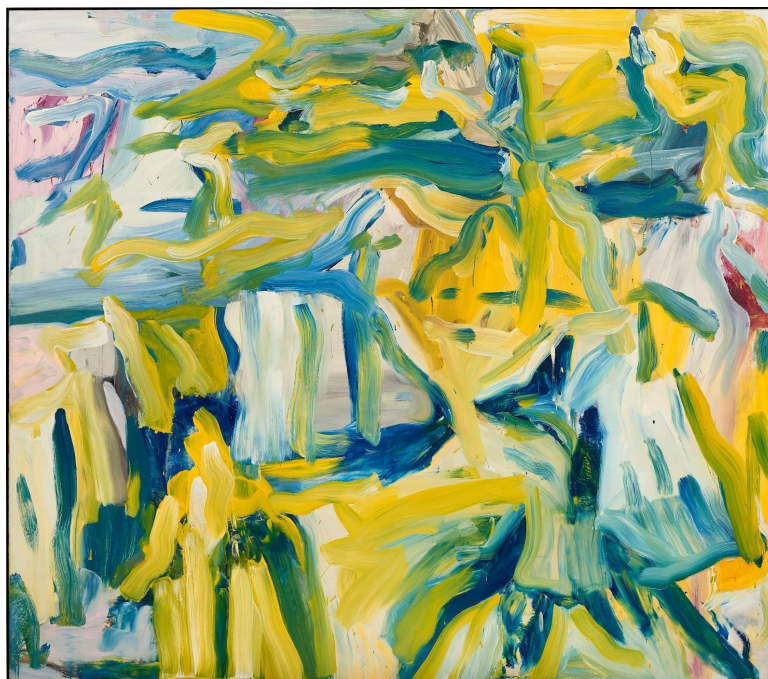


Interpretation and Analysis of Willem de Kooning's *Untitled I* (1978) in *Beautiful, Vivid,
Self-contained*

Hill Art Foundation

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Willem de Kooning, *Untitled I*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 77 × 88 inches (195.6 × 223.5 cm). © 2023 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Matthew Herrmann.

Willem de Kooning's 1978 oil-on-canvas *Untitled I* epitomizes his later-stage artworks, expanding on the Abstract Expressionism art movement he pioneered as a core member of the post-World War II New York School. The brightly colored painting, with its stark flurry of thick brushstrokes generating an irrational sense of motion, is a part of Hill Art Foundation's 2023 spring exhibition, *Beautiful, Vivid, Self-contained*. The show's curator, David Salle, closely examines the relationships between the "nervous system" of an artwork and its' relativity to style and "aesthetic personality," experimenting with juxtaposition to reframe the exhibition's works into one that ultimately transcends past the boundaries of individual artistic movements.¹ As the exhibition engenders a new lens for the artistic eye to witness, the audience deepens a comprehension of the processes and aesthetic choices artists and creators make.

Untitled I was painted when de Kooning was in his late 70s, during a period of relative tranquility. Born in Rotterdam, Netherlands in 1905, the 20th-century Dutch-American painter brought the Abstract Expressionism movement to an international front, becoming

¹ "Beautiful, Vivid, Self-Contained," Hill Art Foundation, April 17, 2023, <https://hillartfoundation.org/art/exhibitions/view/beautiful-vivid-self-contained/>.

contemporaries with other famous artists such as Pollock and Kline during the golden age of the New York School of Art.² Trained classically as a fine and commercial artist, he moved to New York in 1926, employed under the Works Progress Administration to paint murals during the Great Depression. Though he was eventually forced to resign due to his immigration status, this opportunity, as well as his sustained focus on geometric painting, allowed him to further develop his art style. He experimented with strong colors, loose abstractions, and less formalized figures, taking inspiration from previous movements such as Cubism and Expressionism.³ Although he did not gain American citizenship until 1962, de Kooning was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon Johnson shortly after his naturalization, as well as the prestigious National Medal of Arts in 1986.⁴ Hence, de Kooning's evolution is one that cements his quintessential status.

de Kooning is best known for his gestural abstract work, exploring the relationship between space and figures through an expressive deconstruction and reassembling of forms. Painting with large, jagged strokes using cohesive colors to embed images within his abstract compositions, many of his pieces feature evocative shapes referencing human bodies within large patches of pure color and aggressive linework. Like his painting process, de Kooning had a very fluid stylistic style: his motto, "You have to change to stay the same," signified his constant growth and artistic exploration.⁵ As a gestural painter, he worked with his whole body, moving close to the canvas to embellish large strokes and underdrawings to warm up for his motions.⁶ Thus, instead of illustrating representative forms, *Untitled I* serves more as de Kooning's emotional canvas, distilled through the regenerative practice of full-body painting. His techniques infuse his physical movements with his psyche, reflecting the essence of his surrounding landscape and improved emotional state as a result of his relocating from the chaotic

² Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Willem de Kooning." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 20, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Willem-de-Kooning>.

³ "Willem De Kooning Paintings, Bio, Ideas," The Art Story, accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/de-kooning-willem/#:~:text=While%20many%20of%20his%20colleagues,and%20the%20figure%2Dground%20relation>.

⁴ Henri Neuendorf. "7 Fun Facts to Celebrate Willem De Kooning's Birthday," Artnet News, April 24, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/we-celebrate-willem-de-koonings-birthday-290473>.

⁵ Annikka Olsen, "21 Facts about Willem De Kooning | Contemporary Art | Sotheby's," sothebys.com, January 24, 2019, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/21-facts-about-willem-de-kooning>.

⁶ The Museum of Modern Art, "How to Paint like Willem De Kooning – with Corey D'Augustine | in the Studio," YouTube (YouTube, April 5, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7sJ_WNiSrs.

New York City art scene to a quiet studio in East Hampton⁷. Moreover, a sense of expansive space dominates the artwork; de Kooning constructs a world alluding to natural elements, with aspects such as billowing leaves and floating branches. Thus, a sense of airiness and lightness is amplified by de Kooning's compositional choices of loose splashes and freely dripping paint streaks. Compositionally, the green pigment, generated out of an intermixing of blue and yellow, engenders the idea of creation and rebirth, especially when considered within the context of de Kooning's environmental and regional shift. Although the painting has a buzzing energy underlining the greens and yellows, again imitating springtime tones, it also hinges on inertia: lower parts and white flashes of the canvas are marked by stagnancy, perhaps commentating on the finite cycles of both human and natural life and questioning the limited yet purposeful existences conscious entities can lead. Ultimately, every motif in *Untitled I* serves its purpose, ranging from the illusions of representational objects slipping in and out of the viewer's vision, to the vibrant colors popping out.

⁷ Hilton Kramer, "Art: De Kooning of East Hampton," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 10, 1978), <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/02/10/archives/art-de-kooning-of-east-hampton.html>.

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