

Eastern Illinois University

The Keep

Plan B Papers

Student Theses & Publications

1-1-1967

A Study of the Painting Styles of Willem De Kooning and Larry Rivers and their Influence on my Own Work

Paula J. Reinhard

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/plan_b

Recommended Citation

Reinhard, Paula J., "A Study of the Painting Styles of Willem De Kooning and Larry Rivers and their Influence on my Own Work" (1967). *Plan B Papers*. 539.
https://thekeep.eiu.edu/plan_b/539

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Plan B Papers by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

A STUDY OF THE PAINTING STYLES OF

WILLEM DE KOONING AND LARRY RIVERS

AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON MY OWN WORK

(TITLE)

BY

PAULA J. REINHARD

PLAN B PAPER

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE MASTER OF SCIENCE IN EDUCATION
AND PREPARED IN COURSE

ART 570

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY,
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1967

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS PLAN B PAPER BE ACCEPTED AS
FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE DEGREE, M.S. IN ED.

July 6, 1967
DATE

[REDACTED]

ADVISER

July 6, 1967
DATE

[REDACTED]

DEPARTMENT HEAD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Acknowledgements	ii
	Table of Contents	iii
	List of Illustrations	iv
	Introduction	1
Chapter		
I	William De Kooning	3
II	Larry Rivers	8
III	Comparison of the Style of Both Artists, and the Changes in My own Painting	15
IV	Conclusion	19
	Bibliography	22

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Plate
I. Man
II. Pink Woman
III. Woman I
IV. Two Women
V. Woman II
VI. Woman IV
VII. Woman VI (Close up)
VIII. Women
IX. Portrait of Berdie
X. Double Portrait of Berdie
XI. Red Molly
XII. The Drummer
XIII. French Money I
XIV. Dying and Dead Veteran
XV. Parts of the Body: French Vocabulary Lesson III
XVI. Africa II
XVII. Dutch Masters and Cigars II
XVIII. The Greatest Homosexual
XIX. Water Color
XX. Blue Lady
XXI. Large Figure
XXII. Figure I (Unfinished)
XXIII. Figure II
XXIV. Figure III
XXV. Figure IV
XXVI. Feminine Figure III
XXVII - XXXI. Selection of Ink Drawings by Author

INTRODUCTION

The use of the human form as subject matter for art has been present since man first attempted to record ideas and events on stones, pieces of bone, and the walls of caves. Changing cultures have brought frequent changes in emphasis in its reference to the human form. The possibility of variations of this subject matter is still not exhausted and contemporary artists are endeavoring to create new and exciting directions for artistic presentation of the human figure.

The painting of the female figure as developed by Willem de Kooning and Larry Rivers, and the subsequent change in my own painting style which may be attributed to the study of these men and their works, is the major purpose of this paper.

"Spiritually I am wherever my spirit allows me to be and that is not necessarily in the future. I have no nostalgia, however.... Some painters, including myself, do not care what chair they are sitting on. It does not even have to be a comfortable one. They are too nervous to find out where they ought to sit. They do not want to 'sit in style.' Rather they have found that painting—any kind of painting, any style of painting—to be painting at all, in fact—is a way of living today, a style of living, so to speak. That is where the form of it lies. It is exactly in its uselessness that it is free. Those artists do not conform. They only want to be inspired....The argument often used that science is really abstract, and that painting could be like music, and, for this reason, that you can paint a man leaning against a lamppost, is utterly ridiculous. That space of scientists—the space of the physicists—I am truly bored with by now. Their lenses are so thick that seen through them the space gets more and more melancholy. There seems to be no end to the misery of scientists' space. All that it contains is billions of hunks of matter, hot or cold, floating around in the darkness according to a great design of aimlessness. The stars I think about if I could fly I could reach in a few old-fashioned days. But physicists' stars I use as buttons, buttoning up curtains of emptiness. If I stretch my fingers next to the rest of myself and wonder where my fingers are—that is all the space I need as a painter." ¹ —Willem de Kooning

¹*

Henry Geldzahler, American Painting in the Twentieth Century (New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965), p.199.

