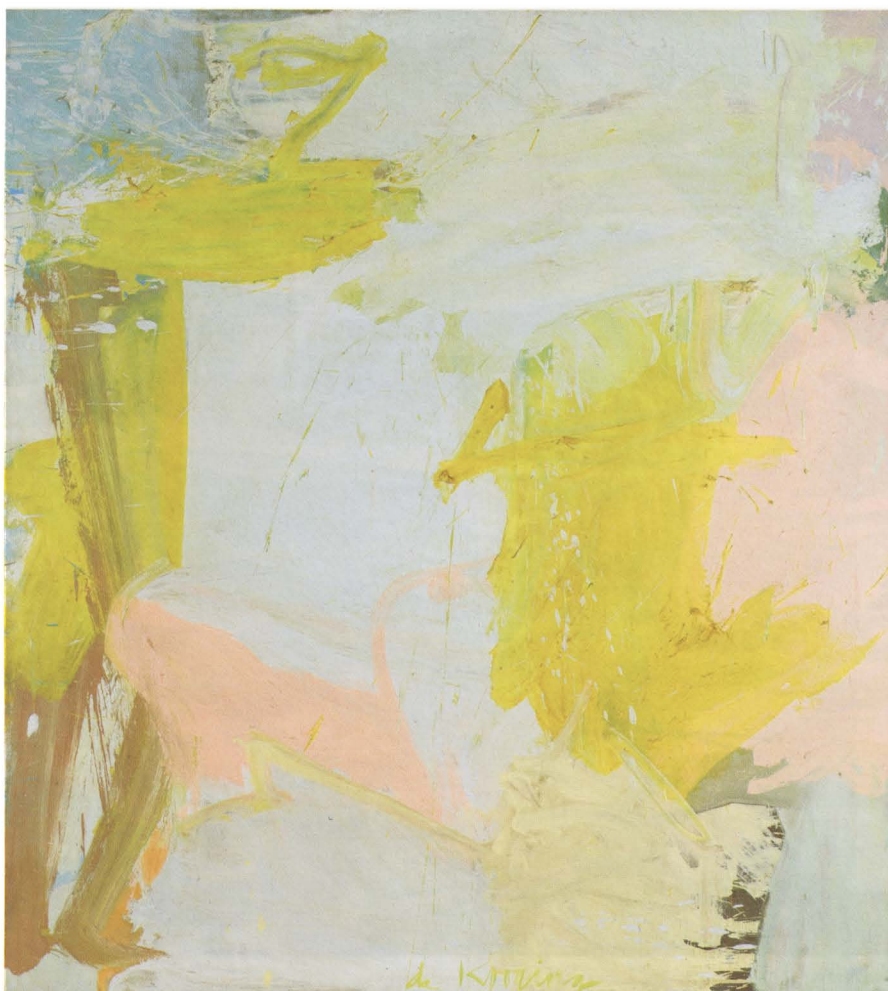
I would say it was a revelation. I had travelled to New York in 1997 to see "The Late Paintings" show at MoMA, so I was aware of the controversy surrounding them. Then, in 2007 I saw an exhibition of 20 paintings called "Willem de Kooning, 1981-86" at L & M Arts on East 78th, and that was where the true love affair began. I couldn't get over them, and since the gallery wouldn't allow any photos, I remember going straight to MoMA and the Met where I carefully photographed every square inch of a couple of paintings that were on exhibition. The thing I was so taken with was the range of everything that was going on, the incidence of activity. They had an impact from afar, and then up close they were glorious. You could see the different ways in which the paint manifested itself. He would get this funny puckering, speckled effect where he'd use plastic or newsprint to either soak up the excess oil, or to keep the paintings wet. Or he would scrape away a bit, or mask off a section

and lay down a gestural brushstroke, and then pull away the masking paper. Suddenly you'd have this gesture existing as a collaged element within the picture. So all these marvelous things were going on right next to and on top of one another, and then parts would have been scraped away and then ripped and turned around. It was dizzying.

**You actually photographed those paintings?**

I wanted to see what would happen if I followed one all the way through with my camera. What I realized was that every square inch of the picture was interesting, and that's not an easy thing to achieve.

**His way of working seemed as various as you could imagine, and there was his refusal to see it as resolved. Some of these paintings, like *Untitled V* from 1982, would go through nine variations.**



1

This afternoon I took *Untitled XII* from the same year, that's the painting reproduced at six different stages in the catalogue, and I tried to copy it, stage-by-stage, on the same page in my sketchbook. I noticed that at each stage the painting was turned either a quarter turn or a full 180 degrees, and that only one part of the painting remained unchanged throughout. The bottom left-hand corner is the only thing that stayed the same, and that's what I used as my orientation.

