Contents

The Creative Process Itself

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Willem de Kooning's first solo exhibition opened at the Charles Egan Gallery in New York on April 12, 1948, twelve days before the artist's forty-fourth birthday. By this point, he already had an underground reputation among the city's artists for single paintings in group exhibitions and from visitors to his studio. "Having chosen at last, in his early forties, to show his work," wrote critic Clement Greenberg, "he comes before us in his maturity, in possession of himself, with his means under his control, and with enough knowledge of himself and of painting in general to exclude all irrelevancies."[1] Featuring paintings that are now among the artist's most celebrated, the Egan show quickly cemented de Kooning's status as a leader among American avant-garde artists. The present publication, and the exhibition it accompanies, is focused around a selection of these works, while also addressing examples of those from 1945 to 1950 that led to and succeeded them.

De Kooning's development over these years belongs among the greatest short periods of radical change in modern art. Moreover, his invention throughout these years was not only *continual*—always underway as, for example, Henri Matisse's transformation of his art step-by-step from 1905 Fauvism to 1910 high decoration. De Kooning's work was one of the few that was also *continuous*—uninterrupted in time and sequence, comprising not the replacement of one style by another but an unbroken process of revising a personal vocabulary with ever-more ambitious results.[2]

In this respect, de Kooning's richly productive period corresponds to that of his peer Jackson Pollock over roughly the same time frame. They differ, though, in one basic way. Pollock's continuous development through the first half of the 1940s was substantially unidirectional, taking him to an increasingly more radical form of abstract painting. In contrast, de Kooning's development was at once continuous and dialectic, moving back and forth between abstract and representational painting.

But that is to simplify a more complex process. Technical examination shows that some of de Kooning's works started out as abstractions but ended up as

Willem de Kooning (1904–1997; born Rotterdam, Netherlands; died East Hampton, NY), ***Black Friday*, 1948**
Enamel and oil over paper collage on fiberboard in painted wood frame; 125 × 99 cm, 128.3 × 102.2 × 7.3 cm (frame). Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of H. Gates Lloyd, Class of 1923, and Mrs. Lloyd in honor of the Class of 1923 (y1976-44)

figurative, and vice versa.[3] Moreover, body parts in some figurative works differ little from difficult-to-describe passages in abstract works. In his review of the Egan exhibition, Greenberg dubbed de Kooning "an outright 'abstract' painter." By surrounding "abstract" with scare quotes, the critic conceded that paintings in the show could be called abstract only because they could not be said to be representational.[4] Neither one nor the other, but both.

Or both separately, at the same time. Indeed, that is how de Kooning proceeded in the years prior to, and during, the years under examination here, begging the question, How best to begin? Before doing so, however, we should bear in mind a far less noticed response to the Egan exhibition, by *Art News* critic Renée Arb, who observed: "His subject seems to be the crucial intensity of the creative process itself, which de Kooning has translated into a new and purely pictorial idiom."[5] According to Elaine de Kooning (neé Fried), his wife since 1943, the artist would come to regard Arb's review as "a prophetic statement about his work."[6] What follows here, as well as throughout the publication as a whole and the exhibition it accompanies, is based on the assumption that it is precisely from concentrated attention on a set of related objects made in a relatively short period that we come closest to understanding how crucial was the intensity of de Kooning's creative process itself.

FIRST PRINCIPLES

A Whole Series of Operations

Before proceeding further, we need to realize that we cannot be sure about the specific dates when de Kooning made his paintings, especially those from this period, including when he completed them. Describing the working method of his friend Edgar Degas, the great critic Paul Valéry characterized "a painting . . . [as] the result of a limitless number of sketches—and of a whole *series of operations*."[7] Even though, to my knowledge, de Kooning was not aware of this quote, it aptly characterizes his approach. So, too, how Valéry further described Degas: "I am convinced that he felt a work could never be called *finished*, and that he could not conceive how an artist could look at one of his pictures after a time and not feel the need to retouch it."[8] As far as I am aware, de Kooning's collectors never got to the point of Degas's in hiding his works to prevent the artist's reworking of them; nonetheless, anything in these years that de Kooning himself possessed was never safe from revision.

According to the dealer Allan Stone, who knew the artist well from the 1960s onward, "De Kooning in his prime never felt a painting was finished. He worked and reworked, often painting over a painting many times. It was Elaine [de Kooning] who would often pull him from a painting, declaring it to be 'done,' and it was Elaine who named many of his works."[9] This tendency was true of de Kooning's earlier works as well, as confirmed by his friend Thomas B. Hess, who wrote the first monograph on the artist, published in 1959. As Hess explains, de Kooning's habit of continually revising made it difficult to identify the sequence in which he made his paintings:

> **De Kooning's pictures are worked on over and over again during long periods of time. He did not sell paintings with any regularity until 1954. Old pictures in the studio often were painted out or drastically changed. He does not sign pictures until they leave the studio. He almost never dates them, and in the case of the few dated paintings and drawings, the dates usually refer to when the picture was sold or given away to a friend—which might have been several years after conclusion.**[10]

Hess confessed that, "aside from a handful of works, most [in his book] can be dated only within 18 to 24 months. And a few may be off by 36." His conclusion, which likewise applies to the present publication, was: "This has made the chronology of de Kooning's work a problem of interior stylistic development."[11] In the present case, my account of his work through the second half of the 1940s is, therefore, a historical one, in the sense that James Boswell defined such an approach in his *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). Boswell distinguished between

the ordering of facts with the exactness of "a journal, which has regard only to time"—which is impossible, in any event, for de Kooning given the paucity of precise dates—"and a history which ranges facts according to the convenience of narration."[12] As such, the works I shall discuss in sequences and groupings may or may not be chronologically adjacent. Let us pause briefly to follow a notable example, since it illuminates both the problem itself and the artist's working methods.

In his 1959 book, Hess dates the painting *Woman Sitting* (fig. 1) to circa 1939, making it the first of de Kooning's series of Woman paintings. By 1968, however, he had modified its date to 1943–44.[13] To complicate matters, an inverted oil sketch of the woman's head and supporting arm appears on the back of the canvas *Black Friday* (see figs. 2, 28), which was probably painted in 1948. Since it is highly unlikely that the sketch dates to 1948, the canvas must be one of the "old pictures in the studio" to which Hess referred, which "often were painted out, or drastically changed"—prompting us to wonder what may lie beneath the front surface of *Black Friday*.