CHAPTER I
WILLEM DE KOONING

Willem de Kooning is considered by some critics to be Americas greatest living painter, and by others to be greatly overrated. Whichever belief one may choose, the fact remains that de Kooning has contributed more to American painting than America can afford to ignore.²

De Kooning was born on April 24, 1904, in Rotterdam, Holland, to Cornelia and Leendert de Kooning, and sailed for America twenty-two years later. He supported himself at first by house painting in and near Hoboken, New Jersey. A year later he moved to Manhattan and began taking commercial art jobs, working for decorators, department stores, and doing murals for speakeasies.³ Through a friend, Mischa Resnikoff, de Kooning met Arshile Gorky, and in this same year he met John Graham who was one of the first people to recognize de Kooning's talent. De Kooning and Gorky became close friends, they shared an apartment, and strongly influenced each other's work. For a number of years de Kooning was said to be one of his close friend's followers. A comparison of their work at

² Thomas B. Hess, Willem de Kooning (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1959), 31.

³ Ibid., 114.

this time shows a close interaction of style that at times approached the Picasso-Braque closeness of relationship.⁴

In 1928, de Kooning spent several months in the well known artists colony at Woodstock, New York and a few semi-abstract paintings he worked on at that time still exist.

The first systematic collector of the work of de Kooning was the poet, Edwin Denby, whom he met in 1934.

De Kooning has been painting full-time since 1935 when he spent a year on the Federal Arts Project. Also included in this project were Gorky and Stuart Davis. Two years later he was commissioned to submit designs for a mural for the hall of Pharmacy in the New York World's Fair. The mural was divided into three parts. Michail Loew had part "A", de Kooning part "B", and Stuyvesant van Veen part "C".⁵

By the 1940's de Kooning's name was well known among New York artists. His work had become widely influential and appreciated in the art world. However, the difficulties of being an artist in New York in the 1930's and 1940's were tremendous. American collectors and museums concentrated almost entirely

⁴
Ibid.

⁵
Ibid., 115.

on European art, or Social Realism.⁶ De Kooning began a series of black and white abstractions. He chose not to use colors since the house paint he was using was not permanent and oils were too expensive for this well known but impecunious artist. A selection of these monochrome paintings were exhibited in the Egan Gallery in New York. This exhibition established him as an important artist in America and even abroad, because by this time American art was becoming known internationally.

Painters such as Larry Rivers, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, and Robert Motherwell were emerging as the most dynamic artists of the post war period. De Kooning became a leader of this "movement" and his works were prominently exhibited in such leading museums as the Whitney, The Museum of Modern Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, and other places.⁷

The summer of 1948 de Kooning spent teaching at the Black Mountain College Art Department, headed by Josef Albers. De Kooning taught at Yale Art School in 1950, which was also directed by Albers.

For about ten years de Kooning worked in an abstract style, but as early as 1951 he had returned to the theme of the figure. A second one man exhibition

⁶
Ibid.

⁷
Ibid., 116.

was presented by the Egan Gallery which included abstractions keyed to pale reds and yellows. His largest abstraction, Excavation, won first prize in the Chicago Art Institute's "60th Annual." The prize consisted of two thousand dollars toward the purchase price of the painting by the Institute. A few days later he began to work on a large painting, Woman I, which took nearly two years to complete.

In March of 1953 de Kooning's "Women" made their debut at the Janis Gallery. The Women made a traumatic impression on the public which has not been⁸ equaled since. Woman I was bought by the New York Museum of Modern Art, and became one of the most widely reproduced and discussed paintings of the fifties.

Most of de Kooning's early works were forgotten when he became closely associated with the so called⁹ "modern American school." He was considered a "convert" to abstract expressionism and although the impressionable Women series was still all but unsellable in 1955, the artist continued the series.

Then the "Women" began to change. First they became more abstract with faces and bodies integrated into the background or landscape.

⁸
Ibid., 117.

⁹
Ibid.

Wealthy collectors in America and Europe became interested in these strange but captivating Women. By 1956 the colors and brush strokes had become much simpler and larger. The series developed a new freshness and scope until 1963, when he introduced to the world his "New Women". On paper these women seemed calmer, prettier, and blonder than before, but this was deceptive.¹⁰ The colors are sharper and brighter. The figure is monumental even in its sitting or crouched position, but could loom ten feet or more if she stood.