**I posed a language question in wondering how to read his surface. What preposition does one use to describe how your eye negotiates the surface? Do you go across it, or through it, or into it, or behind it? Where do we find ourselves on the surface of a de Kooning painting?**

That's a good question. I can't remember where I read this but someone was talking about how

de Kooning was able to distract you, and that the distractions in his paintings foreground looking over seeing.

**And seeing carries cognitive understanding whereas looking doesn't carry anything more than perception.**

Exactly, so you become engaged just in the act of looking, of being pushed in and around and from side to side and under and over. I think central to what he is doing is trying to work out space in painting, and how do you work with space after Picasso and after Matisse? How do you use those two different realizations of space in a painting? I think de Kooning digests both of them and comes up with himself.

**Elderfield's argument is that he is able to shape a new kind of pictorial space and that contribution**

1. Willem de Kooning, *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*, 1963, oil on canvas, 80" x 70". Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. © 2012 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

2. Monica Tap, *Brio*, 2002, oil on canvas, 80 x 90". Courtesy the artist and Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto.



2

is more significant than any of the innovations that may have come in a painterly or representational way. Do you sense he is able to achieve that? I think de Kooning comes up with more than one kind of space over the course of his career. The space of *Excavation*, 1950, is not the same space as is *Woman, Sag Harbor*, 1964, for example, where the space is almost liquefied. What I see him achieving in the earlier paintings is to use line to carve out space that is neither purely figure nor ground. It shifts between the two positions. His line is marvelous. He is able to make the apparently flat surface of the canvas appear to bulge out, become distended, or sink back in. It makes me think of the way you squeeze air from one part into another with water-filled balloons. That's a very strange kind of space; one that is highly compressed as well. That's what you see in the *Women* paintings; they are boxed in and they're kind of like linebackers.

**They're not just tight ends?**

That's right, they're really boxy. He compresses them within the pictorial space. When I saw the Matisse/Picasso show in MoMA's temporary building in 2003, what struck me was how different Picasso's space was from Matisse's. There seemed to be more space in a Matisse painting than in Picasso. I think de Kooning manages the impossible of making them both happen at the same time. There is so much Picasso in a great deal of de Kooning, but towards the end more of Matisse is operational. The paintings are much more buoyant and curvilinear, and again, he is carving out the space.

**When you talk about line I think of drawing, and de Kooning said he didn't really see the difference between painting and drawing.**

I think that is true in his case. One of the things I loved about the MoMA exhibition was how it



1

started with those early drawings and included so many more later on. That beautiful drawing called *Portrait of Elaine* from 1940–41 looks, for all the world, like Ingres-meets-John Currin.

**The two most disputed parts of his career are the late works, because of the issue of his mental competence, and much prior to that, the Women paintings from the '50s. How do we read them now?**

I was surprised to read how strong was the response when they were first shown, and that a number of the most vociferous critics were men. At the show I decided to spend some time with these paintings to see how I would feel in front of them. Just not think about anything else and see what's going on there. I mostly found them funny. I was pretty much delighted by them, especially *Woman with Bicycle*, 1952–53. They seemed fierce and hilarious at the same time. I mean, de Kooning was a big lover of Krazy Kat and he did like comic book art a lot. Those large eyes kept going back to the early portrait of Elaine. You know, he paints these massive breasts that essentially form an inverted heart shape, the

tip of which directs you back up to the eyes, and the eyes nail you every time. But these are not women to be consumed, and heaven help the person who tries.

**Was he ever not a figurative painter? Did he just find more ingenious ways to render fragments of the figure in space?**

I think the body is always there in his work. One of the most beautiful things he said was that in order for a picture to work, and for him to decide to keep it, it had to have a countenance. I thought that was extraordinary. For it to be alive, for this thing to lift off, for it to be separate from you—that was the measure of its countenance. That doesn't mean it has to have a face; it's not a literal thing. Was he ever a completely non-objective abstract painter? No. And I don't know how important that was, either. I think he carved out a really interesting space for himself between the two. Just as he would go back to working strictly black and white for a while and would forge on with the next pictorial problem, where he would once again invent the space. He would be drawing figurative work while painting what looked like abstract paintings,

1. Monica Tap, *Six Ways from Sunday I*, 2011, oil on canvas, 65 x 100". Courtesy the artist and Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto.

