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FINE ART PAINTING

WILLIAM DE KOONINGS' PAINTINGS OF WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

P. 1

For de Kooning "Flesh was the reason," (carnegie, 1979, P.16), as it was for many artists before him and will surely remain the reason for many more artists that will follow. He looked to the past masters and myths as well as the contemporary and the banal for inspiration and new possibilities. For the most part I have confined myself to the discussion of the "woman" series of the fifties and their fleshy counterparts within the paintings of the sixties.

De Koonings ambivalence towards women manifests itself within the paintings conflicting and ambiguous visual language. His ever changing moods and confusion with regard to the female as subject is evident within their depiction. For de Kooning the creative act of painting itself was all that mattered and through this creative process he worked towards an honest reflection of the complexities and contradictions that make up the way we experience reality.

Through this process de Kooning experienced a metamorphosis which reflected the inconclusive and transitory nature of the "women" within the paintings. These depictions of the female suggest many different sources of inspiration both from the realms of the conscious and unconscious imagination. Her roots are to be found within such myths as that of the all-devouring and loving mother, which in turn suggests both an anxiety and fear towards that which is feminine and unfamiliar. De Koonings real subject was the discovery of "the other" and "the self" through the mythic and the banal. To let the paintings reflect the uncertainty of life and the uncertainty within ones self. They strive towards the reconciliation of opposites within the "chaos" of experience. They reflect the struggle within de Koonings psyche to come to terms with his "anima" or feminine counterpart.

The paintings of women from the fifties are shown to be more aggressive in their depiction than the later deities from the sixties. They also appear to be more robust and motherly in comparison to their rural counterparts which are more erotic. De Koonings' Mythic and Fatal "women" are continually adapted in response to changes within their environment. They moved from an urban to a rural landscape until gradually woman and landscape became one and the same.

It is this metamorphosis that enabled de Kooning to define his own position within reality. By equating the female with the Earth archetype she represented all that was dark, negative, seductive and devouring. De Kooning as the "heroic" artist must then overcome his anxieties and fears, transcend the feminine and attempt to discover "the self."

CHAPTER I

THE MYTHIC AND FATAL WOMEN OF WILLEM DE KOONINGS' PAINTINGS.

P. 2

De Kooning said that he considered himself more a New Yorker than an American and referred to New York as being like a "Byzantine City" (Carnegie, 1980, P.25). Gaugh referred to his paintings of women from the fifties series as being similar to Byzantine icons in the sense that much of the image is concentrated through the eyes (Gaugh, 1983, P.49). In an interview with David Sylvester in 1960 he commended; "I think we have gone back to the cities and I feel much more in common with artists in London or Paris." (Sylvester, 1994, P. 25). De Kooning's training began in Holland and his influences stemmed from great European masters such as Ingres, Manet, Frans Hals and Rembrandt. Although he was influenced by such masters he did not want to paint like them, in the sense that to continue to draw like Ingres, with such restraint, would cause him to go mad. This is what Brach calls; "simultaneous looking back to European sources and forward to the freedom of the new American Painting. (Brach, 1996, P.72).

It is this strange combination of a tradition of European painting and the ever expanding possibilities of the new American Painting and culture that informed his attitudes towards his own personal painting experience including the depiction of Women in his work. Just as Mondrian before him absorbed the exciting New York city life, the rhythmic environment of jazz clubs that inspired such works as **Broadway Boogie Woogie** and **Victory Boogie Woogie**, de Kooning is confronted by an exciting larger than life city. Compared to Holland the buildings dwarf anybody and anything, the roads are bigger, the cars faster the noise louder, the bright lights brighter, the clubs more exciting and of course the women as well are louder, brighter, larger and more exciting. They are also threatening perhaps. With a certain amount of apprehension one could say the woman of de Koonings' paintings was "the new American Woman, a formidable type who is in the avant-garde of her sex in the contemporary world" (Sylvester, 1994, P.131).

This idea of the woman as a threatening femme fatale is usually associated with the work of 19th century male artists. It is in the work of such artists as Munch, Klimt and Schiele that she appeared as the all-devouring female. She was manifested and re-invented in the work of Picasso and then de Kooning. De Kooning looked back through history as he looked forward and though his work may be very different in style from such artists there are underlying influences evident in his work. Just as Klimt and Schiele never seemed to tire of drawing and painting women obsessively so too it would seem it was with de Kooning. He said it was something you could never get hold of.

The Femme Fatale type of women can more easily be identified in the work of these earlier Viennese artists compared with de Kooning. She is devoid of any substantial

references to everyday life. She is first and foremost an alluring man-eater who displays her erotic sexuality as a lethal trap:

Women has given birth to man nourished him, seduced him, and now guides his sexual energies towards the destruction of human life which she herself has created. She is the mistress of mans' sexuality and of his doom. (Mullin, 1985 P.39).

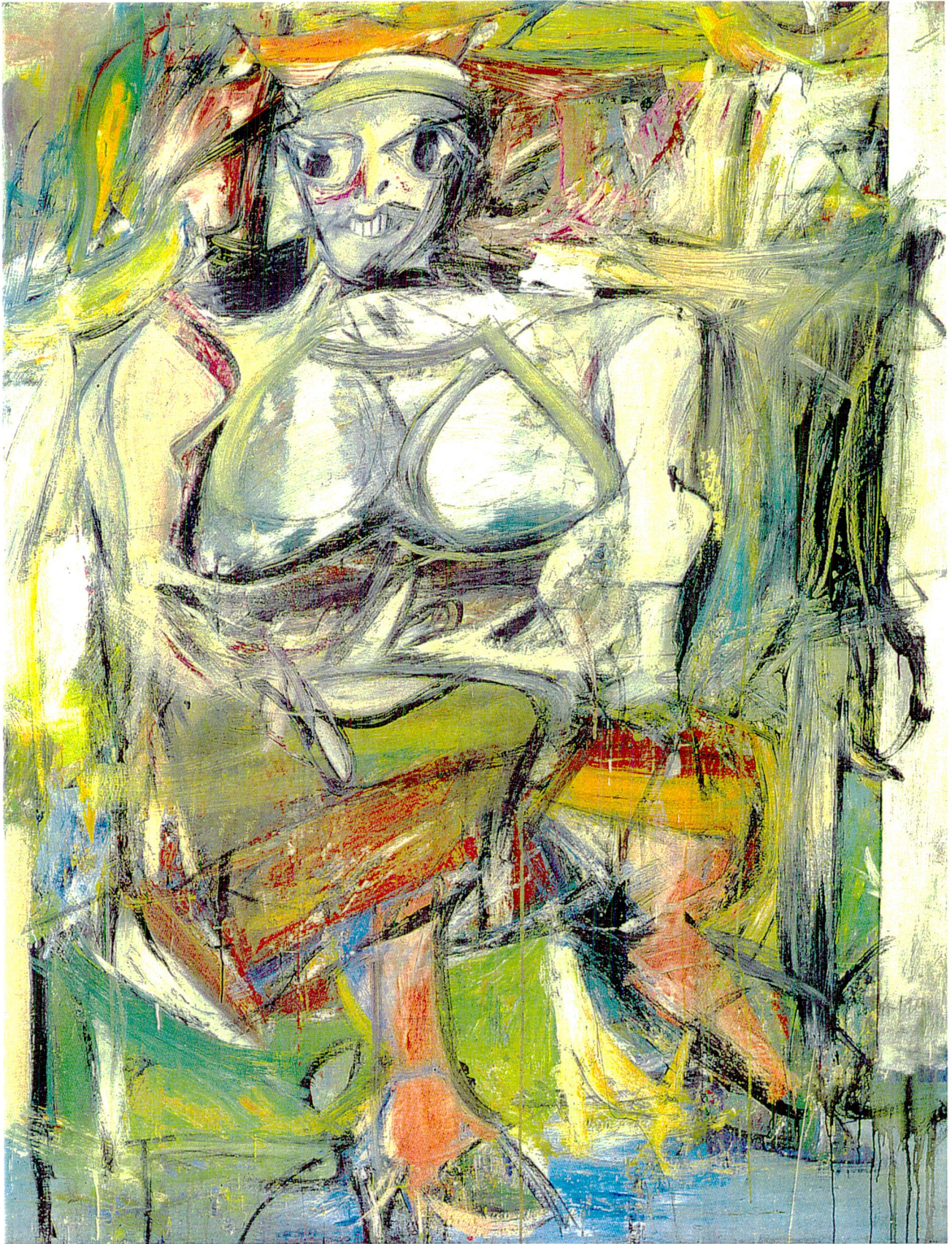
These women seemed to be more one dimensional in character as opposed to the depiction of women in de Koonings paintings. Woman I (fig 1.) combines the voluptuous character of Frans Hals' Gypsy Girl (Fig. 2) with the dangerous sensuality of Gustave Klimt's Judith (Fig. 3). She had to do with, "the female painted through all the ages, all those idols." (Carnegie, 1979, P.57).

De Koonings figures through progressive reworking, were defined by and became more absorbed into their environments. It was Gustave Klimt's practice to firstly draw his figures nude and then he gradually adorned them with, "ornaments of repeated and suggestive shape until their bodies were defined and penetrated by a cumulative symbolic overlay." (Hess, 1973 P.219). Although they are quite different paintings one can imagine that de Koonings' Woman I could trace her ancestry back to Klimt's Judith, 1901. Both women reveal themselves just as they hide themselves within their painterly environments. Both women are draped and adorned with flowing garments of paint and colour. They emerge from and are absorbed into their abstracted worlds.

