GENDER CONSTRUCTION AND MANIFESTATION IN THE ART OF ELAINE DE KOONING

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

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in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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by
Lisa Beth Strahl
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ABSTRACT

Title: Gender Construction and Manifestation in the Art of
Elaine de Kooning
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As a woman whose career lifted off during the era of Abstract Expressionism, Elaine de Kooning is precariously positioned between her gender and her career. She began painting in the midst of a male-dominated movement and in later years continued to use very masculine themes in her art; however, her gender sets her apart from her mostly male colleagues during the Abstract Expressionist period. The mid-century expectation of machismo and masculinity shaped Elaine de Kooning's art and career, and there is a tension within her art as she tried to fit the established (male) persona of the typical Abstract Expressionist artist while also maintaining a female identity.

As the wife of Willem de Kooning, Elaine is most often discussed with respect to this relationship. Her name is infrequently mentioned in scholarship without reference to Willem, and her contribution to art history has only recently been studied in any length in Jane Bledsoe's *Elaine de Kooning* (1992) and in a series of smaller gallery publications. Furthermore, Elaine has become recognized and respected, in some cases, more for her critical writings for *Art News* during the

1950s and 1960s than for her art.[1] She was an artist turned art critic, and this crossover has further complicated the scholarly attention devoted to her.

Elaine consistently revisited male-inspired subject matter: in her portraiture she painted predominantly male sitters; in her cave painting-inspired work she reflected a society of primitive male hunters; in her series of sports paintings she depicted male basketball and baseball players in dynamic postures; in her Bacchus series she investigated a male god and the vitality of the statue's writhing male musculature; and in her bull and bison series she worked with the clichéd animalistic symbol of masculine strength and virility. These subjects, combined with the ejaculatory style of Abstract Expressionism's loose brushwork and vibrant swirling colors, provide a unique contrast to the artist, herself, as a female personality.

[1] See Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings*. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THE CHALLENGE OF HISTORIC SITUATION

> While the recent upsurge of feminist activity in this country has indeed been a liberating one, its force has been chiefly emotional – personal, psychological and subjective – centered, like the other radical movements to which it is related, on the present and its immediate needs rather than on historical analysis of the basic intellectual issues which the feminist attack on the status quo automatically raises.[1]

Linda Nochlin begins her article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" with an issue that continues to be a fundamental problem relating to the integration and position of female artists in the established canon of art history. Nochlin suggests that the dialogue of art history as a discipline has been reserved for a white, male viewpoint and, in order to change that, the scholarly discussion of female artists must extend further than the subjective and emotional. The new dialogue must be one of intellectual analysis and historical precedence.

In 1971 Elaine de Kooning responded to Nochlin's article:

> Well, first – that term, "women artists," I was talking to Joan Mitchell at a party about 10 years ago when a man came up to us and said, "What do you women artists think…" Joan grabbed my arm and said, "Elaine, let's get the hell out of here." That was my first response to Linda Nochlin's article… I agree when Miss Nochlin says "women's experience and situation in society, and hence as artists, is different from men's," except for the "hence as

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[1] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News* (January 1971): p. 23.

> artists." Thirty years ago, the name of an article like this could have been "Where are the Great American Artists?"[2]

Expressing her own conviction that female artists do not necessarily have a different experience in society than male artists, at least not during the 1940s when the American modern art scene was coalescing, Elaine de Kooning emphasized that the term "woman" need not necessarily be a modifier for the term "artist." She believed that focusing on the segregation of artists by gender, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, diminished the true consequence of the era, which was the emergence of modern art that was becoming recognizably American. However, as a woman who launched her career during the era of Abstract Expressionism – an era sometimes distinguished by its sense of machismo and male-domination – Elaine de Kooning, the artist, is precariously positioned between her gender and her career. On one hand, her career begins during the 1940s in the midst of a male-dominated movement; and then, in later decades, she continues to use very masculine themes in her art (basketball and baseball players, male portraits, bull fighting, and cave painting, to name a few). On the other hand, her gender sets her apart from the machismo of the Abstract Expressionist period. The Abstract Expressionist expectation of machismo and masculinity has shaped Elaine de Kooning's art and career, and there is a tension within her art as she tried to fit the established (male) persona of the typical Abstract Expressionist artist while also maintaining a female identity.

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[2] Elaine de Kooning and Roslyn Drexler, "Dialogue, Eight Artists Reply, Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News* (January 1971): p. 40.

As the wife of Willem de Kooning, Elaine is most often discussed with respect to this relationship. Her name is infrequently mentioned in art historical scholarship without reference to Willem, and her contribution to art history and the Abstract Expressionist movement has only recently been studied in any length in books like Jane Bledsoe's *Elaine de Kooning* from 1992 (a publication accompanying an exhibition at the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia in 1992, with an introduction by Bledsoe and three essays by Lawrence Campbell, Helen A. Harrison and Rose Slivka) and in a series of smaller gallery exhibitions and corresponding publications. Furthermore, Elaine has become recognized and respected more for her critical writings that were published in *Art News* during the 1950s and 1960s than for her art.[3] She was an artist turned art critic, and this crossover into critical writing has further complicated the scholarly attention devoted to her. She is often cited in the scholarship regarding the artists about whom she wrote and has not been consistently celebrated for her own personal contribution to painting.

In many instances, Elaine is only briefly mentioned in the extensive Abstract Expressionist scholarship. In William Seitz's important book titled *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (1983) as well as in Irving Sandler's *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970) her name appears only in reference to her art historical/critical writing on fellow artist and friend, Arshile Gorky. The listing of Willem de Kooning in the index at the back of each book, however, is extensive. In

[3] See Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings.* New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994.

Dore Ashton's *American Art Since 1945* (1982) Elaine is mentioned in a single sentence referring to the preservation of realism in portraiture: "Elaine de Kooning in her later portraits sustained her Expressionist impulse while being very precise in her configurations, as in her portrait of the Abstract Expressionist painter Aristedemis Kaldis."[4] This single sentence alludes to Elaine's significance within the American modern art movement; however, interestingly, Ashton goes no further in explaining Elaine's art, working practice or historical situation. Stephen Polcari, in his book *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (1991), mentions Elaine only with regard to statements she has made about Willem. David and Cecile Shapiro, in their book *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record* (1990), go to the extreme of referencing Elaine as "Mrs. Willem de Kooning," even listing her in the index as such (implying that we would not recognize her name unless the association with her husband has been clarified). In Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983) she is mentioned in a footnote and in Clifford Ross (editor), *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics* (1990), Elaine is referenced, once again, for her critical writing about other artists. Other surveys of Abstract Expressionism, such as Michael Auping's (editor) *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Development* (1987) and Nancy Jachec's *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism* (2000), do not mention Elaine de Kooning at all.

[4] Dore Ashton, *American Art Since 1945,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982): p. 168.

Ann Gibson, whose book *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (1997) was compiled in order to re-evaluate the discriminatory omission of non-white, non-male artists during the Abstract Expressionist movement, includes a number of references to Elaine de Kooning throughout the 168-page text. Of course, Gibson's purpose is to question the canonical definition and distinction of Abstract Expressionism as a predominantly white male movement in art. Gibson's text, however, can also be recognized as an introduction to those artists who have been missed or overlooked in the existing scholarship surrounding the Abstract Expressionist period in art history. But, again, this text does not provide a thorough discussion of Elaine de Kooning's oeuvre nor does it fully recount her relationship to the movement that so evidently shaped her career.

In an interview by Jeffrey Potter for an oral history of Jackson Pollock, artist Elaine de Kooning declared that "one single idea runs through one's life."[5] The dominant idea at the core of Elaine's art is the supremacy of energy and gesture. Her work consistently incorporates dynamic movement and the study of motion, specifically as it applies to expression and power. The dynamic motifs in her work are stylistically established by a loose, gestural manner of painting. In her gestural style there is the suggestion of masculinity and an adherence to the Abstract Expressionist precedent that influenced her early career.

[5] Pollock-Krasner Study Center, East Hampton, NY. Elaine de Kooning interviewed by Jeffrey Potter for "An Oral History of Jackson Pollock," July 22, 1980.

Elaine's thematic subject matter, which manifests in several major series throughout her life, illustrates the interconnectivity of the artist's overall oeuvre. As Jane Bledsoe articulates:

> Elaine de Kooning, either consciously or unconsciously, turned the tables on the traditional male painter's rendition of woman as object, whether of desire or danger… This complex issue not only poses, once again, the universal male/female conundrum, but also raises specific biographic questions about the artist.[6]

As will be explored in this thesis, Elaine's art evinces an interest in masculine themes and style explored through the filter of her femininity. By investigating each series in turn, I expose some of the complexities of the "male/female conundrum" in Elaine's work and reveal the artist's foundations as a catalyst for better understanding her overall career.

In the Chapter 2, I discuss Elaine's early career as an artist. I focus on the series of abstract paintings she completed during the summer of 1948 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. This series reveals some of her earliest influences, including mentors, teachers and peers who were predominantly male figures in the contemporary artistic community. Elaine's Black Mountain paintings are completely abstract and therefore correspond very directly to mid-century Abstract Expressionist ideals. By examining these early works, I uncover a spirit of investigation that is at the heart of Elaine's entire career. The Black Mountain paintings demonstrate a controlled structure and a quest for a unique style of painting within the context of the Abstract Expressionist community.

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[6] Jane K. Beldsoe, *Elaine de Kooning,* (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): p. 17.

With her early career influenced so solidly by Abstract Expressionism, Elaine continued to use a gestural, Abstract Expressionist-inspired style in her other major series of work. Chapter 3 concentrates on her portraiture. Elaine is sometimes considered first and foremost a portraitist because she continually created portraits throughout her entire career. Her portraits range in date from the 1940s until the 1980s. In 1962, she was awarded the major commission to create a portrait of John F. Kennedy and this prestigious commission solidified her reputation as a portrait artist. In this chapter, I discuss several examples of her portraits with respect to several points: First, there is the fact that most of her portrait subjects were of men; secondly, some of the male figures painted in the 1950s are faceless, meaning that the faces are unclear and, in most cases, seem smudged away. Elaine's portraits were not about exact features and a replication of minutiae (photographic likeness) but rather her paintings insinuate the movement and body position of an individual. At many times during her career she remarked that a person could be recognizable with limited traits, even without countenance. Her portraits are bathed in a sea of brushwork and the gestural style that she uses in her portraiture furthers the link between her masculine subject matter and dynamic motifs in her oeuvre.

In Chapter 4, I concentrate on her sports paintings, created mostly during the 1950s and the 1970s but revisited by Elaine in other decades as well. This series most directly unites her interest in energetic motion with masculine subject matter – male athletes. These works do not capture detailed portraits of specific athletes, although certain famous figures are identifiable. However these paintings do

summarize in all instances a particular *type* of individual. Similar to the seated male portraits in style, with a ghostly silhouette of an anomalous figure engulfed by expressionist brushwork and vibrant color, these sports paintings capture the extroverted motion of an athlete. The figures are moving in a manner that mimics the movement of the paint.

Chapter 5 focuses on Elaine's extensive series of Bacchus paintings, which she worked on during the 1970s and 1980s. These works are based on a statue from the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. As Ann Schoenfeld describes, "Her obsession is with the architecture of gesture and translating it into two dimensions."[7] In the Bacchus series, Elaine repeatedly painted the statue's writhing conglomeration of figures from a single viewpoint using different combinations of colors and brushstrokes. Again, the theme is a dynamic scene of subjects piled atop one another and the main figure, as Elaine perceived it, was that of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and intoxication.[8] By naming these works "Bacchus" she draws direct attention to this central male figure and her work is, once again, energetically constructed around a masculine form using a framework of loose, gestural brushstrokes.

Chapter 6 concludes my thesis with an examination of a series by Elaine of bulls and bison that culminates in her large-scale cave paintings. In the late 1950s,

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[7] Ann Schoenfeld, "Exhibition Reviews," *Arts Magazine* (December 1982): p. 41.

[8] Elaine misinterpreted the subject of this statue as Bacchus and according to a catalog of the 19th century artist Jules Dalou's work, the sculpture in the Luxembourg Gardens is actually depicting Silenus, foster father and mentor of Bacchus. This discrepancy will be mentioned further in Chapter 4.

Elaine began painting bulls and bison when she relocated from New York City to Albuquerque, New Mexico. The strong central animal form is symbolically masculine. The early bull paintings such as *Standing Bull* (1960) contain a rough central image of a bull with brushstrokes of color forcefully radiating from it. The bull emits a great explosion of energy. If we think of the bull and its frequently-accepted symbolism, the animal stands for steadfastness, strength and perseverance, and it is usually equated directly with masculinity. Elaine retains her characteristic gestural quality of the paint in these works. The smaller bull and bison paintings from the late 1950s and 1960s inform the later series of very large canvases from the 1980s which were inspired by Paleolithic cave paintings. In the caves, of course, bulls and bison (along with other animals) are the principle imagery. These large works are the finale of her career and summarize the ideas that she struggled with along the way, including her masculine subject matter, her own feminine perspective and the Abstract Expressionist roots which underscore her entire body of work.

In Elaine's 1955 essay, "Subject: What, How, or Who?" she explains the bifurcation of "style and subject as distinct elements of painting."[9] In tandem with the onset of Abstract Expressionism there was an increasing interest in non-objective art. Contrary to the accepted values of traditional realism, abstraction (whether partial or total) meant that style was becoming interlaced with subject. Elaine, however, described these attributes as two separate but complementary

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[9] Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* p.143.

ideals and the relationship between style and subject matter are epitomized in her art. After a short stint in complete abstraction with her 1940s work – especially the Black Mountain series of paintings where I begin my study – Elaine returned to subject matter. Her Abstract Expressionist roots and her gestural style of painting, forever after, are intertwined with imagery. Furthermore, she noticeably chooses images and motifs associated with men or masculinity: sports, portraits of men, a statue of Bacchus, bulls, bison and cave paintings. Her style reflects the Abstract Expressionist characteristic of quick gestures and powerful paint strokes.

Bill Berkson writes of Elaine that, "One might say of her, as she did of Gorky, that, given her taste for many different kinds of painting, her talent and temperament took care of her style."[10] But is this not a common characteristic for Abstract Expressionist painting as a whole? With dominant and brooding personalities such as Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning at the helm of the movement, temperament was more than peripheral for 1950s artists, and on more than one occasion the overarching masculinity of the period has been insinuated to be its unifying element. Female artists, such as Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Mercedes Matter and Joan Mitchell have been frequently excluded from study due to their gender difference. Jonathan Fineberg describes this occurrence:

> A painting by Pollock, de Kooning, or Kline embodied a spontaneous act of origination that aspired to an ideal state of defining the style of the painting, the identity of the artist, and even art itself, in the process of painting… In 1952 Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting," modeled on his

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[10] Bill Berkson, "The Portraitist," catalogue essay, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, LLC, New York, January 5 – 30, 1999.

> intimate knowledge of de Kooning's working process. His essay, "The American Action Painters," brought into focus the paramount concern of de Kooning, Pollock, and Kline in particular… with the act of painting. Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, and other remarkable women at the time also shared these aspirations in their work but, as Ann Gibson has pointed out, "they were not *seen.*" The social hierarchy of the forties and fifties, even in the art world, simply wasn't open to the full participation or women or ethnic minorities… Nevertheless, for some of these women of the New York School, as for the action painters, the canvas was not a representation but an extension of the mind itself, in which the artist thought by changing the surface with his or her brush.[11]

The women artists mentioned in the above passage exemplify that personal spirit of temperament as a guiding force in their work on a par with their male counterparts. As Ann Gibson points out in her seminal book, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (1997)*,* "Among women artists, Krasner, Nevelson, and de Kooning all at times had also demonstrated their sexuality, an aspect of their subject matter that has seldom been explored."[12] Gibson is referring to the intersection between the artist's gender and what that artist presents in their painting. For Elaine, this intersection is evident in every series of work I have chosen to explore in this thesis.

My aim is not to psychoanalyze Elaine's career in terms of gender construction, nor is it to completely document and systematically dissect every aspect of each painting she created in her lifetime. Instead, I will call attention to the masculine undertones present in much of Elaine's art – identifying and discussing the gender construction of the Abstract Expressionist era as it applies to and manifests itself in Elaine's own subject matter and style. Elaine has been

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[11] Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being,* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000): p. 34-35.

[12] Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): p. 139.

consistently overlooked in the scholarship of Abstract Expressionism and yet her work very much exemplifies the movement's foremost tenets. Her work has the distinct abstraction and lyricism of a Pollock or a Gorky, for example, as well as the Surrealist, biomorphic beginnings of Rothko or husband Willem. Unlike several of her male contemporaries whose careers were brought to an end prematurely, Elaine's art spans most of the 70+ years of her life, changing and developing along the way, while also retaining this interesting undercurrent of her Abstract Expressionist foundation as it uniquely applies to a female artist. Elaine's own writings in regard to other artists reveal interests and tendencies toward the development of her own style.

