

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
January 1997

FINAL SHOWING OF WILLEM DE KOONING'S LATE WORKS, HIS CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT, ON VIEW AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Willem de Kooning: The Late Paintings, The 1980s
January 26 – April 29, 1997

An exhibition of American artist Willem de Kooning's last decade of work opens at The Museum of Modern Art on January 26, 1997. *Willem de Kooning: The Late Paintings, The 1980s* provides the first opportunity to study in depth paintings made by de Kooning (b. 1904) between 1981 and 1987, works that constitute a major and largely unknown chapter in the sixty-year career of one of the greatest painters of this century. On view through April 29, 1997, the exhibition completes its international tour at The Museum of Modern Art.

With the exception of a small number of works that were shown in galleries and museums during the past fifteen years, few of the paintings of the artist's final period (he ceased painting in 1990) have been seen by the general public or even a specialized art audience. The forty canvases on view are from public and private collections and from the artist's own holdings and were selected from the more than 300 paintings de Kooning completed in the 1980s.

De Kooning devoted his last active decade to a fundamental transformation of his art, moving away from the aggressiveness of his earlier role model, Picasso, and toward the elegant sensuousness of Matisse and the simplicity of his compatriot Mondrian. During this period, he retrospectively altered our understanding of his overall development, challenging many of the

-more-

myths that have grown up around him and the generation to which he belonged.

“Of these works, a significant number count among the most remarkable paintings by anyone active in the 1980s and among the most distinctive, graceful, and mysterious de Kooning himself ever made,” writes Robert Storr, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, in the exhibition catalogue.

A founder of Abstract Expressionism, de Kooning, in his art, was widely thought to have personified the anguish and painterly bravado of that movement. Throughout his career, however, he refused to be typecast, shifting his ground back and forth from classic draftsmanship to daredevil improvisation and from ferocious attacks on the human form to the most lyrical evocations of light and nature. “That’s what fascinates me . . . to make something I can never be sure of, and no one else can either,” de Kooning once remarked. “I will never know and no one else will ever know.”

De Kooning radically redirected his work one last time beginning in 1980 at the age of seventy-five, firmly believing, as he said, that “I have to change to stay the same.” At this point, the artist turned away from the tumult of his previous paintings to limn canvases of a wholly unexpected and unprecedented ease and luminosity. “As the heavy oleaginous currents and skimming riptides of colors of the late 1970s paintings stilled and receded,” writes Mr. Storr, “the sheer hues and spare structure of his new work emerged — light, sharp-focused, and assured.”

These paintings demonstrate a striking formal and emotional range. Enlivened by sinuous, flowing strokes in radiant primary reds, yellows, and blues, augmented by subtle whites,

-more-

strong blacks, and startling greens, oranges, and violets, the paintings reverberate with fragmentary references to the sexually charged figuration, landscape spaces, and biomorphic forms of his great Abstract Expressionist works of the 1940s through the 1960s.

Organized by Gary Garrels, Elise S. Haas Chief Curator and Curator of Painting and Sculpture, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in cooperation with the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, the exhibition is coordinated for and installed at The Museum of Modern Art by Robert Storr, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture. The New York showing of the exhibition is made possible by Banana Republic.

The exhibition opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (October 3, 1995 – January 7, 1996) and traveled to the Walker Art Center (February 3 – May 8, 1996), Städtisches Kunstmuseum, Bonn (June 14 – August 11, 1996), and Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (September 9 – November 25, 1996).

Publication

Willem de Kooning: The Late Paintings, The 1980s, copublished by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, is the first scholarly publication on de Kooning's last decade of work. The fully illustrated 144-page catalogue contains essays by Gary Garrels and Robert Storr. Clothbound, \$50.00, distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Arts Publishers, Inc., New York, and paperbound, \$29.95, are both available in The MoMA Book Store.

Special Events

Panel discussions and a lecture are planned in conjunction with the exhibition. Please see separate press release for more information.

* * *

No. 1

For further information, contact Alexandra Partow, Assistant Director of Communications, The Museum of Modern Art, 212/708-9756. Visit our Web site at www.moma.org.