2. Willem de Kooning, *Orestes*, 1947, enamel on paper mounted on plywood, 24.125 x 36.125". Private collection. © 2011 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



2

and then he would be doing abstract drawing while painting figurative works. He seemed to need to surprise himself, and I think that restlessness is one of the great things about him. Also, the way he makes it difficult for himself by drawing with his eyes closed, or while watching TV.

**What happens when he moves towards what are called the “Abstract Parkway Landscapes,” and the threshold pastoral paintings, like *Door to the River*, 1960, and *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*, 1963? Does the space change?**

I think there were a couple of things that seemed to be happening there. The room with the Montauk paintings is important to this as well, because that’s when black disappears from the palette and things suddenly change. Instead of black he is using colour to delineate. Often, in those early paintings, he used black enamel paint, which is incredibly liquid and could quite easily grey down the other pigments. Those parkway landscapes feel to me almost like enlargements of sections of other of his paintings. They seem more closely associated with the drawings and lithographs that he did in

1959–60, where he is making sweeping gestures across the surface with a large brush. I don’t think there is as much revision in those as there is in something like *Gotham News*, 1955. But *Rosy Fingered Dawn at Louse Point* is one of my favourites. I remember looking to it 10 years ago when I was trying to figure out how to use yellow in painting. So I did a little copy and realized how his yellow operates in that painting: the other primaries are taken up to a high-valued pastel, so you have a really pale pink and a really pale blue, and they are both a higher value than the yellow. Normally yellow would be the highest value of the primaries. But in this painting it’s the lowest value. That was how he was able to hold the yellow, which becomes the weight in that painting. It helped me to solve colour choices for the painting *Brio*, one of the layered line paintings from 2002.

**Does this Retrospective have things to teach you? Are there things you’ve carried out of the show that will be functional?**

There are too many to enumerate. I guess what I come away with most is what Elderfield is talking



about in connection with pictorial space. As someone who right now is working closely with digital video images, the challenge for me is to figure out how I reinflate the very flat, thin image with space but still hew to the arrangement of forms given by the image. After seeing the de Kooning show the image is feeling a little bit like a prison. But it's exciting to see his marvelous freedom and invention and revision, just to see the energy of what he does. I'll have to see what I can take from that.

The palette changes when he gets out of New York and into the Hamptons. He says he wants to paint light and nature at that point. Is that one of the major transformations that you see? Is it that he is rendering a different space, or is he rendering space in a different way?

I think he is doing both. There is that run of majestic paintings in 1975–76, like ...*Whose Name Was*

*Writ in Water* and *Screams of Children Come from Seagulls*, before the late line paintings, where he says, "I could do no wrong." You could feel his absolute confidence in that room; they feel like jazz, these beautiful improvisations and variations. Not overworked; things continue to shift; there are still revisions. I don't see him ever having been the kind of painter that his work is credited with creating, that Tenth Street abstraction. I don't think de Kooning was ever that kind of painter. I think his engagement with the pictorial space of the canvas was so serious, and he was so aesthetically demanding, that simply emoting was not enough. Feeling was important, and you feel that when you're with those paintings, but you never get the sense that what was going on was some kind of expressionist ranting.

Willem de Kooning, *Rider (Untitled VII)*, 1985, oil on canvas, 70" x 80". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase and gift of Milly and Arnold Glimcher. © 2011 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



**Elderfield writes about “a continuum of instability.” Do you find the reading of these works as being in any way destabilizing?**

I think there is movement in all his work. And the liquefying of the image and the wobbliness of the forms is all part of keeping the image from congealing, keeping the painting fluid. De Kooning spoke of “trembling” and of Cézanne, who he looked to a lot, “as trembling very precisely.” I think that kind of instability is crucial. Merleau-Ponty writes that a successful picture is one that makes movement or life visible by its internal discordance. He’s talking about Cézanne but he could just as easily be referring to de Kooning. Perhaps that instability is part of what gives the paintings their countenance.

**Are there spaces between, in de Kooning, or is the space always continuous? Does he have intervals?**

I think in the late line paintings you start to see intervals. In a great deal of the work before that they are both taut and quivering at the same time. Things really are fitted in. On a couple of the visits to MoMA I stood and drew as a way of slowing myself down, so I could see how all the elements in a picture fit together. Things would be shifted or placed awkwardly, or he’d use triangles to push your eye around, and then curves and bars on either side to compress things and hold them in. But the intervals come in the late paintings when they open up into those ribbons. There is definitely space behind the women in landscape paintings where the women become one with the landscape. You can’t really tell interval from figure: it is all interval, or it’s all figure. It’s a bit like *Excavation* at that point; but his line is no longer angular; it’s fluid. He has taken his love of puddles and wateriness and brought that into the painting. I hadn’t realized that he used safflower oil to make his paint even more liquid. There are cases where the paint is just sliding down.