Figure 1
Willem de Kooning, *Woman Sitting,* 1943–44
Oil and charcoal on composition board, 122.6 × 106.7 cm.
Private collection

Figure 2
Willem de Kooning, Verso of ***Black Friday,* 1948** (see fig. 28), rotated 90 degrees counter-clockwise

Figure 3
Willem de Kooning, *The Wave,* ca. 1942–44
Oil on fiberboard, 121.9 × 121.9 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Gift from the Vincent Melzac Collection (1980.6.1)

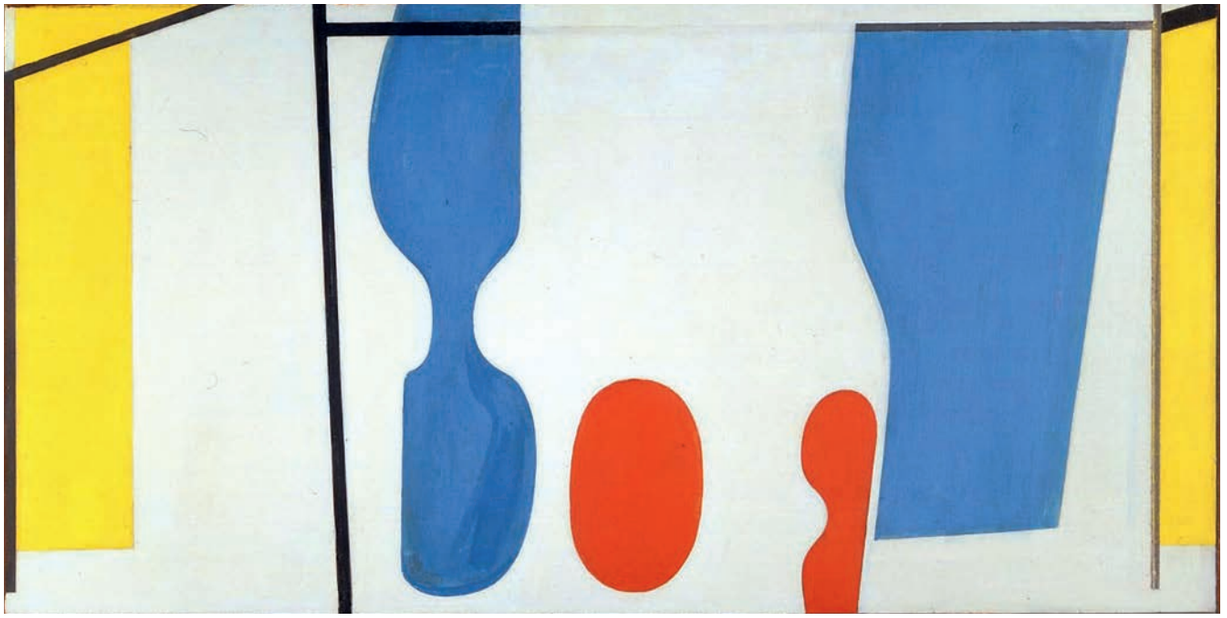

Figure 4
Willem de Kooning, *Father, Mother, Sister, Brother,* ca. 1937
Oil on board, 30.5 × 55.9 cm. Private collection

Figure 5
Willem de Kooning, *Portrait of Elaine,* ca. 1940–41
Pencil on paper, 31.1 × 30.2 cm. Private collection

There is more: *Woman Sitting* is compositionally akin to the abstract painting *The Wave* (fig. 3), which Hess dates to around 1942. The predominantly black curved elements of the abstraction echo the forms of the seated woman; the black teardrop shapes her tilted head. And both canvases have a prominent large rectangle in the top-right corner. Hess tells us that the drawings de Kooning used to make his paintings accumulated on his studio floor to such a degree that he neatly arranged them in portfolios for future reference.[14] So, did he pull out a tracing that he had used to compose *The Wave* to make *Woman Sitting*, or vice versa—either one after the other, or one well after the other had been completed? We will never know.[15]

Woman Sitting and *The Wave* seem, to varying extents, unfinished. In the former, this is revealed by the visible signs of underdrawing not precisely followed as well as passages obviously changed; in the latter, by areas of incompletion. In contrast, the abstractions the artist had made in the 1930s (fig. 4), inspired by recent works by Pablo Picasso, were so carefully composed and rendered that he later conceded they were "timid."[16] Their timidity, it seems fair to say, lies in their being so perfected—because of, not despite, the considerable, extended pictorial invention that gave rise to works of this kind. The same was true of de Kooning's meticulous

early-1940s portrait drawings of his wife, Elaine, inspired by the French Neoclassical artist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, that attest to his extraordinary facility as a draftsman (fig. 5). De Kooning had studied academic drawing at the Académie van Beeldende Kunsten en Technische Wetenschappen (Academy of Fine Arts and Applied Sciences) in Rotterdam from 1917 to about 1921. There, it seems, a single drawing routinely took three to six months to complete.[17] De Kooning's Ingresque academic drawings, which are widely admired, did not take that long to make, but even so apparently long enough to feel torturous. He said that if he kept this up, he would go crazy, remembered his friend Rudy Burckhardt.[18] It may well have been de Kooning's experience of Surrealism that freed him from his timidity and saved him from that fate.

Surrealism had become a major presence in the New York art world by 1942–44, facilitated in part by Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery and the movement's self-appointed leader, André Breton's, activities in the city in these years. De Kooning's *The Wave* was included in Sidney Janis's important publication *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (1944) and displayed at Art of This Century's *Autumn Salon* in 1945. Nonetheless, he was uneasy about the expanding, increasingly dogmatic Surrealist circle there, and his friend Arshile Gorky's embrace of it would be a reason for their later estrangement. The one artist affiliated with Surrealism who de Kooning clearly admired was Joan Miró, of whom the astute Greenberg wrote in 1944: "Miró belongs among the living masters. He is the one new figure since the last war to have contributed importantly to the great painting tradition of our day—that which runs from Cézanne through fauvism and cubism."[19] *The Wave* does reveal the influence of some of Miró's works, but a less obvious indebtedness to him characterizes what happened thereafter and led into the principal direction of de Kooning's art in the second half of the decade. It had two prominent features, both of which promoted the realization of previously untapped aspects of his artistic personality.