Eleanor Munro, in her book *Originals – American Women Artists* (1979), begins the chapter for Elaine de Kooning with the following:

> Elaine de Kooning, painter, critic, teacher, lecturer, came along midway in the Abstract Expressionist era. By inheritance a Feminist, by training an articulate explicator of thorny esthetic matters, she quickly came into her own in that fractious group. Though she married the future Abstract Expressionist master, Willem de Kooning – Bill – in 1943, she thereafter and more so since her amicable separation in '56 steered pretty much her own course. Her manner of handling paint in raking, pleated, balanced-in-tension strokes was learned mainly from him with traces from others she admired, particularly Arshile Gorky. But her imagery was her own. Her theme, one that other women have nearly universally ignored in their art, has been the image of the Towering Male. As male painters through history pursued the nymph-goddess-virgin-queen down the corridors of dream and esthetic mannerism, E de K (as she signs her paintings) has followed her romantic, over-life-size grail, posed now as portrait subject, now as athlete, now as President, now as Bacchus. Now he appears with a recognizable face, now without features at all, sitting knees apart, those jutting knees a child might see first and foremost when facing a grown person. *He* appears even, in some works, as the bull at its moment of truth.[13]

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[13] Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979): p. 248.

Munro's words neatly encapsulate a premise in Elaine's work that demands further art historical study. Many authors and scholars have mentioned the predicament of a masculine theme running through her art, but none have pursued the line in any sufficient depth. Elaine wished to be treated as equal to all other artists, whether male or female. While gender was not part of her personal political platform, it very evidently plays an informative part in her art, be it consciously or unconsciously, and deserves the attention afforded in this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

ABSTRACTION AND THE BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE PAINTINGS

"Despite all of the unaccustomed student and social activity, I still managed to come away with a roll of enamel paintings on wrapping paper – a testimonial to the durability of paint, if nothing more." –Elaine de Kooning[1]

In 1948, Willem and Elaine de Kooning spent their summer at Black Mountain College, an experimental school of art in the small town of Asheville, North Carolina. Willem accepted a teaching position at the school and Elaine accompanied him as his wife. Elaine's work from this period, usually referred to as the Black Mountain paintings, is purely abstract and reflects her relationship with both her husband as well as other artists at the school. While her Black Mountain works lack explicit subject matter, they do exhibit a controlled structure of color and shape. The strict attention to formal composition at the early stages of her career marks the beginning of her quest for her own unique style of painting. Although her work will return to recognizable subject matter after her stint at the College, this early series shows a variety of influences from other artists as well as the historic landscape of Abstract Expressionism as a whole. By examining this early abstract work, we can more easily contextualize her other series and better understand her artistic motivations.

[1] From "de Kooning Memories" by Elaine de Kooning, *Vogue,* December, 1983 reprinted in "Elaine de Kooning: Black Mountain Paintings from 1948," Washburn Gallery, New York, October 1 – November 2, 1991.

Compositionally, the Black Mountain works seem to fall somewhere between the loose biomorphic constructions of Surrealist artist, Joan Miró, and the regimented color theory of Josef Albers or Hans Hofmann.[2] Elaine was directly in contact with both Albers and Hofmann early in her career and both artists eventually became subjects of her written column for *Art News,* "(blank) Paints a Picture."[3] Aside from the influence of these very prominent art educators, there is a strong technical affiliation with her husband, Willem, during this time period. The colors in the Black Mountain abstractions are reminiscent of Willem's earlier paintings, including *Pink Angels* from 1945, and the compositions have a flow similar to that in Willem's *Black Friday* (1948) or *Excavation* (1950). Her works can even be said to have an architectural rationality, possibly a result of Elaine's interest in (and well known adoration of) Buckminster Fuller, a prominent architect and instructor at Black Mountain College, who was there during her stay. Overall, Elaine's series of Black Mountain paintings is exploratory, marking her burgeoning interest in serial

[2] The biomorphic forms of the Surrealists were investigated early in Elaine's Black Mountain work. Specifically, she produced a drawing (graphite on paper, in Vincent Katz, ed., *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002, p. 110) that indicates an early Surrealist interest that later develops into her more typical Black Mountain abstractions. (Figure 65)

[3] According to an interview, Elaine also mentioned a high school art teacher she had, who was influenced by Hofmann's approach. [Fortress, Karl E. (Karl Eugene) (1907-) Collection, taped interviews with artists, 1963-1985, 205 sound cassettes, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., donated 1978-1985.]

investigation and experimentation with style, but they also serve to document her early years – a period in which her artistic mentors are notably men.[4]

Elaine was one of a number of artists who tended towards abstraction during the mid-century. Her Black Mountain paintings (Figures 1, 2, 6, 10, and 11) are methodical patterns of colors and irregular shapes without a subject or a central focal point. Though each work varies in color, the colors are always bold and saturated. In most of these works, the forms are outlined in black and appear to float at the surface of the picture plane. These works have a sense of intellectual control reminiscent of the color and compositional theories of both Josef Albers, who attended to the immediacy of colors and the effects they have on one another, and Hans Hofmann, who strategically placed colors and shapes next to one another in order to bring about a "push and pull" effect. Against a ground of somewhat consistent color, Elaine's own shapes seem to be situated three-dimensionally but with similar effects as both Albers and Hofmann. (Figures 1, 2, and 6) Regularly scattered across the page and exhibiting a balance in color, Elaine's shapes fall into abstract compositions that seem to be more about formal construction than anything else.

Scholar Helen Harrison examined Elaine's art with respect to the New York School in a catalog essay for a 1994 exhibition of Elaine's work in Washington D.C. organized by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. In this essay, Harrison explains how Elaine's early abstractions develop from her even earlier

[4] It is important to note that there were several female teachers at Black Mountain College at this same time, including Fannie Hillsmith and Anni Albers in visual arts and several other female poets and writers.

investigations of still life, which demonstrate a keen interest in pattern and texture.[5] These early investigations by Elaine were encouraged by her soon-to-be husband, Willem de Kooning. As Harrison notes:

> As Elaine's artistic mentor during the earliest phase of her development, [Willem] de Kooning urged her to study form in its totality – not only the shapes of objects but also the spaces between them – in order to grasp the fundamentals of pictorial organization.[6]

We can see this investigation in the arrangement of the details within her *Self-Portrait #3* from 1946. (Figure 7) While the central focus of this work is the artist's own image, the collection of objects that surround her are treated with equal attention. There is a deliberate pictorial organization and an overall rationality in compositional structure resulting from the evenly spaced arrangement of objects.[7] There is also an integration of light and dark spaces within an object and shadows are very carefully created and used rhythmically. (Figure 8) The small background pictures at the upper right, for example, have an interesting patchwork effect of light

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[5] She completed several still-life paintings in the late 1930s and early 1940s including *Still Life (Dead Bird and Leaves)* from 1942, *Still Life (Pitcher and Box)* from 1942 and *Still Life with Scissors,* c. 1939. All of these works are reproduced in Bledsoe, Jane K. *Elaine de Kooning.* Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992. Hans Hofmann also began his work from nature saying that, "nature is always the source of [a painter's] creative impulses." [quoted in William C. Seitz, *Hans Hofmann,* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972): p. 11)]. Hofmann was influenced by landscape images, figures, and still-lifes – observable reality that he then simplified into geometries, volumes and space.

[6] Helen A. Harrison, "Witness to Imminent Drama: Elaine de Kooning and the New York School," catalogue essay, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System Gallery (Washington D.C., June 21- September 6, 1994): p. 6.

[7] The objects in her still-life work (as well as this self-portrait) have not been identified specifically, although they are referenced in an essay by Helen Harrison as possible being chosen for their "formal properties and surface qualities." [Jane K. Bledsoe, *Elaine de Kooning* (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): p. 27.]

and dark. (Figure 9) In fact, if we look past the subject matter in these small paintings within the painting, there is an all over patterning that is structurally comparable to Elaine's 1948 abstractions.

Elaine attended to shapes and spaces in her Black Mountain paintings. While seeming like an abstract system of the forms themselves, the compositions are equally balanced by the areas surrounding the forms. There is evidence of the concept of "totality" that Willem was teaching Elaine. In other Abstract Expressionist work from mid-century – such as Jackson Pollock's drip paintings or Arshile Gorky's abstractions for instance – line is no longer hierarchically important as a delimiter of shape, form or object. The line has a greater sense of freedom and as author Elizabeth Frank describes, in Pollock's work there is the idea of "automatist directness and authenticity."[8] Frank argues that Pollock was attempting to "circumvent the habitual constraints of drawing as contour, and to encourage a greater contact with the unconscious."[9] In Elaine's abstractions, the same liberating principle holds true for shape. Her shapes are not situated distinctly against a background, but instead, all parts of the work are interconnected and patterned; all areas of the canvas are equally relevant to the totality.

Willem provided Elaine with studio instruction even prior to their marriage in 1943. She was also entrenched in the New York School art scene around this time and later in her career she expressed specific interest in, for example, Mark

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[8] Elizabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollock,* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983): p. 66.

[9] Ibid.

Rothko. In an interview from 1981 conducted by Phyllis Tuchman, the artist said that one of the more fascinating aspects of Rothko's work, to her, was the all over quality of his canvases and the non-hierarchical presence of the color. She stated that:

> I saw the first show, the breakthrough. His earlier works in the '40s that was influenced by [André] Masson and had those contours and had a tension to his work. But then when he came out with the first paintings of the floated on areas, the turpentine washes where there were no contours and the edges were indistinct, one color floated over another. And I was absolutely captured by the magic of the presence of the colors, the fact that they did not inhabit shapes. That interested me very much. The shapes, they weren't really shapes.[10]

Rothko completed a series referred to as his "multiforms" in the later 1940s and these canvases mark a transition in his career from his earlier Surrealist-inspired imagery to larger areas of floating color. As Diane Waldman explains, "Dots, dashes, dragged lines, indeterminate contours, all are used to activate the surfaces of the multiforms, as Rothko more and more severely restricts their compositions and reduces the shapes in them to a few simple slabs of color."[11] Elaine's Black Mountain paintings are not, of course, simple fields of color as are seen in the works of color-field Abstract Expressionists like Rothko. Elaine seemed, however, to explore the overarching idea of a totality through the unification of figure and ground. As Harrison points out, this unification of figure and ground has Analytic

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[10] Elaine de Kooning Collection, Elaine de Kooning interview conducted by Phyillis Tuchman, August 1981, for Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project, 1 sound cassette and transcript on microfilm, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, [Microfilm reel 4937]

[11] Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective,* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1978): p. 55.

Cubist roots.[12] Elaine is shaping her art according to historical and contemporary precedent, close instruction from Willem and a situation within the New York School.

Later, when Elaine reintroduces subject matter, her canvases rely equally on positive and negative space, showing figure (or object) in a setting that fully envelops it.[13] In Elaine's work, the interconnectedness of space and void, figure and background, object and setting, derives from the catalyst of dynamic movement. So, for example, the sports players are enmeshed with the background due to the energy spiraling around them, an energy that has been made visible. Her portraits, as well as her later bull, bison and Bacchus works, have this similar characteristic. Hans Hofmann used color and shape to create space and movement within a picture. He experimented with contours of color that appeared to advance or recede spatially, producing what Hofmann described as a "push and pull" effect. In a work like *Ecstasy* (Figure 5), for instance, space is created by the areas of color which represent surfaces of solids.[14] Hofmann's paintings were inspired by nature and the fact that human perception is two-dimensional while the world around us is three-dimensional.[15] He attempted to reconcile these two ideas through the intermediary

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[12] Harrison, p. 7.

[13] See her Chapter 4: The Sports Paintings for examples of the figure enmeshed with its background.

[14] William Seitz describes Hofmann's philosophy and technique in *Hans Hofmann,* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972).

[15] Hofmann stated that "Actually we see only the appearance of things. Our vision is two-dimensionally oriented, but reality is three dimensional." (Seitz, *Hans Hofmann,* p. 14)

of medium and his “push and pull” effect: He stated, “Only from the varied counterplay of push and pull, and from its variation in intensities, will plastic creation result.”[16] In *Ecstasy* and in other works, Hofmann achieves a balance between the flatness of the picture plane and spatial depth by using what he calls “intervals” and “complexes” of color.[17] He describes his interrelation of color by stating that:

> Intervals are tensional variations, the degree of which characterizes a given relation. In a relation, two colors engage each other in a simultaneously accelerated intensification or diminution. None is the winner and none the loser. They are united to carry a meaning through their interaction. The divergency in both makes the tensional difference of the interval.[18]

Whereas Hofmann’s abstractions tend toward tension resulting from contrasts among colors, Elaine’s Black Mountain work seems to have a lyricism that is smoothly dynamic rather than jarring. Transitions in her work flow from one area to another. We can see these transitions by looking at a detail of the *Untitled #15* (Figure 4), where white highlights are used on or near edges of shapes to move from one area of the work to the next. There are smooth transitions between areas of

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[16] Ibid., p. 27.

[17] Hofmann states that “In a complex, a few, a greater number, or a multitude of colors (or color shades) meet… In spite of a multiplicity of shaded differences, their synthesis presents itself as one color complex contrasted with another, and with all the other color complexes within pictorial totality… A color complex presents volume in a multitude of color vibrations.” (Seitz, p. 47)

[18] Ibid.

different colors and even the color choices seem to be more about lyrical contrast than about Hofmann-esque tension/spatial advancement or recession.[19]

Elaine's interest in color and its effect led her toward an architectural construction in her Black Mountain compositions. This can be at least partly attributed to her direct contact in formal classes with both Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller at Black Mountain College. Both Albers and Fuller were experimenting scientifically with unique ideas of aesthetics, and Elaine audited both of these teacher's classes during her summer in Asheville.

Color in Elaine's Black Mountain work seems to hold equal importance as line. Shapes are organic and biomorphic, traced by black lines (but not necessarily defined by the lines) and color unites all areas of the work's surface. Josef Albers, at this time, was systematically investigating the effects of color independent of shape (with shape held constant). His "Homage to the Square" series was the full realization of these preliminary investigations. In Albers' "Concerning Art

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[19] Unlike Lee Krasner, Elaine did not have a prolonged professional interaction with Hofmann. However, Hofmann's influence on Elaine is well-documented. She did study for a short time with him and the two intermingled through the close artistic community in New York City. Krasner's contact with Hofmann led to a slightly different result in terms of the affect on her overall career. For Krasner, Hofmann's influence was that of abstracting nature. As Anne Wagner explains, "From Hofmann Krasner learned the painterly 'detachment' required in his studio: the art of translating forms into a springy armature of lines and planes and circles, working with and through their jumps in scale and color to equalize them all as marks on a planar surface." [*Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): p. 114.] While Krasner de-emphasizes the result of Hofmann's teaching on her overall career, Hofmann's influence notably guided Krasner and she worked with some form of abstraction for most of her career. On the other hand, Elaine's Black Mountain work was a short-lived experiment in abstraction. Her later imagery is influenced by this earlier stint with abstraction. Hofmann's ideas, however, play an important role in Krasner's overall oeuvre.

Instruction" that was published in the *Black Mountain College Bulletin* (June 1934), the artist describes part of his curriculum as a systematic exploration of "the tonal possibilities of colors, their relativity, their interaction and influence on each other, cold and warmth, light intensity, color intensity, psychical and spatial effects."[20] Albers' ideas stemmed from his own earlier studies and teachings at the Bauhaus in Germany, where he stressed the principles of education through improvisational play.[21] From this, Elaine seems to have adopted the idea of experimentation with form and color in order to create dynamic effects in her work. She juxtaposes areas of brilliant color, sometimes only a few colors in a work (Figure 6) or in the case of *Untitled #15* from 1948 (Figure 2), several colors are organized in a collection of biomorphic shapes. Elaine uses abstraction to experiment with rhythm, which indicates the impact of spatial effects discussed by Albers and builds upon her early encounters with Hofmann's theoretical "push and pull" effect.

In an interview from 1962, Albers summed up his earlier intent:

> Color, in my opinion, behaves like a man – in two distinct ways: first, in self-realization and then in the realization of relationships with others. In my paintings I have tried to make two polarities meet – independence and interdependence, as, for instance, in Pompeian art. There's a certain red the Pompeians used that speaks in both these ways, first in its relation to other colors around it, and then as it appears alone, keeping its own face. In other words, one must combine both being an individual and being a member of society. That's the parallel.[22]

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[20] Vincent Katz, ed., *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002): p. 34.

[21] For example, he would present students with discarded materials and they were instructed to create with them.

[22] Frederick A. Horowitz and Brenda Danilowitz, *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes, The Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and Yale,* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2006): p. 80.

