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Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Art review: Willem de Kooning at L&M Arts

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Any excuse to look at paintings and drawings by Willem de Kooning is a good excuse, but L&M Arts is offering one with special rewards in a show called "Figure and Light." Sixteen drawings and paintings on paper chronicle the evolution of his signature "women" from 1947 through 1962. A second room jumps to eight, late abstract paintings made between 1980 and 1985. The timing couldn't be better, especially for the assembly of drawings, given the Arshile Gorky retrospective that closed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in late September. In some respects De Kooning picks up where Gorky, a suicide in 1948, left off. The most Gorky-like (and Picasso indebted) drawing is a powerful

1947 rendering in pencil and paint of two women, one seated with her legs lifted high and the other standing ramrod straight, like an ancient totem. Grinning sets of teeth seem to have been dislodged from bodies by the ferocity of De Kooning's drawing style. One set tumbles to the floor, the other is lodged within a green organic shape that hovers between the women. It's the most colorfully diverse of the paper works, a full spectrum stabbed with shards of black and white.

Also exceptional is a 1947 reclining odalisque, the show's only horizontal figure amid a phalanx of more confrontational upright women. Naked except for a jagged pair of high-heel shoes on her feet, she tosses in space like a fitful sleeper engulfed in a fierce erotic dream. The Cubist-derived fracturing of space begins to heave, like brittle ice sheets in a frozen glacier cracking under immense internal pressure.

With that, De Kooning was off and running. A concise selection of what followed is on view. By 1961-62 the artist was, at least temporarily, running out of steam. Things get wobbly in a study of so-called clam diggers, in which the brushwork in a preponderance of pinkish oil paint is loose and strains to emulate pliable flesh.

De Kooning said that seeing clam diggers along the coast near his Long Island home, bending over and up to their ankles in the surf, provided the inspiration for such works. The figures seemed to dissolve in shimmering reflections of elusive light and shadow.



Hence the show's fast-forward to the marvelous 1980s abstractions. Linear swoops of mostly primary colors play hide-and-seek with fields of white, like light darting off liquid surfaces in a Monet Giverny that's been wholly remade.

The shift is anticipated by an abstract pastel, dated circa 1956-58, that is the show's 17th -- and only non-figurative -- work on paper. The Alzheimer's disease that likely took De Kooning's life has led some to question his late abstractions; but he was an artist whose kinetic powers of muscle-memory were almost unerring. The best of the paintings really don't require any curatorially speculative help.

-- Christopher Knight

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L&M Arts, 660 Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 821-6400, through Jan. 15. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.lmgallery.com

Photos: Willem de Kooning, "Untitled (Two Women)," 1947; "Milkmaid," 1985.

Credit: L&M Arts