Automatism and the Grotesque

In 1924, Breton famously defined Surrealism as "pure psychic automatism by means of which one intends to express, either verbally, or in writing, or in any other manner, the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, free of any aesthetic or moral concern."[20] Miró's version of automatism found inspiration in the embrace of chance, letting his brush wander over the canvas and playing with his materials, including pasting bits of paper randomly on his canvases or tacking the canvases to the wall to paint from: in either case, freeing himself from conscious control before consciously applying himself to their organization.

Elaine de Kooning recalled that her husband "would begin a picture by writing words across the surface of the canvas. These were very large—one or two to a canvas—hastily scrawled with charcoal or brush using the greatest possible muscular freedom of shoulder or arm. . . . I can almost remember the exact words—one like *hope* clear across the top, and one like *man* across the bottom."[21] He may well have begun *The Wave* in such a way, then filled in the cavities formed by the letters, turning them into shapes that resembled a figure seated in a chair.

De Kooning's early training from 1916 to 1920 at the decorating firm Gidding & Zonen in Rotterdam, where he worked prior to and while at the Academy, provided him with skills in marbling, graining, and composing decorative designs. This experience lay behind his continued interest in lettering, which is evident in his work from the later 1940s as well. His background in commercial art also prepared him for playing with his materials. According to a Dutch friend, artist Joop Sanders, de Kooning "used to do these things that they do in commercial art layouts—they cut out and do a sort of collage, a final paste out. I remember him . . . drawing lipsticks . . . He would make an arrangement by cutting them out and moving them around."[22] Hess elaborated on this point, saying that de Kooning "will do drawings on transparent tracing paper, scatter them one on top of the other, study the composite drawing that appears on top,

Figure 6
Harry Bowden (1907–1965; born Los Angeles, CA; died Sausalito, CA), **Willem de Kooning's studio, 1946**
Photographic print. Harry Bowden Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Figure 7
Joan Miró (1893–1983; born Barcelona, Spain; died Palma de Mallorca, Spain), ***Dutch Interior (I)*, 1928**
Oil on canvas, 91.8 × 73 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund (163.1945)

Figure 8
Willem de Kooning, *Pink Angels*, ca. 1945
Oil and charcoal on canvas, 132.1 × 101.6 cm. Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles

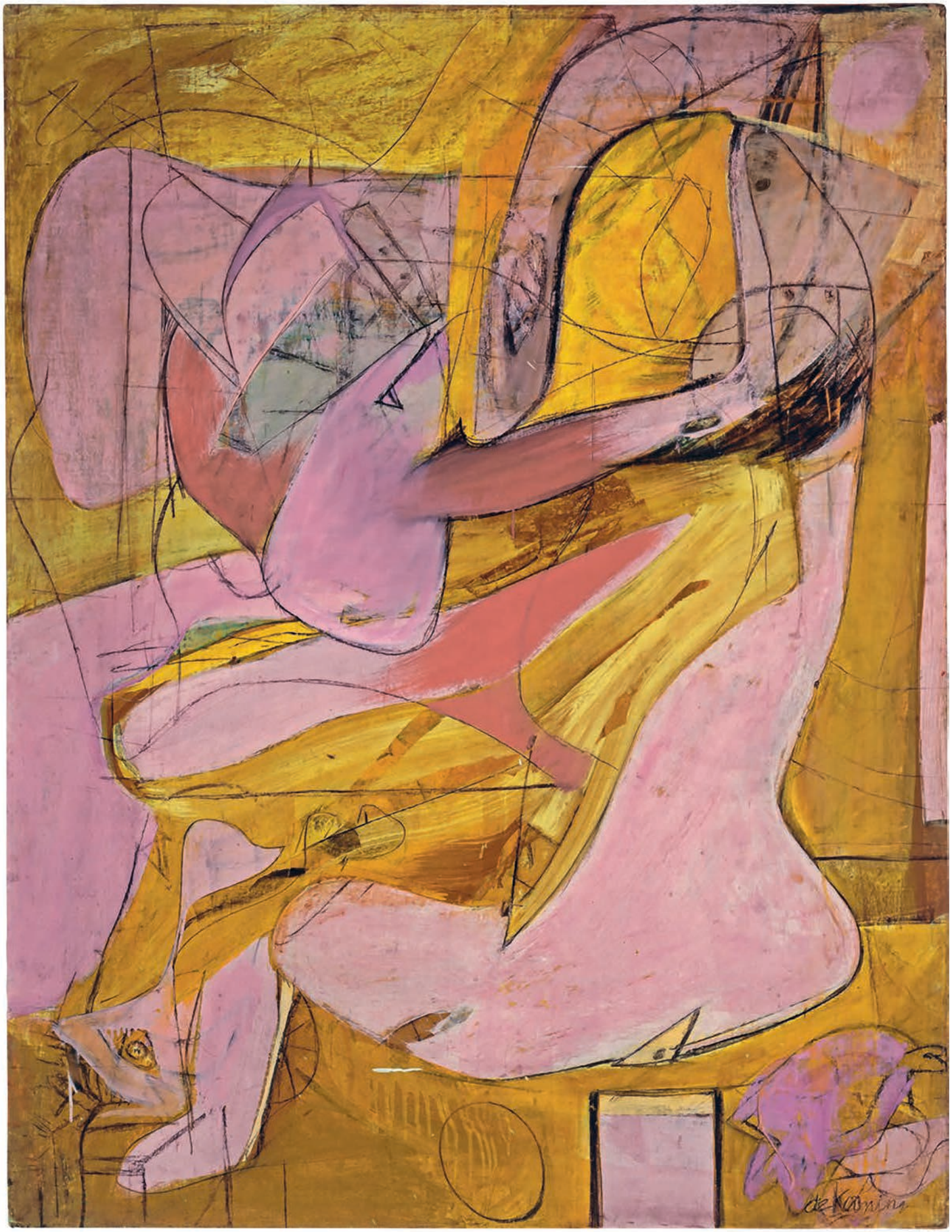

Figure 9
Willem de Kooning, *Special Delivery*, 1946
Oil, enamel, and charcoal on paper mounted on paperboard, 59.4 × 76.2 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966

make a drawing from this, reverse it, tear it in half, and put it on top of still another drawing."[23]