Elaine's Black Mountain work exhibits this characteristic of both independence and interdependence of color. The colors are solidly painted with little contact between areas of different colors. This makes us feel as though the forms float in an overall field. But the repetition of color and form and the consistency of the interwoven black line that surrounds the shapes emphasize the interdependence of one form with another. It is no accident that these ideas of Albers are visually prominent in Elaine's work.

In her 1950 piece for *Art News*, "Albers Paints a Picture," Elaine writes:

> Interested in employing "color-discords" rather than harmonies, Albers feels that any group of colors can have an exciting relationship. "That seems quite simple enough," the artist continues, "but since the effect depends on the quantity, placement, shape, recurrence, ground, reflectability, etc., it remains a struggle, as color is the most relative medium in art, and it takes a trained eye to see the possibilities of correspondence among any given tones."[23]

She explains how Albers fixes his proportions in his painting and then considers those aspects of color that create an "exciting relationship." I would venture to say that Elaine considered all of these same ideas when creating her Black Mountain work. For example, the colors are noticeably similar in several canvases. She repeats color schemes, keeping certain colors constant while others change. *Untitled 12* (Figure 10), *Black Mountain Number 6* (Figure 11) and *Black Mountain #16* (Figure 1) all contain a similar gold-yellow color as a backbone to the composition and red highlights strewn throughout. Other colors are repeated as well between canvases and within a single work.

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[23] *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings.* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 86.

Furthermore, she employs a color palette similar to that of her husband, Willem, as seen in her *Untitled # 15* (Figure 2).[24] The color choices in this work follow the color schemes of some of Willem's works such as *Judgment Day* from 1946 (Figure 3) or *Seated Woman* from 1940. The same shade of pink provides a connective background in both Elaine's and Willem's works and a similar green, blue, yellow and orange dominate the rest of the composition. This suggests a close working relationship and a mutual exchange of ideas between the two artists. There may even be evidence here of experimentation with a fixed amount of colors. A back and forth and give and take between husband and wife can also be recognized in the overall compositions that Willem explores. In his *Excavation* from 1950, for example, there is a similar connectivity of figure and ground, an interplay between spaces and shapes, although Willem's work seems rougher, more jagged and angular while Elaine's work is comprised of smooth and flowing curves. Interestingly, in the 1980s, Willem returned to greater abstraction in his work and at this point, his works become more delicate and curving rather than rough and sharp.[25]

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[24] While I focus on similarity here for the sake of arguing mentorship, differences are also apparent such as the smudged, less regular forms of Willem compared to the more regular patterning of shapes in Elaine's work.

[25] It is known that Elaine's Black Mountain works were stored away during much of her career only to re-emerge in 1984. It is interesting that at this time, Willem created more lyrical abstractions that resemble somewhat Elaine's Black Mountain work. Elaine and Willem were in close contact at this point, as Willem was suffering from dementia and Elaine took care of him on a regular basis. They lived near one another in East Hampton.

In some cases, it seems as though Albers' influence is not always directly related to form or color necessarily, but instead to something philosophical. In "Albers Paints a Picture," Elaine comments, "as Albers says: 'The concern of the artist is with the discrepancy between physical fact and psychological effect.'"[26] In her Black Mountain abstractions, Elaine is unconcerned with representational or recognizable subject matter, although the "physical fact" does return in her later series of works based upon visual reality. These early abstract works, however, allowed the artist to explore the psychological effect of color and shape of which Albers speaks without the need for or potential distraction of recognizable imagery. This psychological component is relative to the biomorphic imagery she adopts from the Surrealists. Earlier graphite sketches from the mid-1940s include three-dimensional, organ-like shapes, much more anthropomorphically- and psychoanalytically-derived than her work from 1948 and 49. (Figure 65) In the Black Mountain work, Elaine retains the Surrealist undertone while evolving the shapes into a much more geometric composition. Much of what Albers brought to the educational process was a spirit of experimentation, and Elaine's Black Mountain work offers evidence of her own systematic transformation of shape, color and form.

Elaine's inquiry at this time was equally balanced between the formal instruction, in particular the color theory of Josef Albers, and a more unusual source; the teachings of architect, inventor and designer, Buckminster Fuller. Fuller is best known as the inventor (or architect) of the geodesic dome, and his ideas

[26] *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* p. 83.

ranged from the fields of mathematics, engineering and science to philosophy, literature, architecture and visual art. One author said of Fuller's methods: "Fuller saw clearly that men do not make structures out of 'materials'; they make large structures out of small structures – visible module associations out of non-visible module associations."[27] His ideas, then, were not stimulated by materials per se but by hierarchical construction methods in which structures were broken down into smaller parts. His geodesic dome, for example, was a series of smaller, load-bearing units comprising the whole.

There are documentary photographs that show a captivated Elaine in Fuller's classes.[28] She seems to have been absorbing the construction method that Fuller was teaching at the college and her own works from this time exhibit a methodical interlay of color and shape that can be characterized as architectural. Like stones placed into cement, Elaine's Black Mountain works seem to be built and constructed, more than emotively materialized as is the case for her later work. There is a hard and fast design to these pictures and the arrangement may very well have been inspired by the engineering philosophies of Buckminster Fuller, which Elaine herself describes in her 1952 essay "Dymaxion Artist," as being more concerned with efficiency and mechanics than aesthetics; however, Elaine does confess that Fuller's structures have, what she calls, a "spare beauty" while the "all-

[27] Katz, ed., p. 148.

[28] For these documentary photos, see Katz, ed., pages 114 and 148. Both of the photos show Elaine engrossed in an interactive class taught by Fuller at Black Mountain College.

inclusive efficiency is his primary consideration."[29] Having the feel of prefabricated units arranged on a surface, Elaine's Black Mountain paintings seem to have less of the explosive immediacy of her later work and more of an inherent intellectual framework: a vocabulary of biomorphic form upon which she bases each work in this series. However, we can see that this intellectual investigatory process does reemerge in her later work as she tests her technique on several canvases with respect to a specific subject matter. Working in series (for instance, the Bacchus Series as discussed in Chapter 5 or the Cave Paintings in Chapter 6) was a way of keeping subject matter constant while color, gesture and style shifted slightly or dramatically. In an interview, she described her methodology of painting multiple portraits in the same pose. She remarked that this was a way to not only investigate different aspects of a personality, but also "different aspects of painting too." The interviewer asked "So subject matter is not the point?" and she answered, "It's not the point, but I have to have something that sends me, something that excites me to trigger it."[30] Her method of painting and thinking about subject matter as a catalyst for stylistic exploration seems to have the scientific and structural backbone of Fuller's architectural endeavors.

Elaine writes in her 1952 essay "Dymaxion Artist":

> A visionary who immediately converts his insights to practical application, Fuller is the founder of a system of mechanical-mathematical relationships which include the element of motion called "Energetic Geometry." This

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[29] *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* p. 109.

[30] LTV DVDs, Segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton.

> system – probably his greatest single contribution – supplies the basis for the miraculous trusswork of his domes.[31]

She discusses how Fuller starts with certain shapes and forms that have a "tendency to a particular motion." It is as if she also builds her work from comparable foundational ideologies, searching for certain shapes and forms (which, in later works, are those of a specific subject matter such as bulls, a sculpture of Bacchus, a cave drawing or a human figure). From these forms she can assemble her own "energetic geometry." Her work is not strictly geometric, but she constructs whole paintings from smaller structures of loose brushstrokes and biomorphic shapes and, in the case of the Black Mountain works, a controlled black line. These elements are the trusswork; the smaller structures (brushwork and shape) buttress the overall design.

Of course, Elaine's was not the only work of a female artist to exhibit this type of structure at this time. The work of artists like Mercedes Matter, Lee Krasner and Grace Hartigan also depended on a strong architectural pictorial framework. Artists like Krasner and Hartigan (Figure 12) continued in this vein throughout their careers while, for Elaine, abstraction seemed more a means to an end.[32] She was constructing and experimenting and, in fact, her Black Mountain works were put

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[31] *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* p. 113.

[32] This is not unlike the career of Lousie Nevelson, who began her work during the Abstract Expressionist period and then broadened her scope but still retained the core of her earlier work. As Mona Hadler states, "By embracing Surrealism and Cubism, her early work grows out of the 'mythic forties' in the manner of Louise Bourgeois, David Smith, and others, and furthers on some level the Abstract Expressionist quest for the timeless and tragic." ["Review of *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend*," *Women's Art Journal,* 29, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2008): p. 59.]

into storage and not recovered until 1984, well after she had established a reputation with portraiture and other series involving clear subject matter. For Elaine, the abstract period in which she worked was finite and therefore somewhat different from the other female artists of the era.

Anne Wagner discusses, in detail, Lee Krasner's work with respect to her position as a female artist and wife of Jackson Pollock in her book, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe.* In a passage regarding Krasner's series of *Little Images,* Wagner argues that these paintings stand in opposition to Pollock's large-scale drip paintings. Wagner states that, "the *Little Images* approach and back away from legibility, but they do so without ever surrendering their main difference from Pollock's own peculiar script" and later she continues, "the *Little Images* provide a painted answer – hard-won, intellectually rigorous – to the most difficult problem Krasner faced: establishing an otherness to Pollock that would not be seen as the otherness of Woman."[33] Wagner also points out that Krasner's painting evolved away from early self-portraiture (overt autobiography) to a nonfigurative art that allows for a greater freedom of psychological interpretation.[34] Elaine seems to avoid this urgency in her painting. Instead of a hard-fought struggle against her situation as wife, woman, and other, Elaine's abstractions are very explicitly dependent on the influence of the male role

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[33] Wagner, *Three Artists,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): p. 144-149.

[34] Ibid, p. 154-156.

models in her life at this time, and yet are also a unique version of those influences as discussed through this chapter.

Author Vincent Katz describes Elaine's Black Mountain series as "bacchanalia, an unlimited energy that flows among the several parts, liberated by the ability to move beyond convention."[35] The importance in Elaine's Black Mountain series is the perceivable experimentation with energy and dynamism. During this summer, Elaine was introduced to ideas from several sources that led her in a direction towards the energetic depiction of forms. It was as if she phased pure abstraction out of her system at this point but utilized her studies of it more for the innate energies created by color, line, form and shape. Author Ann Gibson describes Elaine's work:

> She produced a net of geometric biomorphism whose flattened literalism was unlike that of any of her colleagues, a development that linked gesture and field approaches, but whose use of an apparently flat-footed naïveté was attempted by few at this time.[36]

The energy (gesture) that mixed with field here was stimulated by her male role models and the influence of a largely masculine Abstract Expressionist artistic milieu. This energy would inform her later work, combining subject matter and gesture in one swirling composition.

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[35] Katz, ed., p. 110-13.

[36] Ann Gibson, "Lee Krasner and Women's Innovations in American Abstract Painting," *Woman's Art Journal* (Fall/Winter 2007): p. 15.

CHAPTER 3

PORTRAITURE

"For me, doing portraits is an addiction. I don't choose to do portraits – I just do them." –Elaine de Kooning[1]

Throughout her career, Elaine de Kooning repeatedly worked in the genre of portraiture. Only two of her painted portraits were formal commissions: President John F. Kennedy and the soccer player, Pelé. For Elaine, painting portraits was not a money-making endeavor, but rather a passion in which she had a deep interest. She was not commissioned to do the vast majority of her portraits, and she seldom made portraits of people who were famous just *because* they were famous. As Lawrence Campbell states in his essay "Elaine de Kooning: The Portraits," she "made portraits of friends, people she was fond of, and some of them just happened to be well-known in the arts – the poet Allen Ginsberg; the ballet critic, dancer and poet, Edwin Denby; the poet, critic, and museum curator Frank O'Hara."[2]

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[1] Gerrit Henry, "The Artist and the Face: A Modern American Sampling, Ten Portraitists: Interviews/Statements," *Art in America* (January-February 1975): p. 35.

[2] Lawrence Campbell, in Bledsoe, Jane K., *Elaine de Kooning,* (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): p. 33. Elaine's choice of portrait subjects is summarized in a *Time* magazine article from 1963 which states that, "Elaine de Kooning paints only people who interest her – cops, collectors, critics, or a bunch of teen-aged slum kids she calls the Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue. Viewers who do not know her subjects personally may get an uneasy feeling that the work is sometimes slapdash, sometimes arbitrary. The judgment would be wrong, for the portraits are virtually instant summaries – the unconscious summing up that one friend makes of another when the two unexpectedly meet." ["Instant

Portraiture was the only genre in which Elaine consistently worked throughout her artistic career, and it was also the one that served to solidify her reputation as an artist. Within this genre we can see her growth as an artist, including her Abstract Expressionist stylistic origins as well as how she develops and also diverges from this manner over time. By examining a number of works in this genre, it becomes evident that Elaine integrated aspects of Abstract Expressionist gestural painting techniques into this motif while exploring gender issues as a woman artist portraying mostly male figures.

At the crux of 1950s modernism was the dissolution of subject matter, and especially the human figure, in art. Abstract Expressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock were acclaimed by art critics like Clement Greenberg for removing subject matter from their art.[3] Elaine, like her husband Willem, opposed this particular ideal and focused directly on the figural form in a good portion of her work. While utilizing a loose, expressionistic style, she also retained resemblances of individuals. In the early 1960s she declared, "I want my portraits to be literary…to say a lot about a person in addition to telling what he looks like."[4] Using her own unique

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Summaries," *Time,* Friday, May 3, 1963 (http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,828185,00.html)].

[3] See Clement Greenberg's "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), "American Type Painting" (1955) for his discussions of modern painting in relation to its self-reflective qualities such as abstraction, the flatness of the picture plane, and the attention to the medium itself above all else. Modern painting, according to Greenberg, should never include a subject matter, let alone the very traditional subject of the human figure.

[4] Campbell Geeslin, "She Paints Many Ways," *Houston Now* (June 17, 1962): p. 3.

version of gestural painting, she was able to heighten the emotional and less transient aspects of a portrait.[5] Her sitters have a timeless quality, while the characteristic style of her handling of the paint and the unique way in which she interpreted her sitters are tied to her core Abstract Expressionist roots.[6] In this chapter, I will look at the portraits in several different ways. The first corresponds to her husband, Willem. As an intimate contemporary male counterpart working in the genre of figurative painting, Willem made figural art in a comparable gestural manner although it reveals a blatantly masculine cultural and social viewpoint. The second context relates to Alice Neel, who was also an important modern female portraitist. Like Willem, Neel painted portraits and figural studies but with a different social intent. Thirdly, I will examine in some detail her only formally composed large-scale group portrait, *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue*, and how that group portrait links her own signature style of portraiture to the art of the 1950s.

In general, Elaine's portraiture can be examined within the context of Abstract Expressionism as defined by its aggressive application of paint combined

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[5] The idea of mimetic likeness in 20th century portraiture is a frequently discussed topic. Richard Brilliant, for instance, remarks that "In portraiture the possibilities of identification range far beyond the boundaries of mimetic likeness." [*Portraiture,* (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 1991): p. 14.] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to reiterate all of the scholarship and ideas surrounding this general topic of portraiture; however, it is important to note that Elaine's own goals in creating portraiture correspond to the 20th century trend of delving beyond mimetic likeness and searching for alternative methods of identifying an individual.

[6] On many occasions Elaine has talked about the timeless quality of art. For instance, in a letter sent to fellow artist and friend, Michael Lowe, on February 5, 1985, she writes: "What art historians don't understand (and never will) is that the time of art is always NOW." [Lowe, Michael (file), Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, New York City].

with its masculine overtones. The gestural nature of Elaine's work has been noted by scholar Thomas Hess in his essay "There is an 'I' in 'Likeness.'" Hess asserts that Elaine's skill in capturing a likeness has to do with "how a painting is structured, how your eye is led through torn colors, along background planes that define foreground shapes, to a climax in the visage."[7] In this description, Hess uses typical Abstract Expressionist jargon: the term "climax" has very masculine, ejaculatory implications linked to the explosive scattering of paint. In this same essay, Hess also talks about the "coherence of parts in a whole" in Elaine's portraits – a description that reminds us of Pollock's drip paintings or even Gorky, Kline or Motherwell.[8] The terminology used to characterize Elaine's work in Hess's writing is similar in flavor to descriptors of her male Abstract Expressionist counterparts. But as we shall see, the internal factors of her work – methodology, psychology and consequence – are in contrast to the masculine aspects of Abstract Expressionism.

While husband Willem painted a series of women, Elaine proceeded with her own series of portraits predominantly of men. Unlike Willem, whose women series was relatively limited, Elaine continued to paint male portraits throughout her

[7] Thomas B. Hess, "There is an 'I' in 'Likeness,'" *New York* (November 24, 1975): p. 84.