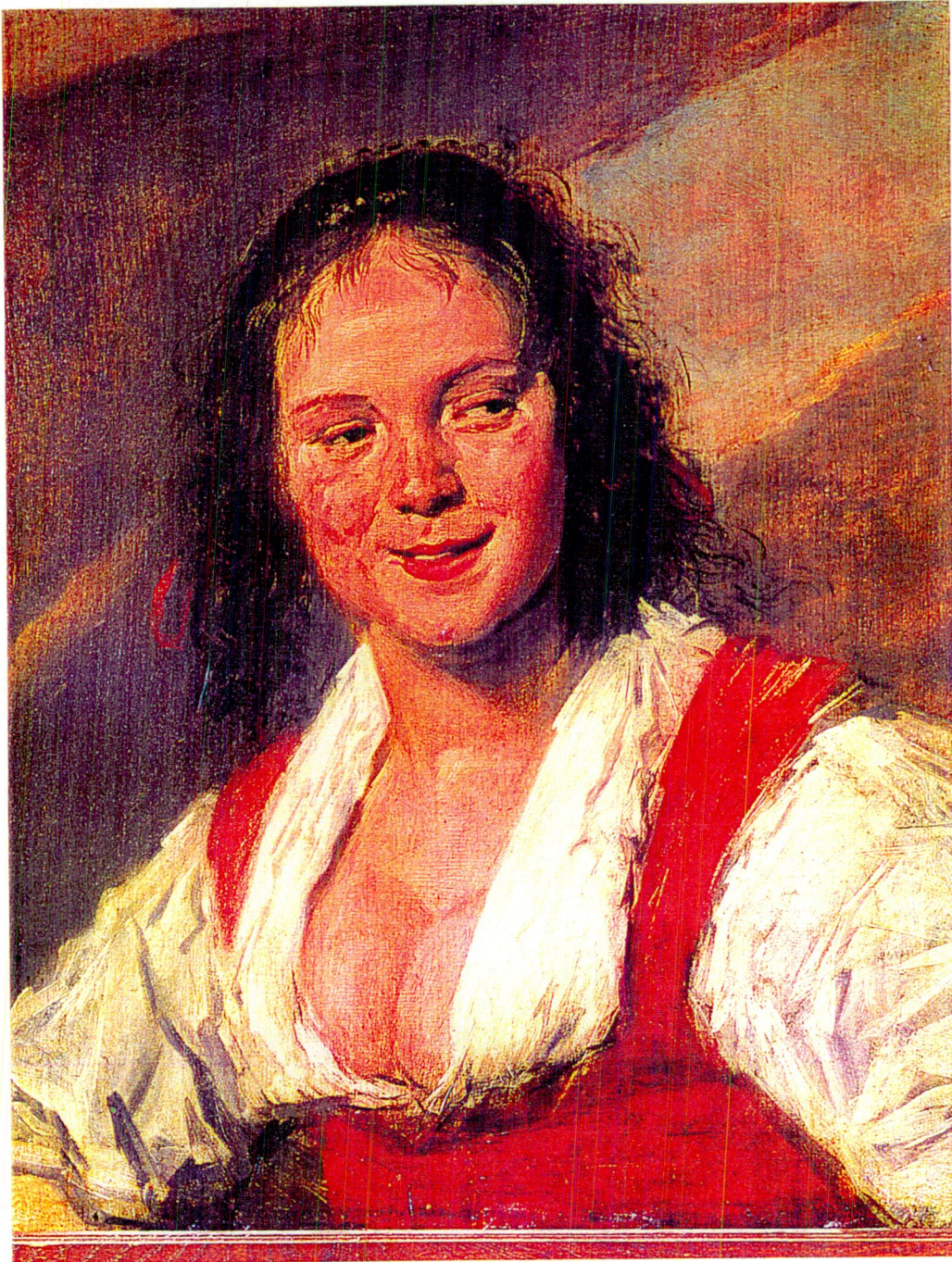
Both women are presented as the most alluring icons of male desires and fears. They stare directly towards the viewer in an inviting and threatening way. Woman I's bug-eyed and Judith's heavy lidded stares penetrate, seduce and warn the viewer. Their lips part in a half grin, half scowl. Their ample bosoms are invitingly concealed and exposed.

Klimt's Judith is a gentler, poetic seducer. She is presented as the straight forward - if there can be such a thing - alluring Femme Fatale. Her depiction is not as viciously direct as maybe Valentin's. She almost seems to be caressing her victims partially visible head which is suggestive of the sexually seductive dangers involved. One is most certainly assured of losing one's head (either physically or metaphorically) upon an encounter with this woman. She is the cold manifestation of man's 19th century fear of women so fervently expressed in the words of Ernst Stohr:

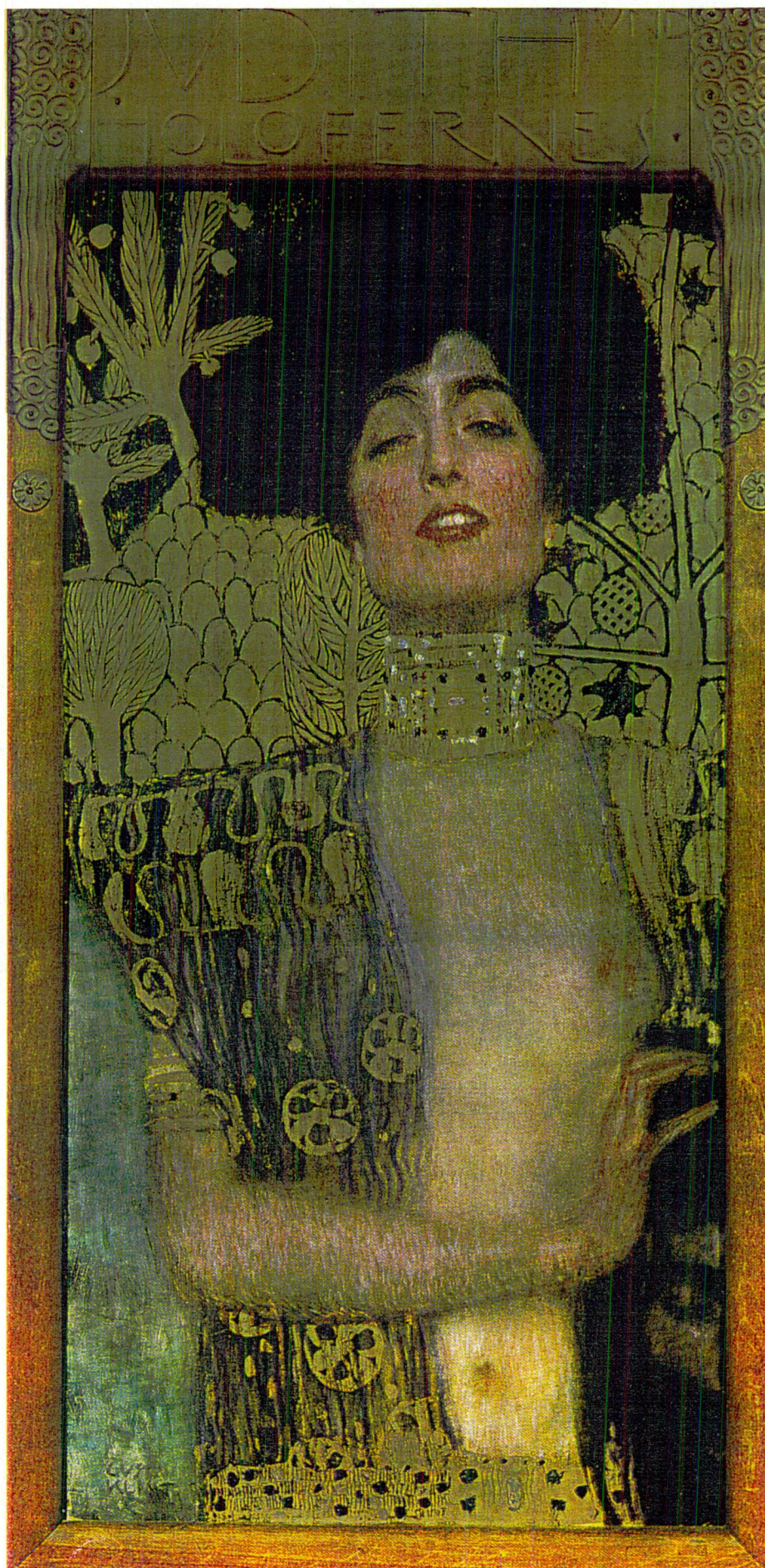
Why do you entice me to sweet lust
with your red, dark mouth?
I sink onto your hot breast!
Ah! kiss me that I may get well!
How your mouth burns us in hot fever!
And blaze in wild fire!
My poor life is the price!
You drink by hearts blood!



1. Woman I, (1950-1952)



2. Gypsy Girl, (1928-30)



3. Judith, (1901)

Freud wrote that man has the habit of projecting his own "inner feelings of hostility onto the outside world, that is, of ascribing them to whatever objects he dislikes, or even is unfamiliar with." (Mullin, 1985, P.49). Now the woman has become the source of the artists' anxieties and fears. Her sexuality is viewed as both a source of pleasure and pain. This is reflected in both Judith, 1901 and Woman I, 1950-1952. Freud also observed that fears are frequently the expression of unconscious desires (Brown 1987, P.19). What the paintings show is a desire for and fear of the dominating woman. Woman is seen as enslaving the "heroic" ego of these artists. De Kooning's depiction of the female in Woman I is more ambiguous than that of his Viennese predecessors. Unlike Klimt's Judith painting, his subjects were not just remote evocations of poetic fantasy but the "most tangible reality of the human figure and the urban environment" (Rose, 1967, P.15). Both Munch's Madonna and Judith respectively, seem more like ghostly apparitions whereas De Kooning's "woman" has her stilettos firmly planted in the so much more complex, tangible and vulgar realities of the contemporary day.. (Sylvester, 1994, P.131).

Woman I which he worked on for two years marked the beginning of the woman series, 1950-53. She is an amalgam of both the past and present which is reflective of the artist's own thinking and state of mind. She is a product of a ruthless contemporary society. This woman finds herself caught between the worlds of Botticelli's Venus, Manet's Olympia, Valentin's Judith and a shopping experience in New York city.

The artist's depiction of women involves both the mythical and the banal. Woman I is a modern day bargain hunter who charges through the urban jungle with her arms laden down with parcels. She has the bulging eyed look of flustered determination as she bustles through the crowds looking for a good buy. Nothing stands between this woman and her shopping experience. She is reflective of the mythical femme fatale together with the banal realities of the day. "The mythical and the banal; the mythical in banality and banality in the mythical-that was his true subject." (Cummings, 1983 P.125). Much of the city atmosphere is reflected through such paintings as Woman V (fig 4), to the extent that the woman's physical architecture is a mirror of that environment.

These women compress 10th street and art history, common experience and visual models, ideas about women and the proximity of women in a hectic but unified paint surface. (Sylvester, 1994 P.132).

De Kooning's "woman" Series, "triumph through their sexuality. Oddly enough they are not erotic paintings" (Gaugh, 1983, P.49). Both Woman V and Woman VI, have been compared to Rembrandt's famous bather because of their exposed legs and their seemingly raised garments but they are completely lacking in the 'meditative intimacy' and eroticism of the former. Despite the artist's assertion that his women from the fifties series were funny he acknowledged a ferocious and threatening aspect to their depiction. The constant chopping and changing of the slashing brushmarks



4. Woman V, (1952-1953)

which pulls and stretches the figure seems to underline the passionate and violent nature of these women.

Unlike the delicate, poetic physically of past femme fatale types, here the woman has a stature closer to that of an american football player (shoulder pads and all). The most delicate and feminine aspect of these women are their fragile, slim ankles which you would think unable to cope with the strain of the tremendous heaving bodies they are forced to carry. The voluptuous matronly figures of Gaston Lachaise such as standing woman, 1912-27, spring to mind. These women are now, not just psychologically dominating but also physically.