A photograph of de Kooning in his Fourth Avenue studio in November 1946 (fig. 6) shows this kind of composition in process, producing—at least at this stage—an image that deserves to be called "grotesque." The great nineteenth-century critic John Ruskin defined the Grotesque as "composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful." Wanting it both ways, de Kooning once said, "I like the grotesque. It's more joyous."[24]

Commenting on Ruskin's words in his 1948 book on Miró, Greenberg proposed that the "cheerful flamboyance" of his work was underpinned by hints of the monstrous and the macabre.[25] Miró's *Dutch Interior (I)* of 1928 (fig. 7) was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1945, probably the same year in which de Kooning painted the macabre *Pink Angels* (fig. 8). He appears to have paid attention not only to the overall metamorphic figuration of *Dutch Interior (I)* but also to specific motifs, including the abstracted animals that surround a rectangle on the bottom edge. De Kooning added the features of grotesque animals in the same location in his own cheerfully flamboyant composition. The fish head at lower left and the scurrying, crablike creature at lower right are images derived from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's prints of *The Last Judgment* and *The Seven Deadly Sins* (both 1558),

Figure 10
Willem de Kooning, *Judgment Day*, 1946
Oil and charcoal on paper, 56.5 × 72.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From the Collection of Thomas B. Hess, Gift of the heirs of Thomas B. Hess, 1984 (1984.613.4)

which de Kooning could have seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He positioned these motifs below a drawing of an upturned head that lies just above the knee of the big, seated angel, the latter of which comes from a very different source—Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which went on long-term view at the Museum of Modern Art on July 26, 1943.[26]

Special Delivery (fig. 9), dated to 1946, transforms such grotesque figural motifs into more ambiguous biomorphic forms, rendered in white on a yellow ground, set in an interior. The composition's lower-left quadrant appears to have been traced from a small painting titled *D* (see fig. 46), which allows us to see how that section depicts an abstracted reclining female figure beneath a lamp and a window. Also that year, such motifs completely filled a composition titled *Judgment Day* (fig. 10), which de Kooning copied at a greatly enlarged scale in about three days with the aid of fellow artist Milton Resnick, to create a seventeen- foot-square backdrop for a dance called *Labyrinth*, performed on April 5, 1946.[27] Much later, in 1977, he told Hess that the backdrop portrayed the four angels at the Gates of Paradise.[28]

The performance of *Labyrinth* occurred eight months after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, respectively, and de Kooning was not alone among artists in alluding to these events in their writings or

statements. Not unexpectedly, as the Second World War came to a close, news of its carnage, of genocide, and of nuclear destruction gave rise to what W. H. Auden, the British poet domiciled in the United States, called "The Age of Anxiety"—the title of his long narrative poem published in 1947. Set in a bar in New York, Auden's poem—which describes the loneliness and anxiety-ridden purposelessness of its characters' lives and ends with their being drunk on the city's streets—is a dystopic rendering of what the lives of many impoverished artists at the time may have been like. Yet the convenient coincidence that it won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1948, the year of de Kooning's first solo exhibition, only goes to show that it was not, in fact, solely an age of anxious-seeming art.

De Kooning did refer to Hiroshima, albeit not directly, in a short lecture of 1951 at MoMA, featuring an extremely odd reference to angels: "Eyes that actually saw the light melted out of sheer ecstasy. For one instance, everybody was the same color. It made angels out of everybody. A truly Christian light, painful but forgiving."[29] Unsurprisingly, *Judgment Day* has been associated with that passage, and raises the question, which will continue to require attention, as to the extent to which a work by de Kooning may be judged to be an illustration of the title that he—or Elaine, or someone else—gave it.

I shall return to this topic presently. For the moment, though, I think we must agree with Greenberg's statement in his essay "Abstract, Representational and So Forth" that the value of illustration per se was indisputable, even in abstract art, but "not a value that is realized by, or as, *accretion*"[30]—a nicely put warning against reading too much into imaginative titles. In making this point, the critic observed that a work that "has an allegorical or anagogic meaning does not make it a more effective work than one that has solely a literal one."[31] It seems fair to say that the title of *Pink Angels* is not especially inviting of more than a nominal literal association, given the massively revised surface and complex relationship of figure and ground. In contrast, the tightly, carefully composed *Judgment Day* seems to encourage an allegorical reading—while the interiors with grotesque inhabitants invite interpretation but refuse to provide it.

Never Empty Perfection

Writing in his journal in 1824, the great French painter Eugène Delacroix warned: "Never seek after an empty perfection. Some faults, some things which the vulgar call faults, often give vitality to a work."[32] Several decades later, he added, more impatiently, "The so-called conscientiousness of the great majority of painters is nothing but perfection laboriously applied to the art of being boring."[33] With rare exceptions, this was de Kooning's creed. He would say:

> **For many years I was not interested in making a good painting . . . I didn't want to pin it down at all. I was interested in that before [presumably, meaning his work through the 1930s], but I found it was not my nature. . . . [I worked] [n]ot with the idea of perfection but to see how far one could go, you know—but not with the idea of really doing it. . . . [With] [a]nxiousness and dedication to fright maybe, or ecstasy, you know, like *The Divine Comedy*, to be like a performer; to see how long you can stay on the stage, with that imaginary audience.**[34]

Given statements like this, and the fact that so much attention has been paid to de Kooning's willingness to let the process of painting show, we need to be clear that his obvious aim was to produce a work on which he had gone as far as he could go, at which point it was finally done—even if it took someone else to persuade him that it was. To look broadly at the interior stylistic development of de Kooning's work through the second half of the 1940s is to see two basic types of hybrid paintings—neither abstract nor representational, but both—and two kinds of figure compositions, which I will be mentioning a little later. There are very few hybrid canvases in which de Kooning appears to have deliberately set out to make a summative, hopefully not boring,

Figure 11
Willem de Kooning, *Untitled (Three Figures)*, 1947–48
Oil, enamel paints, graphite, and charcoal on paper, 52.7 × 61 cm. Glenstone Museum, Potomac, MD

perfected composition. *Judgment Day* and its enlargement, *Backdrop for "Labyrinth,"* both from 1946, were the least successful and the first of this kind. *Attic* and *Excavation* (see figs. 50, 51), from 1949–50, were the final, widely acclaimed pair. In contrast, most of these works followed the lead of *Pink Angels* in clearly having been declared "to be 'done,'" even though parts of some compositions may be deemed provisional, while other works managed to appear stopped at the perfect moment without looking laboriously perfected at all.