[8] Hess discusses the continuity and climax of Elaine's work again in the same article: "A portrait, then, unsurprisingly depends on each element of its plastic structure – shapes, colors, their fit, the manipulation and velocity of pigments, how each motion can parse the syntax of the body, which in turn leads you to the face, where shapes are clearest, drawing sharpest, color most specific. The whole image, in Elaine de Kooning's portraits, urges towards this climax." ["There is an 'I' in 'Likeness,'" *New York* (November 24, 1975): p. 85].

career.[9] The thematic oppositions between these two bodies of work are marked even though on first glance they seem to be similar figural studies. First there is the difference in gender. In concentrating mostly on the opposite gender, both artists evoke a certain level of mysteriousness as they cannot ever fully understand their "other." It has been frequently suggested that Willem's depictions of women as threatening and domineering are a psychoanalytic reversion to childhood memories of his own powerful and overbearing mother.[10] Elaine, on the other hand, expressed her interest in the male portrait subject in an interview conducted for the Detroit Institute of the Arts exhibition titled "Crosscurrents U.S.A." Elaine stated that her interest in male sitters stemmed from their clothing. She said that she also painted portraits of women and children but with males, there was "the mystique of their clothes."[11] In this interview, she referenced the portraits she made of fellow artist, Aristodemos Kaldis whom she first painted in 1952. (Figure 13, which is a later version of Kaldis from 1978. Note that the earlier versions of Kaldis were not locatable at the time of writing this dissertation.) She described him as "strikingly visual" and called his clothing a catalyst for her painting. This quickly brings to

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[9] Willem painted his most famous *Woman* paintings during the 1950s. He continued to paint images of women through the 1960s and early 1970s; however these works became progressively more abstract and he abandoned figural studies altogether after the mid-1970s. (See Cummings, Paul, Jorn Merkert and Claire Stoullig. *Willem de Kooning: Drawings, Paintings, Sculpture.* New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1983.)

[10] For a lengthy discussion of Willem de Kooning's childhood, see Stevens, Mark and Annalyn Swan, *De Kooning: An American Master.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.

[11] Detroit Institute of Arts, Crosscurrents U.S.A. artists' statements, sound recording: 1969 March, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

mind connotations regarding the power of suits ("power suits") and the adage "the clothes make the man." In an explanation of another of her portraits, she said that the "whole personality was expressed in the folds of his clothing and the silhouette of his head," as if the two aspects are interchangeable.[12] Rather than controlling the opposite gender by creating a threatening image as Willem has done in his work, Elaine channels what she considers to be her male subjects' innate power through the clothing. By using characteristic masculine clothing she symbolizes (and abstracts) ideas of dominance and power.

The use of the clothing as a primary catalyst in her work is also documented in discussions of specific men. In a recollection of Edwin Dickinson, for example, Elaine provides a vivid account of his clothing to underscore his personality:

> A tiny, immaculate, perfectly proportioned man, all edges, corners, contours, he seemed to belong to another period, an impression he cultivated in his elegant Edwardian attire – narrow trousers, high-buttoned jackets and beautifully groomed beard (which he was in the habit of combing when one's back was turned).[13]

The clothes are a metaphor for the man inside them in addition to outwardly identifying the individual. In homage to another fellow artist, Gandy Brodie (Figure 26), Elaine personifies the clothing and regards it as a powerful vehicle for understanding her portrait subjects:

> When I painted his portrait three or four years ago – through a stream of Gandy's consciousness, his way of thinking affected my way of painting. It

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[12] Ibid.

[13] *Edwin Dickinson: Draftsman/Painter* (organized by John H. Dobkin), National Academy of Design, New York, New York, 1982, in Graham Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, New York City, donated 2008, Artist files ca.1964-1974, box 5 of 46.

> was irresistible. I had to struggle to get my own ideas down on canvas past his ideas, but his ideas got onto the canvas too. They became part of the portrait. Even Gandy's clothes seemed to have opinions, his jacket, the blue hat he was wearing.[14]

It was as if Elaine integrated cognizance and clothing, personality and image, and artist and sitter. Certain details were accentuated – like Brodie's blue hat – in order to describe that specific person. The blue hat, for instance, visually caps Brodie's body vertically, drawing the viewer's eyes to the head and face. The hat is also a particular article of clothing that is quite personal to the portrait subject. The hat, therefore, works on several levels in the painting: First, it is a descriptive characteristic of the sitter's physical being; secondly, it functions as a compositional aid for the overall structure of the piece; and thirdly, it is a symbolic attribute of the individual. Elaine is attempting to capture more than superficial appearances in her portrait.

In the video documentary series called "Strokes of Genius" that was produced for public television, Willem de Kooning is highlighted in one full episode. In this video, Elaine discusses Willem's *Woman* paintings (Figure 55) and how they operate between abstract art and what we know to be reality.[15] There is a blurring of boundaries between abstraction and representation. Elaine states this as being one of the more alluring aspects of this series of Willem's work and interestingly, she has adopted a similar approach to her own portraiture. While the

[14] Part of a memorial delivered by Elaine at Memorial Service for Gandy Brodie at the New School for Social Research, November 10, 1975, from the Graham Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, New York City, donated 2008, box 33 of 46.

[15] Courtney Sale, *Willem de Kooning: Strokes of Genius,* Video, Direct Cinema Limited, 1982.

figure, in general, retains certain recognizable features, on the whole her portraits are comprised of an overall gestural patterning of paint strokes. The paint is neither blended nor smoothly applied to the canvas surface. Elaine's finished works are positioned between abstraction (the unblended and quick application of paint) and reality (the retention of subject matter). A similar fusion of abstraction and verisimilitude is evident in her husband's work created during the height of Abstract Expressionism.

In the interview conducted for the Detroit Institute, Elaine discussed the portrait process as one in which the artist not only wrestles with the likeness of the sitter and how the artist *sees* the sitter but also with the sitter's own self-image.[16] The idea of a self-image can be divided into stereotypical standards by gender. The masculine construction might have characteristics of strength, power and self-assertion while the feminine standard might be sociologically described as demure, quiet and reserved. As Linda Nochlin points out in her book, *Women, Art, and Power*: "Strength and weakness are understood to be the natural corollaries of gender difference."[17] Elaine was drawn to the prescribed strength of her male subjects, and her portraits attempt to resolve her own need to be accepted in a male-dominated profession of art via her sitter's projected personality.[18]

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[16] Detroit Institute of Arts, Crosscurrents, sound recording.

[17] *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988): p. 3.

[18] Tangential to this discussion is the idea of mediation between an artist's rendition of a sitter versus the sitter's self image. As Linda Nochlin contends: "Unlike any other genre, the portrait demands the meeting of two subjectivities: if the artist watches, judges the sitter, the sitter is privileged, by the portrait relation,

A unique series of portraits by Elaine are her "faceless" men series from the 1950s. (Figures 14, 16, and 17) While the individuals in these works are named in the titles, these portraits stand out for their characteristic removal of the actual faces of the figures, which is historically the focal point – and the most important detail – of a portrait.[19] Because they are so distinct, these faceless portraits are often mentioned (even if only briefly) in the limited scholarship surrounding Elaine. Of course, there are many examples of a departure from physical likeness in 20th century portraiture.[20] Elaine's work, however, exemplifies this departure while also profoundly observing an artist/model, female/male dichotomy.

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to watch and judge back. In no other case does *what* the artist is painting exist on the same plane of freedom and ontological equality as the artist her or himself, and in no other case is the role of the artist as *mediator* rather than dictator or inventor so literally accentuated by the actual situation in which the art work comes into being." [*Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988): p. 99.]

[19] Interestingly, Elaine omitted facial features from some of her portraits while Willem, in the *Woman* series, tended to use exaggerated features, especially stylized eyes and mouths. These features (along with exaggerated breasts and sometimes legs) were iconic to womankind – typological – rather than being indicative of a specific woman. It seems as though the identity of the persons in Elaine's work is unrelated to the reasons for the removal of facial features. Instead, this characteristic is typical of most of her portraits from the early to mid-1950s and indicates an attempt at conveying a likeness without the most typical descriptor (the face).

[20] In a 1994 exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, the eradication of physical likeness in portraiture was discussed. The exhibition was called "Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art" and the catalog essays present different ways in which artists in the 20th century approach a portrait without the traditional replication of physical likeness being the dominant characteristic. [See Melissa Feldman, *Face Off: The Portrait in Recent Art.* University of Pennsylvania: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994.] A specific example of an artist who eradicates aspects of physical likeness in 20th century art is Egon Schiele. As Alessandra Comini states in her book, *Egon Schiele's Portraits*: "Projected with poster-like clarity, the bodies are silhouetted as brittle solid objects against an

Arshile Gorky is an artist who exhibited a type of elimination in his work. Gorky was a close friend of Willem and consequently, Elaine. Gorky's artistic influence on the de Koonings is clearly documented and discussed, and Elaine even cited him as one of the most important artistic influences of her career. We can see a similarity between Elaine's faceless men and Gorky's *The Artist and His Mother* from 1926-36. (Figure 15) A noticeable difference in the technique of the removal of features for these two artists is that Gorky's work feels unfinished while Elaine's faces are more smeared away. The important similarity, however, is that significant details of physical likeness have been removed from the finished portrait, thereby constructing an image rather than replicating it with photographic accuracy. Having struggled over the portrayal of himself as a young son with his mother that was based on a photograph taken three years before her death, Gorky chose to disintegrate certain areas of the canvas. The effect is ephemeral and ghostlike, and one of the most captivating areas of the canvas is the area of "erasure" or dissolution of body parts. In his painting Gorky has left the hands of his mother unfinished, implying dematerialization (possibly a reference to her death) or maybe

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empty area that functions less as a neutral background and more as a foil of a Void." She continues by explaining that: "The achievement of a naturalistic physical likeness is not the objective. Instead Schiele is concerned with *what happens* to his physical likeness as the impact of his inner feelings and sensations is registered upon it… Schiele allows and even encourages himself to become gripped by such powerful emotions that his very physiognomy is affected." [Comini, *Egon Schiele's Portraits,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974): p. 50)] We are drawn to the empty areas because of the elimination itself. In a similar manner, Elaine removes the faces of her men – the single most defining characteristic of traditional portrait construction. In doing so, there is an internal consciousness that surfaces – the elimination becomes a direct pathway to the psyche. While Elaine has not (to my knowledge) mentioned being directly influenced by Schiele, this act of eradication achieves a similar result: it emphasizes that feature which has been abolished in order to serve a greater psychological/internal impact.

this is a dreamlike manifestation of his mother's image rather than her authentic self (a posthumous reminiscence perhaps). Either way, the artist forces us to see his mother as a constructed image rather than a photographic, or absolute, replication. According to Melvin Lader, "By simplifying the forms, eliminating most of the detail, and emphasizing the broad areas of color, Gorky gave this image a timeless quality."[21] Rather than an absolute likeness, Gorky's portrait indicates the underlying profundity of existence. Lader further explains that Gorky's work evinces spatial ambiguity "by denying measurable and logical relationships between the forms," which in turn causes them to float mysteriously.[22] Harry Rand agrees with Lader, explaining that, "as in his other portraits, the edges of shapes tend to smoothe, simplifying each form's contour."[23]

Likewise, Elaine has removed (or really blurred out) the visage of her men so that they are "faceless" and also become constructed images – manifestations of form rather than authentic or photographic replicas. Richard Brilliant, William Rubin and many other authors discuss portraiture in the context of constructed images.[24] Brilliant, in his book *Portraiture,* tries to reconcile "the way portraits

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[21] Melvin P. Lader, *Arshile Gorky,* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985): p. 35.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Harry Rand, *Arshile Gorky: The Implications of Symbols,* (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmon & Co., Publishers, Inc., 1980): p. 21.

[24] See for example, William Rubin, "Reflections on Picasso and Portraiture" from *Picasso and Portraiture,* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996) in which Rubin discusses the interpretation of a portrait subject through the filter of the artist's mind. Also, Christopher Reed, "Postmodernism and the Art of Identity," in *Concepts in Modern Art,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), discusses the

stifle the analysis of representation, the relationship between the presentation of the self in the real world and its analogue in the world of art."[25] In the wake of the invention of photography, late 19th and early 20th century artists like Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne (to name only a few) reframe the genre of portraiture so that it becomes an analysis of a real world persona rather than only a physical resemblance.

Not only are Elaine's men constructed according to persona rather than physical likeness, but they also reflect their immediate role as models, with a concentration solely on the body minus the face. These faceless men are conduits for the artist's own disposition and confront the artist/model juxtaposition. As discussed earlier, Elaine felt that the subjects' personalities are evinced not by their faces but by their clothing (i.e. "the clothes make the man" idea), and the faceless men especially emphasize this philosophy. Marsha Meskimmon discusses how female artists will sometimes adopt masculine roles in self-portraiture by cross-dressing.[26] In Elaine's portraiture, she examines men's clothes with a gendered scrutiny comparable to physically adopting the masculine role for herself. In doing this, she assumes a metaphorical role of transvestism.

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overlapping of representation and reality in postmodern contexts in portraiture. For further discussions on this topic, see also Melissa Feldman, *Face Off: The Portrait in Recent Art,* (University of Pennsylvania: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994).

[25] Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture*, (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 1991): p. 8.

[26] Marsha Meskimmon explains that "The issue of cross-dressing becomes significant in terms of women artists who have adopted masculine roles in their self-portraiture, as the most obvious strategies have employed the wearing of men's clothes as costume." (*The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Columbia Press, 1996): p. 118.

Elaine called her faceless male portraits her “gyroscope” figures and as Ann Gibson articulates:

> Historically, one response to being in a comparatively powerless position has been to parody those in power, yet simply turning the tables without changing the rules of the game is seldom an effective way to resist domination. Perhaps this is another reason why Elaine de Kooning’s avowedly parodic *Faceless Men* series of “gyroscope” figures was practically unknown, while a comparable *Women* series painted by Willem de Kooning soared to prominence…She called them “gyroscope men” because the rigidity with which a spinning gyroscope maintained a position perpendicular to the earth’s surface reminded her of men’s stereotypical relation to women.[27]

Elaine’s faceless figures differ markedly from the cartoonish-faced women that Willem has painted. She is not overtly dismembering and reconstructing her male subjects’ identity in the same fashion as Willem does with the anonymous women. Instead, Elaine retains a strict identity for her men but merely smudges facial features rather than emphasizing them to absurdity as in her husband’s work. She is, however, still commenting on gender differences. Elaine has erased the part of the man that typically provides immediate identity. The gendered undertone is that the visual lines of masculine clothing and the distinct personalities of the male sitters accentuated by the clothing provide enough clues to convey the strength and uniqueness of her portraiture. It is unnecessary to offer caricaturized facial features that are particularly “male” in form.

Elaine remarked in an interview with Ann Gibson that “women painted women: Vigée-Lebrun, Mary Cassatt, and so forth. And I thought, men always

[27] Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism:Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): p. 134-35.

painted the opposite sex, and I wanted to paint men as sex objects."[28] This is an important facet of these faceless figures. In the context of the larger community of New York City artists, Elaine was addressing the typical 1950s spirit of "machismo." As Griselda Pollock points out in her 1996 essay, "Killing Men and Dying Women: A Woman's Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s":

> Rather than easy moralizing about sexism, we need instead to analyze with much greater sophistication and far more stringency just how enmeshed, yet not incapacitated, *all* the members of the New York School were in this dense, but not totally disempowering, web of hierarchical relationships and discriminatory discourses.[29]

Elaine's subtleties of gender are both enmeshed with *and* contrary to not only her husband, Willem's, work, but also to the entire Abstract Expressionist interest in the dominating male persona that is blatantly expunged in Elaine's faceless portraiture. When Elaine removes the faces of her men she removes the source of the male gaze and restructures gender roles. Historically, men are the initiators of the gaze and women are the objects. Elaine forces herself into the position of "gazer" as she makes it impossible (by expunging eyes and faces) for her subjects to initiate a gaze themselves.[30]

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[28] Ibid, p. 135.

[29] Griselda Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women: A Woman's Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s," in Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996): p. 122.

[30] For a more in-depth discussion of the removal of male facial features by women artists and the resulting "castration," see Rozsika Parker, "Images of Men," in Kent, Sarah and Jacqueline Morreau, eds. *Women's Images of Men.* London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society Limited, 1985.

