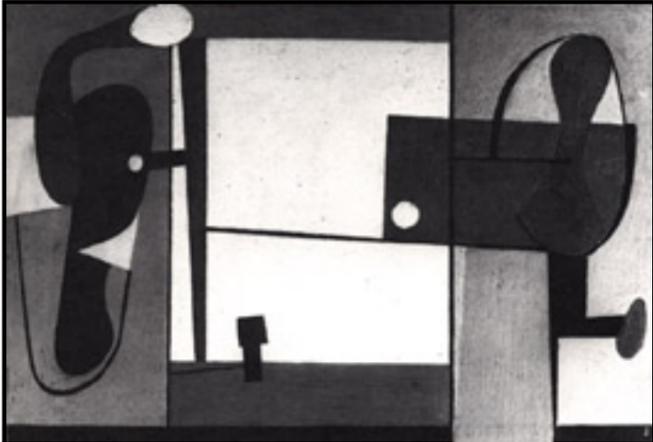


ADDRESSING DE KOONING

One of the great beauties of the City is its palimpsest nature. That is to say, the way the stories and dreams of our predecessors propel themselves into the present - be it in material fact or a knowing in the heart.

The artist Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) constructed his paintings similarly - allowing previous incarnations, traces of discarded tangents and struggle to remain visible in his finished compositions. Much of his work's lingering power derives from this honoring of each painting's history - and, by extension, the history of the painter who painted it.

From late 1934 through 1936*, de Kooning maintained a studio on 21st Street. His first space, at **145 W. 21st**, proved unappetizing and short lived - only a few weeks - for he could not stomach the smell of fresh baked bread wafting up from the bakery below. He shifted just one door down, to a loft at **143 W. 21st**.



Study for mural in the Williamsburg Housing Project Social Room, Brooklyn, 1935, (never executed) - While working for the WPA, de Kooning met Fernand Leger. Of the French master de Kooning said, "You got the feeling that to be an artist was as good as being anything else. This was a very healthy feeling."⁴

Up to this time, his biographers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, write "de Kooning seemed to others no more or less committed to art than he was to a particular lover."¹ On 21st Street, he would jettison this ambivalence.

His decision to declare himself an artist was buoyed by the newly created Works Progress Administration (WPA) whose Federal Arts Project offered employment to impoverished artists. De Kooning however did not qualify as "impoverished." The choice before him was to continue working as a designer for A. S. Beck or cast his lot with his artistry and the opportunities and camaraderie of the WPA. Stevens and Swan:

"The decision to take was: Was it worth it to put all my eggs in one basket, that kind of basket of art,' he told the critic David Sylvester many years later. 'I didn't know if I really was competent enough, if I felt it enough.' Little by little, however, de Kooning was styling himself, in his own mind at least, as a full-time artist rather than a Sunday painter. He was beginning to reverse the old terms in which one worked for a living and then painted on the side. 'It was a gradual development and it was really more of a psychological attitude: that

it was better to say, *No. I'm an artist. I have to do something on the side to make a living.* So I styled myself an artist and it was very difficult. But it was a much better state of mind.'...

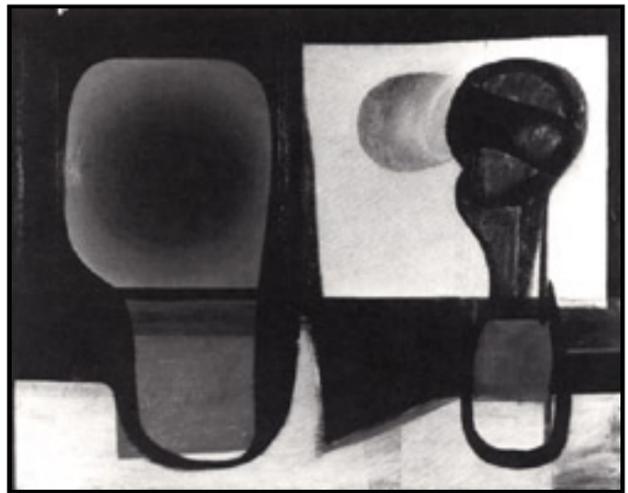
"For several months during the summer and fall of 1935 de Kooning agonized over what to do. Then, in late 1935, he went to the display manager at A.S. Beck and told him that he was quitting his current project. The reason he gave was that he was not making enough money...To de Kooning's astonishment, the manager offered to double his salary. 'Then,' de Kooning realized, 'I knew that I had to quit.' At the age of thirty-one, he had made his choice: he was now a full-time painter."²



Portrait Of Rudolph Burckhardt, c. 1939 - Photographer Burckhardt (along with dance critic and poet Edwin Denby) was a 21st Street neighbor, friend and early patron.

1. Stevens, Mark, and Annalyn Swan. *de Kooning: An American Master*. New York, Knopf, 2004, pg 121.
2. *Ibid.*, pg 122.
3. Interview for *Willem de Kooning*, exhibition catalogue, Paris: Centre Pompidou, Musee national d'art moderne, 1984.
4. Stevens and Swan, pg 129

* Some sources, such as the catalogue for the 1984 retrospective and Diane Waldman's, *Willem de Kooning*, date the artist's move to 21st Street as 1936. The dates cited here are derived from Stevens and Swan's biography, *de Kooning: An American Master*, whose exhaustive research would seem definitive.



Untitled, c. 1934 - While working at **143 W. 21st Street**, de Kooning initiated a 10 year series of high-key color abstractions - often dominated by ovoid shapes.



Four years drawing Browner culminated in **Reclining Nude** c.1938

he had made his choice: he was now a full-time painter."²

Once committed to his artistry, de Kooning's ambivalence for resolution was put in service to his work. While living at **143 W. 21st Street**, de Kooning's lover, Juliet Browner, was a frequent model. Browner describes the experience:

"He would think a lot. It took him more than a week to draw my eyes. He wanted to draw them in the style of Leonardo, showing the outside of the eye as the inside. The part above the eye he wanted to draw without the skin around it. I remember him drawing on his knees."³

Next
Stop?
Depends
which
way
you're
walking.

MAP: Addressing de Kooning