We should remember that *Pink Angels* was likely painted only five years after de Kooning had been making his "timid" abstractions of the late 1930s and, more recently, the meticulous, Ingres-inspired portrait drawings of his wife, Elaine, from the early 1940s. The radical shift was noted in Greenberg's review of the Egan exhibition: "Emotion that demands singular, original expression tends to be censored out by a really great facility, for facility has a stubbornness of its own and is loath to abandon easy satisfactions. The indeterminacies or ambiguity that characterizes some of de Kooning's pictures is caused, I believe, by his effort to suppress his facility."[35]

This recalls what T. S. Eliot famously said of poets: that "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."[36] It may be said that only an artist with such a plenitude of draftsmanship skills as de Kooning knows what it means to want to escape from dependence upon them. There is, however, another side to the story, told by Gus Falk, one of de Kooning's students at Black Mountain College

Figure 12
Willem de Kooning, *Secretary*, 1947–48
Oil and charcoal on paper mounted on fiberboard, 61.9 × 91.9 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966 (66.1193)

in 1948. Falk recounted the artist revising *Attic*, then in progress when he visited him a decade or so later: "He made a drawing of it, to work on the parts where he felt there was a problem. He worked on that picture carefully. 'Maybe I could throw a line here,' he would say. He would erase parts, redraw it. In other words, he *did* it like Ingres. It was not throwing his guts on the wall."[37]

What did Falk mean by saying "he did it like Ingres"? Certainly not like the Ingres of the meticulous pencil drawings. Perhaps, Falk knew that Barnett Newman had credited Ingres with being a progenitor of Abstract Expressionism, saying, "That guy was an abstract painter. . . . He looked at the canvas more often than at the model. Kline, de Kooning, none of us would have existed without him."[38] But what Falk describes could not be further from what the critic Harold Rosenberg called "action painting."[39] It would be Hess who more specifically compared de Kooning's methods to those of Ingres, "like de Kooning an encyclopedic draftsman, who, once he had established the turn of a bather's neck or the set of her spine, would rephrase the shape with constantly re-inspired variation for the rest of his life."[40] Of course, the result was very far from Ingres's ever-more polished Neoclassicism. Allan Stone got it right when he wrote: "De Kooning valued the

Figure 13
Willem de Kooning, *Night*, 1947–48
Oil on board, 55.9 × 73 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Art.
The John R. Van Derlip Fund and The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund (63.36)

appearance of spontaneity and pursued the accidental rigorously. He would try out a 'spontaneous' passage on vellum many times before he achieved the desired effect, and then he would meticulously reproduce the passage on canvas."[41]

Stone's assessment seems to reflect what Falk characterized: that it was "the *appearance* of spontaneity" that mattered to de Kooning, however meticulously it was realized. Although Falk was describing the artist at work on the densely composed *Attic* (see fig. 50), this careful additive and revisionary process may be seen in some of de Kooning's figure compositions, most notably, his small works on paper, reportedly from 1947–48, depicting men and women, and women without men (fig. 11). Some of these show de Kooning having dissected figures into jigsaw-like parts; used tracing to repeat the same leg and arm fragments within an individual work (as he did from one such composition to another); and employed what he would later term "fitting-in" to weave together the body parts.[42] The settings of other works bear an affinity to presumably earlier grotesque interiors including *Special Delivery* (see fig. 9), but they are as splintery geometric as that had been biomorphic.

And such was de Kooning's range in this 1947–48 period that at this time he also made the most grotesque

of these interiors: *Secretary* (fig. 12) and *Night* (fig. 13). The former belongs to a small group of paintings on the theme of the young American women who, after the war, entered the labor market to do office work, a theme popularized by *The Secretary's Day* (1947), an instructional film featuring glamorous actresses.[43] De Kooning's office scene is not easily deciphered but seems to picture a falling figure above a smiling face with a large nose; a red, Miró-like sexual symbol above a penis peeping out from below a yellow garment; a door at the top and an open window, or perhaps a notebook, below a falling, pleated gray cloth. Drips going toward the top edge show that *Secretary* was partly painted in an upturned position. If we look at it upside down, we see that de Kooning had traced this composition onto *Night*, or vice versa. *Night* is even more grotesque, with its grinning, ghoulish face set above a two-legged, amorphous creature that leans across the surface. Below it is the falling man of *Secretary* leaning rightward up in the corner. Flashes of blue, pink, and red, especially in the upper-left corner, suggest that *Night* had been a brightly colored composition like *Secretary* before being transformed into a nocturnal scene. De Kooning's Egan exhibition was most frequently discussed as a show dominated by black paintings. However, it seems fair to assume that he left *Night* out of the show because he did not want to include examples of his more macabre compositions.

The same would seem to hold for his omission of the contemporaneous black painting *The Moraine* (fig. 14). It may have been an extremely tactile response to Gorky's smoky-dark *Charred Beloved* paintings (fig. 15), shown at the Julien Levy Gallery in April–May 1946. The painting's title—referring to a flow of debris, specifically rock debris transported by glaciers—aptly describes the composition in its movement of areas of dense, resistant white and black paint across the paper. Close observation reveals that *The Moraine* depicts two figures—a standing, headless man overwhelmed by another with a raised arm. Paint both clotted and freely streaming down within and around the figures makes this the most nominally unfinished of the series of de Kooning's paintings of grotesque subjects. Evidently, it was initially painted in layers of black, with white over them. These are set on a substrate of perhaps brown (or later discolored) paper, regions of which appear within the visible black paint around the perimeter, while thin black lines describe undecipherable motifs on each side of the composition.