The three years from 1963 to 1966 were de Kooning's most productive, and most exciting, because he gave new life to his Women.¹¹ This same exciting outlook upon the human element is a new approach to painting and has likewise been carried out in the work of de Kooning's contemporary, Larry Rivers.

¹⁰
George Dickerson, Saturday Evening Post (November 21, 1964), 64.

¹¹
Ibid.

CHAPTER II

LARRY RIVERS

Larry Rivers was greatly influenced by the emotional concept of painting as practiced by the older man, de Kooning, and in his early work utilized the same slashing strokes of the action style of the Dutchman.

It is interesting that both men evolved the human form from their exploration in paint. Where de Kooning still retained the wild slashes of color in a highly emotional manner, Rivers became more meditative and placid in his approach to the human form. The emotional quality became more subdued and akin to "Classical form". The composition became more intellectual in arrangement although he still was just as concerned as de Kooning in the placement of large masses of tone and the interaction of planes in the complete configuration.

Rivers first entered maturity as a painter in the 1950's. He was looking for something newer and more personal than the new American abstract art. He became interested in action painting but also cherished motives and practices in painting which artists seemingly had put aside by the logic of the new approach. The result was, as I have stated previously, a subdued composition incorporating the influence of the Clas-

sical approach to form.

This young artist became very much involved with action painting, and through his association with de Kooning, was able to grasp the painterly principles of the older man which he assimilated and modified in his painting style.

De Kooning's follower is his junior by nineteen years. Born August 17, 1923, Larry Rivers grew up in the Bronx, the son of a plumber. After being discharged from the Army Air Corps in 1943 with a medical disability, Rivers studied at the Juilliard school of music and earned a living in and around New York as a jazz musician.¹² It was while playing with a band that his interest in painting was aroused. In the summer months of 1945 he was playing the saxophone in a band at a Maine resort with the accomplished musician, Jack Freilicher. Rivers became a close friend with Freilicher's wife, Jane, who is a well known painter. She introduced Rivers to modern art through Braque's cubist painting on a musical theme, Bass. With the encouragement of his two newly found friends, Rivers began to experiment in paint as an expressive media other than jazz.¹³

At the suggestion of Nell Blane, the first estab-

¹² Samuel Hunter, Larry Rivers. (Boston: Brandeis University, 1965), 45.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

lished New York painter he met, he enrolled in Hans Hofmann's school in January of 1947, for a year. He then attended New York University during the day and supported himself by playing the saxophone at night. In 1951 Rivers received his art education degree, but¹⁴ has never taught.

The great Bonnard exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1948, excited the younger generation and Larry Rivers was no exception. For many young artists, this show was a confirmation of their effort to bridge two divergent approaches to expression. In his first one man exhibition at the Jane Street Gallery in 1949, Rivers' paintings showed the direct influence of Bonnard. The critic, Clement Greenberg, praised the show in The Nation, referring to Larry Rivers as "....this amazing beginner.", and "....a better composer of pictures than was Bonnard in many instances." Rivers was selected by Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro to show in the Koots Gallery "New Talent" show. His large painting, The Burial, was acquired some time later for the Gloria Vanderbilt¹⁵ museum purchase fund. Few of Larry Rivers' contemporaries in New York had been launched so auspiciously. In the years to come, Rivers would be

¹⁴
Ibid., 23.

¹⁵
Ibid., 45.

known and respected throughout the art world as a
serious artist.

Larry Rivers and Willem de Kooning have become two of America's most famous figure painters. Both painters, as I have stated earlier, have chosen the human form as the subject with which they can best express themselves on canvas. Although de Kooning had several years of struggling as an artist before Rivers' interest in art was even stirred, both men emerged into public light at about the same time. Rivers' first notable painting, The Burial, shows a de Kooning influence. The figures are slashed into the background. The direction and size of the strokes determine the forms. This style of painting has been associated with Gustave Courbet's A Burial at Ornans¹⁶ because the figures are stocky with solemn mask like faces, and the less significant figures merge into space. The light, fluent Portrait of Berdie shows a definite change in Rivers' style. His palette lightened, and so did the pressure of his hand on the canvas. Rather than heavy opaque strokes, the paint was applied in thin transparent washes. Out of the areas of surface activity a nebulous but existing figure appeared — a figure that seems to dissolve

