

A handwritten signature in orange ink, reading "Elaine de Kooning". The signature is stylized and fluid, with the first name "Elaine" written in a cursive script, followed by "de Kooning" in a more blocky, yet still cursive, style.

ELAINE DE KOONING AND AMERICAN ART

Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989) played a vital role in the cultural life of the United States. Her contributions as a painter, teacher and critic greatly enhanced the artistic milieu in which she moved and provide lively insights into Abstract Expressionist stylistic and philosophical concerns. The effectiveness of Elaine de Kooning's work stems from her ability to intelligently assimilate the ideas of others while experimenting on her own with subject matter, color and drawing. Her ultimate aesthetic success reveals itself in the many remarkable paintings from her long career.

Elaine de Kooning committed to art as a vocation at an early age. At 17, she dropped out of Hunter College, complaining that, while there, she had "never touched a paintbrush." Instead, the aspiring artist enrolled at the less traditional Leonardo da Vinci Art School, also in New York City, where she studied with Conrad Marca-Relli, an early advocate of European abstraction in the United States. Quickly, the young artist met Arshile Gorky and her future husband, Willem de Kooning--two painters already conversant in modern European art. Before the age of twenty, Elaine de Kooning was at the center of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

While her work from the late 30s and early 40s is representational, de Kooning¹ was working with compressed per-

spectives and ambiguous positive and negative spaces. Her drawing became increasingly abstract. Following Gorky's lead, the younger generation of avant-garde artists in New York explored Surrealism and Cubism in addition to the more traditional painting of Ingres. The tight drawing and classical simplicity of Ingres and early Picasso informed Elaine de Kooning's work in the 40s, and became a solid aesthetic mode to which she referred throughout her career. The early portrait heads of her future husband, Willem (they married in 1943), demonstrate her mastery of draftsmanship and her innate ability to draw upon her subject to enliven her work. De Kooning's technical abilities and deeply felt appreciation of art are visible in her earliest work.

In the summer of 1948, after Willem de Kooning's financially disastrous solo show at Charles Egan Gallery, the couple was invited to live at Black Mountain College by Joseph Albers, the school's director, who offered Willem a teaching position for the season. The salary enabled the two to pay the rent on their studios and flee New York City. While at Black Mountain, Elaine actively participated in the rich artistic environment, attending classes and seminars. She found time to produce eighteen works in oil, done on brown wrapping paper out of economic necessity.²

Elaine de Kooning's **Black Mountain #13** [Page 5] comes from that remarkable series of works executed at the College. The painting marks her as an incisive participant in Abstract Expressionism, consisting of spontaneous all-over gestures and incorporating accidental effects into the composition. Within an essentially Cubist grid, de Kooning sets into motion tensions between biomorphic shapes. Drawing upon her earlier work, the artist manipulates and reverses positive and negative spaces to attain a visual dynamism. Deeply saturated pinks contrast with white and beige, furthering the

painting's vigorous impact. Certainly this series was influenced by Gorky (who committed suicide while the de Koonings were at Black Mountain) and by the natural ebb and flow of influence from her gifted husband. Nonetheless, her own vitality and emotion are the most important aspect of Elaine de Kooning's work. Powerful paintings such as **Black Mountain #13** demonstrate the diversity of voices which made up the New York School.

Despite her active participation in abstraction, Elaine never gave up her attention to fact. Alongside her abstract works of the 40s and 50s, the artist continued to execute portraits and multi-figured pictures of athletes. The portraits demonstrate her ability to infuse technical bravura with a personal response to the sitter. In the life-size **Bill at St. Marks**, 1956, [Page 7] de Kooning depicts her husband informally, seated facing the viewer. The figure is caught up in a swirl of dramatic gesture and color. The brushwork and light enliven the surface of the painting such that the sitter is almost obscured by the artist's activity. She has combined the power of vigorous gestural abstraction with her ability to capture the essence of her subject. Despite being faceless, the figure is recognizably Willem de Kooning. (People who know Willem de Kooning immediately remark upon the accuracy of the likeness in this work.) The pose and silhouette of the figure

mark it as a unique individual. Furthermore, with dynamic brush strokes and color, the artist records her own powerful response to a man she admired and loved.

The critic Lawrence Campbell notes that de Kooning's portraits are not photographic likenesses, but rather combine the sitter's past, present and future. Campbell describes her portraits as "...a bundle of simultaneous imaginative conceptions" which incorporate what she knew about each person she painted.³ In the artist's own words, the portraits attempt to capture "the instantaneous illumination that enables you to recognize your father or friend three blocks away...I wanted paint to sweep through as feelings sweep through..."⁴

Elaine de Kooning's portraits combine the subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism with an American insistence on objectivity. The history of American art up until the mid-20th Century is marked by the repeated hard-nosed factualness of the limners, Copley, Guy, Eakins, Homer and Hopper. De Kooning's work can be seen as a mediation between that tradition and more recent developments. Her brushy action paintings, which move through space and time like cubist works, manage to retain a specificity which has always been a hallmark of American art. Many in the New York School were bitterly divided about figure painting, and Elaine de Kooning was outspoken in her defense of representation. In 1955, she wrote an article in *Art News* which rebuts Clement Greenberg's privileging of flatness and abstraction.⁵ In her art, she set about resolving this conflict, brilliantly bridging the gap between abstraction and realism.