Figure 14
Willem de Kooning, *The Moraine*, 1947
Oil on paper mounted on Masonite, 93.7 × 65.1 cm. Eastman Collection

Figure 15
Arshile Gorky (1904–1948; born Dilkaya, Turkey; died Sherman, CT; active New York, NY, and Boston, MA), ***Charred Beloved No. 2*, 1946**
Oil on canvas, 137.3 × 101.6 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1971 (16690)

THE FIRST SOLO EXHIBITION

Selection and Allusion

De Kooning's first solo exhibition opened at New York's Charles Egan Gallery on April 12, 1948, and was scheduled to close on May 12. (Monthlong exhibitions were common then.) However, according to Elaine de Kooning, Egan extended the exhibition in the hope of selling more work "until it became an embarrassment to Bill."[44] (It probably closed on June 25.[45]) In fact, the exhibition did receive a reasonable amount of attention, most of it positive, as the documentation in the Chronology (pp. 85–88) here shows; and three of the ten, or possibly more, paintings shown were sold during or shortly after the exhibition, one of them, *Painting* (see fig. 27), to the Museum of Modern Art.[46]

There appears to have been no checklist of the exhibition. Clement Greenberg's review in *The Nation* says that it comprised "ten pictures . . . done within the last year"; that there did "not seem to be an identifiable image in any"; and leaves the impression that most of them were dominated by black and white.[47] Since the review was not illustrated, and other contemporaneous reviews were illustrated only in black and white—critical journals at that time rarely having color reproductions—readers were not able to judge the veracity of Greenberg's two descriptions. As we shall see later, neither was strictly accurate; it is therefore possible that the critic was also mistaken about the number of works shown. Renée Arb's short review in *Art News* was illustrated by *Painting* but speaks of "brilliant hues" as well as black and white; and there do appear to have been some, if not many, bright colors in the exhibition, judging by what the gallerist Charles Egan remembered.[48] As for the

Figure 16
Willem de Kooning, *Bill-Lee's Delight*, 1946
Oil on paper mounted on composition board, 80.3 × 122.9 cm. Eastman Collection

Figure 17
Willem de Kooning, *Orestes*, 1947
Oil, enamel, and paper collage on paper mounted on board, 61.3 × 91.8 cm. Private collection

number and the identity of the works shown, we cannot be entirely sure. Nonetheless, we can be reasonably certain of a good number of them.

A brightly colored, untitled painting, now known as *Bill-Lee's Delight* (fig. 16) was illustrated in a black-and-white cartoon by Ad Reinhardt (see fig. 62) published in December 1946 and again, with the untitled work soon to be titled *Orestes* (fig. 17) in *Magazine of Art* on February 2, 1948, two months before the show would actually open.[49] They accompanied a "Biographical Sketch" (see fig. 66) of de Kooning, which announced: "His work is in a number of private collections; he will have his first one-man show this year at the Egan Gallery."[50]

Among the works mentioned after these two was a painting called *Brown and White* (see fig. 29) in one review of the Egan show.[51] *Brown and White* was also one of four reproduced in the newly established *Partisan Review* in August, the others being *Valentine* (see fig. 20), *Zurich* (see fig. 23), and *Painting*, the MoMA picture. It would therefore seem that contemporaneous documentation tells us what were likely six of the works in the exhibition: these four, plus *Orestes* and the work that later became known as *Bill-Lee's Delight*. We are therefore indebted to art historian Charles Stuckey for

asking Egan if he remembered what was shown, and reporting in 1980 that the gallerist remembered eight: not *Brown and White,* but the other six that were documented early, along with *Light in August* (see fig. 18), *Mailbox* (see fig. 21), and *Black Friday* (see fig. 28).[52] This totals nine works, one short of Greenberg's tally. When working with my colleagues on MoMA's 2011 de Kooning retrospective, we determined that, not only had Egan been forgetful but also that Greenberg may have undercounted and proposed that one or two other works, *Abstraction* (see fig. 31) and *Noon* (see fig. 22), were as likely to have been de Kooning's choices for the show as those that Egan remembered. They have been retained here for the same reason and will be discussed in the pages that follow; recent research does reveal that *Abstraction* could well have been in the exhibition.[53]

We might wonder whether de Kooning's decision to finally have a solo exhibition, at age forty-four, had anything to do with Jackson Pollock's first exhibition of his allover drip paintings at the Betty Parsons Gallery in January 1948. Or whether Elaine de Kooning having that month begun to write reviews for *Art News* caused her to speak to her husband about his needing to get more attention for his work. And whether one or both of these events led de Kooning not to include any recent figurative works in his exhibition, only those in which he showed a more radical face.

Be that as it may, de Kooning's work did begin to attract new attention. In March, just prior to the opening of the Egan exhibition, the recently founded journal *The Tiger's Eye* illustrated the de Kooning painting now titled *Orestes* by the journal's publishers, Ruth and John Stephan.[54] The other work illustrated in the *Magazine of Art* did not receive its title, *Bill-Lee's Delight*, until many years later, after Lee Eastman had become Willem (Bill) de Kooning's lawyer. The remaining works in the Egan show received their titles at a meeting in de Kooning's studio at which Elaine de Kooning, she later recounted, suggested titles to her husband and Charles Egan, and three affirmative responses were needed to determine each title.[55]

Figure 18
Willem de Kooning, *Light in August*, 1946
Oil on canvas, 140 × 105 cm. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Iran

Figure 19
William Faulkner, *Light in August* (1932; Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1947)

Abstraction, *Painting*, *Brown and White*, and *Untitled* (the later-titled *Bill-Lee's Delight)* escaped more imaginative titles; *Noon* and *Zurich* received inscrutable ones, unless the "Z" of "Zot," slang for "nothing," and in Dutch, "crazy" or "foolish," at the bottom-right corner of *Zurich* (see fig. 23) was meant to allude to the Swiss city. *Valentine* (see fig. 20), with the pink heart, and *Mailbox* (see fig. 21), humorously titled for the grinning mouths, were fairly obvious choices. This leaves *Orestes,* already titled as such in *The Tiger's Eye*, plus *Black Friday* and *Light in August*, three unexpected titles that, it is reasonable to conclude, did have thematic resonances for de Kooning—although there is no circumstantial evidence to tell us what they were.[56]

In the case of *Orestes*, Elaine de Kooning recalled that because *The Tiger's Eye* was focused on Greek

Figure 20
Willem de Kooning, *Valentine*, 1947
Oil and enamel on paper on board, 92.2 × 61.5 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Phillips (1093.1969)

Figure 21
Willem de Kooning, *Mailbox*, 1948
Oil, enamel, and charcoal on paper on composition board, 58.7 × 76.2 cm. Collection of Bettina Bryant

Following pages:

Figure 22
Willem de Kooning, *Noon*, ca. 1947
Oil and enamel on Masonite, 121.9 × 86.4 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Albert M. Greenfield and Elizabeth M. Greenfield Collection, 1974 (1974-178-24)