The artistic niche of portraiture was solidified for Elaine when she was commissioned to paint her most famous portrait sitter, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. (Figures 18, 19, and 20) The portrait was intended for display in the Truman Library in Independence Missouri. (Figure 20 is the portrait that currently resides in the library). The events leading to this commission are described in an exhibition publication from 1965:

> In the fall of 1962, Robert Graham, with his friend Thomas Hart Benton, paid a visit to President Harry S. Truman at Independence, Missouri. While the two were at the Truman Library, the former President expressed his admiration for President Kennedy along with his interest in having a portrait of the young President for the library. Returning to New York, Mr. Graham queried the White House about the possibility of President Kennedy sitting for a portrait. Due to the pressure of office, the White House advised that a formal sitting would be impossible, but if the artist was in Palm Beach during the Christmas period, time would be made available to sketch the President during specific intervals of work and relaxation.[31]

A close friend of Elaine's, Ernestine Lassaw, described in a videotaped interview how she believed that the project had also been orchestrated through Washington D.C. artist, Bill Walton, who was friends with Elaine and also with Kennedy himself.[32] A specific sequence of events regarding the arrangement of the commission has not been officially documented. In a catalog publication called *JFK*

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[31] "President John F. Kennedy: An exhibition of portraits and sketches by Elaine de Kooning," Charlotte Crosby Kemper Gallery, Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design, February 12 – March 7, 1965 from the Graham Gallery Papers ("James Graham and Sons, Inc. Records"), Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, New York City, 46 Boxes, donated 2008.

[32] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #1.

and Art, the explanation for the commission is glossed over with the following brief passage:

> She received this commission as a result of *New York Times* art critic John Canaday's review of her standing men series, exhibited at the Graham Gallery, New York, in 1962. Although Canaday panned the show, de Kooning's subject matter – along with her reputed ability to paint a full-length portrait in less than two hours – attracted the attention of Kennedy, who disliked sitting still.[33]

While the events leading to the assignment are nebulous, it is remarkable that an artist associated with abstraction was chosen for a formal presidential portrait. Senior Historian Frederick S. Voss of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. explains:

> Formal presidential portraiture by and large falls into fairly conservative stylistic patterns, and good, bad, or indifferent, a portrait of a President, particularly one commissioned for a public place, almost never reflects the avant-garde trends in the art world. The reason for this is simple: Like presidential politics, presidential portraiture is meant to cater to mainstream tastes, which by definition tend to shy away from adventurous extremes.[34]

Voss remarks that there are exceptions to this trend and that Elaine's portrait of John F. Kennedy is one of them.[35] If we compare Elaine's portrait to the official White House portrait by Aaron Shikler from 1970 (Figure 21) or American artist

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[33] Kenneth E. Silver, Cynthia Drayton and Nancy Hall-Duncan, *JFK and Art,* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2003): p. 64.

[34] National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C., curatorial files regarding the portrait of JFK (750 9th Street, NW, Suite 4100) including exhibition pamphlet, acquisition material and articles.

[35] While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to determine John F. Kennedy's own motives for allowing Elaine to complete this portrait, it was pointed out to me by Dr. Gerald Silk that it is probably reasonable to assume that Kennedy was trying to convey a certain political image of youth, energy and cultural modishness that was exemplified by Elaine's avant-garde style of painting.

James Wyeth's thoughtful yet conservative image of Kennedy from 1967 (Figure 22), it becomes obvious that Elaine's conception of the President is radically different.[36]

Elaine herself acknowledged that one of the main reasons she was approached for this assignment was her rapidity of completion. She usually completed her work in one sitting, sometimes under two or three hours.[37] However, this swiftness required a sitter to remain virtually immobile and this was not the case with the President Kennedy who Elaine described as restless.[38] Instead of making a quick finished portrait, Elaine completed many fragmentary sketches that resulted in subsequent preliminary studio drawings and numerous canvases worked and reworked until the image of John F. Kennedy seemed "correct." The entire

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[36] Both Shikler and Wyeth created posthumous renditions of Kennedy. James Wyeth was approached by the White House after Kennedy's assassination to complete a posthumous portrait. Wyeth refused the official commission but still created a portrait. According to an article written in 1968 for *Look* magazine, Wyeth refused the commission in order to have a greater level of freedom in creating his portrait. [Joseph Roddy, "Another Wyeth: The Portrait Artist is a Young Man," *Look* (April 2, 1968): p. 57-62]. Shikler's official portrait of the President currently resides in the White House, and it, too, presents an interpretive image of John F. Kennedy, with arms folded and a downward gaze foreshadowing the assassination.

[37] In a *Time* magazine article, Elaine is quoted as commenting that, "If I paint fast, the painting becomes unconscious, almost as if someone else was doing the painting and I the manual labor." ["Instant Summaries," *Time,* Friday, May 3, 1963 (http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,828185,00.html)].

[38] In a recollection of the portrait process, Elaine commented "When I began the sketches, I found that he moved constantly – which drove me insane. It soon became clear (although he *tried*) that it was physically impossible for this man to sit still!" (excerpt from an interview conducted by Ben Wolf in 1964, reprinted in the exhibition catalog for "President John F. Kennedy: An exhibition of portraits and sketches by Elaine de Kooning," Charlotte Crosby Kemper Gallery, Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design, February 12 – March 7, 1965.)

process took about a year, starting with initial sittings in the winter (December) of 1962-63. (Figure 23) However, the Kennedy portrait process was thwarted abruptly in November of 1963 when the President was tragically assassinated. At that point Elaine stopped painting altogether for an entire year in mourning for the deceased leader. Overall, the process of working on this portrait resulted in a series of compositions on this singular subject.[39]

While Elaine was chosen to paint this very famous portrait of President Kennedy she very clearly did *not* want to be designated as a "portrait painter." Instead, in an interview with Karl E. Fortress, she stated that she is "a painter who paints portraits," an important designation for a woman who did not like to be inhibited or cornered by categorization.[40] In an interview regarding the portrait of President Kennedy, Elaine instead remarked that:

> It was crucial for me that the portraits did not become mere visages. I was determined to convey a sense of the Presidential office, but more important, the experience of a one-to-one contact with J.F.K., to communicate his

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[39] Ernastine Lassaw explained that Elaine always did hundreds of paintings of one thing. The image of Kennedy was not an exception and the assignment of producing one portrait for the Truman Library resulted in hundreds of sketches, studies and paintings of the President which are now scattered around the globe in numerous public and private collections, including a painting that is currently on display at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. (Figure 18) and the work finally chosen for the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri (Figure 20). According to Lassaw, Jackie Kennedy visited Elaine's studio in order to assess which works she liked best. Overall, Lassaw felt that Elaine kept a strict confidentiality regarding the commission and her silence probably reflected a tightly monitored situation when Elaine was allowed to sketch the President in Palm Beach. (LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #1)

[40] Karl E. (Karl Eugene) Fortress (1907-), Collection, taped interviews with artists, 1963-1985, 205 sound cassettes, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., donated 1978-1985.

> warmth, sharp wit, appraising glance, and something of the outdoor figure I saw in the brilliant Florida sunlight that first morning.[41]

In a word, Elaine tried to capture the vitality of President Kennedy, his more human qualities as well as those related to his Presidential deification. She spoke of his "spiritual quality" and said "he had a kind of radiance" that she hoped to harness in her use of bright colors such as yellows and oranges.[42] On another occasion, she further clarified that "the colors were chosen, not to convey a realistic sense of a grey flannel suit worn by a man with a tan – but rather to attempt to communicate the brightness and high color of John F. Kennedy as I saw him."[43] Weightlessness and warmth exudes from the paint and its application in sweeping brushstrokes. In the portrait, *Seated Figure,* for instance (Figure 20), the oranges, yellows and golds of the background melt sensuously into the figure. In *JFK #21* (Figure 19) the vertical brushwork frames the body, at the same instant rising like flames from the top of his head and liquefying his feet. The combination of vertical and horizontal strokes surrounding the body in *JFK* (Figure 18) mimics the folding form of the seated body bent at the waistline. The unification of figure and ground in each work is elegant.

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[41] Interviews, July 19, 1985 and March 20, 1987, printed in the publication accompanying "Elaine de Kooning: Paintings 1955-1965," Washburn Gallery, New York, October 23 – November 30, 1996.

[42] Excerpts from an interview conducted by Ben Wolf in 1964, reprinted in the exhibition catalog for "President John F. Kennedy: An exhibition of portraits and sketches by Elaine de Kooning," Charlotte Crosby Kemper Gallery, Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design, February 12 – March 7, 1965, p. 6.

[43] Elaine's speech at the dedication of the final painting to the Truman Library, Graham Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, New York City, donated 2008, box 8 of 46.

But she also wrestled with the significance of portraying a public figure. As she described in her speech presenting the work to the Truman Library:

> The private portrait presents a simple conflict or agreement between two people only – the artist and the sitter, and nobody else has a say in the matter (except perhaps a wife or a mother). In the case of a portrait of a public personality, the whole world has a right to an opinion of the likeness based on their familiarity with the subject... A portrait of a public personality who happens to be President of the United States presents added difficulties in that the portrait must capture, above likeness the dignity of the person, the sense of his office.[44]

The piecemeal method of working on the Kennedy portrait – the fact that she labored over it for most of a year – allowed Elaine to sift through many facets of the man so that she could also describe the sense of his office. As she recounted of her first session, "I concentrated on fragments… eyes…outline… hair…gesture."[45] In many ways, the intimacy that Elaine brought to the image of the President – the "one-on-one" aspect of the portrait – evokes the femininity that she generates in her other portraits despite the masculine subject matter. In a nurturing manner, she was probing beyond the surface appearance of John F. Kennedy and extracting a more emotional and vital exposé of the man's inner being.[46]

In her dedication speech, Elaine declared that "recognition is a matter of immediacy. We don't have to have the features spelled out to see if they add up to a

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Excerpts from an interview conducted by Ben Wolf in 1964, p. 8.

[46] It has been pointed out to me by Dr. Gerald Silk that the manner in which the paint strokes and colors have been applied to the canvas seem to imply femininity. The sweeping strokes soften the man and the quick brushwork that is typically equated with masculinity in Abstract Expressionism, in this case, moderates the potency of the sitter.

likeness. They add up in a split second."[47] In her images of Kennedy, she includes recognizable physical features such as his softly slanting, introspective eyes, his boxy shoulders and stiff torso and the slight puffiness of his parted hairstyle. These traits, while blurred in an energetic swirl of paint, easily identify the man as John F. Kennedy. The features "add up" to that identity. However, the dynamic style of the work affords a greater sense of vivacity helping us to understand the sitter's behavioral vitality as well as his physical attributes.

Interestingly, in 1963, Willem de Kooning completed a work called *Reclining Man (John F. Kennedy),* a small oil on paper work that seems unusual within his oeuvre. (Figure 24) The images of Kennedy by Elaine and Willem contrast sharply. Different from Willem's work, which was painted after the assassination and seems considerably colder overall, Elaine's portrait, *JFK* (Figure 18) and *JFK #21* (Figure 19), both from 1963, as well as the portrait eventually selected for the Harry S. Truman Library, *Seated Figure (John F. Kennedy)* 1962-63 (Figure 20), all evoke warmth and life. Elaine's palette of warm yellows, golds and oranges tinged with greens insinuate life: the green growth of the outdoors, the warm subtle golden glow of sunlight and the even more subtle fiery halo of a man full of passion and determination.[48] The canvases are left unpainted around the

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[47] Elaine's speech as the dedication of the final painting to the Truman Library, Graham Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, New York City, donated 2008, box 8 of 46.

[48] She directly equated the outdoor setting at Palm Beach to the President's character: "[H]e was enveloped by the green of the leaves and the golden light of the sun. It was part of his character… even part of his likeness." (excerpt from an interview conducted by Ben Wolf in 1964, p. 8).

edges and the color, especially in *JFK #21* and *Seated Figure (John F. Kennedy),* appears to emanate from the figure, that is, from the man himself. It is as if his aura, and the heat of his human body and soul, are visible to Elaine and she has in turn made it visible to us. The strict verticality of the body of the President emphasizes the steadfast, unyielding strength (and calm) of someone fit for high-ranking office. His face describes the intelligence and thoughtfulness of a political decision-maker. As with her other portraits of seated and standing men, Elaine has emphasized the lines of the clothing, igniting again the masculinity that she believed to be accentuated in the "striking visual" aspects of the fold of the cloth.[49] Through contrasts of highlights and shadow, applied paint and blank surface, the equilibrium of this portrait rests in resolving the complexity of the personality.

On the other hand, Willem's *Reclining Man (John F. Kennedy)* is generally more visceral in the sense of being a visual assault rather than a composite analysis. Like Elaine's work, his figure is painted with some regal yellows and golds but has been tinged quite remarkably with pinks and reds. Instead of encircling the figure in a halo or aura of light that serves to define a figural outline, the colors seem to bleed from an undefined center. His work is more abstract than Elaine's: a mass of color and swirling paint. The only truly distinct aspect of the portrait is the face which is painted in a somewhat realistic manner. The eyes on the figure's face lie

[49] The clothing outfits in the finished portraits of John F. Kennedy are not the actual outfits he wore when Elaine had originally sketched him. He generally sat for the artist in casual clothing: sweatshirts, sailing pants, sneakers, and Elaine had been charmed by his casualness. When it came time to paint the final image, however, she felt as though a formal portrait of a President should involve a suited figure. She had male friends of hers who had similar builds as Kennedy wear suits and sit for studies of this clothing. She later imposed that imagery on her composites of the President.

open and blank against the pale skin and stare indiscriminately upwards from their position. The colors, especially the reds and pinks against the paleness of skin, create an image of dying and death. What we see in Willem's work is a body without a soul, a lifeless corpse perhaps, signified by the horizontality of the canvas (which was a significant departure from the verticality of most of his other figural works). The colors and the movement of the paint seem to insinuate a pouring of the flesh off of the body, moving away from any solidity of life and towards a more indeterminate and fluid state, perhaps one that would imply the afterlife of death and decomposition. The morbidity and fatality of this work is underscored by the fact that Willem finalized it just after John F. Kennedy's assassination.[50] Furthermore, as Judith Zilczer points out, the drip marks at the bottom of the canvas suggest that the work was most likely originally vertically-composed in keeping with most of Willem's other figural works. Willem only seems to have decided to turn the work on its side after Kennedy's death in order to represent that death.[51] As Zilczer also points out, "representations of prone male figures have been restricted to scenes of death and dying."[52]

In Willem's overall catalog of figural painting, this lone image of John F. Kennedy is unique. Both the insinuation of death (not the norm in Willem's figural

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[50] Judith Zilczer, "Identifying Willem de Kooning's 'Reclining Man,'" *American Art,* (Summer 1998): p. 29. Zilczer states that archival records support the identification of this portrait as JFK and that friends have recollected the completion of the work after November 22, 1963 – the date of the assassination.

[51] Ibid., p. 30.

[52] Ibid., p. 28.

work) and President Kennedy as a subject are, as far as I am aware, extraordinary in Willem's career. On the other hand, Elaine produced many quickly-executed "snapshots" of the President in lively situations.[53] In one interview, Elaine recounted the story of Bill Walton visiting her East Hampton studio in November 1963:

> He doubled over laughing when he came into my studio, because wherever you looked you saw some image of Kennedy – in the bathroom, in the kitchen, in my bedroom, on every wall – huge canvases, small canvases, watercolors, charcoals, xeroxes.[54]

Her amalgamation of those many sketches culminated in a vast series of painted works.

In yet another interesting counterpoint to Elaine's portraits of the President, Willem worked from media images and memories conjured from second-hand sources – "lifeless" sources one could say – to create his painting of President Kennedy. There is a Pop Art quality to Willem's work in that his figure feels removed from direct, real-life sources. Willem's image of John F. Kennedy is a replication of contrived, media sources. A friend of the de Koonings, Ernastine Lassaw, recounted in an interview how Willem spent much of what she dubbed "the assassination period" with her and her husband Ibram in their neighboring home in

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[53] The corpus of preliminary sketches, drawings and paintings of John F. Kennedy by Elaine is too vast to reproduce in this dissertation. For a significant sampling of these works, see gallery publications, "John F. Kennedy: Portraits by Elaine de Kooning," The Washington Gallery of Modern Art, October 29 – November 1, 1964, and "President John F. Kennedy: An exhibition of portraits and sketches by Elaine de Kooning," Charlotte Crosby Kemper Gallery, Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design, February 12 – March 7, 1965.

[54] Robin White, Interview with Elaine De Kooning at East Hampton, NY, (*View*, Spring 1988, vol. 5 no. 1): p. 10.

East Hampton. She remarked that Willem did not have a television set so he watched the events unfold at their house Ernastine described that Willem was "tremendously moved by it."[55] Although Willem seemed emotionally interested in John F. Kennedy at this point after the assassination, his painted image of the man was completed using second-hand, "cold" media sources.

On the other hand, Elaine's sources were so personal and "first-hand" that she became emotionally attached to the individual behind the celebrity. As she said after the President's death, she was "traumatized" by the assassination, which in turn caused her to stop painting altogether for a whole year. We can only presume about the emotional ties that were forged between the artist and her subject. Furthermore, the intimacy of having her living space completely infiltrated by Kennedy's image brings to mind what are typically considered feminine qualities of sensitivity and admiration. In Simone de Beauvoir's seminal feminist text, *The Second Sex,* the author acknowledges that, "The well-known 'feminine sensitivity' derives somewhat from myth, somewhat from make-believe; but it is also a fact that woman is more attentive than man to herself and to the world."[56] Beauvoir then describes a plethora of minutiae to which the female is attuned in everyday life – things like a bouquet of flowers, a cake, loving laughter, song, adornments, etc,

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[55] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #1.

