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Tell Me: with Daniel Herr

by Noah Dillon

I've been visiting — with artists, writers, curators, dealers, and others in the art world — to look at one artwork of my guest's choice. We have a one-on-one conversation about the artwork, what they find interesting in it and why it's important to them. In this edition, I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with the painter Daniel Herr, to look at one of his favorite paintings, Willem de Kooning's *Easter Monday* (1955 – 56).



Willem de Kooning, *Easter Monday*, 1955 – 56. Oil and newspaper transfer on canvas, 96 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the Rogers Fund and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

NOAH DILLON: You wanted to look at and talk about a de Kooning painting. So why did you pick *Easter Monday* (1955 – 56)?

DANIEL HERR: Well there's this one, and there's another at the Guggenheim, *Composition* (1955), and when I was around 17 or 18, visiting New York, I remember seeing both paintings a lot. I didn't really understand them, but I remember thinking that they must be what painting is. I don't think I've seen the one at the Guggenheim in person since then because they just don't ever seem have it out. But this one's always here. I really like this one.

This body of work from 1955 is one of the best that he made. There are others — '77 for example was incredible — but this work is special, and this is definitely a larger, grander piece of that series.

When MoMA did de Kooning's retrospective, in 2011, there were several paintings from that period together. There was *Police Gazette* (1955) and *Saturday Night* (1956), etc. I remember thinking how they must have looked when he made them — how much brighter and striking the colors must have been, because who knows what he actually used when he painted this.

It's a pretty stark contrast to the van Goghs that we were just looking at.

Those paintings were made 75 years before this one and they still look perfect today. It's kind of sad. But he did mostly use good materials after this. And I guess the quality of



Robert Rauschenberg, *Winter Pool*, 1959. Combine painting: oil, paper, fabric, wood, metal, sandpaper, tape, printed paper, printed reproductions, handheld bellows, and found painting, on two canvases, with ladder; 89 1/2 x 58 1/2 x 4 inches. Courtesy of Steven A. Cohen and The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the color is not really the point of his work anyway.

You can see, too, that this one probably inspired Robert Rauschenberg. Over here, in the same gallery, you have Rauschenberg's *Winter Pool* (1959), which uses newspaper and paint in a similar way. You can imagine Rauschenberg — on whom de Kooning was a big influence — seeing this and taking it for his own work. This is one of the paintings where the newsprint is still visible. He would use newspaper to soak up the oil, or keep the surface wet when he wasn't working on the painting. In part because the newsprint is visible and was transferred, this painting has the feeling and ideas of collage with paint that I find really interesting.

He did a lot of stuff that people do now. He used to throw pieces of paper on the floor, randomly, and then draw over them, and then rearrange the pieces of paper on the canvas to transfer them. He was able to synthesize all these different painting movements in his head. What's interesting about this series, and maybe the *Woman* series, was that it is to me the first de Kooning style; there was no question that this was a de Kooning. It wasn't a copy of Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, or Arshile Gorky. I'm sure he knew what he had stumbled upon, because the work looks a lot different than it did even just five years before. And this was also the first series where there wasn't a central figure anymore.

So it doesn't have anything that had formerly held the image together?

Well it probably did. He would always say "the figure is in there somewhere." He called these landscape paintings, or cityscapes. It's dark, gray, there's the newsprint, and it resembles architecture and billboards and things you look at when you walk down the street.

And there are perspectival elements that imply a street.

Yeah: lights, people walking, motion... And the fact, too, that it's vertical, not a pastoral view. And this little patch of green is like a Green Spaces park or plaza.

What does this artwork mean to you and the paintings you make? You've talked about seeing this when you were younger and it being an example of what painting is. What does it mean now?

I think it still impresses me as what painting *could* be. I didn't understand it at the time, not at all. I don't think I really understood him until I was in my mid or late 20s and I'm still learning now. He is like Picasso. He was studying Picasso basically forever; he couldn't ever get away from that influence. And there was no reason to, because the guy made so much work and there were so many different styles, and all of it was so rich with material and intense, creative personality.

I think you can find a lot of interesting stuff by working in someone's shadow.

You can see Picasso in this, but de Kooning's definitely not trying to make it look like a Picasso. It's hyper-sensitive yet hyper-aggressive. The whole series is aggressive, in the way that he made these, and the subsequent landscapes, like *The Door to the River* (1960), at the Whitney.

You can see Picasso here, too, in the newspaper: that element of collage is similar to his use of pasted-in or painted newspaper, *faux bois*, or other materials. Obviously it's translated into something else and may be happenstance, but it is funny the way that this carries through. And, again, one can carry it forward to Rauschenberg creatively misinterpreting this move by de Kooning.