There are two predominant forces at work within these paintings, which are the forces of heaven and those of the earth. The artist identifies the woman with the Earth archetype, which is seen as the "Negative Feminine", while the artist associates himself with the dominant positive "archetype of heaven." (Neumann, 1944 P.166). Woman I, Woman III (fig 6) and Woman IV (fig 7) symbolize that which is seductive and hostile because they are an embodiment of or at least closely allied with the forces of nature and the city. The Earth is the "unconscious-making, instinct entangling and therefore dangerous Feminine" (Neumann, 1944, P.171). She derives herself from the realm of creative fantasy within the unconscious imagination of de Kooning. Accordingly to Jung." In the products of fantasy the primordial images are made visible and it is here that the concept of the archetype finds its specific application" (Jung, 1969, P.12).

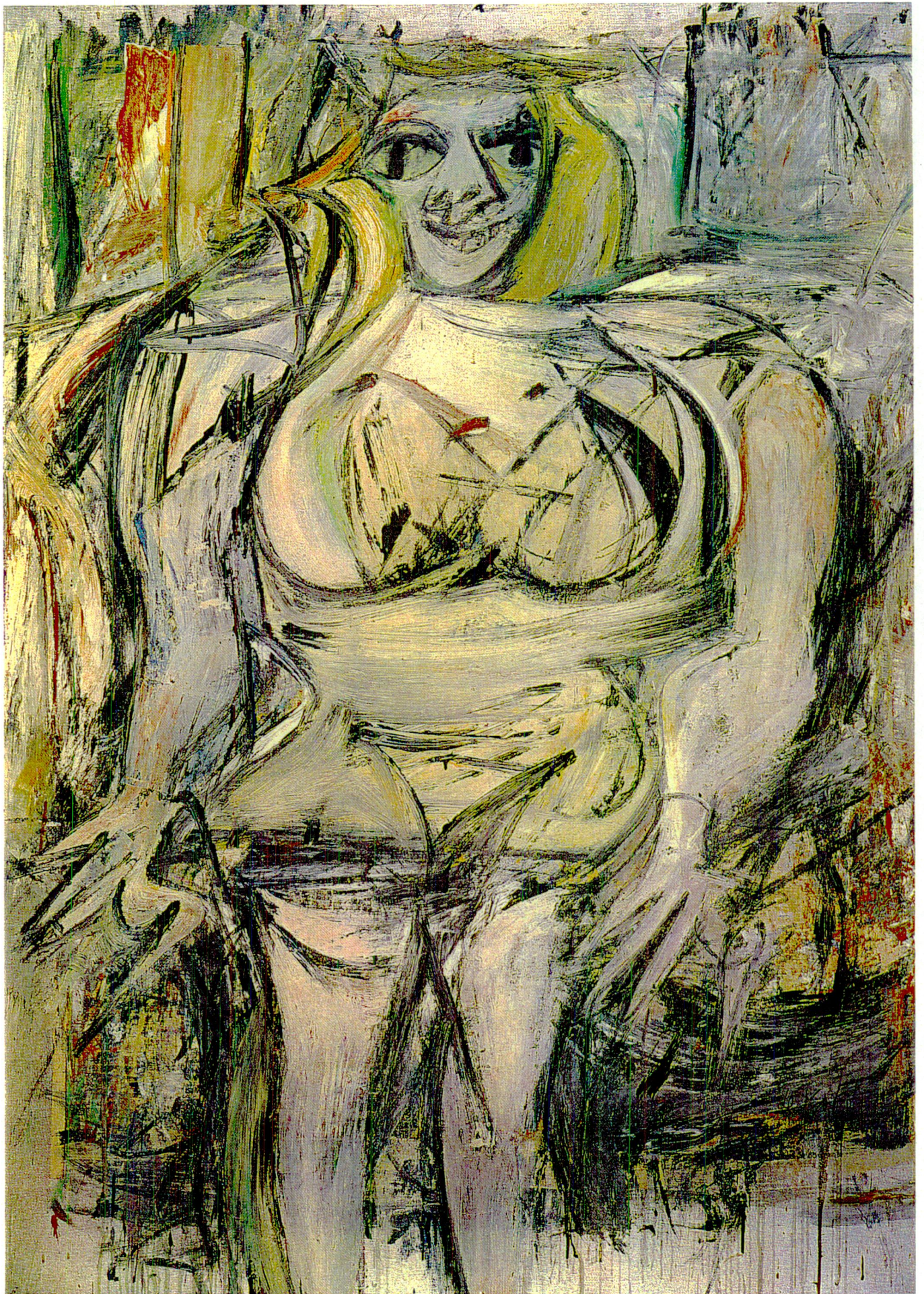
De Kooning said that the women were perhaps the feminine side of him "but with big shoulders," (Sylvester, 1994, P.137), and that many of the paintings of the women could actually be self portraits. It is this struggle between masculinity and femininity that is projected on the surface of the canvas. These are formidable women with regards to their sexual nature as well as their monumental physical stature. The depiction of women in the paintings of the early fifties seem to be the most threatening and closer to the idea of the woman as a Mother archetype, both loving and devouring.

Elaine de Kooning commented on their ferocious aspect being associated with the artists' mother. Indeed they do have certain motherly qualities about them particularly woman I with her life sustaining bosom and child bearing torso. Her arms are folded in such a way as to suggest the cradling of a child. Maybe she has that ferociousness one might associate with a mother protecting her young. The artist reiterated;

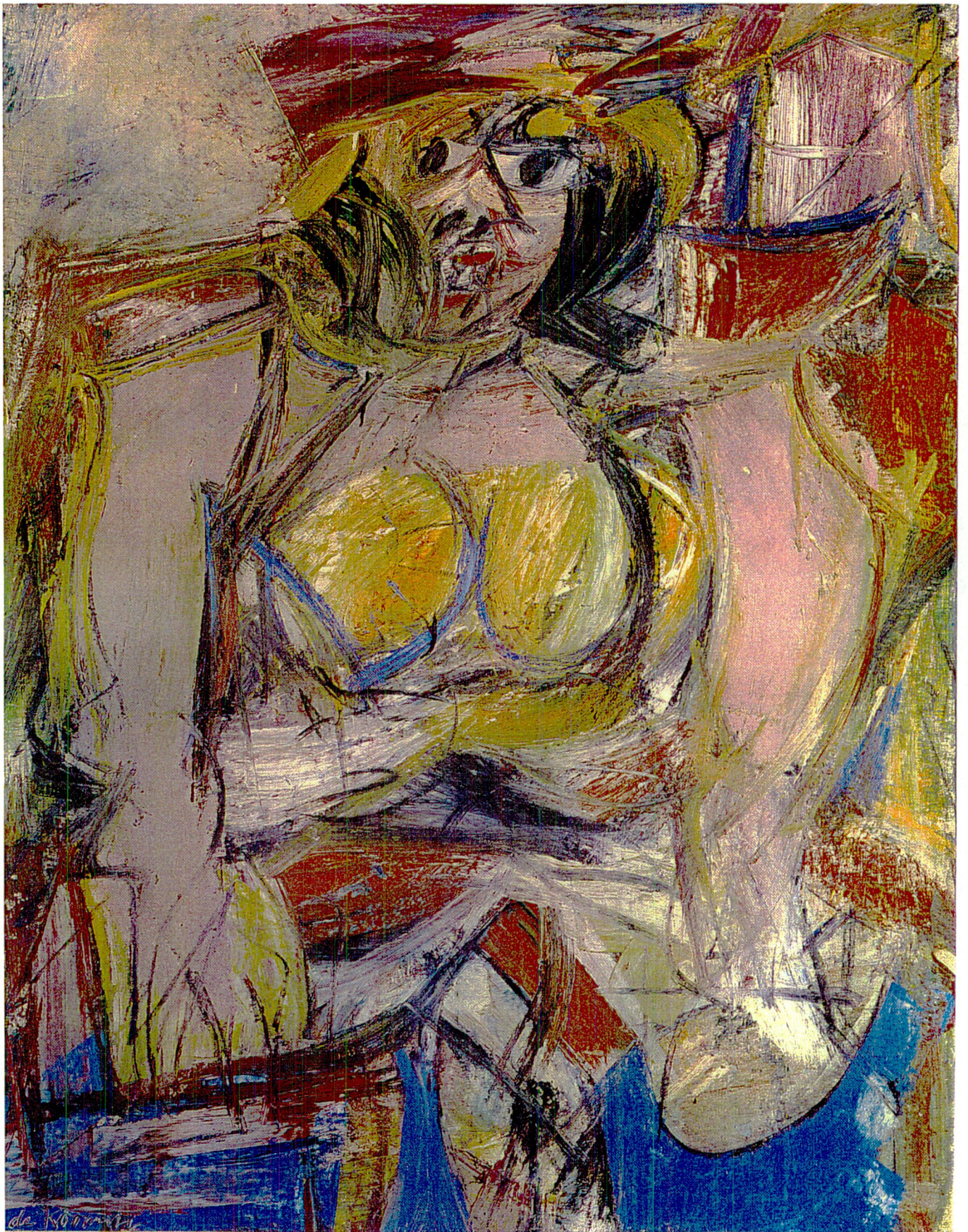
I find I can paint pretty young girls yet when it is finished I always find that they are not there, only their mothers, possibly it has to do with the feminine in me. (Sylvester, 1994 P.132).



5. Woman and Bicycle, (1952-1953)



6. Woman III (1952-1953)



7. Woman IV, (1952-1953)

Jung ascribed the feminine side of man's personality to archetypes. The artist clearly has some sort of anxiety towards that feminine side of his own psyche. If he has a so-called mother-complex it is surely evident in the paintings from the fifties. His repeated investigation of woman as subject reveals the presence of anxieties and fears towards the mother, which constantly demand attention within the images. According to Jung both the negative and positive aspects of the mother archetype forms the foundation of the mother-complex. It seems that his anima archetype is bound up with his own mother-image resulting in conflict within the paintings. What is suggested is an unresolved mother-complex and anima-complex.

When de Kooning referred to the "feminine" in himself, it possibly reflects this unresolved mother-complex which is manifested as the "terrible mother" image in the paintings. It would seem:

The conscious bond to the mother corresponds to an exaggerated fear of the feminine as fear of woman and fear of the world. Neither of which can be "conquered." (Neumann, 1944 P.257).

This unconscious fear and anxiety towards the mother also goes hand in hand with a fear of the masculine, which is a product of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex is seen as unconscious wishes with regards to possessing the opposite-sexed parent and eliminating the same-sexed parent. In his paintings de Koonings' obsessive involvement with the female-and the archetypal imagery that is sure to occur-suggests an "Oedipal" need to possess that which is feminine. Each painting reflects a desire to control her as well as the retribution that will follow in the form of castration or sexual intimidation.

Richard Shiff noted that throughout his career he concentrated on such "sensory common places" that could easily delight a child of seven, "the artist has been 'seven' from beginning to end remaking, reinventing, intensifying himself" (Sylvester, 1994, P.63). De Kooning seemed to have had attained a "second naivet  " as Santayana called it, which could account for an archetypal presence of the mother in a painting such as woman I and his generally, unrestrained and joyous exploration of the woman in the paintings.

