

# ADDRESSING DE KOONING

One of the great beauties of the City is its palimpsest nature. That is to say, the way the stories and dreams of our predecessors propel themselves into the present - be it in material fact or a knowing in the heart.

The artist Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) constructed his paintings similarly - allowing previous incarnations, traces of discarded tangents and struggle to remain visible in his finished compositions. Much of his work's lingering power derives from this honoring of each painting's history - and, by extension, the history of the painter who painted it.

In the early 1960s de Kooning maintained a studio at **831 Broadway**. During these years he was feeling the pull that would eventually draw him and his work to the far end of Long Island. **831 Broadway** would be his final New York City studio - not an insignificant fact for an artist whose identity had been inextricably bound to the City. As he once famously declared: "It's not so much that I'm an American: I'm a New Yorker."<sup>1</sup>

The painting *Pastorale* (1963) is perhaps the signal image de Kooning created at the Broadway studio. His biographers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan describe the painting and how it differed from its immediate predecessors:



*Pastorale*, 1963

"No powerful public 'highway' brushstrokes dominated the landscape of *Pastorale*. Instead, de Kooning seemed to have traveled to the end of the highway and into roadless country. The brushstrokes dissolved into light and watery reflections, into what the artist Scott Burden called 'form-obliterating radiance.' De Kooning appeared to have yielded to his senses, to have become more feminine and lyrical. The palette of yellows, peaches, and whites - what Mera McAlister's son called "ice cream colors" - looked back to the playful pastels of the rococo rather than to more masculine, assertive styles. Though no one noted this quality at the time, they were also brave works. It would be hard to imagine anything that would irritate a smart young critic in 1963 more than a loosely focused, brushy painting full of personal touch.

"In fact, as the critic and curator Lynne Cooke has suggested, de Kooning's retreat to the country was much richer and more radical than any of his contemporaries recognized. His private reverie was also an eccentric advance in a great Western tradition - that of the pastoral - at a time when American society was itself showing a fresh, idealistic concern for the landscape...The pastoral evoked the Garden of Eden; and yet it also, inevitably, suggested the Fall and worldly corruption, as viewers gazed longingly upon paradise from their vantage point in the actual world.



*De Kooning in his 831 Broadway studio, June 1962*

Photo credit © Randolph Burchhalter



*Rosy-Fingered Dawn At Louse Point*, 1963

- and therein lay the dream of a transcendent pastoral unity. But this being de Kooning, there must be movement and tension. Doubt must snake through the paint."<sup>2</sup>

"De Kooning was ideally suited to explore this fraught space between joy and corruption. Certainly, he had no intention of creating Edenic landscapes ("I'm not a pastoral character. I'm not a - how do you say? - 'country dumpling'") or visions of prelapsarian happiness like those found in Giorgione or, in a modern form, Matisse. In particular, he would never show the figure entirely from outside, the way earlier artists might display a nude by a river. In his work, the body would almost fuse with the landscape

Next  
Stop?  
Depends  
which  
way  
you're  
walking.

MAP: Addressing de Kooning



1. De Kooning, interview with David Sylvester, "Content Is a Glimpse," *Location 1* (Spring 1963), 45-53.  
2. Stevens, Mark, and Annalyn Swan. *de Kooning: An American Master*. New York, Knopf, 2004, pgs. 442-443.