I really wouldn't be surprised if Rauschenberg saw this de Kooning and based his entire career off of this one painting. I mean, I would have done that. There's no reason not to. You'd be an idiot not to.

[laughing]

His intuition as a painter is so precise, so sharp.



Willem de Kooning, *Easter Monday* (detail), 1955 – 56. Oil and newspaper transfer on canvas, 96 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the Rogers Fund and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. © 2015 Artists

Can you point to anything in particular that speaks to that in this?

I think every mark in here is incredibly precise. There's no excess, nothing insufficient, or that's too soft. In a certain way everything that's there is supposed to be. It has this quality that all great paintings have where it just looks like it painted itself. And at this point he's 51 years old and he's pretty much mastered this style of painting, which explains why he then went and did something totally different. And five years after that it's totally different again.

He was also really sharp intellectually. He gave a few public talks early on and they're really, really funny, really eclectic, like "The Renaissance and Order" (1949) or "What Abstract Art Means to Me" (1951). He talks about the history of art and what people thought about, using imaginary painters who see things a certain way but without understanding how to see it from a historical context. They're kind of like Surrealist, absurdist prose poems — like reading DeLillo or something. I

still can't tell half the time if he's just teasing people or if he means things literally or if it's a language barrier. He definitely had a sense of humor about it.

And he knew what was going on. In one of those talks, he identifies Duchamp as the most important artist of the era. He said, basically, "Duchamp is a one-man movement and he's showing people that everyone can be their own movement, and you only have to do what you think is important." And he said that was more important than what he himself was doing, more important than painting. He was saying that before Duchamp was even taken seriously by most people.

Do you feel like this is a particularly relevant painting, or that de Kooning's work is especially relevant right now in a way that isn't being thought about, recognized, or has been forgotten?

Definitely it has come back, as with the MoMA retrospective, or the shows at Gagosian and Pace in recent years.

You could see the influence in recent shows, such as "The Forever Now." As a painter, though, I kind of liked it better when it wasn't popular. I remember being in school and painting like this and people would be like, "What are you doing? You can't do this. Stop it." Now everyone thinks they are abstract artists. The irony is that de Kooning didn't identify at all with the term "abstract art."

They're also all much younger than he was when he made this painting. You described how long it took de Kooning to get out from under Picasso, and it's going to take them time to get out from under de Kooning, and whoever else they're looking at.

Do you want to say anything about this artwork in this gallery, in this museum? Does that have any bearing on what it looks like to you, how you experience it?

He's a New York painter; it's made in New York and it gets to live in a New York museum forever. Seeing the museums and galleries in person, you learn what kind of artist you want to be. Every time I would visit the city I would go the Met and I started wanting to see the de Koonings. I remember I thought they were ugly, early on. I always thought about how ugly the Woman paintings are.

They're kind of a mess.

They're definitely not clean. And I thought art was supposed to be clean because that's what my teachers told me. Or maybe I just had a clean upbringing.

What do you make of the title, *Easter Monday*?

It has the ambivalence and duality that critics talk about with respect to his work. But a lot of times he and other New York School painters, in general, didn't title their work. They used names like *Composition X* or *Untitled XI*, or *Picture* or whatever. Or their wives or girlfriends titled the work. Nobody really cared that they didn't care what the title was. I like it. It's Easter Monday: a special day but an ordinary day

Some of this generation titled their works, too, as a reflection of where they were in their lives. They named their paintings for the season or the day, or a place, such as Richard Diebenkorn's various series. I connect with that, too, because those were about making a painting that reminds you of a certain place. His work in the Hamptons wasn't serene, but the palette was different — a little brighter, a little more floral. All of his work is intense though; there are no laid-back de Koonings.

Do you want to say anything else about why it's important to the work that you make?

I just like how American his work is, even though he's technically European. It's so America-in-the-'50s — tough, with a cigarette. He's like a boxer, bashing away while he listens to Igor Stravinsky. The poor immigrant boy who comes of age during the time of American empire. There are all these influences: the classical Dutch art-school training, Surrealism, Existentialism, working in advertising and sign painting, the poverty of the Depression, and then meeting all these other artists around him like Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Josef Albers.

What I'm always asking myself is what *didn't* he do? The same things he was asking probably about Picasso. But if you're starting to learn how to play jazz you don't begin with third-tier improvisers. You go to Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, John Coltrane. If you're interested in painting, you don't start with lesser artists. De Kooning is what he is for a reason; it's not like he just happened to become an important painter. He's better. It lets you see where the bar is, how high it is. That's important if you want to continue to do something different.



Willem de Kooning, Door to the River, 1960. Oil on linen, 80 1/8 x 70 1/8 inches. Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of Art.

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