¹⁶

Ibid., 17.

into space like torn paper being gently absorbed by a pool of clear water. The slashes of his first painting style softened into large planes with a softness which has become identified with Rivers' work. The dexterious use of the brush and palette of the early de Koonings, as Man, indicates a similar approach of style of the two men in their early work. That they chose the human form as the aspect of nature they wish to represent is not so unusual, because it is the most challenging. This is due to the various facets of interest which lie beneath the exterior aspect of the body. For this reason both men found the figure the most challenging with which to experiment in their painting.

Rivers usually used a model or a picture from which to work. His favorite model was Bertha "Berdie" Burger, mother of his first wife. She was the subject of many of his paintings until her death in 1957. He then began transferring images from photos to canvas.

A year after Portrait of Berdie Rivers painted O'Hara and Joseph. These paintings had the same softness and fragility of the previous portrait of his mother-in-law, but the painting presented a new space relationship. The different action areas are brought together with broad planes of color. This

style of pulling together separate parts of the entire painting is also found in de Kooning's work. For example Woman I has large planes of lighter color across the breast and shoulders which unite the entire torso. Large areas of color are found in most of his works, which unite the form.

In Double Portrait of Berdie, painted in 1955, Rivers has united his belief in the classical or traditional form with his new experiments in space relationship. This painting is alive with small areas of movement. The drawings on the wall, the open doorway, the folded blanket, and the spread on the bed are examples of this relationship.

Once again large planes pull the entire painting into a unit. The bed represents a light plane through the center of the canvas. The dark corner and the light cast onto the figures are open spaces which control the entire activity.

CHAPTER III
COMPARISON OF THE STYLE OF BOTH ARTISTS, AND THE
CHANGES IN MY OWN PAINTING

The treatment of the figure by both de Kooning and Rivers differs in some respects yet in others shows a similarity of technique.

De Kooning's first notable works were soft and rather drawn onto the canvas with grayed colors, as in Man. The features are painted onto the face and become a part of it, whereas with his "Women" he drew the features out by pulling and bending the paint. His figures have a plastic quality which seems to create a feeling of constant motion within the painting.

Larry Rivers' figures are more noticably graphic than the older man's work. He "draws" with his brush and, not unlike many of de Kooning's earlier works, his paintings have more of an airy quality. He uses open spaces to link areas of color and bulk. He handles the brush lightly and touches the canvas with color so softly as to produce an almost torn effect around the painted areas. Not unlike de Kooning, his effect is not produced in the same manner as with de Kooning's "Women". These "fine ladies" give this idea because of the large, strong brush strokes which slash

through the figure cutting it into and pulling it out of the canvas. The empty spaces Rivers uses seem like torn bits of clouds that obliterate, in part, his configurations, and the whole scene is passing behind these clouds. The parts obscured by the clouds do not need to be guessed at, they are understood.

Both men are trying to express the inner quality of humanity, de Kooning in an emotional manner, and Rivers in a meditating vein, and they both achieved integration of the form by a similar philosophy.

De Kooning uses and controls space as an architect. A color may move in, out, up, and back within a canvas. He builds thick areas of paint then scrapes, destroys, then rebuilds. Never fully satisfied that a painting is completed, he continues this process many times. De Kooning is also an inventor. Lines bend, circle, join, and shapes are formed.

While de Kooning uses space as an architect, Rivers utilizes the art of omission. He seems to leave out that which is not necessarily observed in a glance; perhaps an eye, or a hand, or part of the body.

Although these two men may reach similar ends, their techniques are not similar. The older man is a painter who uses drawing as a means to produce desired effects. He creates no intricate details but rather

slashes color in the desired areas. Rivers is a draftsman who uses paint to achieve his goal. He rubs paint in and wipes out entire areas, achieving rather thin light areas. With a smaller brush he draws in details such as flowers in a transparent vase, or an eye. A black and white photograph of his work may resemble a chalk drawing with loose chalk dust still adhering to the rough paper. De Kooning's media could not be taken for anything but thickly applied oil paints. De Kooning is a painter, whereas Rivers is a draftsman.

