

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.

From the Fall of 1952 through the end of the decade, de Kooning maintained a studio at **88 E. 10th Street**. These were the years when de Kooning was at the apex of his celebrity and influence, an artist in full command and a leading light of the New York School.

Before moving into this studio, de Kooning had spent the previous two years (June 1950 - June 1952) in tormented engagement with the canvas that would become the legendary painting, *Woman I*. This unsettling icon finally came to completion upon de Kooning's move to **88 E. 10th Street**. His biographers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan write:

*"In the new studio, de Kooning took yet another look at the Woman series, and resumed making changes. Then, in December 1952, just before sending the pictures off to the Sidney Janis Gallery, he once more attacked the original image, Woman I. When first laying in the picture, he had intentionally used more canvas than the image required, to give himself some flexibility if he should wish to change the size of the painting or the positioning of the figure. He covered the unused edges in aluminum paint so they would not "make a plane." Now, he decided to include those eight added inches on the right, thereby putting the figure more off center and adding some aluminum-colored open space to the image."*¹

In the immediate aftermath of the charged public reception of the Woman paintings, de Kooning received a visit - an omen - in the form of Robert Rauschenberg, who came bearing a request for a drawing from the master - not for his collection or appreciation, but so that the younger artist might erase it. Stevens and Swan describe the scene:

"De Kooning recognized that Rauschenberg's request was a deep if disturbing compliment: the son loves the father he must kill. And so, he returned the compliment, playing out his part in the Oedipal game with surpassing generosity. He did not let the affair become just an inside joke that could be easily dismissed. He made the younger artist squirm, for the death of a father must not come too easily to a son, especially if that son is an artist. 'He really made me suffer,' Rauschenberg said, referring to the elaborate process that de Kooning established for the execution. De Kooning brought over a portfolio of drawings and began leafing through them. At last, he seemed to settle on one. He looked at it. But then he slipped the drawing back into the portfolio. 'No,' he said, 'I want to give you one that I'll miss.'

*"De Kooning brought over a second portfolio. He leafed through it as slowly as he had the first, examining one drawing and then the next. 'These I would miss,' he said. 'I like them.' He seemed to settle on a particular image. 'No,' he said at last, 'I want it to be very hard to erase.'"*²

During the 1950s the art world revolved around de Kooning - almost literally. Stevens and Swan describe what this block of 10th St. was like:



De Kooning outside his building, 88 E. 10th St., in the 1950s

"The New York scene jelled on de Kooning's doorstep. Throughout the 1950s, young artists were pouring into the city, typically settling in the area becoming known generally as "Tenth Street," a low-rent section of the Village between Eighth and Twelfth Streets and First and Sixth Avenues. The center of the district was de Kooning's street; a number of the more established artists of the period lived on his block between Third and Fourth Avenue, including Esteban Vicente, Philip Guston, Michael Goldberg, and Milton Resnick. Not surprisingly, newcomers arriving in New York, many of whom went to art schools in the area, wanted to exhibit their work. Early in the fifties, the Hansa Gallery, the Stable Gallery, the Martha Jackson Gallery, and the Tibor de Nagy Gallery began showing the art of emerging artists. As the art scene grew, young artists also began to open cooperative galleries, managed and financed by the artists themselves, around Tenth Street. The first to open was the Tanager Gallery in 1952. By 1957, the Camino, Brata, March, and Area Galleries had joined the Tanager on de Kooning's block. Although some young artists in the Tenth Street galleries resisted de Kooning's influence, many adopted his gestural 'language' and almost all revered him..."

*"At openings, he was almost always a center of attention. The Tenth Street galleries often organized joint openings on Friday evenings, creating a kind of floating cocktail party along Tenth Street. De Kooning, as he came down the high stoop from his studio, was acknowledged as a modern master at work in New York...Everywhere he turned on Tenth Street he came upon complimentary reflections of himself, as if he lived surrounded by admiring mirrors."*³

His success and celebrity was a respite from decades of struggle and privation but renown holds no sway before the blank canvas.

Photographer Robert Frank had a view into de Kooning's 10th Street studio. He often watched in admiration as the artist struggled with a painting:

"I'd see him with his hands behind his back, his head bent, pacing up and down the length of his studio. I could see the easel standing there and I'd wonder if he ever would get to paint and stop walking up and down. Quite often I think of that image now. That was the time when I was a photographer, doing jobs or going out on my own to photograph in the streets. Then it seemed to me I was making a big effort."

*"Now thinking of de Kooning, I understand better what it is, to face a white sheet of canvas; to face something which does not respond to my movements, all will have to come from inside me..."*⁴

The "Highway" paintings were the final works de Kooning painted at **88 E. 10th Street**. They were both a summation and a harbinger for an artist who had spent the decade uniquely in synch with his times, city and dreams. Stevens and Swan:

"The grand abstract paintings that de Kooning completed in the city in 1958 and 1959 looked eastward, reflecting the light, ocean, and color of Long Island. Their large and heavy brushstrokes were often compared to highways and aptly so, for de Kooning during this period was constantly traveling back and forth between his New York studio and the house in the Springs. (While he himself never learned to drive a car, he loved sitting in the passenger seat, studying the highway and glimpsing the passing landscapes.)...[H]is

Next
Stop?
Depends
which
way
you're
walking.

MAP: Addressing de Kooning



Ruth's Zowie, 1957

*beautiful highway strokes swept through the picture plane with the bravura of an emperor traveling through his dominions. The paintings had panache; they displayed the confident "grand style" of which de Kooning dreamed. He always enjoyed looking at the billboards along the highway, and his pictures of the time capture the eye with the instantaneous impact - the "gotcha" - of an unforgettable sign."*⁵

1. Stevens, Mark, and Annalyn Swan. *de Kooning: An American Master*. New York, Knopf, 2004, pg. 336.
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 360.
3. *Ibid.*, pgs 398-400.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 368. Robert Frank, in "Letter from New York," reprinted in David Brittain, *Creative Camera: Thirty Years of Writing* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2000).
5. Stevens, Swan. pg. 410