The earlier woman series of the 40's shows the beginnings of and a steady progression towards the woman series, 1950-53. Woman I has surely descended from **woman, 1944** it almost seems like these later women are the weary mothers of the earlier ladies who have yet to mature into infinitely older, wiser and more threatening idols. In comparison they seem quite serene almost like "pretty young girls" - which de Kooning talked about- waiting for the harsh realities of life to help them change and develop into their monumental mothers. These later women have a life time of experience resting on their shoulders. Despite the earlier woman's disjointed quirkiness and mannequin like presence they have a strange eroticism about them. It is this eroticism that is derived from Ingres odalisques, something distant, inviting yet at the same time unattainable.

The positively jovial woman, 1942, along with the pouting, vampire like, tartiness of woman, 1944 and pink lady 1944, merge together only to burst forth into the monumental women of the fifties which then develop and mature into the gentler erotic, sensual, fleshy women of the early sixties.

For de Kooning "flesh was the reason" (Carnegie, 1979, P.16) and his paintings of women from the sixties seem to be the most fleshy and with it alot calmer and more fragile than their monumental predecessors. There is a celebration of the sensual nature of the flesh although he still appears to retain anxiety towards the female. Ratcliff notes that, "it is an unsure reflection of the body de Kooning has a problem with the body especially the female body (Kuspit, 1994 P.78). Compared with the earlier paintings of women from the fifties the portrayal of women here is intensely more erotic and sexual. Again de Koonings imagery is full of conflicting and contradictory implications. Though these rural women seem a good deal calmer there is just as much violent distortion of their pale bodies. Despite their pastoral environment the women can be seen as displaying their sexuality as a lethal trap for the artist or spectator.

De Kooning has expressed himself:

The women I paint now are very friendly and pastoral like my landscapes and not so aggressive. Women are the symbol of civilisation like the Venus of Willendorf. (Sylvester, 1994, (P.177).

Clamdiggers, 1963, (fig 8), is on a scale that reflects its intimate nature. These "women" have often been compared to those of rubens because of their 'homey eroticism' and they are now reflecting the artists change from an urban to rural environment. They have a calmly erotic, ghostly appearance. Unlike their urban counterparts they lack such accessories as stilettos-which would keep them firmly rooted in reality-therefore they float like watery apparitions before us. The soft undulating milky pink, fleshy forms are evocative of the waves gently caressing the sand on a beach. Their big blue eyes and curls of blond hair suggest, the unthreatening nature of a 'cattering cutie' rather than that of a devouring female.

The artist mentioned trying to free himself from realism:

Everything should float when I go down to the waters edge on my daily bicycle ride I see the clam diggers bending over, up to their ankles in the surf, their shadows quite unreal as if floating. (Sylveter, 1994, P.174).

It was this urban realism that gave the earlier women of the fifties their monumental physical presence and weighed them down-unable to move or breath-in the agitated chaos that engulfed them. Now the figures in their rural existence float and drift by with more ease in their watery breathable and sensual environments. De Koonings' "women" have moved from "violence to a massive ease". (Sedelijk, 1983, P.20).

The larger than life format of Woman Sag Harbour (fig.9) and Woman Accobonac (fig.10) changes the mood compared with clamdiggers. Despite the lessening ferociousness which gives way to an increased eroticism and sensually, signalled by

The clamdiggers, the monumental scale of these paintings force the women again into an arena of domination which reflects mans 19th century, "terrified fascination for dominating woman". (Mullin, 1985 P.45).

These later paintings especially Woman Sag Harbour have certain animalistic qualities to them, partly because of the watery distortion of their bodies. An early depiction of Woman Accobonac showed her wearing stilettos which give way to paw like feet in the final version. Again this is a not so distant echo coming from the idea that the female is not actually human but closely allied to a beast. Woman Sag Harbour is particularly frenzied, with a snout like nose, deep set eyes and an open display of a lushly painted genital region like "the abandon of an animal in heat" (Rosenblum, 1985, P.102).

Even such titles as Woman as a landscape (fig 11) more than suggest her alliance with powers greater than man. This continues in the sixties when a definite bond is formed between woman and mother-earth. They are "remote deities of earth, sand and water who embody the generative forces of nature". (Rosenblum, 1983, P.103), which is reflected in such works as; Woman on Dune, 1967 (fig 12). Woman in Landscape III, 1968 (fig 13), Woman in the water, 1972 (fig. 14). Some of the oldest myths through history like the birth of Venus and Artemis (Diana), the Goddess of the moon and of Hunting, "link women with natural forces in a way man is ill equipped to understand or to cope with". (Mullin 1985, P7).

Importance is placed upon certain re-occurring physical features of the all-devouring woman. For artists such as Edward Munch it was the kiss that became a "confessional of discontent and Angst". Once transformed into a woman by "medium of the kiss", she did "not docilely remain woman, proceeding blandly and automatically to fulfill her biological destiny". (Hess, 1973. P.217). Now the mouth and the promise or threat of a kiss has been reinvented in de Koonings painting's. The kiss, the embrace, the tangible closeness of a dominating female presence is nearly always suggested, whether it is the pouting freshly painted lips of Woman, 1944 or the ferocious "mesopotamian" grin of Woman and Bicycle. According to de Kooning "everything ough to have a mouth maybe its sexual" (Carnegie, 1980, P.27). Giving everything a mouth increases the allure of the figures whether it is the lipstick grin of the formidable American contemporary women of the fifties or the suggestively distorted and smudged mouths of the later deities.

The "woman has two mouths and one of them is the sex" (Sylvester, 1994, P41). This brings to mind the Freudian metaphor of the vagina dentata which again one finds suggestions of in works like Woman Sag Harbour and Woman and Bicycle. The mythical is juxtaposed with the very real experience such as cut out mouths from pin ups and the actual lipstick kissed drawing of a woman.

This very real experience is what de Kooning was trying to capture with the depiction of women in his paintings. It was something that as he says himself could go on forever and in the end it would fail which didn't matter. Content for him was very "tiny" like a brief "glimpse" of something. The paintings do not lend themselves to conclusive definitions they are an amalgam of the woman's contemporary situation as it relates to this artist and the intrusions of such poetic myths like that of the "all-devouring" female. What is reflected is a highly personal response to a subject which has obsessed man through history and probably always will. Robert Rosenblum refers to it as "exploring a repertoire of private fantasies inspired by universal myths" (Rosenblum, 1985, P.11).

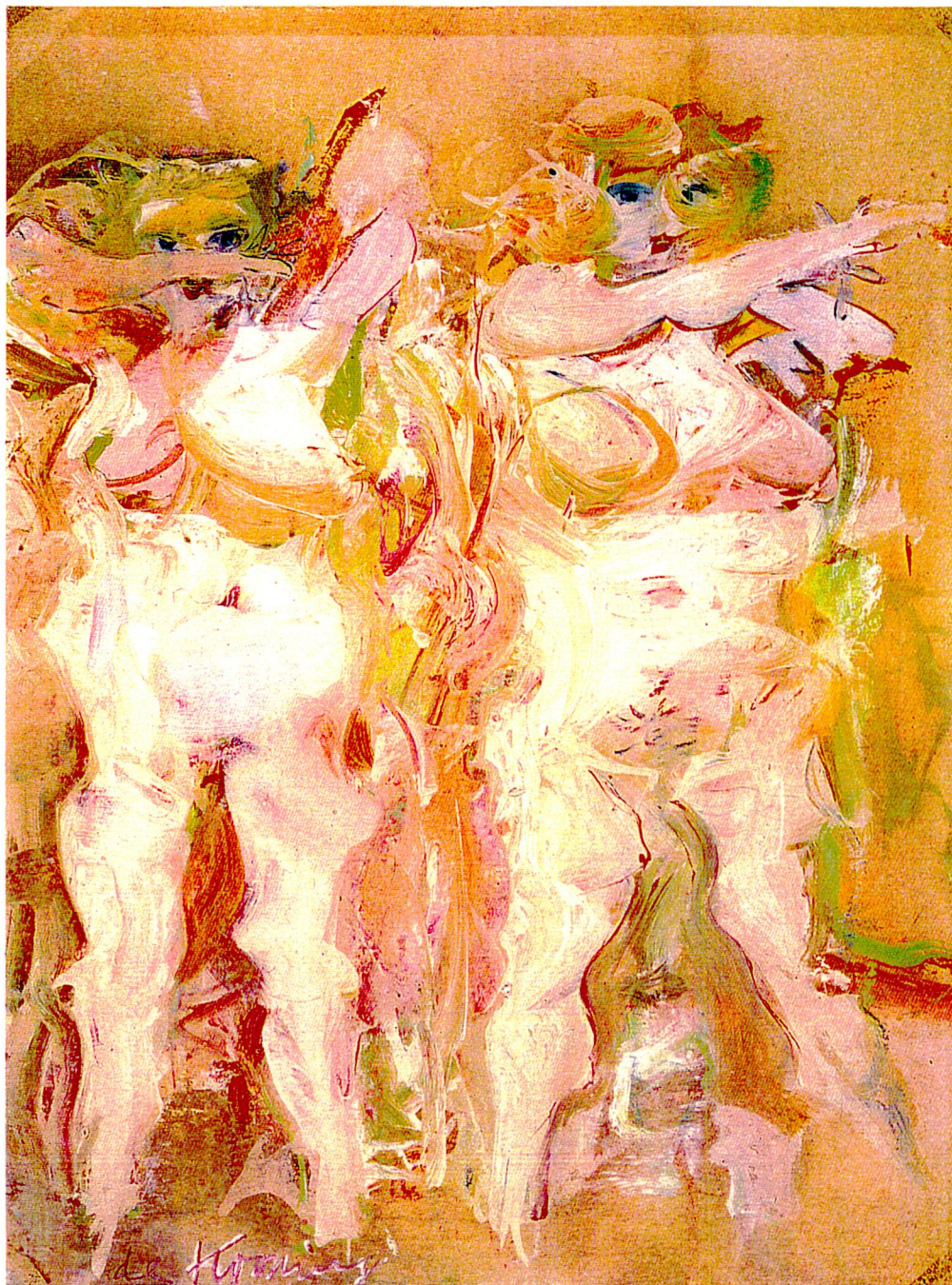
Such myths like that of Aphrodite, the Venus of Willendorf, women allied closely with animals and greater forces of earth, sand and water, women as the narcissistic devouring female, "all those idols," find themselves both consciously and more usually sub-consciously absorbed into this "slipping glimpse" on canvas where she herself is distorted if not changed completely by the contemporary situation of women and the influences that that brings. This contemporary situation throws up such idols as Mae West, Marilyn Monroe along with seemingly banal images of clamdiggers and their reflections in the surf. But all through history man has been obsessed with and invested such mythical proportions in the most banal activities of women. A fine example, is that of the woman bathing which has been pursued by Rembrandt, Soutine and now de Kooning. These are quite intimate and private experiences made public.