[56] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1952): p. 589.

etc.[57] In a discussion of feminist paradigms in literature, authors Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan identify a certain faction of feminist scholars called “essentialists” who claim that “women’s physical differences alone (birthing, lactation, menstruation, etc.) make them more connected with matter or the physical world than men.”[58] According to Rivkin and Ryan’s research, these feminist theories are considered in the work of feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow (*The Reproduction of Mothering*), ethical philosopher Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*), and French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (*Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which is Not One*).[59]

While Willem de Kooning chose to focus on the morbid image of uninhibited death, exhibiting a typically masculine fascination with the macabre, Elaine’s John F. Kennedy paintings demonstrate a more complex fusion of sensual observations (equated with femininity) and strength of form (masculinity). Rivkin and Ryan discuss the spectrum of psychological identity across which “masculine” and “feminine” extend, ranging from “aggressivity and self-assertiveness to emotional flexibility and psychological relationality.”[60] Elaine’s methodology in creating the portraits of President Kennedy is unequivocally intimate and feminine (spending a great deal of time becoming emotionally attached to the person and meticulously

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds, *Literary Theory: An Anthology,* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998): p. 529.

[59] For further explanation and excerpts of the texts mentioned, See Rivkin and Ryan, pp. 527-672.

[60] Ibid., p. 530.

observing all of the minor details describing the person); however, the works themselves are more aggressive in the (gestural) application of the paint on the canvas's surface. This dynamic style of *JFK* from 1963 (Figure 18), for instance, with its sweeping horizontal and vertical brushwork drives the life force of this painting. The infused dynamism, movement, and activity evident in the compositions are typical qualities of her work in general. These are masculine societal traits and are implicated in sports, hunting, fighting, etc. In her portraiture, Elaine balances these traits with her skillful (and feminine) observational sensitivity.

Elaine's overall series of portrait paintings bears comparison with those of contemporary female artist, Alice Neel. Neel utilized portraiture in tandem with her own genetic make-up. She delved into her subjects in an emotional manner. Melissa Feldman comments that:

> With a psychoanalyst's acumen, Neel discerns signs of anxiety, sadness, malice, resentment, and resignation in every feature and gesture. Her vivid, twisting brushstroke roots out what the body wants to hide from public view.[61]

In the exhibition notes at a show of Neel's portraits of women, critic and gallery owner Charlotte Willard was quoted as saying, "Even fully clothed her sitters

[61] Feldman, Melissa, *Face Off: The Portrait in Recent Art* (University of Pennsylvania: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994): p. 38.

appear naked before us in their vulnerability, their bewilderment, their aggression, their self-concern, their resignation."[62]

While Neel seems to scrutinize her sitters emotionally, building her portraits from the ground up in order to best convey their psychological depths, Elaine on the other hand starts from a prototypical platform. Instead of feeling as though the subjects are imparting only personal aspects of their own unique personality, Elaine's male portraits also emerge from her own specific conception of their masculinity. Each man is posed similarly, emphasizing masculine qualities: legs splayed, suits that force strict horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines (rather than soft curving human flesh), neckties that point definitively to the sexual organs and even hand positions that blatantly call attention to the genital region. (Figures 25, 26 and 27) We know from interviews and writings by Elaine that she was interested in the male sitter for just these reasons. She mentions again and again the "mystique" of male clothing and the "striking visuals" that are inherent in her subjects.[63] The contours of a suit jacket are noticeably delineated in *Bill at St. Mark's.* (Figure 25) These contours direct our eye through the figure, from the arms down to his mid-section and then to his splayed legs. The lines of the trousers and thrusting torso are accentuated in the portrait of Harold Rosenberg. (Figure 27) The lines draw our eyes visually to the forward shift of Rosenberg's swelling lower section.

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[62] From a wall plaque at the exhibit "Alice Neel's Women" (October 28, 2005 – January 15, 2006) at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC. For related exhibition information see Carr, Carolyn, *Alice Neel: Women.* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002).

[63] Detroit Institute of Arts, Crosscurrents, sound recording.

In interviews, Elaine commented that it was most important to capture the manner in which people sit in a most comfortable way. [64] To accomplish this, she would talk casually to the intended subject and then, in the throws of conversation she would interject with, "hold that pose."[65] This method helped her to capture an intimate moment between the artist and her subjects, while drawing forth from them what she considered to be their most fascinating or alluring lines and forms. She is in effect manipulating what is a natural pose by filtering it through her own awareness and objectives from a gendered point of view – an intimacy with the sitter.[66]

Unlike many of their male portraitist counterparts, both Alice Neel and Elaine de Kooning did not make many self-portraits.[67] In a discussion of Alice Neel, Ann Temkin remarks that male painters such as Rembrandt, Goya and van Gogh have left a progression of self-portraits that help to shape and control their artistic biography. Temkin explains: "They offer cues for how these artists wished to be perceived and were the starting point of a personal myth, a bid for a place in

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[64] Many of Elaine's subjects were peers both in the sense of artists and in some cases writers, like herself. This roster of individuals provided a certain amount of instantaneous intimacy. Only in her two commissioned portraits of John F. Kennedy and Pelé did she work with people who she did not know personally at the outset.

[65] Fortress, Karl E. (Karl Eugene) (1907-) Collection, taped interviews with artists.

[66] For a more in depth discussion of the poses of Elaine's sitters and the gendered implications of those poses see Stahr, Celia S., "Elaine de Kooning, Portraiture, and the Politics of Sexuality," *Genders OnLine Journal* (Issue 38. http://www.genders.org/g38/g38_stahr.html, 2003): paragraphs 18-30.

[67] In comparison, Willem did not make many self-portraits either.

history."[68] Neel and Elaine, on the other hand, left only limited self-portraits. Neel painted one very notorious self-portrait in 1980 at the age of 80, towards the end of her career. (Figure 28) Elaine made a few self-portrait sketches at the very early stages of her artistic career. (Figures 7 and 29) She completed several more over a year and a half period during which she described interest in self-portraiture as a result of a large square mirror in her studio that allowed her to study her own self-image. She later stated that she had quickly tired of producing these works.[69]

There is, of course, substantial literature regarding portrait construction in the 20th century. In the introduction to the exhibition publication for "Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art," Associate Curator, Melissa Feldman, explains that "exposing the construction of appearances is just one aspect of this review of the portrait in recent art. Today's highly varied practice responds to issues that range from the condition of representation to social change."[70] As Feldman's statement indicates, portraiture ranges in intent and conception. While many artists are highly imaginative in their self-portraits, putting forth a devised persona or a mythical fabrication of the all-confident and powerful artist who is essentially controlling and enhancing his or her own career, Neel and Elaine have produced self-portraits that are more straightforward. Neel's self-portrait, for example, quite candidly describes herself as an aging woman and an artist. While she is seated in a chair very much

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[68] Ann Temkin, "Alice Neel: Self and Others," in *Alice Neel,* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000): p. 13.

[69] Robin White, "Interview with Elaine De Kooning at East Hampton, NY" (*View* (Spring 1988) vol. 5 no. 1): p. 13.

[70] Melissa Feldman, *Face Off: The Portrait in Recent Art* (University of Pennsylvania: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994): p. 9.

like her other portrait subjects, she holds the accoutrements of a painter. Moreover, eyeglasses could signify the process of "seeing" (a painter's main perception) as well as refer to her old age. The poised paintbrush is ready to apply paint and the cloth is there to wipe away any errors or spills. She has painted herself as an active participant in her art, towards the end of her career. Her past (and her renowned body of work) are as factual a part of her existence as her wrinkled body. The portrait is not insinuating anything we do not already know about Neel – it is not perpetuating a myth or creating a devised persona but instead recounting who she is and what she has already accomplished. Even her nudity, while quite daring in the subversion of the traditional idea of beauty regarding an artistic subject (and more specifically youthful, female beauty), is also quite daring in its openness. She is not hiding anything physically, intellectually or artistically.

Elaine fashioned some of her only self-portraits at the beginning of her career. The frank nature of Elaine's work is very similar to Neel's, even though the two artists may have created their works at opposite ends of their careers. Elaine explained her matter-of-fact exploration of her self-image when she commented that: "For a year and a half, I did self-portraits, because I had a great big square mirror."[71] We get the very clear sense that the investigation of her own image is, at least in part, the result of convenience rather than a calculated agenda on her part. In her early self-portrait sketches, Elaine, like Neel, is not formulating a powerful, facade but rather, we sense that she is working candidly with a familiar subject. In

[71] Robin White, "Interview with Elaine De Kooning at East Hampton, NY" (*View* (Spring 1988) vol. 5 no. 1): p. 13.

the 1942 sketch (Figure 29), for example, we sense a straightforward reality – the visage is characteristically "Elaine." In photographs of the artist we recognize similar strong stares and confrontational expressions. In her self-portrait, Elaine maintains a strong and determined posture, but the portrait also seems to be an exploration of style more than a precise physical likeness or the construction of a desired persona.

Alice Neel's portraiture, on the whole, has a characteristic vulnerability to it. The vulnerability allows the viewer to penetrate the portrait sitter, but this openness also stems from the artist's own experiences and emotions that are in many ways connected to her gender. In the catalog for the 2000 exhibit of Alice Neel's work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Ann Temkin points out that: "Although Neel did not portray herself, her paintings assert an individuality that was unmistakably her own" and Temkin cites specific works that are implicitly autobiographical, in other words, indicative of Neel's personal life, without being self-portraiture.[72] In a similar fashion, Elaine's portraiture also describes personal qualities. In Elaine's portraits her scrutiny of masculine form may parallel her own desire for acceptance and respect in a patriarchal society. Throughout the history of art, women artists have struggled with the challenge of being accepted in the role of artist. More typically, the female is relegated to the role of the model, or, more generally, the object of the male

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[72] "Alice Neel: Self and Others" in Temkin, Ann, ed., *Alice Neel* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000): p. 17-18. This quality has also been mentioned in the more recent exhibition of Alice Neel's portraits of women held at the National Museum of Women in the Arts (October 28, 2005 - January 15, 2006).

gaze.[73] But Elaine subverts these typical roles by concentrating her efforts on the male form. As discussed earlier, her choice of subject matter could very well have been a conscious or subconscious reaction to her husband's concentration on women in general, or a reaction to the overwhelming masculinity of the 1950s. However, there is also an underlying autobiographical tone to Elaine's art, as in Neel's, that reflects the artist's own personality. Through strong stares and dignified postures, Elaine's portraits are self-descriptive as much as they are outwardly portraying another person. She confronts characteristics in others that she, herself, wishes to possess – things like assertiveness and confidence. Even when she portrays figures in relaxed poses, her subjects command respect. This type of authority was unquestionably an attribute that Elaine found alluring in others and one that she also strove to personally possess.[74]

The reflection of Elaine's authoritative persona shining through her portraits can be illustrated by comparing her portraits of men (Figure 30) with her early self-portraits. (Figure 7) In examples of each of these, there are similar descriptive features such as direct stares and poised lines of the body. Elaine described talking to her sitters until the correct poses "appear" so it is not surprising that the poses she

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[73] For a thorough discussion of the male gaze in general see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., (*Literary Theory: An Anthology.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998): p. 585-595. For further discussion of gender identity construction in art, see Amelia Jones, "Negotiating Difference(s) in Contemporary Art," in Richard Hertz, ed., *Theories of Contemporary Art,* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993): p. 201-211.

[74] My assertion here is based on the strong cast of characters that was her social circle (her friends were – and are – most certainly assertive and confident individuals) as well as her own assertiveness that is projected in taped and videotaped interviews.

ultimately chose for her male subjects are similar in strength and attitude to those she personally chose for her self-portraiture. She even remarked that she should not be labeled a "portrait artist" because she also *chooses* the subjects herself and they are mostly painters, sculptors, poets and all are friends and/or professional peers. This explanation implies a familiarity from the outset and maybe even the desire to closely identify with these particular individuals. She opts for intimate subjects and the deliberate poses.[75]

Another self-described aspect of Elaine's portraiture that perhaps underscores her own feminine viewpoint is the use of floral accents in many of her portraits. In one interview Elaine vaguely expressed that she was interested in painting portraits of men with flowers (Figure 30) and that she would execute the flowers and the face with the same kind of brushstroke.[76] The seemingly incongruous and usually unassuming feature of the flowers juxtaposes male and female components. The typically gendered bouquet of flowers are a colorful accent but may also suggest the artist's own straddling between the art world's construction of artist as male and model as female, or even more simply the two genders intertwined in a personality. And Elaine often shifts her perspective on this

[75] Fortress, Karl E. (Karl Eugene) (1907-) Collection, taped interviews with artists.

[76] Detroit Institute of Arts, Crosscurrents U.S.A. artists' statements, sound recording: 1969 March, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. The image cited here is a portrait of fellow artist Fairfield Porter. Subjects of nature often occur in Porter's art and while this similarity between Elaine's inclusion of flowers in her portrait and Porter's own artistic content seems notable, I have not found any interviews or literature alluding to a deliberate parallel made between the floral detail and Porter's own work. It has not been documented as to where (specifically) the portrait was completed.

gendering. Floral arrangements have long been a classic subject for still-life painters and in some cases can be considered as feminine content. In a discussion of the history of still-life painting, Max Friedlander points out that:

> On a superficial view the still-life attempts nothing save the true-to-nature portrayal of familiar things. But deeper insight does not miss the symbolic and the decorative function.[77]

By adding flowers into a gesturally dynamic and subjectively male image, they can add a sense of decoration thereby provoking symbolic male and female connotations within a single work.[78]

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[77] Max J. Friedlander, *Landscape, Portrait, Still-Life: Their Origin and Development,* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963): p. 280.

[78] Adding the element of still-life to portraiture unites two standard genres of painting. Still-life painting evolved during the 16th century and marked a trend away from exclusively religious or moral themes and towards the utilization of collections of objects. In some cases, the objects were used symbolically, as in vanitas paintings, to express the brevity of life. As David A. Petit describes, "Still life painting evolved out of emblemism and figurative paintings. Gradually the supporting elements of a painting began to take on more prominence until they became the visual equivalent of the figures. The moral or religious themes eventually became more subtle, even fading physically to the background in 16th century Dutch kitchen scenes. By the 17th century, figures were eliminated in most cases, and the moral and religious themes were symbolized by objects or groups of objects." [David A. Petit, "A Historical Overview of Dutch and French Still Life Painting: A Guide for the Classroom," *Art Education,* vol, 41, no. 5 (September 1988): p. 17]. It is interesting, although probably coincidental, that Elaine's work combines ideas of figuration and still-life, while also attending to symbolic gendered references. It is not clear from any of the artist's direct statements in interviews that she was consciously considering 16th and 17th century still life paintings when completing her own pieces. However, in an article for *ArtNews* in 1950, "Andrew Wyeth Paints a Picture," she admires Wyeth's subtle injection of symbolism into his otherwise realistic paintings that is reminiscent of vanitas work. Elaine writes, "A master of the magic-realist technique, the thirty-three-year-old artist bases his astonishing photographic improvisations on a thorough familiarity with his subjects – most of them taken from his surroundings at Chadds Ford, Pa., where he has lived all his life. But his depictions of commonplace visual realities are always charged with a high emotional content. Without tricks of technique, sentiment or obvious symbolism, Wyeth, through his use of perspective, can make a

With a comparable amalgam of gender-specific ideas and a subsequent diffusing of the typical gender stereotypes, Alice Neel's *Nadya Nude* 1933 (Figure 31) explores gendered juxtapositions. In an effort to confront the established canon of art history in which female models are posed seductively for odalisque-type paintings, Neel has chosen to portray what she calls "a new york Olympia."[79] Her nude, rather than posing suggestively for a male artist (to be consumed by the male gaze), is presumably pregnant and exceedingly curvaceous to the point of aversion by societal standards of beauty. Her situation is one of assertiveness rather than consumption. Much like Manet's *Olympia* or Cezanne's *A Modern Olympia* when compared to Titian's odalisques, Nadya does not lie in an alluring position for the assumed male viewer to merely admire sexually, but instead chooses her own purpose (just as Manet's Olympia controls her own vocation). Nadya lies solidly in her own comfort zone, seemingly letting everything go. There is a reality and nonchalance in the pose that reflects an air of confidence or even disinterest. Denise Bauer describes Nadya's situation:

> Nadya is altogether freed of the burden of the male gaze. Despite her overt sexuality, she is without the taint of a "fallen woman" or prostitute. Instead, Nadya appears as an individual in touch with her sexuality. It is Neel's skill at capturing and deconstructing this complex blend of what women are "supposed to" experience and how they may actually experience the male gaze that expertly cuts to the reality of so many women's experiences of themselves and their bodies.[80]

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prosperous farmhouse kitchen or a rolling pasture as bleak and haunting as a train whistle in the night." [*The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 75].

