GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Willem de Kooning

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

I feel like a fool for having asked to review Willem de Kooning—like, what could I possibly say, how could I say something new? All I can do for starters is reminisce. When I was fifteen years old I went with my mother to a de Kooning exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and I asked her to buy me the catalogue. It was the first contemporary-art catalogue I ever got; I had plenty of modern art–type books (on Picasso, Dalí, Mondrian, Ernst, etc.), but this was the first living-artist one. This was the book that set me off on contemporary art.

De Kooning has this effect. His work conjures something undeniably genuine in terms of human experience. I could not, in my youth, convey in language what I perceived in these paintings, yet they seized upon me to confirm something I already deeply felt, a sense of ripped-up abstraction, of space at once grossly fleshy and palpably deep. This recognition was compelling yet destabilizing, and, to an extent, it remains so even now. I've changed a lot since then; I understand the "irritation" de Kooning refers to in explaining his paintings of women—or wasn't he simply speaking of women, period?—in a different way. And with time's passage, I feel all the more shaken by his art. The transformations—the scraping away of paint, the interleaving of space, the flesh torn by line or melting into ground—that signaled a new freedom from solidity and decorum for me as an adolescent now carry the burden of, well, I won't call it wisdom; let's just say the Years.

In his later work, de Kooning himself shifted radically, moving from the visceral physicality that made his painting iconic to a dematerialized, increasingly linear style. John Elderfield organized this cogent exhibition of ten works made between 1983 and 1985. This is the

Willem de Kooning, *Untitled XXIX*, 1983, oil on canvas, 77 x 88".

period during which the artist's late style is said to have crystallized. Perhaps, after four decades, the familiar strategies bored the great man. Perhaps angst has a different valence after a certain age. These spare paintings, with their reduced and spatially ambiguous—can I call them ambivalent?—curving lines hovering over white and off-white expanses, are sometimes characterized as "difficult."

As an attempt to take stock of current thinking, I perused a range of online sources during the first weeks of the exhibition, perhaps not the wisest choice, as critiques of the show's ostensibly "market-driven" character and references to aging and illness figured rather prominently. Does the sparseness of the later work prefigure de Kooning's struggle with Alzheimer's? Titian survived into his late eighties, accepting commissions up until the end; the plague took his life. But de Kooning's (dubiously received) 1997 show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, curated by Robert Storr and Gary Garrels, which focused on this late style, may have raised the terrifying specter of an artist in the throes of a horrific disease, and not a rare one. More troubling is the idea that people writing on the Internet include recent college graduates, who have a distant relationship to the notion of aging.

The ten paintings selected by Elderfield for this show do more than dispel vulgar misconceptions. "Volume switching to void, and vice versa, had long been a preoccupation of de Kooning's," Elderfield writes, here with respect to *Untitled XXIX*, 1983. Hinge-corporeality, which he sees in an adjacent painting from the same year, *Untitled XVIII*, gives way to further openness, airiness, clarity, and spectralization. Three über-dematerialized figures—perhaps the witting descendants, Elderfield suggests, of the Nereids in Rubens's *Disembarkation at Marseilles*, 1621–25—recede into the flatness of the ground, seemingly pure outline, "cutouts" à la late Matisse, save for the exquisite vagaries of the application of pigment, as red fades to pink, through which we see white. A couple of limber rushes of blue course below: Call it the sea.

—David Rimanelli