Similar to his European predecessors including Ingres, Manet, Corbet, Klimt and Picasso to name but a few de Kooning has found himself engaged in the obsessions and melodrama of everyday life, myth and "private fantasy", which encapsulates a "glimpse" of all that is passionately real and outrageous, intimately erotic, embarrassing, sensual, vulgar, peaceful, violent and loving. Everything finds itself present on various levels and with different intensities. With de Kooning it is like a "all-absorbing Heraclitean Flux" (Sylvester, 1994, P.16). He commented that he is "wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity." (Carnegie, 1980, P.22).

Willem de Kooning brings into the open all the ongoing anxieties that exist beneath the surface whereas before-as Hess comments when referring to the erotic photograph-artists like Manet had presented the "skin of an issue." Now it is de Koonings' "woman" that "reveals the anxieties inside." (Hess, 1973, P.230), creating many paradoxes on various levels and contained within a unified and turbulent paint surface. So deciphering the "true" nature of de Koonings' paintings of woman becomes in it's self a paradoxical situation.

Going back through Art History and popular culture there are endless comparisons that can be alluded to in de Koonings' paintings of women, whether its the Venus of Larussel, the emaculating women of the Vienna secession, or the pinups of the fifties. Sidney Geist commenting on the women of the fifties series refers that: "Her image

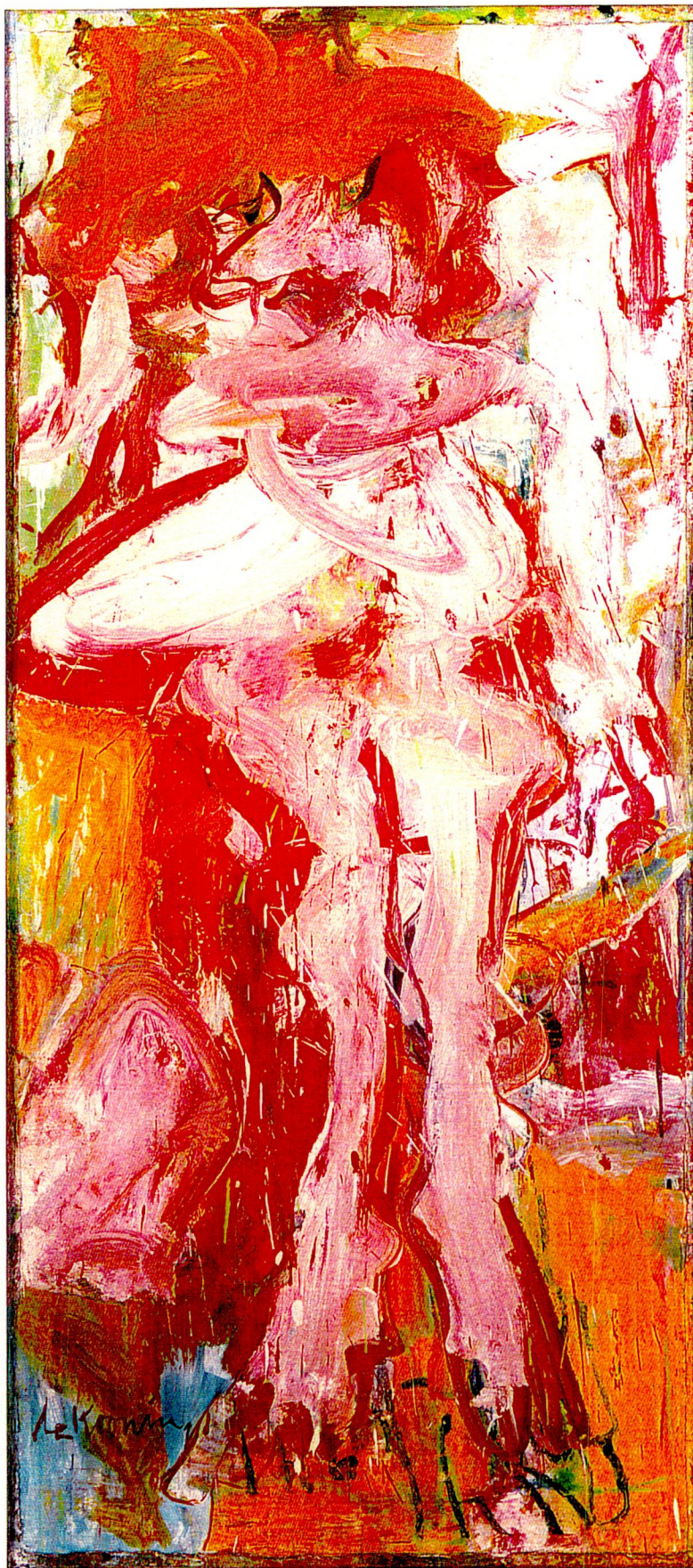
exists in a vast arena between something scratched on the wall of a cave and something scratched on the wall of a urinal.” (Gauguin, 1983, P.4). It is impossible to say whether these women are rather one thing than another because the very nature of the paintings is one of ambiguity, paradox and inconclusiveness. One critic referred to them as “monuments of confusion” (Gauguin, 1983, P.4). De Kooning himself said that that's what fascinates him; “...to make something I can never be sure of and no one else can be either. I will never know, and no one else will ever know - that's the way art is.” (Sylvester, 1994, P.180).



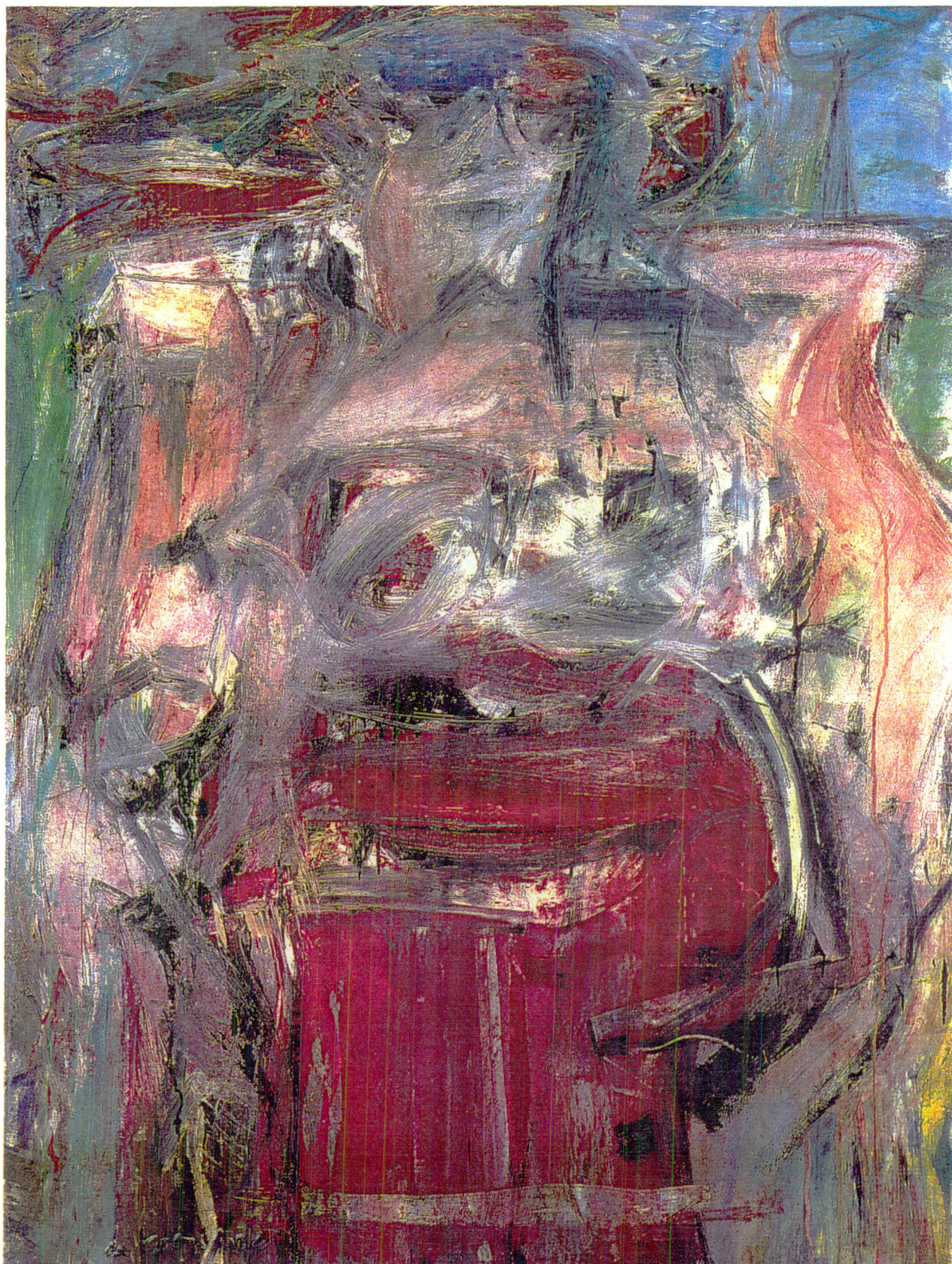
8. Clamdiggers, (1963)