[79] Ann Temkin, p. 20.

[80] Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Female Nudes," *Woman's Art Journal,* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Autumn 1994 – Winter 1995): p. 24.

Nadya parts her legs with the same freedom that many of Elaine's male sitters do, as one author describes "the male privilege of sitting in an open-legged position."[81] Nadya is asserting that same confidence of a masculine pose: however hers could also be a pregnant pose (enlarged belly, breasts, legs splayed insinuating the actual birthing that is to come). Neel is reflecting gendered contradiction through this robust woman who usurps the position of female model as sex symbol and object of male gaze and replaces it with a typically masculine, confident posture of comfortable sexuality.

In Elaine's series of portraits, there is the same air of confidence and authenticity as in *Nadya Nude,* but Elaine accomplishes her gendered juxtaposition not through nudity, but through clothing. An interesting comparison can be made between Elaine's portraiture and Alice Neel's portrait of John Perreault from 1972, in which Neel reconfigured the reclining nude; she painted a *male* nude in the typically feminine reclining pose, thereby making him vulnerable and an object of a (female?) gaze. Like Elaine, Neel mixes female and male characteristics in the work. Both artists question the accepted art historical roles of artist versus model. Instead of using the position of the body as the catalyst for swapping male and female roles, as in *John Perreault,* Elaine uses clothing. Elaine stated of one of her paintings that "[the sitter's] whole personality was expressed in the folds of his

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[81] Stahr, Celia S. "Elaine de Kooning, Portraiture, and the Politics of Sexuality," *Genders OnLine Journal* (Issue 38. http://www.genders.org/g38/g38_stahr.html, 2003): paragraph 18.

clothing and the silhouette of his head."[82] It seems as though, for Elaine, individuality as well as gender can be associated with clothing. Moreover, clothing *defines* the bodily form underneath. Fashion, stereotypically feminine, defines Elaine's males, just as reclined nudity, also stereotypically feminine, is defining Neel's male. For Neel, it is the flesh that describes the individuality of the body most directly and for Elaine, it is the clothes. Each artist, in a potentially subversive dialogue with the masculine canon of art history, portrays males in motifs or with accoutrements associated with females.

Elaine at one point stated that "My portrait of Frank [O'Hara] was faceless but was absolutely Frank O'Hara" and that her objective was to "paint him in terms of the gesture of his body."[83] Both Neel and Elaine capture a likeness not by shaping an accurate (photographic) portrait but by instilling it with what makes their sitters most unique. These two artists each confront gender roles in art through portraits of the poet/curator Frank O'Hara.[84] O'Hara sat for portraits by both Alice Neel (Figures 32 and 33) and Elaine (Figure 14) with different results. The first and most obvious difference between these two artists' renditions of the same figure is that Neel does not obscure the features on O'Hara's face while Elaine removed most of them. Elaine's portrait from 1956 emphasizes instead what she called the

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[82] Detroit Institute of Arts, interview, sound recording.

[83] Fortress, Karl E. (Karl Eugene) (1907-) Collection, taped interviews with artists, 1963-1985, 205 sound cassettes, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., donated 1978-1985.

[84] It should be noted that Frank O'Hara was homosexual, and there are inherent gendered issues that coincide with this fact. While this may be a motive in the use of feminine details, the more important issue to discuss is the manner in which the masculine and feminine are intertwined.

"gestures of his body," allowing O'Hara to be recognizable even though facial features have been eliminated.[85] While Neel also presents pose, gesture of body, clothing, etc. in her portrait, she retains O'Hara's face as an important descriptive feature. Neel's portrait maintains some naturalism, but more so, it appears caricatured, with features exaggerated, as if the countenance is not meant to be merely descriptive but also symbolic. In her first work, *Frank O'Hara* from 1960 (Figure 32), Neel paints him in strict profile, bringing attention to the prominent nose and thoughtful gaze. Invoking earlier portrait traditions, a poetic romanticism – and possibly O'Hara's homosexuality – is underscored by the lush floral arrangement that outlines his head like a halo and mimics the curves of his neck and back. Like Elaine's incorporation of flowers in portraits (Figure 30), Neel's flowers seem to be for compositional purposes (color to contrast the profile) but also possibly gendered, indicating the poet's homosexuality. In the later work, *Frank O' Hara, No. 2,* also from 1960 (Figure 33), the pose is frontal, confrontational and somewhat menacing in the enigmatic expression (is it a smirk or a smile?), and the somber color palette reinforces the more unsettled feeling in the work.[86]

The stylistic technique is radically different here between Neel and Elaine. Neel's depiction – especially *Frank O'Hara, No. 2* – communicates the maleness of

[85] Fortress, Karl E. (Karl Eugene) (1907-) Collection, taped interviews with artists, 1963-1985, 205 sound cassettes, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., donated 1978-1985. Elaine described wanting to capture someone's likeness as if recognizing someone from a distance, walking down the street – recognizing them only from the back, for example.

[86] For more description and meaning behind these portraits of O'Hara see Richard Flood's "Gentlemen Callers: Alice Neel and the Art World" in Temkin, pages 55-56.

the sitter in his forthright expressions and somewhat intimidating presence. On the other hand, Elaine paints her version of O'Hara lacking visage and therefore lacking confrontation. Paired with the imprecise boundary between figure and ground (common brushstrokes unite the whole of the canvas) and the soft pastel color palette, the missing facial features characterize the figure as an androgynous, specter-like form. Although we know that the portrait is male by the clothing and the title, the general feel is light and airy, the pose is gendered with hand at the pelvis and hip thrust outward, and the colors are soft and feminine; even the face is coated in a very deep pink. There may be implications here of poetry as linked with femininity, or even O'Hara's sexuality, but rather than using peripheral details like Neel's flowers to highlight psychological subtleties, Elaine muddles gender characteristics by using her gestural style of painting. Once again, Elaine's art exhibits a delicate balance of masculine and feminine characteristics in an overtly male subject.

Images of women are scarce in Elaine's overall series of portraits. Elaine has vaguely remarked in interviews that her inclination just tends toward the male subject.[87] However, she did paint portraits of women during her career and it is telling to place these works side by side with the male portraiture. One such

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[87] In the interview conducted by Robin White for *View*, White commented that "I mentioned earlier that many of your subjects are masculine. I remember you saying earlier that you wanted to react against some of the things Bill [de Kooning] does, and Bill paints women," and Elaine responded "Well, I think that was part of it, you know, but also it just seemed natural to paint men. When I was sixteen or so I would draw my brothers, but I would draw my sister Marjorie, too." [Robin White, "Interview with Elaine de Kooning at East Hampton, NY," *View* (Spring 1988) vol. 5 no. 1: p. 12].

comparison can be made between *Megan #2* from 1980 (Figure 34) and *Pelé* from 1982 (Figure 35) specifically because of the similarity of the poses. Megan is the daughter of one of Elaine's close friends, Connie Fox. Pelé is a Brazilian football (American "soccer") player, considered by many as one of the greatest athletes of all time.[88]

Each sitter is perched on a stool in almost identical fashion with one leg lower than the other, body turned slightly toward the left side of the picture plane, and the backgrounds are similar. Despite the similarity in pose, the two works impart very different impressions of these individuals. Megan looks upward, angelically, without making eye contact with the viewer. Pelé, on the other hand, stares more aggressively, even confrontationally, at the viewer. While his pose is relaxed and easygoing, he seems strong and assertive. Megan's hands lay softly in her lap, uneasily resting in a somewhat awkward position, and the subtle details of her pose create tranquility in the overall composition. Contrastingly, Pelé's hands rest solidly on his legs, his legs resting solidly on the rungs of the stool. While the portrait lacks the accessories of his athletic profession, Pelé's position subtly emphasizes his legs, and perhaps this is an indication of his sport, soccer.

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[88] The portrait of Pelé is cited in several articles as one of only two formal portrait commissions awarded to Elaine during her career (her first being the portrait of Kennedy). I have been unable to find specific details regarding the commission itself or the events leading to the commission. There is evidence of other paintings of Pelé by Elaine, possibly suggesting a process of study like the JFK commission although not to that extreme. Pelé is also the subject of many portraits by a wide variety of artists; a discussion of these other works is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I use the portrait of Pelé (Figure 35) in the specific context of comparing its visual similarities to *Megan #2*. (Figure 34)

Pelé’s portrait, while relaxed and natural in the positioning of his body, is explosive in the background. Colors emanate behind him like fireworks as if his body is at the heart of the explosion. It seems quite remarkable that there is little besides the title of the painting to indicate who he is; however the dynamic quality of the painting style echoes this man’s career and dominance in his sport. Somewhat like Umberto Boccioni’s *Dynamism of a Soccer Player,* the action here is told through the explosive style of the work even though the man, himself, is static in Elaine’s work. Contrastingly, the portrait of Megan seems more deliberately posed (and poised), somewhat stiff though graceful nonetheless. And the background of *Megan #2,* while similar to that in Pelé’s portrait, is much more traditionally constructed. The two portraits were probably painted from the same vantage point in the same outdoor setting on Elaine’s property in East Hampton (a setting that was familiar and favored by her); however there is a more definitive horizon line in the portrait of Megan and the forested area in the background is more clearly rendered. These details harmoniously interact with the figure of the adolescent girl. Instead of the explosive brushstrokes of Pelé’s portrait, the lines which make up the trees behind Megan calmly echo the legs of the stool and the lines of the young girl’s body. A similar calmness and relative reservation are apparent in other portraits of women by Elaine. They tend to reflect more traditional portrait techniques and have less of the explosive gesture of Abstract Expressionist Action Painting. (Figure 36) Clearly, masculinity is enmeshed with the explosive, gestural painting technique in Elaine’s work. From her faceless men, to her portraits of John F. Kennedy and Pelé, there is a gendered correlation linking

Abstract Expressionist styling with masculine subject matter: her male subjects are simply more dynamic.

One work by Elaine de Kooning's that is considered a group portrait (and stylistically falls somewhere between portraiture and her large-scale cave painting work that will be discussed in later chapters) is the 1963 canvas titled *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue.* (Figure 37) Elaine's series of individual male portraits is interrupted by this group portrait of nine anonymous male figures given the collective identity of "The Burghers." Measuring 88 x 166 inches (almost 7 ½ x 14 feet) this painting is one of her larger works (and probably the largest up until this time) and the size augurs the later mural-like configuration of her cave paintings. Elaine demonstrates the common Abstract Expressionist interest in encompassing the viewer with large-scale works like this one. As Campbell writes, "if it looks life-sized, it must be painted larger than life."[89] Moreover, the mural-like scale and horizontal configuration of the work prefigure Elaine's later cave paintings. She seems to have absorbed some New York School ideas during the 1950s that manifest themselves in her work again and again.

Several ideas are captured in this piece. First, it is one of the few multi-figure portraits in Elaine's oeuvre. While the title of this work helps us identify the collective group of figures, the individuals themselves remain anonymous. However both the obscurity of the sitters' identities (faceless men series) and the

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[89] Lawrence Campbell, "Elaine de Kooning: Portraits in a New York Scene," *Art News* (April 1963): p. 63.

collective nature of the male figures (sports paintings) are common in Elaine's work. Secondly, the painting itself in style and composition relates to important works from the Abstract Expressionist era. In that same vein, the group construct of this painting is similar to the January 15, 1951 photograph in Life Magazine of the Abstract Expressionist group of artists, titled "The Irascibles" (Figure 45); a quintessential image of quick-tempered machismo. The figural arrangement in Elaine's *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue* parallels the prescribed (and assigned) image of the predominantly male Abstract Expressionist group of artists.

In Lawrence Campbell's 1963 article for *Art News,* "Elaine de Kooning: Portraits in a New York Scene," he briefly mentions *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue,* but at the time he was writing the article, the painting was only a concept. He describes:

> While this was being written, Elaine deKooning [sic] was planning to undertake a politically engaged painting to be called *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue.* It would be a life-sized ("if it looks life-sized, it must be painted larger than life") group portrait, a juvenile *Inferno* consisting of some twelve New York High School kids, all lined up in a non-aligned way, all at the same time, sitting and standing, each standing free.[90]

This passage is one of the rare explanations of this work in the literature.[91] In a conversation with artist Sherman Drexler, who was a close friend of Elaine's, he

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[90] Lawrence Campbell, "Elaine de Kooning: Portraits in a New York Scene," *Art News* (April 1963): p. 63.

[91] This work was exhibited at the Salander-O'Reilly Gallery in 1999 and while additional literature regarding this exhibition might exist, the gallery was recently shut down for legal and financial reasons. Unfortunately, contact cannot be made with Salander-O'Reilly at this point. For a short mention of the 1999 Salander-O'Reilly exhibition, see Kramer, Hilton. "Elaine de Kooning's Ode to a Vanished New York," *The New York Observer,* January 17, 1999 [http://www.observer.com/node/40947].

explained that the youth in this work were his students at an alternative school for narcotics addicts on North Brother Island (an island in the East River situated between the Bronx and Riker's Island). According to Drexler, the students at the school ranged in age from 15 to 21 and they had the option to work at the hospital on the island or go to school and earn their high school equivalency. The group in *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue* is a random assortment of students. Drexler made a general announcement that whomever would like to sit for Elaine's portrait show up at a certain place and time.

This work can be seen as an anomalous culmination of Elaine's portrait oeuvre in that she ritualistically investigates the poses and personae of the dominating male subjects and their anonymity, describing them collectively as "burghers" rather than being individually named.[92] Each of the group of nine males

[92] It is difficult to find any specific reason for the title "Burghers" being assigned to these youth. The term refers to the original colonial settlers of New York City, the burghers, or freemen, of New Amsterdam. I also consider the possibility of the reference to Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* which was also a collection of male figures as well as a visualization of a collective sacrifice that might loosely parallel the harsh situation of these youths in society. There is a correlation to Evan Hunter's novel, *The Blackboard Jungle* (published in 1954 and made into a feature film in 1955) which is the fictional story about a young English teacher in a New York City technical school who struggles with the education of disenfranchised youth. Since the actual students who posed for her painting were students in a similar alternative school in New York City, this novel may have been an inspiration for Elaine although there is no documentation to support the connection. There is little concrete information on this painting in scholarship. One more obscure finding in the Graham Gallery Papers, Box 2 of 46, is an article from Newsweek, May 13, 1963 that stated, "These are nine young men who are growing up absurd in New York City…The picture is not realism, not abstraction. It is pure apprehension plus intelligence, and that makes it look startlingly like the jungle-Paris apparitions of Henri Rousseau." [Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, NYC] This passage might propagate the idea of the youth as surviving a jungle-like atmosphere, or persevering as had Rodin's *Burghers of Calais*.

assumes a characteristic pose, in units of "2"s and "3"s across the picture plane. The grouping and movement through the painting with regard to subject matter and situation is decidedly horizontal, but Elaine contrasts this arrangement with the verticality of much of the brushwork on the figures themselves and in the background.

In my opinion, the overall composition of *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue* is remarkably similar to canvases such as Jackson Pollock's *Guggenheim Mural* from 1943 (Figure 38) or Lee Krasner's *Celebration* from 1960. (Figure 39) Measuring 7 ft. 11 in. x 19 ft. 9 in. and 7 ft. 7 in. x 15 ft. 6 in. respectively, both Pollock's and Krasner's murals are similar to Elaine's work in scale and horizontality. The overall brushwork and consistency of painterly marks in Pollock's *Mural* and Krasner's *Celebration* is also similar in both style and effect. Furthermore, there exists a modernist flattening of the picture plane.[93] Of course, once again (and in contrast to both of these other artists) Elaine retains subject matter. Although not nearly as regular in overall patterning and repeated motif and of course, not completely abstract as Pollock's or Krasner's works, Elaine's painting exhibits the Abstract Expressionist interest in a repetitive motion of the paint. One article briefly describes *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue* as "the natural heir to both the social responsibility of American art of the '30s and the esthetic sky-diving

[93] The standards of modernism in the 1950s and 1960s were perpetuated by art critic, Clement Greenberg, who professed that in order for a work of art to be modern, it must also be flat. [See Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.]

of the postwar years."[94] Elaine utilizes patches of colors (yellow in the background, blue in both the background and clothing of the figures, etc.) to move the eye systematically through the canvas in a rhythmic motion. As in both Pollock's and Krasner's works, there is a repetitive activation to the style.[95] In *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue*, this dynamism contrasts with the often typical stillness of a traditional group portrait.[96] Furthermore, whereas Pollock's and Krasner's paints saturate their canvases, Elaine leaves blank patches of canvas that add further motion to the surface. The blank areas operate as foils to the quick and gestural brushwork. These blank areas are at times in syncopation with the brushwork defining figures and space; for example, in the very center of the canvas a blank area rhymes with the verticality of a leg. (Figure 40)

It is not surprising that both Pollock and Elaine had a similar interest in the work of Spanish painter El Greco [1541 – 1614]. Elaine stated in an interview that "To me El Greco was much more important than the French artists with his vibrant brushstrokes."[97] One painting that was specifically influential is called *The Vision of Saint John* 1608-14. (Figure 41) This was a favorite of Elaine's and it resides in

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[94] Graham Gallery Papers, Box 2 of 46, "The Oldest Art," *Newsweek*, May 13, 1963, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, NYC.