Both men try to show an escape from the absurdity of our lives. I feel that I identify with this philosophy and can see similarities in my own painting with the work of these two men.

My earlier works could be compared most easily with de Kooning's "Women" of the 1950's. They were slashed into and onto canvas, barely fitting inside the frame, with large brush strokes full of paint. The paint was then moved, thinned, and spread to give color and form to these "ladies". As with de Kooning, I was never quite sure when the painting was at the stage of completion and many times a figure was painted over so many times that the canvas became extremely heavy. As I studied these two men a change became apparent in my work. The figures became more feminine

and petit. They acquired softer colors and gentler lines about the body and face. I realized that my work was nearing the Rivers style. Features became clearer and my feeling toward my media became that of gentleness instead of harshness. My brush became smaller and I found myself using a cloth to wipe or smudge areas. The effect was a soft pale canvas.

CONCLUSIONS

My latest paintings show a marked transition from some of my earlier works. This change, I believe, can be attributed to the study of the styles of Willem de Kooning and Larry Rivers.

Throughout the past two years, I have felt a close relationship with my painting, that is, I seem to be able to express myself more completely. As a consequence I can see with more ease a comparison between my painting and that of de Kooning and Rivers. Through this study I have become aware of a sense of restlessness in my work which, once discovered, I tried to subdue. The work of Rivers caught my attention because it contained an expression I believed necessary, but also offered it in a calm, almost poetic manner. This is what I was seeking. Through a close inspection of technique and expression I became aware of a similarity in my way of working with that of de Kooning whom I had long admired. This was my answer. I kept my figures bulky but let large areas take the places of lines and slashes. By combining some of the qualities of both artists I achieved a style of my own, which was apparently influenced by their styles combined.

My work is more gratifying to me and I feel I have gained insight into myself and my work which makes me indebted to these two American artists: Willem de Kooning and Larry Rivers.

"...when I was very young, and went to the zoo a lot, I once went with my father who is quite strong. He was feeding a deer through the wire fence and then began playing with the deer's antlers. Suddenly the deer backed away and a part of its antler broke off and there was my father holding it in his hand, and the deer charging off into the distance. Aside from expectations of glory, all I can hope from my work is that it arrests your attention with no more or less insistence than the breaking of a deer's antlers—that something in my work obliges you to forget for a few moments the absurdity of your life."¹⁷

—Larry Rivers

A17

Art USA Now, ed. Lee Nordness (2 Vols.; New York: The Viking Press, 1963), II, 405.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Creban, Hubert. "Woman Trouble," Art Digest, XXVII (April 15, 1953), 5.
- Dickerson, George. "The Strange Eye and Art of De Kooning," Saturday Evening Post, Vol. 237 (November 21, 1964), 64.
- Geldzahler, Henry. American Painting in the Twentieth Century. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965.
- Giest, Sidney. "Work in Progress," Art Digest, XXVII (April 1, 1953), 15.
- Hess, Thomas B. "De Kooning Paints a Picture," Art News, Vol. 52 (March 1953), 30.
- . "De Kooning's New Women," Art News, Vol. 64 (March 1965), 36 - 38.
- . Willem de Kooning. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1959.
- Hunter, Samuel. Larry Rivers. Boston: Brandeis University, 1965.
- "Larry Rivers." Time, Vol. 85 (April 16, 1965), 94.
- Nordness, Lee. Art USA Now. New York: The Viking Press, 1963. Vol. 1.
- Nordness, Lee. Art USA Now. New York: The Viking Press, 1963. Vol. 2.
- Porter, Fairfield. "Rivers Paints a Picture," Art News, Vol. 52 (January, 1954), 57.
- "Prisoner of the Seraglior." Time, Vol. 85 (February 26, 1965), 74.