Figure 23
Willem de Kooning, *Zurich*, 1947
Oil and enamel on paper mounted on fiberboard, 91.4 × 61.3 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest, 1981

mythology, its publishers, the Stephans, "named a painting of Bill's . . . Orestes. It was not inappropriate. The painting did have this sense of possibly of the furies and so on, but Bill was in no way thinking about Orestes or Greek mythology with which he is not acquainted. So they just kind of imposed it."[57] Nonetheless, the Stephans maintained they would not have done so without de Kooning's approval.[58] Those acquainted with Greek mythology know that Orestes killed his mother, Clytemnestra, but what are we to make of the serious suggestion that de Kooning's *Orestes* alludes to his loathing of his own mother?[59]

As for *Black Friday*, the titular phrase is an alternative name for Good Friday. This being the case, how are we to understand one writer's assertion that de Kooning's painting alludes to the Crucifixion of Christ?[60]

Stuckey has shown that *Light in August* (fig. 18) shares the title of William Faulkner's 1932 novel and has been said to reflect passages in that story of a partly Black and partly white rootless, disinherited man, Joe Christmas, whose surname links up with *Black Friday*, and in whose rootlessness the author recognized his own.[61] Stuckey also tells us that de Kooning was deeply impressed by Faulkner's novels and especially admired *Light in August*, whose melodramatic sex-and-violence aspects associate it with the lurid tabloids the artist enjoyed. Alvin Lustig's dramatic black-and-white dust jacket for the New Directions edition of the novel (fig. 19), published in 1947, is very much in keeping with de Kooning's black-and-white paintings.

I think we have to ask: In such cases, was de Kooning alerting his viewers to allusions that he acknowledged and hoped they would recognize? "To speak of an allusion is to predicate a source," the literary critic Christopher Ricks reminds us, adding, "[but] a source may not be an allusion, for it may not be called into play; it may be scaffolding such as went to the building but does not constitute any part of the building." We have to decide whether we think de Kooning, in voting to adopt these particular titles, did recognize them as now "being part not only of the making of the painting but of its meaning" as well?[62]

Not Black and White

Greenberg's glowing review of de Kooning's first solo exhibition, at the Charles Egan Gallery in the spring of 1948, devoted a considerable amount of space to the artist's use of black.[63] The review was not illustrated, but two paintings in the exhibition were reproduced in the February 1948 issue of the *Magazine of Art,* and four more in the April issue of *Partisan Review*—in black and white in both cases, and without commentary.[64] This allowed those who had not seen the exhibition—as the California painter Richard Diebenkorn told me—to conclude that the works on view were black-and-white paintings. And the exhibition was continually referred to as a "black-and-white exhibition" of abstract paintings, although that characterization is supported by only about half of its ten or eleven works. The remainder comprised one multicolored composition; one that suggested an interior; another that advanced the series of grotesque interiors; two works with conspicuous lettering on a painterly white ground; and one brown-and-white and another brown-and-black canvas that do bear obvious comparison to the black-and-white paintings. Let me take them in this order, which may well not be the sequence in which they were made.

The multicolored work was the canvas now titled *Bill-Lee's Delight* (see fig. 16), completed to display bright-green biomorphic and anthropomorphic forms set against a red-orange ground. It is unclear whether the picture was unique in the Egan exhibition. There may have been more like it: As we saw earlier, Renée Arb's short review in *Art News* speaks of "brilliant hues" as well as black and white, but no such others appear to have survived—that they were painted over seems a very plausible explanation. I think all we can reasonably conclude from this single anomalous canvas is that de Kooning had chosen to work with not only the tonal polarities of black and white, but also the chromatic polarities of red and green, which he had exploited in earlier figure paintings.[65]

He engaged two polarities in the larger *Valentine* (fig. 20). The black-and-white contrast in this composition is clearly more vivid than the pink-and-white one, both intrinsically so and enhanced by the reflectance of

the slick black enamel. De Kooning thereby draws attention to their use: While the pair of pink shapes and the single red form seem unspecific, not especially worthy of our notice, the black shapes suggest a figure seated upon a chair in the bottom-right corner, and a window in the opposite corner. Yet, he associates the areas of black enamel and pink oil paint that, while set flatly separately on the canvas, hardly overlapping, nonetheless appear to be floating, mutually attracted on the white substrate.

Mailbox, with its grinning mouths (fig. 21), follows the sequence of grotesque interiors begun at midcentury but differs in no longer seeming to paste its imagery flat on the surface as they did, and as *Valentine* does. Rather, de Kooning disposed the larger forms so they all lie more or less in plane, forming the proximate layer of the depicted incident; have open spaces around them that reveal an essentially continuous drawn layer beneath them; and feature a ground plane beneath that. There is some overlapping of these layers, but not to such a degree as to negate the effect of foreground and background. Whereas Pollock painted in layers, the layers cannot be distinguished in the viewing of his canvases. De Kooning is often said to have painted wet-in-wet, a common technique in oil painting that allows blending of subsequent layers, and that is largely true of his work in the 1950s and 1960s. However, as the essay on *Black Friday* in this volume explains (see p. 130), he did not employ a true wet-in-wet technique in the later 1940s, but used solvent to work lower layers up to the surface. And in works like *Mailbox* and *Valentine*, he painted in layers and let the layers show. In effect, de Kooning followed the embrace of stratification in Paul Cézanne's paintings of rocks and quarries—that is, interest in parallel layers of material one upon another.[66]

Painting by layering—Cézanne's gift to modern painting—lived on in the layering of early Cubist collages before they became the flat, jigsaw-like unities, their space squeezed out of them, that shaped the airless abstractions de Kooning inherited in the 1930s. *Mailbox* shows him engaging the art of adjustment to pry open the space in his paintings. His pursuit of this goal is seen

Figure 24
Pablo Picasso (1881–1973; born Málaga, Spain; died Mougins, France), ***Ma Jolie*, 1911–12**
Oil on canvas, 100 × 64.5 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange) (176.1945)

in the firm manner in which he drew the edges of the planes, along with their sheer multiplicity and density within a composition. Both challenges, each a matter of surface composition, were affected by—and influenced—how de Kooning managed the planes so that they appear to be layered.

