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# ARTS & LETTERS

GALLERY-GOING

## Composing Without Composure



Willem de Kooning, 'Screams of Children Come From Seagulls' (1975).

L&M ARTS/PRIVATE COLLECTION



By JOHN GOODRICH

Robert Mnuchin's fondness for Willem de Kooning (1904-97) is no secret. The co-owner of L&M Arts has been paying top dollar for the artist's work for years, most recently with his dramatic acquisition last Wednesday of de Kooning's "Untitled XVI" (1975) at Sotheby's. Last fall, his purchase of an untitled 1977 canvas at Christie's set the previous record for the artist's work from the 1970s.

**WILLEM DE KOONING:  
PAINTINGS 1975-1978**  
L&M Arts

**JOAN BROWN: THE AFFAIR**  
George Adams Gallery

The painting from Christie's appears in L&M's current installation, which revisits the theme of the gallery's inaugural 1993 exhibition: the exceptionally lush canvases produced by the artist between 1975 and 1978. Coming as it does on the heels of the Pulitzer Prize winning biography of the artist by Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, L&M's exhibition offers a timely look at an intriguing period in this modern master's life.

De Kooning was then in his mid-70s, having aged a quarter-century since abstract masterpieces like "Excavation" (1950) catapulted him to fame. Critical reaction to his more recent work had been mixed: Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess remained enthusiastic while Clement Greenberg and Hilton Kramer saw a decline from the heights of the 1940s.

The 13 paintings and three sculptures at L&M show not the slightest slackening of energy. Built up of great slashes of color — glowing blues and crimsons, along with warmer reds, oranges, and yellows, breaking up fields of whites — these large abstractions have the roiling limpidity of the dunes and sea near the artist's Long Island home.

"Screams of Children Come From Seagulls" (1975), with its darting orange-reds and blues, comes the closest to specific description. In "Untitled XII" (1977), the white and off-white planes form a kind of fragmented background for circling, dancing notes of dark blue and black. More often, however, there's no firm distinction between calligraphy and background, but a ceaseless, fluid blending of the two.

These canvases boast some of de Kooning's most delicious surfaces. Creamy strokes of paint are slathered and scraped, then cut through with fresh ones. In places the paint crests and puckers. The artist's gestures are deliberate but always questioning, often hooking reflexively back on themselves. His every stroke adds, but never summarizes, as if the artist were propelled by a faith in the outcome and by the morality of his task.

Some areas seem to result from the artist's habit of pressing paper into the wet paint, then lifting and applying the marks elsewhere. The artist may also have challenged himself by working

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with his eyes closed or with his left hand, as he was known to do. In any event, the paintings radiate a sense of spontaneous composing, with all foresight banished.

Together, the canvases amount to a glorious affirmation — what else could one ask of painting? But nitpickers may find themselves yearning for one aspect of his early work. Though these late paintings astonish because of their willful, expansive curiosity, their discoveries tend to be local ones: the twist of a brushstroke, the scraped bit of cerulean gleaming through a veil of white. There's nothing here quite like the gathering rhythms of "Pink Angels" (c. 1945), and the singularity of its moments: the way a diagonal speeds past an obtuse oval, nearly bisecting the canvas, or the necessity of a partic-

ular kink in a swelling contour. Such early works speak less exquisitely about painting's processes, but affirm more of its powers.

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Joan Brown's lifework can seem like a prolonged determination to join two untamable forces: her own feelings, along with high traditions of art. The results — her double portrait of herself with her third husband in the style of Henri Rousseau; a Matissean self-portrait in the pose of Manet's "Eva Gonzales" (1870) — are always entertaining and often poignant.

The five large canvases currently at George Adams date from the period right after Brown's trip to Italy in 1976. The exhibition title, "The Affair," suggests a continuous narrative among four of the canvases, and one finds in them a couple flirting, embracing and then parting. But the real interest lies less in the storyline than in the paintings' astringent mixture of earnestness and whimsy.

In "The Last Day of Summer" (1976), the artist has painted herself enthusiastically embracing a human-size version of Michelangelo's "David." The statue stares stonily ahead, groping her

breast with a propitiously free hand; the artist waves off another paramour (a mortal one) offering a glass of champagne. In "The End of the Affair" (1977), the painter sits pertly on a bed in a revealing negligee, her legs intertwined with those of a mysterious figure covered head to foot with Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the shadows, her sated lover dresses before a mirror.

These are more than just swaggering fantasies about couplings with a higher muse, however. Brown's colors impart a visual weight and an earnest edge to the goofy scenarios. The royal purple, fiery orange, and brooding red of "The Kiss" (1976) make mountains loom and shadows lengthen with operatic fervor.

The art world is accustomed to artists wearing either their tortured or celebrated feelings on their sleeves, but Brown wears all of hers. The artist died in 1990, at age 52, in a freak accident while installing one of her works, but her feelings have an afterlife in these intense, offbeat works.

*De Kooning until June 3 (45 E. 78th Street, between Park and Madison Avenues, 212-861-0020). Brown until June 16 (525 W. 26th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-564-8480).*