Elaine de Kooning maintained a residence in New York through the late 70s, although she frequently traveled and lived away from her home. In 1957, she accepted her first teaching position, joining the faculty at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. As was the case with generations of

American painters, the expansive landscape and the light of the West deeply impacted de Kooning's work. *Juarez 7 P.M.*, 1960,⁶ [Page 9] while clearly related to her earlier work in its energetic gesture, demonstrates some of the artist's new concerns. While most of her previous work was vertical and dealt with the figure, *Juarez 7 P.M.* is horizontal, as the artist now integrated the landscape into her painting. Furthermore, the earth tones and acid greens and pinks of her work from the 40s and 50s here give way to primary colors lit by dramatic tints. The subject matter is also new. The artist attended her first bullfight in Juarez, having driven down from Albuquerque. The brute power of the huge animals and the violent action of the event appealed to the artist, and she responded with a series of bullfight pictures. Bulls, traditionally a symbol of strength and virility, provided a stirring image to which she returned throughout the rest of her career.

Elaine de Kooning returned to New York in 1959, but visited New Mexico periodically for the rest of her life. She executed her first multiples at the Tamarind Studios in Albuquerque in 1973 and maintained warm friendships in the region. Stylistically as well, Elaine's affinities for Southwestern color and light continued throughout her career.

Elaine delighted in teaching--in the 60s and 70s she accepted numerous posts around the United States and

abroad, influencing scores of art students to move to New York City.⁷ She continued to execute portraits, and in 1963 was commissioned by the Harry S. Truman Library to paint President John F. Kennedy. Interestingly, Thomas Hart Benton, a fellow Missourian, assisted Truman in finding an appropriate portraitist. Having close ties to Elaine's dealer, Robert C. Graham, Benton knew her work. Because she possessed a quick brush and ability to capture the pith of her sitter's character, she was awarded the commission to paint the busy President. She was the only artist to paint Kennedy from life, and the commissioned work now hangs at the Library in Independence. Another portrait from the Presidential series of paintings and drawings hangs in the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, Columbia Point, Boston. Kennedy's death disrupted her art for the next few years, although she continued to teach and travel.⁸

In 1984, de Kooning visited the caves at Lascaux in Southern France, during one of her constant journeys. Using her charisma and reputation, she gained admittance to the protected caverns full of Paleolithic wall paintings. The artist sketched from life and from memory the direct, simple images of bison, ibex, bulls, and other prey of the early societies. It is no wonder that the rugged gestures in raw colors on the cave walls appealed to de Kooning. Equally appealing must have been the accuracy of silhouette and pose which the prehistoric artists achieved. The artist also noted the early artists' use of the bulges and texture of the rock to depict a beast in three dimensions. After her journey, de Kooning returned to New York, as she always did, and executed over one hundred paintings and works on paper in response to the caves of Southern France.

Avalanche Wall (Cave #106), 1987, [Page 10] illustrates de Kooning's primary concerns in her series of cave paintings. The artist has again responded to a new place,

retaining her fluid active brushwork and solid drawing, but allowing her colors and forms to echo the Paleolithic ones. The bull motif recurs, as does the dramatic horizontal sweep of her Southwest landscapes, indicating a limitless horizon. De Kooning uses a flickering light and ground shifts to enliven the surface of the canvas. Again, she has fused the drama of Abstract Expressionism with description.

In her last years, de Kooning used Sumi ink (picked up during a trip to Asia) to explore the cave/bull motif. In many ways, her late work provides an inventory of her stylistic achievements and enduring concerns. In **Bison Ta-Ku (Cave #137)**, 1988, [Page 11] the artist modulates the intensity of her brush stroke to create a soft flowing wash of light and shadow. Her gestures follow the form of the massive bison she had observed at Lascaux.

Elaine de Kooning died in 1989, having enjoyed an unusually rich career as a painter and teacher. She was also a brilliant critic whose well-written reviews in *Art News* demonstrate her ability to articulate the goals of her peers and her own intimate knowledge of the art world.⁹ Her painted and written contributions to art assure her of a respected place in art history. Widely liked for her vivacity, energy and infectious humor, and respected for her keen intelligence and vibrant style, Elaine de Kooning exemplifies the spontaneous, confident spirit of Abstract Expressionism. JAY GRIMM

I thank Marjorie Luyckx, Elaine de Kooning's sister and confidante, Joan Washburn, her friend who now represents the Estate of Elaine de Kooning, and Edward Lieber, the artist's curator, for their support and for sharing their knowledge of Elaine de Kooning.

Footnotes on page 16.

1. Elaine de Kooning always disliked being referred to as "de Kooning" owing to the confusion and unfair comparison it caused. She signed her paintings "E de K" and many authors have opted for this name when writing about her. In this essay, I have shied from the use of "de Kooning" in referring to Elaine; however, in the interest of conforming to standard art historical practice, I do at times refer to the artist by her last name.
2. A fascinating account of the de Koonings' stay at Black Mountain is provided by Elaine de Kooning in "De Kooning Memories," Vogue (December, 1983), pp. 352-53; 393-94.
3. Lawrence Campbell, "The Portraits," Elaine de Kooning, Jane Bledsoe, editor. Georgia: University of Georgia, 1992, p. 36.
4. Elaine de Kooning, "Statement." It Is, Philip Pavia, editor. (Autumn, 1959), pp. 29-30.
5. See Irving Sandler, The New York School, New York: Harper & Row, 1978, pp. 96-98.
6. Elaine de Kooning brought back a large body of work from the Southwest and continued to work in this vein in New York. *Juarez 7 P.M.*, while executed the year after her return from New Mexico, demonstrates the continued influence of the bullfight motif on her work.
7. Conversation with Marjorie Luyckx, 1955.
8. According to Edvard Lieber, Elaine was unable to paint for a full year after JFK's assassination, and so began to experiment with other media.
9. A compilation of Elaine de Kooning's art reviews have recently been published: Marjorie Luyckx & Rose Slivka, The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings of Elaine de Kooning, New York: Brazillier, 1994.