

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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10 Late de Kooning Works to Go on View, and on Sale

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Tim Nighswander/IMAGING4ART; 2013 The Willem de Kooning Foundation - Artists Rights Society, New York
De Kooning's "Privileged (Untitled XX)" (1985) will be at Gagosian.

When Willem de Kooning was a struggling young artist and needed money, he would frequently sell a painting or sculpture as quickly as he made it, often bypassing his dealer, Xavier Fourcade. After the artist's death in 1997, when the Willem de Kooning Foundation needed cash, it, too — like many artists' foundations — would sell a work from its holdings, but always privately.

Now, to raise more than \$30 million for an endowment that would support scholarly and educational initiatives, the foundation has decided to sell 10 paintings in a particularly grand way. Rather than parting with works privately one at a time or stage an auction, it has sent a group of paintings to the Gagosian Gallery, which, will hold a show, “Willem de Kooning: Ten Paintings, 1983-1985,” from Nov. 8 through Dec. 21.

The show will be organized by John Elderfield, a consultant for Gagosian and the Museum of Modern Art's chief curator emeritus of painting and sculpture. He organized the blockbuster de Kooning retrospective at MoMA two years ago.

While grand in gesture, the move is actually a conservative one. By choosing a gallery show, the foundation avoids the harsh spotlight of a public auction, where, if a painting doesn't sell, it risks being publicly tainted. Galleries can keep the prices they get for an artwork private.

The Gagosian Gallery has built a reputation for putting together museum-quality exhibitions of 20th-century masters like Picasso and Lichtenstein, as well as de Kooning. (When it held its show of late paintings by Picasso in 2009, people stood on line outside its West 21st Street space in Chelsea for hours to see it.) This has often helped boost prices for an artist's work.

"It's as much about presentation as it is about money," said John L. Eastman, a member of the foundation's board, who was also de Kooning's longtime lawyer, executor and conservator. Mr. Eastman said that presenting 10 paintings together in Gagosian's premier space would create a dramatic visual impact that would help sell the works.

Having seen many of the gallery's historical exhibitions, Mr. Eastman asked Stefan Ratibor, director of Gagosian's operations in London and an organizer of several Lichtenstein shows for the gallery, whether Gagosian would want to exhibit and sell 10 paintings for the foundation in New York this fall. Mr. Ratibor, together with Mr. Elderfield and Larry Gagosian, the gallery's founder, then selected 10 canvases from 20 that the foundation had earmarked for possible sale.

"Their holdings are basically from the 1970s and '80s," Mr. Elderfield said in a telephone interview. "But I thought it would be particularly interesting to concentrate on just three years — 1983 to '85 — because the paintings he made then were so radically different." Also, he noted, there has never been a show focusing on only those years. It was during this time that de Kooning condensed the rich, thick surfaces of his earlier work, producing stripped-down canvases made of spare patterns of looping, buckling lines and ribbons in red, yellow and blue.

De Kooning was highly prolific during the 1980s, painting more than 300 canvases. During his later years, his health began to fail; by 1987 he began showing signs of dementia, and in 1989 he was declared incompetent by his lawyer and his daughter, Lisa.

Over the years, some of his late paintings have been criticized for being empty. There has also been speculation regarding how much help he received from his studio assistants. But Mr. Elderfield said that during the early '80s, he was still leading an active studio life. "When the works were shown at Fourcade shortly after they were painted, they were greeted with admiration by several prominent critics," he said.

While the organizers of the Gagosian exhibition said the paintings have not been priced yet, Christie's has recently auctioned two canvases from the same years. A 1984 work that had belonged to the singer Andy Williams brought \$9.7 million in New York in May, while another from 1983 went for \$4.4 million in London in June.

How the fall show could affect the market for late de Koonings is anyone's guess. In 2009, after John Richardson, Picasso's biographer (and a consultant to the Gagosian Gallery), organized a show of late Picasso paintings, a rash of other late works by him began appearing at auction, becoming more popular and increasingly more expensive.

Since there is no catalogue raisonné of de Kooning's work, proceeds from the show will go toward financing the publication of one, a multiyear project that will require hiring a team of scholars. Amy Schichtel, the foundation's executive director, said the money would also go toward building an endowment for education, which would include enhancing existing programs it helps support at the Long Island Children's Museum in Garden City.