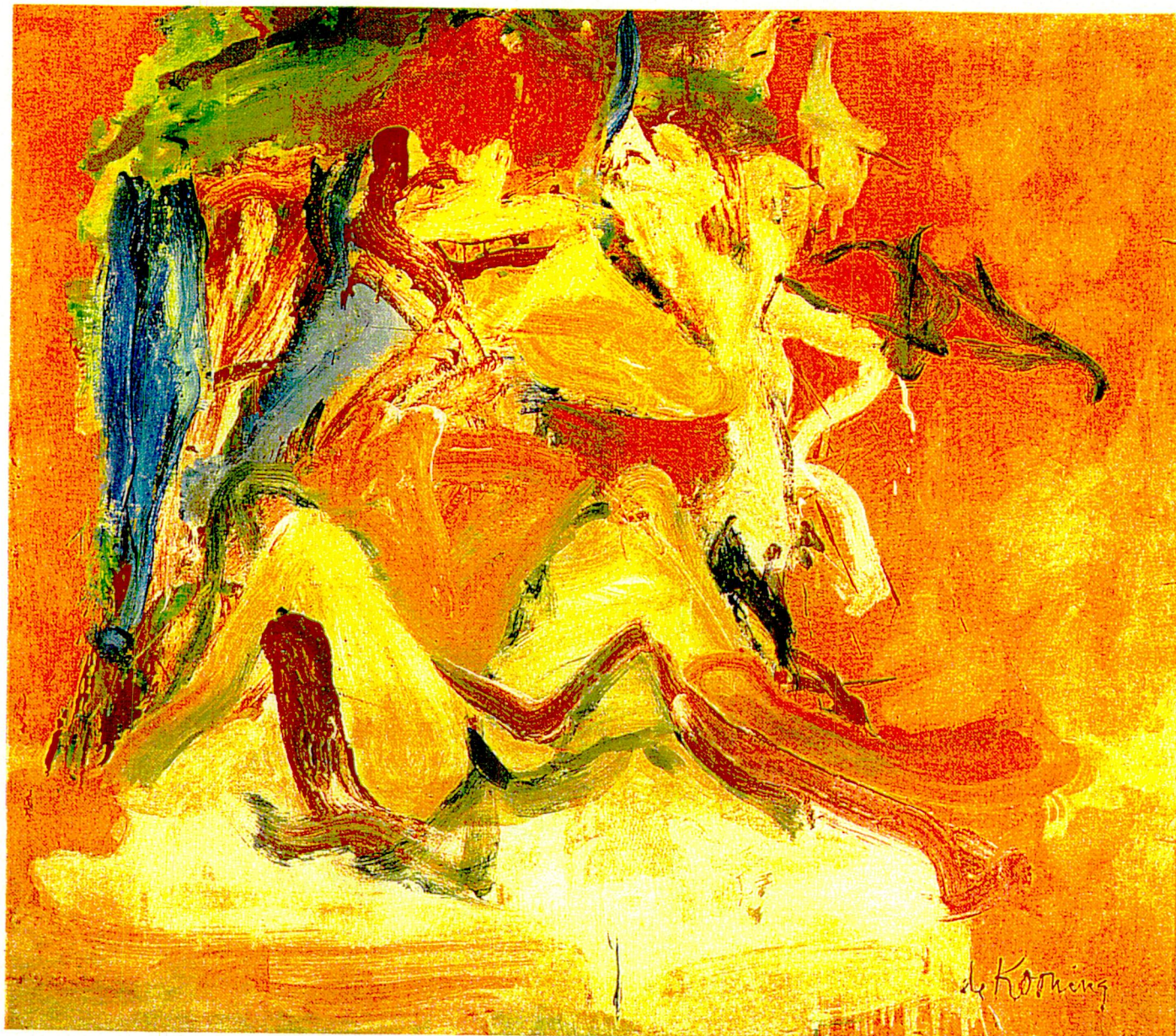
9. Woman Sag Harbour , (1964)



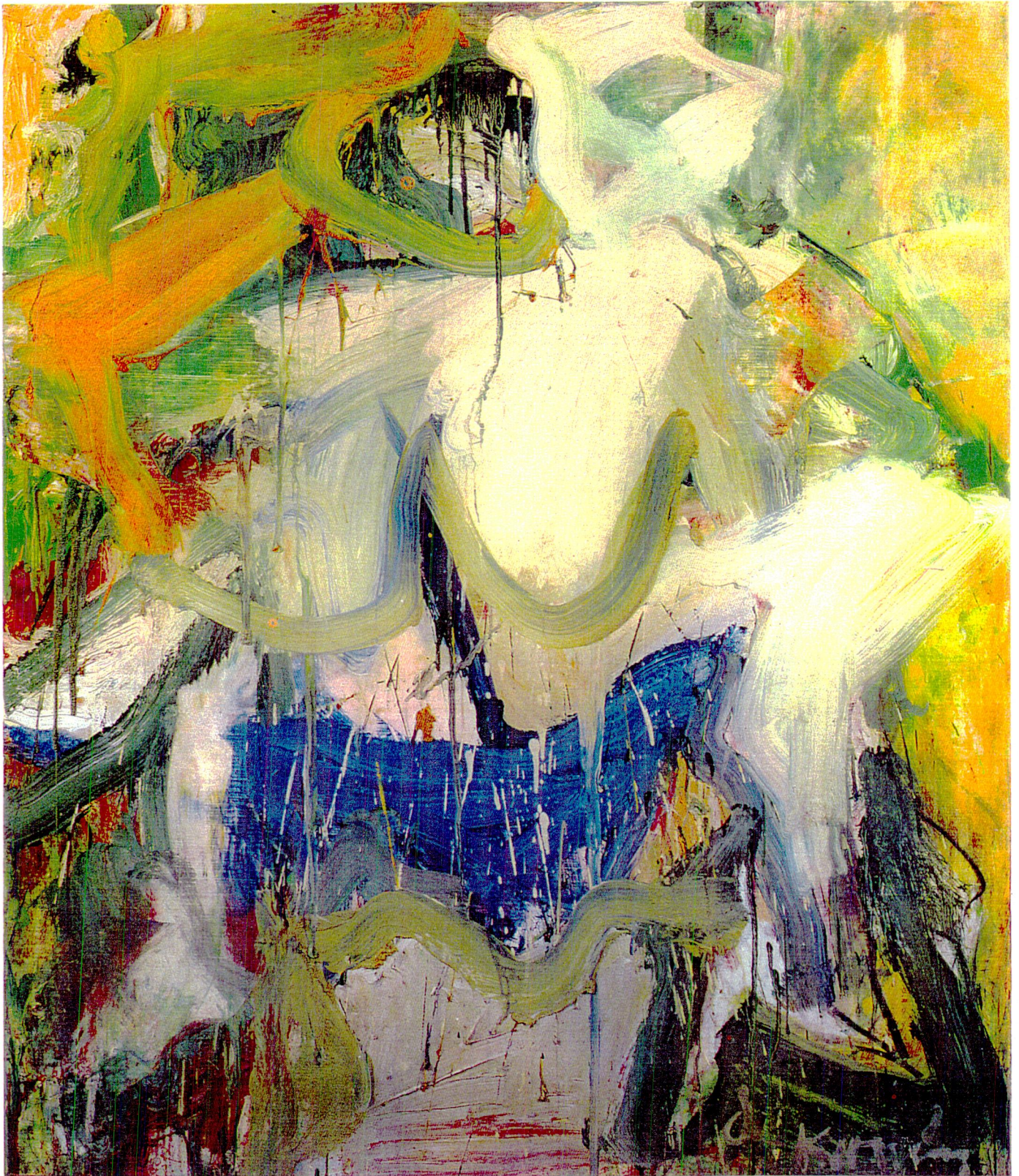
10. Woman Acobonac, (1966)



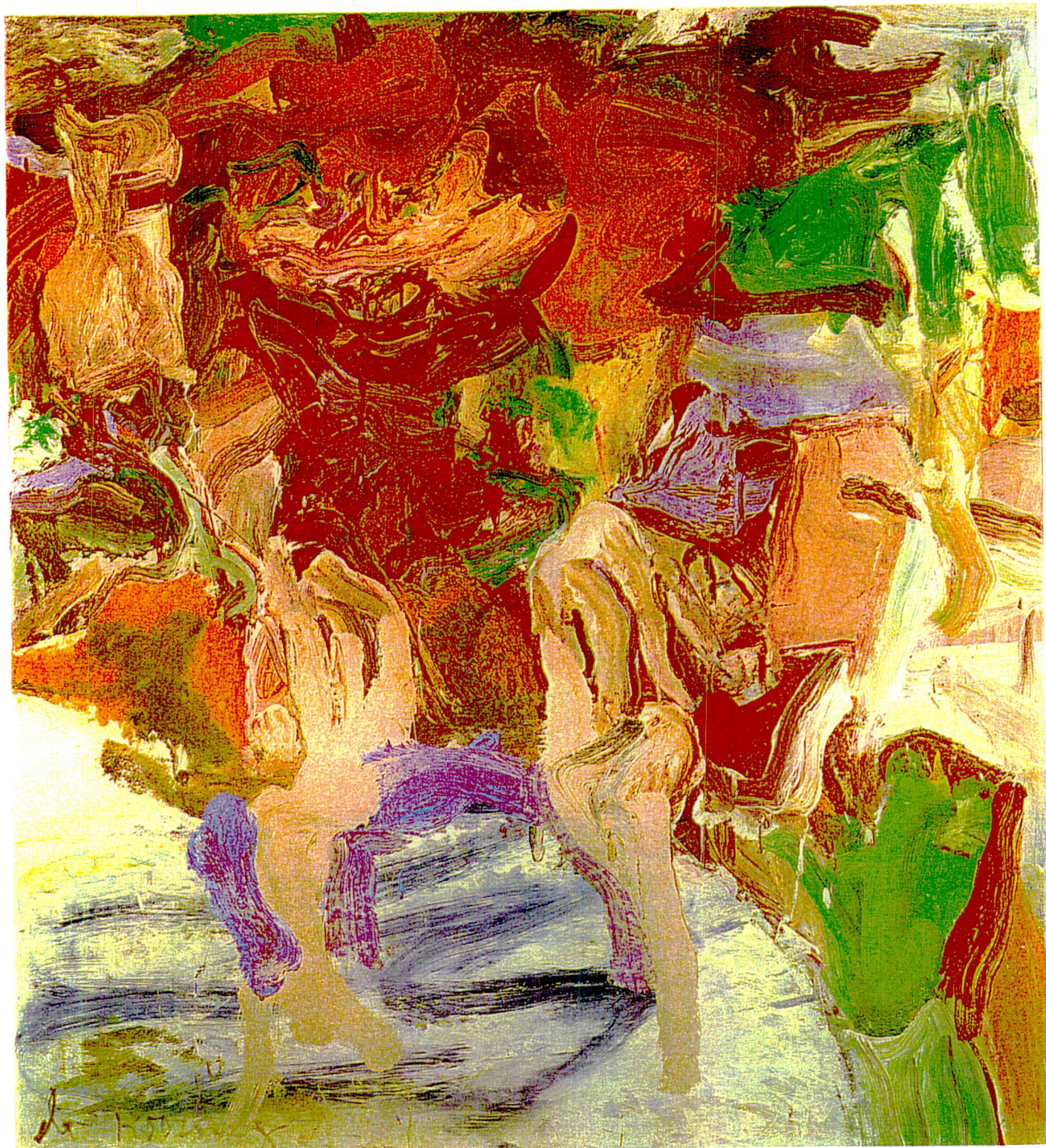
11. Woman as a Landscape, (1954-1955)



12. Woman on the Dune, (1967)



13. Woman in the Landscape III, (1968)



14. Woman in the water, (1972)

THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF DE KOONINGS' PAINTINGS OF WOMEN

The woman became compulsive in the sense of not being able to get hold of it - it really is very funny to get stuck with a woman's knees for instance, you say, what the hell am I going to do with that now? It's really ridiculous, it may be that it isn't supposed to be done. (Carnegie, 1980, P.26).

Throughout de Kooning's career he had involved himself in dealing with the paradoxical nature of his subject matter. He made it his goal to tackle that which was uncertain and ambiguous. For him, it was his "women" that defied holding and expounded ambiguity. It was the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of his subject matter that he became the victim compulsive about and fascinated with.

Not only was it the "women's" ambiguity that he found so fascinating but also the resulting uncertainty that was inevitably going to plague any prospective viewer of the paintings. The inconclusive and uncertain nature of his subject matter leads to a reflection of this uncertainty in his conflicting visual language and images. De Kooning, it seemed, reflected a state of erotic confusion towards women, in his paintings, which was another source of and reason for their fluctuating nature.