Selection of paintings by

Willem de Kooning

Plates I - VIII

PLATE I

Man
1939

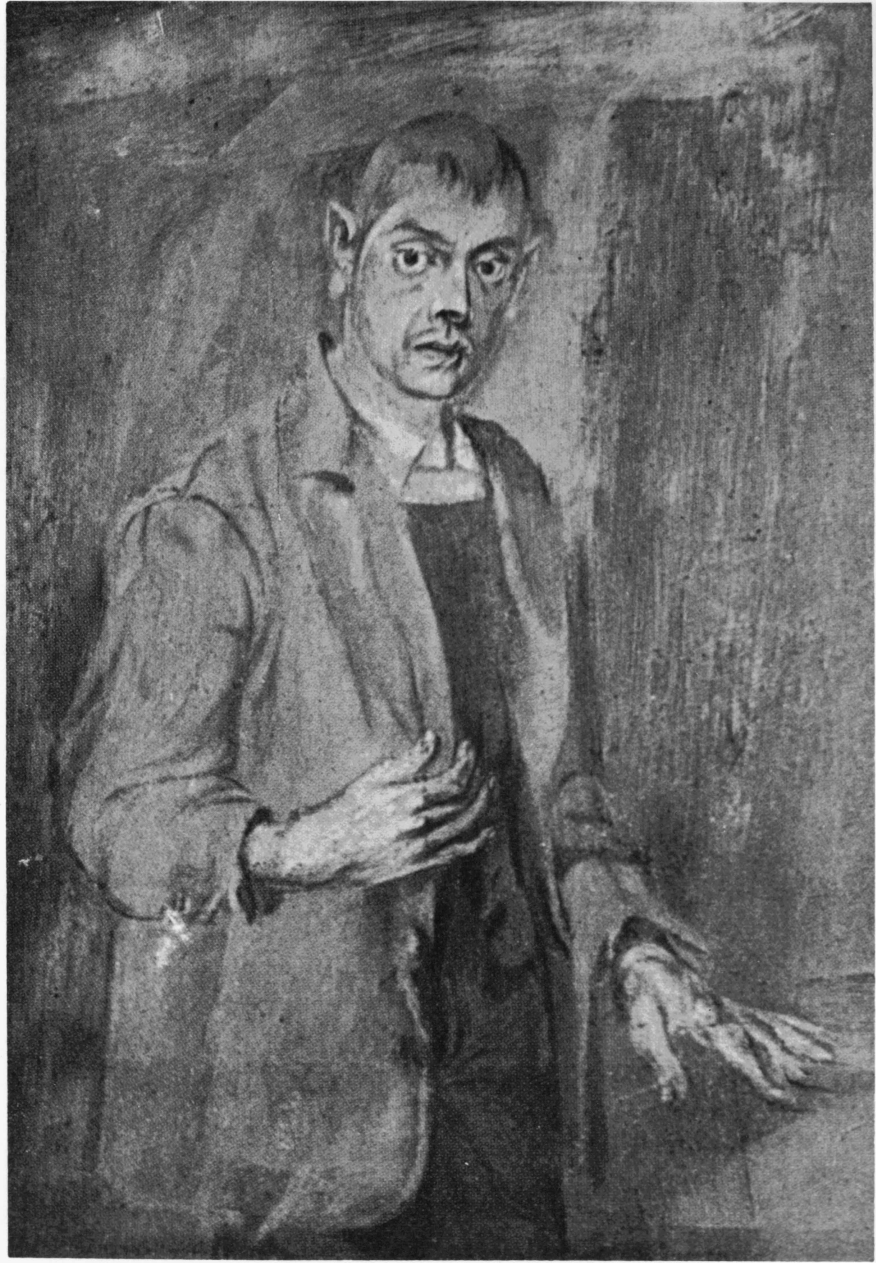


PLATE II

Pink Woman
1943



PLATE III

Woman I
1952



PLATE IV

Two Women
1952



PLATE V

Woman II
1952-53



PLATE VI

Woman IV
1952-53



PLATE VII

Woman VI (Close up)

