

Keep on Keeping On, But Don't Stray Too Far *by Joan Altabe*



Two lessons in one here: the value of persistence, and painting abstractions that don't lose touch with reality.

Willem de Kooning, an illegal immigrant who became a leader of America's modern art world, not only learned these lessons; it's fair to say that he taught them by example.

De Kooning's rise from a 21-year-old kid out of Rotterdam, who stowed away in a ship's crew quarters, to an insider in Manhattan's art scene, had as much to do with his single-minded nature as his unrivaled way of painting. Three times he tried to get into the country by using different ruses: asking for a job as a deckhand on the Holland-America line with the intention of jumping ship; smuggling himself aboard a ship which, he didn't realize, was headed for Buenos Aires; and stowing away in a crew's quarters.

But he held his course.

The same goes for his way of making a picture. While he was one of the leaders of the Abstract Expressionist movement – the post-World War II style that said goodbye to the reality of a world that could wage genocidal war, and said hello to senselessness and

inwardness – he straddled both abstraction and reality in his work.

Though never losing the emotional value of Abstract Expression, de Kooning also never gave up completely on representing the seeable. Coming through in his characteristically frenzied brushwork are recognizable female figures in each of his pictures. They look angry, quarrelsome and even demonic.

Many have seen these viragos as a representation of de Kooning's struggle with his own demons. But one could also say that they signal his struggle to stand astride the real and imaginary world. By his example, de Kooning showed that in the cause of self-expression, one can use both the visible world and the raw emotionalism of Abstract Expressionism.

Considering that his cohort in the Abstract Expressionist movement was Jackson Pollock, whose paint-splatter technique is removed from anything recognizable, de Kooning's independence of style is astonishing.

Woman V, Willem de Kooning,
1952-53

He stayed linked to the world outside his studio, as well. The poet Frank O'Hara tells of meeting de Kooning on the street and the painter telling him he was out "buying some environment" for a painting. Under his arm was a box of drugstore cotton.

Another connection to the outside world: de Kooning designed and built his own house, down to the steel framework and furniture drawers.

He was independent in another way, too. He didn't see himself as an artist. He painted houses for a living in the '30s, and referred to himself and to other artists he knew as "men with beards."

In fact, when he saw Michelangelo's *Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel* he shrugged and said, "I'm no art lover."

While this non-art lover's first job off the boat was painting a house in Hoboken, N.J., for \$9 a day, his paintings are now worth millions. With the statute of limitations on illegal entry



long expired, de Kooning became a U.S. citizen. He will be known to future generations as an American artist who introduced the world to the raw emotionalism of Abstract Expressionism – his way.

Way to go. Are you getting this, folks?

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