A pair of works in the Egan exhibition with lettering on a mainly white painterly ground, *Noon* (fig. 22) and *Zurich* (fig. 23), the former less certainly in the Egan show than the latter, convey the impression of having been conceived as contrasting versions of the canvas as a page. The former—ironically—has the word "Art" "hastily scrawled . . . using the greatest possible muscular freedom of shoulder or arm," as Elaine de Kooning

remembered such a work.[67] The latter includes a carefully composed but largely unintelligible text focused on the word "Zot." The writing comprises the proximate zone of each painting, set more independently upon the canvas in the former work than in the latter. For, in the case of *Zurich*, the narrow letters belong equally with linear markings that are not letters, akin to Analytic Cubist paintings with stenciled lettering, the most prominent example for de Kooning being Picasso's *Ma Jolie* (fig. 24).[68]

In neither *Noon* nor *Zurich* does the writing form the matrix for the entire composition, as it perhaps had with *The Wave* (see fig. 3). But it did in one of the black-and-white paintings, *Orestes* (see fig. 17), which brings us to the four black-and-white paintings and the two related brown-and-black paintings that were the most radical works in the Egan exhibition.

The Color Black

While Greenberg did not identify any of the works in the Egan exhibition, it was to the black-and-white paintings that he explicitly referred. The critic not only emphasized de Kooning's use of black, associating him in this respect with Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, and Pollock, but also applauded his unique method of employing it:

> **For de Kooning black becomes a color—not the indifferent schema of drawing, but a hue with all the resonance, ambiguity, and variability of the prismatic scale. Spread smoothly in heavy somatic shapes on an uncrowded canvas, this black identifies the physical picture plane with an emphasis other painters achieve only by clotted pigment. De Kooning's insistence on a smooth, thin surface is a concomitant of his desire for purity, for an art that makes demands only on the optical imagination.**[69]

Greenberg's first two points are uncontroversial. For de Kooning, black became a color, functioning on the prismatic, not merely the tonal, scale. And black paint spread thinly on the canvas makes us as much aware of the flat picture plane as does the thick paint used by other artists. But the critic's ascribing to de Kooning a "desire for purity" would have amused the artist, who in 1951 spoke disparagingly of painters for whom "the "pure form of comfort became the comfort of pure form," adding, "Art never seems to make me peaceful or pure. I always seem to be wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity."[70]

This is not the place to offer a history of the use of the color black prior to de Kooning's use of it, commonly viewed as beginning in modern art with the work of Édouard Manet. Nor is it even the place to begin recounting its later history, in which African American artists played an increasingly important role. But we do need to be cognizant of the milieu in which de Kooning's black-and-white paintings were produced.[71] Greenberg mentioned a trio of American artists besides de Kooning. I take it that neither he nor de Kooning knew that European painters were also making such paintings. It is likely, however, that the Galerie des Deux Îles in Paris was aware of the response to the Egan exhibition, since it opened its own presentation of nine such painters some three months later, *Blanc et neige* (in English, *White and Black*), on July 19, 1948.[72]

In New York itself, there were four important examples of black or black-and-white paintings of which de Kooning was certainly aware. Most notably, although clearly hard to assimilate with what he was doing, was Picasso's *Guernica*, which had returned to the Museum of Modern Art in 1942 after touring the United States for two years. (The artist had a postcard of the work in his studio.)[73] A second was Gorky's *Charred Beloved* paintings of 1946, mentioned above. Less obvious, but well received by Greenberg, was the Albert Pinkham Ryder exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the autumn of 1947 (fig. 25). The Pinkham retrospective coincided with the news, in September 1947, that MoMA had foolishly sold twenty-six early modernist works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in order to obtain funds to buy recent art. Matisse's *Gourds* (fig. 26) was among the three Matisses in the group of works that MoMA gave up.[74]

Judging from what de Kooning exhibited the following year, it seems fair to say that it was the

Figure 25
Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847–1917; born New Bedford, MA; died Elmhurst, NY), ***Moonlit Cove*, 1880s**
Oil on canvas, 35.9 × 43.5 cm. The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Acquired 1924 (1708)

Figure 26
Henri Matisse (1869–1954; born Le Cateau-Cambrésis, France; died Nice, France), ***Gourds*, 1916**
Oil on canvas, 65.1 × 80.9 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund (109.1935)

Matisse that attracted his particular attention. Whereas his chiaroscuro *Night* (see fig. 13) is of a type with the Gorky paintings, and *The Moraine* (see fig. 14) with the heavily impastoed Ryders, his black-and-white paintings in the Egan exhibition are akin to the Matisse in being composed "on a smooth, thin surface," as Greenberg put it—whereas not always comprising one, but often heavily marked by evidence of de Kooning's revisions. Nonethless, his blacks do not seem to break the continuity of the surface. When Matisse visited the aged Pierre-Auguste Renoir in 1918 to show him some paintings, Renoir said that one thing prevented him from telling Matisse that he was not a good painter: "When you put on some black, it stays in its plane. All my life I thought that you couldn't use it without breaking the chromatic unity of the surface. . . . As for you, using a colored vocabulary, you introduce a black, and it holds."[75] That is precisely what de Kooning started doing with the works in the Egan exhibition.

The artist admitted that he began using black and white paints because they were inexpensive: "I did not have any money, I did not have any particular aesthetic idea or theory, but I could go to a store and buy a gallon of white and a gallon of black and be in business, I wanted to be free of the material. . . . and out of that came some idea about black-and-white pictures."[76] These were gallons of "black and white household enamels."[77] They were mainly Ripolin, the first branded version of enamel paint, which was produced by the merger of Briegleb, a Dutch company, and LeFranc, a French manufacturer of artists' materials. The white version was popularized by the architect Le Corbusier's "la loi du ripolin" (Law of Ripolin) in his book *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (1925), which argued that Ripolin could invest buildings with the "eye of truth," since any blemishes would stand out against such pristine surfaces, and against such cleanliness the accumulated soot of a building would obscure its constructive essence.[78] It is doubtful that de Kooning was aware of this history, but he was familiar with enamels from his early days as a sign- and housepainter and presumably reasoned that, since they were designed for outside use, they should be particularly durable. One problem with Ripolin is that

(continued...)

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Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations.
"Egan show" refers to Willem de Kooning's solo exhibition at the Charles Egan Gallery in 1948.