1953



PLATE VIII

Women



Selection of paintings by

Larry Rivers

Plates IX - XVIII

PLATE IX

Portrait of Berdie
1953



PLATE X

Double Portrait of Berdie

1955



PLATE XI

Red Molly
1957



PLATE XII

The Drummer
1958

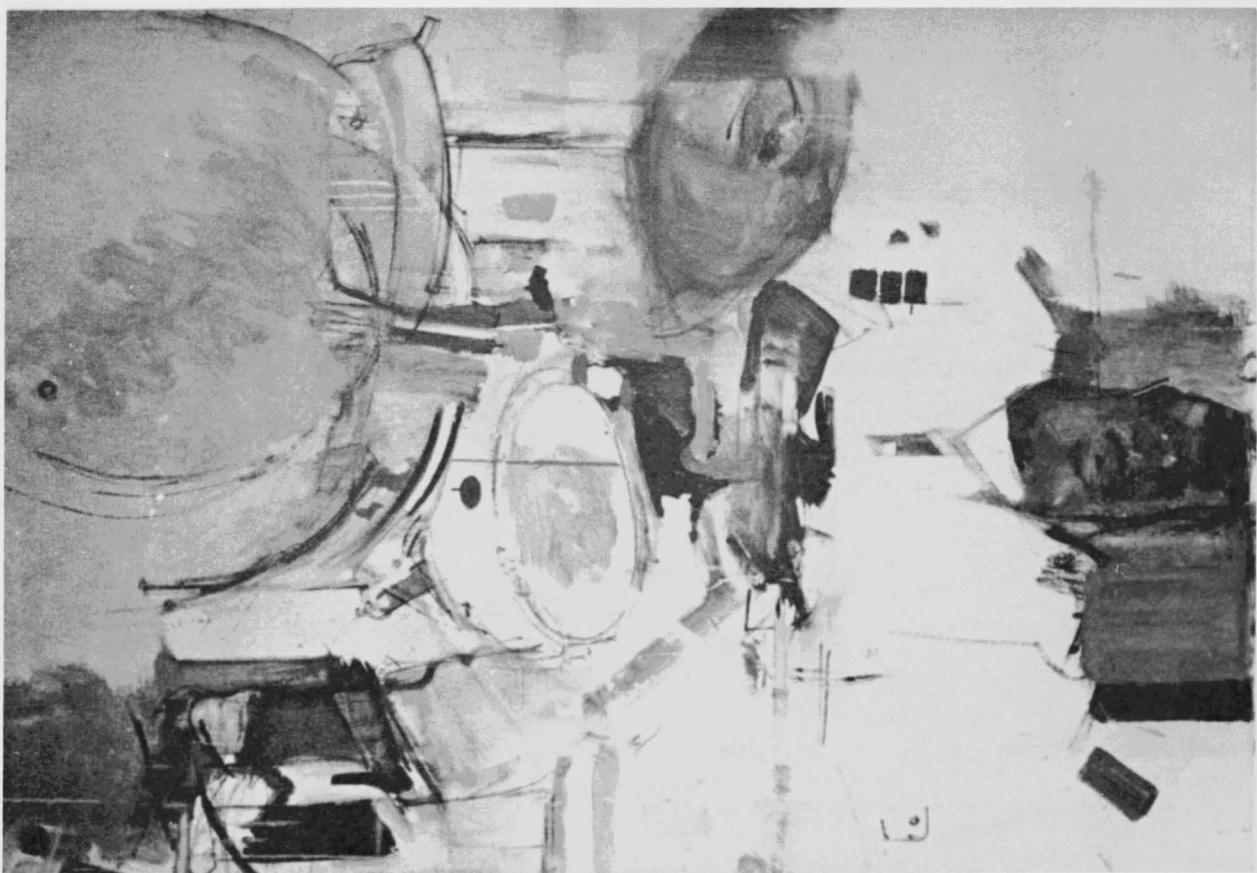


PLATE XIII

French Money I
1961



PLATE XIV

Dying and Dead Veteran
1961



PLATE XV

Parts of the Body:
French Vocabulary Lesson III
1962

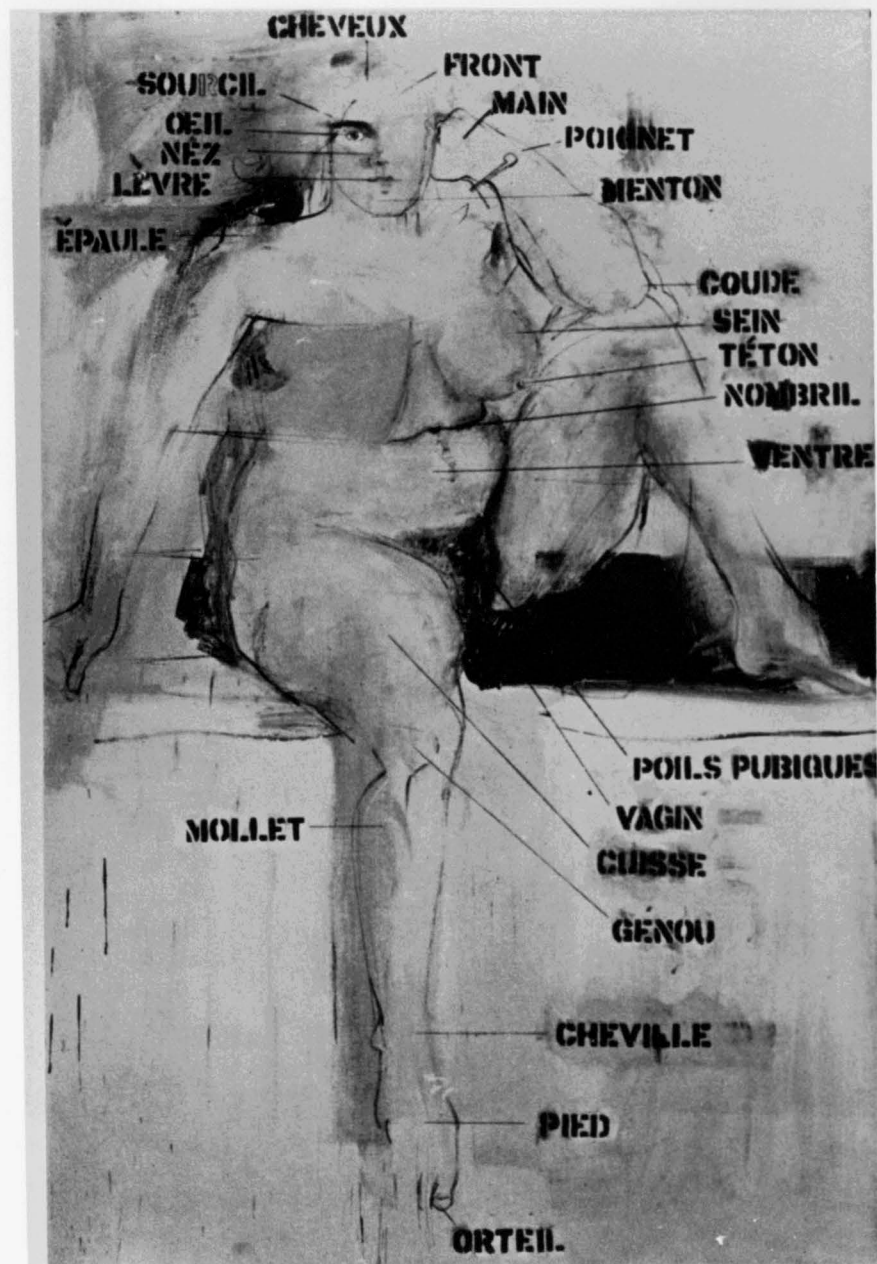


PLATE XVI

Africa II
1963



PLATE XXIII

Dutch Masters and Cigars II
1963



PLATE XVIII

The Greatest Homosexual
1964



PLATE XIX

Water Color
1965

A demonstration painting combining
the style of De Kooning with Larry
Rivers by Dr. Carl Shull.



Selection of paintings by

The Author

Plates XXI - XXVI

PLATE XXI

Blue Lady
1964

PLATE XXI

Large Figure
1964



PLATE XXII

Figure I (Unfinished)
1965



PLATE XXIII

Figure II (Unfinished)
1965



PLATE XXIV

Figure III
1965



PLATE XXV

Figure IV
1965



PLATE XXVI

Feminine Figure III
1966



PLATES XXVII - XXXI

Selection of
Ink Studies on the Figure
by the Author
1966