**In a painting like *Bolton Landing*, 1957, he’s a more structural painter. He seems to build a painting the way Kline might have done.**

They’re not my favourite works. I don’t even like the colour; there’s a lot more ochre and brown. He’s not using black at all, and the colour relationships are less exciting. I missed the finer lines and I missed the curves. These are more geometric and he is working with a housepainter’s brush. This is the body of work where he is thinking about the

glimpses out of the car, and they feel more topographical. They seem like they’re from above and they seem like details.

**He doesn’t have much truck with surrealism. *Untitled (The Cow Jumps Over the Moon)*, 1937–38, looks a lot like Miró, but not much else does.**

One thing about *The Cow Jumps Over the Moon*, a painting that I loved, was that a cantaloupe shape on the lower right-hand side is identical to one of the pieces of fruit in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907. It’s the exact shape and pretty much the same colour. I ran downstairs at MoMA to check.

**He wasn’t just a slipping glimpser; he was a close looker, too. His 1927 still life imitation of Matisse is impressive.**

Exactly. You see him taking on Ingres in a couple of the early women, and he is constantly working off Picasso’s sense of the figure and the face.

**How do you assign the proportional weight of will, spontaneity and habit in his later work?**

I found the later works mixed. They are so different from the other work, and yet they obviously couldn’t have been made by anyone else. The more you look at them the more you begin to see the memories of other paintings in them. The curved shape is a leg, is a buttock, is an arm, and they are really elegant in that way. There were a couple that made me sad, like the untitled painting with the blue lines on a white ground from 1985. This was one that definitely felt as if the lines had been very carefully coloured in, the curves slowed down, and there was no revision. I realize I could be making a fetish of revision and there are certainly works from 1982–84 that are equally spare, but you still have a sense that his arm is creating the sweep of this arc. When you work from a projection it can often be freer, a kind of Dutch courage; you can see what you’re doing, and you don’t have to be so careful. One or two paintings seemed carefully coloured in, but those were the exception. *Pirate (Untitled II)*, 1981, is a gorgeous painting, and once again his pictorial space has shifted and the line manages to activate the space around it. You really can’t tell what’s figure and what’s ground; it’s all figure and it’s all ground. That makes sense considering that his main subject was women and landscape, figure and ground.

Does de Kooning paint the skin of the surface or does he paint the flesh of the painting? It's this question of where we're able to go with the surface itself. If it's about the skin, then there is no depth, whereas flesh is below the skin.

I think he manages both. Fundamentally it's the flesh of the body, it's the sculptural contour, the twisting form, the bulging and moving of forms within the canvas. But at the same time he said, "I get my paint to stay right on the surface and no one else can do that." And think about his way of working by scraping down a painting every night. He wanted these big paintings to be as fresh as a sketch, and in many cases he achieves exactly that. He uses collage to reposition elements, to constantly have everything in play. He manages to have the skin of the painting be very alive and very open and engaging from up close, but he also has the form and the sculptural presence within the painting, this pictorial space that has been bent and shifted.

**What do you make of the sculpture?**

They're 3D paintings. I'm glad he made them. They're an important move in sculpture. I don't know if anyone else was making figurative sculpture at the time.

**He makes them with gloves on because he doesn't like the feel of the clay.**

He wanted to be able to make the gestures bigger, sometimes working with two pairs of gloves. With that liquid squishiness, they are so much like the paintings.

**At the end of his superb catalogue essay, Elderfield writes eloquently that de Kooning has a place among the very few artists "who are able to picture their own disappearance." He doesn't do it through subject, the way Rembrandt did by painting himself as an old man. He does it through those late paintings. What do you make of his disappearing act? Do you think they are a conscious recognition of mortality?**

I don't know. That is difficult to say. What I saw was a connection back to some of the earliest works in the show; once again we're with line and the line has been consistent throughout his work. The cartoon quality is still in there; the body is still there. It's as if he remembers what Gorky said about keeping it spare. He has gone on this marvelous trip for 80 years, and at the end it is all that he needs. ■

Willem de Kooning, *Woman*, 1965, charcoal on transparentized paper, 80 x 35.75". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchased with funds provided by Kathy and Richard S. Fuld Jr., Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, Thomas Weisel, Agnes Gund, Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, and gift of The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection (by exchange). © 2011 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