Confusion in the paintings is directly related to the artist's confusion, as to what woman represent to him. Is she divine beauty or devouring femme fatale? The women depicted in the paintings can be interpreted by both the artist and the viewer as having opposing or similar meanings. They can be seen as vulgar, threatening, erotic, sensual and funny. They can be perceived as having predominantly any one of these individual characteristics or maybe as their ambiguous nature suggests they exude this multiplicity of similar and contradictory elements all at once.

There is confusion in the paintings between the sensual flesh, which is desirable but also threatening. De Kooning is unsure as to whether he wants to kiss or kill the woman into existence. His violent impulsive brushmarks are juxtaposed with the sensual nature of the flesh and his desire for the woman he paints.

That which you are unsure of whether it is the "woman's" true nature or the ultimate impossibility of representing her will surely lead to inadequate or at least unstable ends. The ambiguous visual language distorts the figures and their surroundings, creating a sense of confusion, uncertainty and maybe more importantly, it increases the visual vocabulary in order to create new and contradictory meanings within the painting. These new developments are central to de Kooning's paintings in the sense that, "inconclusiveness (junctive, process, trial, foreplay) not conclusiveness is de Kooning's way." (O'Reilly, 1990, P.1).

He referred to the fact that to be; "inside and outside is to be in an unheated studio with broken windows in the winter or taking a nap on somebody's porch in the

summer" (Carnegie, 1980, P.22), which is an indication of his contradictory nature and the reflection of such contradictions in his paintings of women. It shows a man

intent on dissecting his own innermost feelings in order to regurgitate them back onto a canvas in a glorious explosion of controlled messiness. What results is like a "Living and life-generating and decomposing substance." (Sylvester, 1994, P.16). De Koonings perception of the world around him is directly and inextricably linked to the painting experience. For him, "to be painting at all, in fact-is a way of living today, a style of living so to speak. This is where the form of its lies." (Carnegie, 1980, P.22). So the language of the painting needs to be as complex, varied, uncertain and as discordant as life itself." It must be intrinsically contradictory and ambiguous so as not to falsify the way we experience reality." (Cummings, 1983, P.119)

So through the act of painting the artists imagination his experience of reality, on a conscious and subconscious level becomes unextricably linked to and fueled by his own private passions and fears. In this way the paintings become so much more than just images of women. It results in a painting that is as ambiguous, paradoxical and varied as the 'chaotic flux of experience' itself. Confronting us in all its triumphant uncertainty are sickly greens, grass greens, fleshy pinks, bloody reds and so much more besides. We experience the exhilarating out door yellows, blues and greens of the sun, sea, sky, grass and the claustrophobic garish shadows of the indoors. "The sensuous flow of paint becomes a reflection of the cerebral stream of consciousness." (O'Reilly, 1990, P.17).

It would seem that de Kooning's erotic confusion towards 'the other', that which he is unsure of is not only dependent upon his conscious, but just as equally upon his subconscious imagination, which in turn results in limitless possibilities with regards to the visual language of a painting and its interpretation. Jung said that; "Our conscious intentions are continually disturbed and thwarted, to a greater or lesser degree, by unconscious intrusions whose causes are at first strange to us." (Jun, 1969, P.38). Maybe this would provide an explanation as to why de Kooning had primarily seen his 'women' from the fifties series to begin with as merely funny. "I see the horror in them now, but I didn't mean it I wanted them to be funny." (Sylvester, 1994, P.132). He even consciously gave them smiling grins which which were consequently seen as ferocious growls and the vagina dentata.

This aggression towards that which is feminine and unfamiliar to the artist seems to be a product of his subconscious imagination. Therefore such seemingly opposing inclinations of desire and aggression towards the female - and of course the feminine within the artist - contribute to the ambiguous and contradictory elements, within the depiction of woman in the paintings and the artists supposed intentions.

Two such opposing views concerning his "woman" series at the time came from firstly Sidney Geist who comments; "In a gesture that parallels a sexual act, he has vented himself with violence on the canvas which is the body of this woman," (Sylvester, 1994, P.131), and secondly Leo Steinberg who was unable to see 'ugliness' or 'hate' in the paintings; "For the capacity to love only the prettiest chorus

girl in the line bespeaks a finical emotion ... It takes a manly heart, like that of Rubens if you like, to stake the bounds of lovability more wide, and to love Helen Fourment for all her puckered, sag-fleshed knees." (Sylvester, 1994, P.131).

The validity of both opinions and the paintings' ambiguity is supported with jungs idea that;

The psyche is far from being a homogeneous unit - on the contrary, it a boiling cauldron of contradictory impulses, innibitions, and affects and for many people the conflict between them is so unsupportable that they even wish for the deliverance preached by Theologians. (Jung, 1969, P.38).

It would seem that de Kooning's ambivalence towards the female manifests itself in the womens ambiguous character and the formal visual language contained within the canvas. The "women" can be interpreted as manifestations of a violent devouring monstorous presence or that which is fun, loving and all-embracing with regards to the discordant uncertainty of life. De Kooning's women encompassed;

The all all american girl of the cigarette ads and the monstrous dark goddess, primitive idol and superficial chattering cutie, the venus of western art, the truckers' pin up girl, the loving whore and child - eating mother, eros and death, life and animal sexuality, dream like vision and everyday streetlife the real and the magic fear and longing." (Cummings, 1983, P.123).

Within de Koonings paintings there are insunuations of limbs and confusion between breasts and eyes, nipples and bulging eyeballs. Shoes become feet and then paws. Body parts become interchangeable and the fact that a thumb may resemble a thigh when looked at closely is what the artist referred to as "intimate anatomy" (Cummings 1983, P.125). The sweeping gesture of a pair of buttocks mimics that of the breasts. All aspects of the painting are ambiguous and interchangeable. Breasts, mouths, thighs, arms, genitalia are all just spontaneous gestures, shapes and colours. "...Nothing is unambiguous, the human body may metormorphose into an abstract landscape, or an evanescent experience of nature may be given concrete, physical presence." (Cummings, 1983, P.16).

This ambiguity and confusion not only represents de Koonings uncertainty with regards to the body, especially the female body it also serves as an investigation of his inner self and of the unfamiliar "woman," it is like a process that has to be gone through on the path to some higher level of consciousness. The woman is being considered over and over again with obsessive scrutiny and attention to detail. She is considered both as a collective whole within her limiting environment and as a series of individual body parts, which after careful examination are reassembled in a disjointed, distorted manner, very rarely including all the pieces in their appropriate places, within the final solution.



15. Woman, (1949-1950)



16. The visit, (1966-1967)

Within this final analysis by their very nature de Koonings paintings provide no conclusive solutions, on the contrary, more questions are posed and anxieties revealed for the painter and viewer to address. His dissection and distortion of the female body does create ferocious and violent results which could be seen as an attack upon the sitter and upon women in general. This is evident in 'woman I', 'Woman Sag Harbour.' and 'the visit.' His repeated investigation of woman as subject surely reflects some sort of attraction to and repulsion from her. De Kooning himself said it was something that could go on forever and he could not get away from it. The aggression vented on the canvas, could be seen as frustration within himself (maybe the feminine side of himself) and also with the impossibility of representing woman's true identity and her relationship to him.

Woman, 1949-150, (fig, 15) presents us with a particularly violent and discordant motif. Here the woman seems to be drowning under the debris of her own body, a lot of which is unrecognisable, and those body parts which are distinguishable seem almost like chance happenings. The paint is dragged, scraped, dripped across the surface of the canvas. Form, contours and colours collide within the mayhem of the surface. There is no definite information with regards to the environment the woman is in. She is in what de Kooning termed as 'no-environment.' The figure and her surroundings become one and the same. The resulting information is ambiguous and contradictory. This surely comes close to an expressed wish of wanting to paint like Ingres and Poussin at the same time.

The counterpart of, woman, 1949-1950, is to be found within the paintings of the sixties and the The visit, 1966-1967, (fig, 16) Here the woman is stretched spread legged across the canvas. The pose is like an imaginative exaggeration of a position taken up when sunbathing observed from above, or a clamdigger squatting. She could also be reminiscent of Poussin's bathers. The pale skin is stretched over the canvas. Flesh drips and splashes into the absorbing sensual and erotically pleasurable mayhem that surrounds. There is a balance between delicate fragile marks and more vigorous decisive slashing brushwork. The curves and fleshiness of breasts and buttock are all suggested. The pale pinks and bloody reds are all reminiscent of the erotic and fragile nature of the flesh.

It is an open display of both, aggression and sexuality within these paintings which I feel is a product of the subconscious imagination rather than just that of the conscious reality. The fluid, erratic and spontaneous brushwork represents a physical manifestation of de Kooning's bridge to unconscious desires which in turn produces ambiguous and contradictory visual language and meanings. Therefore you will find all that is joyfully and erotically life-affirming existing side by side with that which is aggressive and destructive within de Koonings paintings.

Woman Sag Harbour, 1964, is a painting in which seemingly unreconcilable emotions are brought together within the one canvas. Her all-embracing, undulating body appears to be at odds with a nature that comes across as aggressive, to say the

least. The painterly brushstrokes holds the figure together as well as simultaneously pulling it apart, they are suggestive of all that is fleshy and inviting as well as violent and repulsive. "If the juicy liquidity of paint seemed unreluctantly to drive de Kooning to strive for rising tides of flesh and/or water, that same liquidity aroused tides of analytical doubts and mayham." (O'Reilly, 1990, P.17). De Kooning is an instinctual painter, "trusting his work entirely to the intuitions that arise in the course of creating it." (Sylvester, 1994, P.58). Freud appeared to explain people as being the

'off shoots of instincts.' We are motivated by a need to express the instinctual drives of sex and aggression.

Freud considered that there were two basic instincts. Eros, the life instinct and Thanatos or the Death instinct. Eros comprises sexually and ego-preservative instincts while death instinct suggests, "an innate destructiveness and aggression directed primarily against the self," (Brown, 1987, P.27). This idea that we are comprised of primarily creative and destructive instincts can be seen to play a major role in de Koonings' paintings, including his method of working and re-working them to the point of their obliteration. He would challenge the painting to survive and more often than not, they were rescued from destruction by an outside influence, woman as a Landscape, 1954-1955, being one example.

Such opposing impulses are inherent in the painter and in the paintings. These seemingly contradictory instincts form the basis of the work, from which his ambivalent attitude towards women, at least in part, derives itself. For de Kooning, "joy and aggression were not mutually exclusive emotions." (Sylvester, 1994, P.128), which is why his paintings of women are perceived as both life-affirming monuments of fertility/sexuality and frustrated outpourings of destructive aggression towards women and himself. The artist said, "all violence seems pastoral to me," (Sylvester, 1994, P.128). Eros and death, sexuality and aggression are being reconciled within the paintings, which is why they can be perceived as such icons of ambiguity and confusion.

Freud's theory, involving the Eros and death instincts implies that, "...they are always found in a fused state in the actuality of behaviour nevertheless, they are separable and in the end represent the entire struggle of life," (Frosh, 1987, P.32)). It is this struggle that de Koonings' paintings articulate. It is this conflict between man's environment and himself that is constantly being redefined within the canvas. The paintings of women try to reconcile his ambivalent feelings towards that which he is unsure of. These feelings of aggression, lust, fear and longing are not mutually exclusive emotions but ever present to a greater or lesser extent as conscious and unconscious desires waiting to be realized in the spontaneous creative process of painting and drawing.

We can see the unconscious as an; "entity in which all is wish, impulse and drive, where reality has no place and there are no constraints upon desire." (Frosh, 1987, P.23). Therefore his ambiguous painterly language of both anatomy and environment

will reflect this unrestrained emotion. Feelings of exhilaration, embarrassment and even anger are aroused by such honesty. The surface of the canvas becomes the playground for all that is wishful and impulsive. There are no limitations placed upon form or content. Anything and everything is possible, that which is impossible must be proved by doing it. The visual language repeatedly drags and pushes the figure to the edge, to its limitation and then beyond, off the edge into oblivion. This is done again and again until the painter is brought to some place he hasn't been before then things begin to evolve and metamorphose in this way. "The darkness which clings to every personality is the door into the unconscious and the gateway of dreams ..."
(Jung, 1969, P.57).

In this way; "he not only sees external reality in a new light but his inner world experiences a metamorphosis." (Cummings, 1983, P.16). The ambiguity becomes the driving force behind this metamorphic experience. It opens up the artist to new and contradictory meanings. Slashing brushmarks become fraught with anxiety, curves become suggestive of anatomy, landscape or just an intense sensual residence left by the painter's physical touch on canvas. The imagination is released to create associations and improvise freely as to the "woman's" nature and environment. The collective, rhythmic movement of gestural brush strokes and splashes suggest time and space. Movement and change are ongoing experiences. Nothing is finite.

"An arching curve can be fraught with reference to the flesh of a breast or the crest of a wave or both and more, but it always devolves in the knowledge that no solution is final." (O'Reilly, 1990, P. 17). The distortion and ambiguity of both woman and landscape represented a metamorphosis and provided de Kooning with a platform to further exploration. He himself commented that he didn't like to think of completion in art. His paintings of women are continually changing and gradually being pulled into the landscape. Whereas before it was 'woman in landscape now it's, woman as landscape'. Not only do the "women" have much of their environment about them so too, the environment becomes increasingly womanly. The female and the landscape become interchangeable and eventually become almost undistinguishable, as separate entities.

In this way de Kooning comes to terms with his fear of the unknown, which is the female, all those repressed desires and anxieties towards her, that are locked within his unconscious. These conflicting desires become reflected in the distortion of the woman and her environment. Spontaneous gestures and symbols become saturated with paradoxical meanings and desires. Fear and lust must be transcended if 'selfhood' is to be achieved. Repressed anxieties are sublimated into the painting through the creative act itself. For de Kooning the 'landscape' of the woman must be transcended for the chance of 'perfect wholeness,' which explains his obsessive fascination with woman as theme and his need to distort and reassemble her continuously.

In **woman IV**, 1953, and **woman as a landscape**, 1954/1955, the figure takes on the monumental stature of a landscape itself. There is a lot of the city atmosphere about

these figures even though they seem to be in a rural environment. They have an immense power because of their vast sprawling bodies. Despite their clumsy appearance they still signify a dominating presence which has to be transcended. They come across as aggressive outpourings of emotion. De Kooning attacks the women and himself simultaneously. These paintings lead the way towards a change in mood marked by such works as woman in Landscape III, 1968, woman in the water, 1972, and woman on the dune, 1967, where the virtually formless figures melt into the environment. There is a watery feeling about these women which indicates transition and rebirth, the 'water of life' for instance.

"The unconscious expression of a desire for wholeness is found in dreams, myths, and other symbolic representations." (Hall, 1978, P.138). Gestures which out of context would become completely redundant are saturated with emotion and symbolic meaning. In woman and landscape III, simplified instinctual brush strokes mimic the form and colours of the body but also of the landscape. The colours of nature describe the flesh and those of the flesh carry the mood of nature. These symbolic gestures and colours do not specify a conclusive environment instead they enable paradoxes and contradictions to exist side by side in order to facilitate transition and discovery of "the self." The aggressive mood gives way to a feeling of "joie de vivre." Buttocks, Breasts, genitalia and mouths are all made visible as life-affirming gestures and symbols of fertility and ultimately rebirth.

Accordingly to Jungian theory the "complete actualization of the self is impossible." (Hall, 1978, P.126), therefore the struggles within "the self" which de Koonings paintings in the end represent, is an never ending process of transformation. The fact that the artist mentions about never being able to get hold of it-with regards to the subject of woman in the paintings - and that it could go on forever and in the end fail, acknowledges the impossibility of the situation. Paintings are continually scraped down or turpentine is thrown on them, they are placed under the threat of annihilation to stop the image becoming too contrived. In this sense the paintings seem to evolve out of their own destruction. This recognises the fact that the actualisation of "the self" and "the other" are ultimately futile pursuits. Rebirth requires loss, destruction and in fact "the goal of all life is death" (Stoller, 1988, P.43).

Still there will always be this struggle between opposites within life, within our personalities and as a reflection of ourselves, within art. Jung believed that "tensions created by conflicting elements are the very essence of life itself without tension there would be no energy and consequently no personality." (Hall, 1978, P.127). De Koonings' painting is held together by the same such tensions and opposites; Eros and Death, fear and desire, Aggression and sexuality, that which is very real and that which is fantasy, the loving mother, the whore and devouring female, woman and man, man and his anima, woman and her animus. The conflict never ceases.

This struggle is reflected within the working process and the difficulty he had with deciding when a painting was finished. De Kooning worked with a "vague" idea of direction but did not mind if it went in the "opposite direction," he said that, "there's

no end really. I just stop it. Abandon it." (Sylvester, 1994, P.200). Woman I was one of those abandoned paintings, after two years of work. Abandoning works like this implies a failure to come to terms with the unfamiliar feminine and rise to the occasion of the woman, with all the paradoxes and conflicts, it holds.

The "landscape" of the woman and her surroundings considered either as a whole or broken down and considered as separate forms, contours, gestures and so on are what, Jung might term as symbolic representation of the psyche. The image created, including all its tensions and ambiguities are reflective of de Koonings' psyche. Applying Junian ideas to the paintings of de Koonings' women shows that they are not solely a product of frustrated impulses but that they are driven by two forces. The first of which, is guided by the instincts and the other is guided by transcendental goals, rebirth.

The instinctual aspects are those which are the primary force behind the depictions of women. It is these instincts that charge the work with its ambiguous meanings and emotions. They are sexual and aggressive, creative and destructive instincts. De Kooning is confused with regards to "the other," which is reflected in these conflicting impulses. The insecurity and uncertainty within the depiction of the women and their environment is a mirror of the artists over insecurity. These primary instincts, coming from conscious and unconscious sources provide the backdrop for all conflict and paradoxes within the paintings. The unconscious, instinct, sex and the earth are associated with the "negative feminine" aspects of the paintings.

The transcendental goals which provide the second driving force, supply the depiction of women primarily with their mythic qualities, symbolic representation and gestures. It is this transcendental aspect that encourages the destructive element and threatens the paintings survival out of which de Kooning move nearer to "the self."

Therefore the ambiguous nature of de Koonings' depictions of women, within his paintings reflects many prevailing internal and external influences. They are fueled by private passions and fears as well as universal myths and concerns. The women evolve out of the artists meditation between conscious and subconscious experience. Their confused, uncertain and conflicting character is a direct reflection of de Kooning's ambivalence towards women, therefore by their very nature, they do not lend themselves to conclusive definitions and are a reflection of the insecurity and anxieties within the artist.

They represent his attempt to satisfy instinctual impulses both sexual and aggressive and in the process reconcile opposing emotions within the psyche. He is trying to confront, that which is unfamiliar with regards to the female and thus simultaneously address the unknown aspects of "one self", which results in transformation and unending metamorphosis. Jung said that symbols as representations of the psyche and consisting of instinctual energy and transcendental goals - do not, "veil something that everybody knows," but on the contrary, "it represents an attempt to elucidate by means of analogy, something that still belongs entirely to the domain of the unknown

or something that is yet to be “(Hall, 1978 P139). De Koonings paintings of woman in all their ambiguity embrace that which is unsure and unknown. The artist said himself in 1983, “..but you can’t stop either, or you’ll be lost, so you go ahead, even though you don’t know where you’re going because you never know. You just know how to leave from where you’ve been” (Sylvester, 1994, P.202).

It is clear from this discussion that de Kooning is an eclectic painter. He draws his inspiration from many different sources, which through his instinctual process of working, become sublimated within the image, on canvas. This results in the paintings having many different meanings and interpretations related directly to the various influences from within the realms of the conscious and unconscious. The depictions of women involved both the mythical and the commonplace. She evolved from the all-devouring woman of the Viennese secession-and their terrified fascination with the dominating female- only to merge with de Koonings "own" formidable, contemporary American woman.

He presented the female as something which is as conflicting and paradoxical as life itself. Her identity is shown as both ambiguous, inconclusive and also a direct reflection of de Kooning's anxiety towards the female. The paintings' visual images and language suggest both a conscious and unconscious bond with the image of the dominating mother which implies that there is the presence of an unresolved Oedipus complex. This is reflected in the struggle between the desire to control the woman within the painting and the overwhelming feeling of sexual intimidation that radiates from her monumental, distorted and agitated depiction. De Koonings' paintings reflect an obsessive investigation of the female in order to discover her "true" identity, her relationship to him and to reconcile the feminine within himself. It was through the reconciliation of opposites, within the depiction of women in the paintings, that provided de Kooning with the opportunity for the ultimate goal of "self actualization" to be attempted.

De Koonings' paintings epitomise the constant struggle between opposing impulses within man and his environment. This conflict is reflected by the "womens" ambiguous and paradoxical nature. She is both aggressive and friendly, sexually seductive and repulsive, loving and devouring. Her insecurity is a reflection of the artists insecurity. She is a manifestation of the reconciliation between, the creative and destructive instincts of both Eros and death respectively. In this way all that is joyfully life-affirming exists side by side, with that, which is destructive. Her presence recognised the fact that such opposing emotions and impulses of fear and desire, love and hate are not mutually exclusive but in fact are always found together and in the end represent the entire struggle within life.

These paintings of women are an expression of his unconscious desire for wholeness. She has a vastness equal to a landscape and must be transcended if a higher level of consciousness is to be attained. For de Kooning she represents torment, salvation and that which is unknown.

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