[95] It can be noted though, that while Elaine's work is more sharply angular, both Pollock's and Krasner's are much more serpentine in movement.

[96] In some figural paintings that seem to imply movement, such as Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* from 1907, the movement is conceptually suggested by the different (and contradictory) poses of the figures. Elaine's work, instead, blurs and shifts before our eyes.

[97] Bruce Duff Hooten, "'My First Exhibit… To Now' – Elaine de Kooning" (transcript of a taped interview) *Art World* (Oct. 1982): p. 1+.

the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[98] Elizabeth Frank, in her monograph about Jackson Pollock, discusses several sketchbook pages of Pollock's that are devoted to in-depth analyses of two works by El Greco, *Annunciation* and *Coronation of the Virgin with Saints Peter, Paul, James and the Two Saints John*.[99] According to Frank, Pollock's investigations of El Greco resulted in his systematic breakdown of forms into "autonomous geometric complexes."[100] She also uses descriptions like "arabesquing, serpentine and spikey forms" to describe these sketchbooks and the description can easily be applied to Pollock's figurative work like *Going West* from 1934-38.[101] We can see the transition to his much later *Mural* with its own arabesquing, serpentine features that dance rhythmically through the composition. The shapes and marks in the *Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue* are not quite so fluid; however El Greco's influence is apparent in the elongation of the figures, especially in their accentuated verticality. The figures are discretely arranged in space much like the figures in El Greco's *Vision of Saint John;* as Campbell states, the *Burghers* are "all lined up in a non-aligned way." Even the patches of un-worked canvas in Elaine's painting seem to replicate the effects in the sky of El Greco's *Vision of Saint John*, with patches of white breaking up the color. Fundamentally, the most compelling parallel between El Greco and Pollock and

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[98] Lawrence Campbell, in Bledsoe, Jane K., *Elaine de Kooning,* (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): p. 37.

[99] Elizabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollock,* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983): p. 19.

[100] Ibid.

[101] This work was also notably influenced by Pollock's mentor at the time, Thomas Hart Benton.

Elaine is emotional expression. In Elaine's work this is achieved by rough brushstrokes and quick execution; in Pollock's, with thick overlaps and abstract repetition and patterning.

While the exact motivation for painting this particular group of males is unknown, the conception of the work is described by Lawrence Campbell as "politically-engaged." We can only assume that Elaine had some special interest in the social role of the alternative school as well as the changing climate of youth in New York City at this time.[102] Elaine declared her interest in the singular masculine form but there was also a compositional precedent for her group configuration in a few portraits she had made in the early 1960s showing more than one male per canvas. In 1961 she completed a work called *The Loft Dwellers.* (Figure 42) According to longtime friend Connie Fox, the young men in this work, Eddie Johnson and Bob Corless, were among a number of troubled youth who Elaine randomly invited to her studio to paint and then befriended.[103] In 1962 she painted another work called *The Silent Ones* (Figure 43), presumably of subjects with a similar background to *The Loft Dwellers.* While these are not large groupings of figures like *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue*, these works show two male forms in an anonymous grouping on a very large scale (both of these paintings are a little

[102] I have tried to investigate this connection further, although the only information I garnered was from Sherman Drexler, a personal friend of Elaine's. According to Drexler, Elaine had a general interest in people. As he articulated, "She was fascinated in general with human endeavors." This is the best explanation I can find for her decision to paint these struggling youths.

[103] Connie Fox (artist and personal friend of Elaine de Kooning), Interviewed by Lisa Strahl (May 3, 2008 at her home on Saddle Lane in East Hampton, NY).

larger than life-size, about 7 ½ feet tall). These works seem to serve as preparatory studies, both in subject matter of troubled youth and in style, for the more intensive grouping from 1963. In Valerie Peterson's article "U.S. figure painting: Continuity and cliché" from *Art News* (Summer 1962), *The Silent Ones* is vaguely mentioned but pictured prominently. Peterson briefly discusses the structure of the work as being solidly supported by different parts of the figures' bodies – the hands, the thighs, etc. – but she goes into little detail beyond that and mentions nothing about the origin of the work or the identities of the sitters. According to Lawrence Campbell, Elaine also completed a series of portraits of fathers and sons that was her version of the traditional Mother and Child theme that is a common focus for female artists (Mary Cassatt and Alice Neel, for example).[104] Elaine's subversion of this theme emphasizes again the interest she had in assembling the male figure specifically.

A group portrait titled *Grand Street Brides* from 1954 (Figure 44) by contemporary female artist Grace Hartigan can be discussed as a gender-oriented counterpoint to *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue*. Hartigan met Elaine in 1948 and shared the same New York City artistic community.[105] Hartigan's depiction of New York City street life hinges on a grouping of female figures, namely brides,

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[104] Campbell, p. 63. I have not found any reproductions of these works by Elaine nor additional scholarship describing them.

[105] In homage to Elaine, Hartigan writes, "I met Elaine in 1948, when I was trying to figure out a personal style to present to the world. So far I had just walked around in paint smeared studio clothes. There she was – beauty, charm, wit, sexiness, intelligence. I had my model and have spent the ensuing years trying to live up to her." ["Elaine de Kooning: Portraits," (The Art Gallery, Brooklyn College, February 28 – April 19, 1991): p. 6.]

who we can only assume by their specific categorization are defined, in part, by their relationship with men.[106] Here, Hartigan is a woman artist painting images of women. Hartigan's work lacks the movement and more harshly divided paint strokes that define *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue* and the affect is a softening of the forms. There is a blending of the features that does not exude the same masculine sense of energy. In this and other urban-themed, group paintings, for example *Masquerade* from 1954, Hartigan painted softer, rounder, more curvilinear feminine images.[107] For Elaine the male form, the more rugged poses, and the gestural inflection of the paint corresponded more naturally to her work and connected her with the prescribed Abstract Expressionist ideology of her artistic background.

There is a provocative visual parallel between Elaine's *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue* and the ideology of the Abstract Expressionist group, exemplified by the photograph that appeared in the January 15, 1951 issue of LIFE Magazine capturing the so-called "Irascibles," which almost immediately became an archetypal image of the Abstract Expressionist artists. (Figure 45) The term itself, "irascible" means hot-tempered or testy, clearly proposing that this group of mostly males is quick to fight and assert their machismo. The photograph was taken in

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[106] Robert Saltonstall Mattison points out that Hartigan's studio was on the Lower East Side of Manhattan where "marriage was extremely important and arranged brides were often brought from Europe." (*Grace Hartigan: a painter's world.* New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990): p. 33.

[107] Mattison writes of *Masquerade:* "Spectral images nearly lost through rubbed-out paint, the figures undulate with the unsettling rhythm provided by Hartigan's curving brushstrokes." p. 36.

correlation with the Metropolitan Museum of Art's inaugural contemporary painting competition and the "Irascibles" were fifteen painters who boycotted the exhibition.[108] The men in the photograph sit and stand in dominant (even threatening) positions, with strong, confrontational stares and stern expressions on their faces. According to one author:

> The combination of facial and bodily attitudes creates a psychological barrier, walling out the ordinary middle-class *Life* subscriber. The sense of exclusion is completed by the fairly tight, almost closed circle of their grouping. The overall impression is of a highly serious, unified front against the ordinary American.[109]

The photo reflects the underlying currents of the New York association of artists who spent time discussing their art in pubs and cafeterias in tight-knit and very exclusive groups where outsiders were clearly not welcomed.[110] Elaine's *Burghers* have the same air of exclusivity and brashness: both the photograph and Elaine's painting present a group of mavericks whose sense of independence and anti-authoritarianism could lead to powerful action/reaction or even violence.

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[108] Included in the photo are (left to right, back to front): Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Sterne, Richard Pousette-Dart, William Baziotes, Jimmy Ernst, Jackson Pollock, James Brooks, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Theodore Stamos, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko. Eighteen painters actually participated in the boycott. Three artists – Fritz Bultman, Weldon Kees, and Hans Hofmann – were unable to attend the photo session.

[109] Bradford R. Collins, "*Life* Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-51: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise," *The Art Bulletin,* Vol. 73, No. 2 (June 1991): p. 293.

[110] It is well-documented that Elaine was uniquely accepted in these inner Abstract Expressionist (male) circles. She has been described as being able to assimilate because of her strong opinions and ability to keep up with the heavy drinking of the group.

Both the LIFE Magazine photograph and Elaine's painting, *The Burghers of Amsterdam Avenue* have many visual similarities. Both revolve around a central point and the predominantly male figures (with the one exception of Hedda Sterne in the Abstract Expressionist group) are remarkably similar in both Elaine's painting and the photograph. For example, the left-most figure in Elaine's painting mimics the pose of Richard Pousette-Dart in the photograph (the left-most figure as well). The third figure in from the left in Elaine's painting is in a seated pose with leg bent upward that almost exactly parallels that of Theodoros Stamos, seated in the front left of the LIFE photograph. The strict profiles of the right-most figures in Elaine's painting are similar to the pose of Mark Rothko (seated on the right) in the LIFE photo as well as Jackson Pollock's pose in the center of the photo, with body turned in profile but face staring forward. Elaine remarked in an interview that:

> I am interested in the way men sat in about five different poses. There are men who fold themselves up, press their arms, cross their legs, and there are those who sit openly with their arms at their sides, and their legs akimbo.[111]

The variety of seated and standing figures reflects this interest in body pose and both this body positioning and the verticality of the arrangement (with the two figures standing behind the others in Elaine's work) are apparent in Elaine's painting and the photograph of the Irascibles. While one is not necessarily a source for the other, both of these works exhibit the underlying *feel* of masculinity and its presentation in the 1950s atmosphere. The "Irascibles" presented themselves as aloof and as the LIFE magazine staff photographer, Nina Leen, described, "they

[111] Bruce Duff Hooten, "'My First Exhibit… To Now' – Elaine de Kooning" (transcript of a taped interview) *Art World* (Oct. 1982): p. 12.

seemed afraid to be nice – they didn't want to appear too commercial."[112] The students, similarly, did not want to seem too accepting of authority. Both groups were asserting a dominance and typical form of masculinity that manifests as power and control.

It is not only likely, but almost certain that Elaine was quite familiar with this representation of the New York School artists in the LIFE magazine photograph. Whether or not she directly used this photograph as a source for her socially-constructed image of these high school-age young men is uncertain because of the lack of documentation regarding the painting. It can reasonably be asserted that the influence of the *projected image* of the Abstract Expressionist group (the poses asserting a certain dominance and masculinity) was a source, at least in respect to the posing of male figures.

Overall, Elaine's portraiture is a combination of the artist's feminine character and masculine design. By skillfully weaving the two together, she straddles a thin line between her own personality as a female artist and her history as an Abstract Expressionist. As we will see in the next few chapters discussing the other series of paintings that dominate her career, this sophisticated amalgam is a thread that knits together her body of work and provides a unifying core for career as an artist.

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[112] Collins, p. 298.

CHAPTER 4

THE SPORTS PAINTINGS

“Time and time again as I was going past a newsstand my eye would be caught by a particular abstract composition and it would turn out to be a sports photograph.” –Elaine de Kooning[1]

By definition and intent “sport” involves movement and interactive energies. This most basic (and perhaps most primitive) example of dynamic movement is exactly what Elaine de Kooning found so alluring in scenes of competitive sports. During the 1950s and 1960s she began a series of work focusing on sports-related scenes, including moments from basketball and baseball games specifically. The artist, herself stated:

> Time and time again as I was going past a newsstand my eye would be caught by a particular abstract composition and it would turn out to be a sports photograph. So I began to collect them and make drawings from groups of them – a figure from this photograph, a pair of arms from that. The drawings suggested another scale, and I worked up to seven- and eight-foot-high canvases, with elongated figures that were a reversion to my adolescent passion for El Greco, with colors flowing through and across the reaching forms.[2]

It does not matter so much that the scenes are composites of several sources – “a figure from this photograph, a pair of arms from that” – as Elaine indicates. What is important is the consistency of her gestural painting style that was used to convey these dynamic scenes. Elaine’s underlying Abstract Expressionist penchant

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[1] Munro, Eleanor, *Originals: American Women Artists,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979): p. 255.

[2] Ibid.

functions in tandem with the writhing masculine form. Corresponding to both an abstract, gestural style and a masculine subject matter, Elaine's sports paintings can be discussed in terms of their portraiture, their relation to art historical sources, and the influence and incorporation of her own first-hand experience with sport, a typically masculine endeavor.

In recalling her childhood, Elaine commented that:

> I reacted, of course, against my mother's ambivalent but fierce anti-Feminism by being competitive with boys, and my way of competing was to join them. I played with boys exclusively until I was thirteen – baseball, football, field hockey, handball.[3]

This spirit of alliance rather than antagonism reveals a good deal about Elaine's personality and her later experiences with the masculine group of Abstract Expressionist artists. Even at this early age, Elaine was willing to maneuver within an existing paternal system in order to achieve her own envisioned results. In doing so, she garnered a level of respect and admiration, both for and from her male compatriots. This admiration is easily identifiable in her series of sports paintings, which are her most clearly delineated homage to masculinity in motion.

Elaine's work is not a conveyance of some static scene or photographic relic of a contest or game. Her work is always about capturing the feel of a changing moment. Elaine's series of sports related works, like her portrait painting, demonstrates a clear interest in the masculine form. But central to each of the sports series (unlike the portraiture) is a writhing gesticulation that to a certain extent camouflages the human forms in movement. While figures are still present in these works as in her traditional portrait paintings, they are swept up in the thick sea of

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[3] Ibid., p. 251.

brushstrokes and Abstract Expressionist-inspired motion. Bodies intertwine with the action of the sport. Backgrounds shift to account for the changing outlines of figures, insinuating the figures' next passage in time and space. In *Campy at the Plate* 1953-1980 (Figure 46), for instance, body parts of the different figures – hands, faces, fingers – are undefined and only slight outlines and color differentiation divide the figures at all from the untidy greens and yellows of the field and the peach-colored dirt of the diamond. At first glance, this work looks child-like in its freedom but on closer inspection, the elements of detail are remarkable. There are just enough lines of shading and modeling to indicate the folds of the uniforms and motion of the bodies underneath. She calls attention to the essentials needed to suggest the energetic activity of the scene. And all the while, Elaine retains the abstracted, gestured expression of the paint itself.

One theme on which she focused in several works was the competition of two basketball players struggling vertically to reach a ball high in the air. (Figures 47, 48, and 49). While the action is frozen temporally on the painted surface, the brushstrokes and fractured colors clearly imply the movement. The gestural style simulates the effect of moving lights, as if one had turned his or her head quickly around in a room filled with spotlights (as in a basketball arena). In *Basketball #40* (Figure 49), the vibrating gestural strokes also mimic the musculature of the men in motion: the twitch of the muscle as it strenuously exerts itself in the throws of competition. Friend and fellow artist, Sherman Drexler, explained that Elaine was fascinated in general with human endeavor. He described how sports contests

provided dramatic poses for Elaine such as reaching, falling, and thrusting.[4] Furthermore, these movements are extremely well aligned with Elaine's active brushstroke.

One catalog of baseball-related works of art by various artists is divided into chapters like "The Place," "The Equipment" and "The Players."[5] According to this catalog, Elaine's work *Campy at the Plate* (Figure 46) falls under the category titled "The Action."[6] Conjuring recollections of Harold Rosenberg's "Action Painting," this categorization parallels Abstract Expressionist ideology. In his article, "The American Action Painters," Rosenberg asserts:

> At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.[7]

This description of a new method of painting that used the canvas as "an arena in which to act" suggests physical (athletic) processes. While Elaine did not engage in aggressively physical techniques of painting, as did Jackson Pollock for instance, she does remark in her writing that "For me the most important thing about the words 'painting' and 'drawing' is that they end in 'ing.' A painting to me is

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[4] Conversation with Sherman Drexler, Interviewed by Lisa Strahl (March 21, 2008 at Tracks Restaurant in Penn Station, NYC).

[5] See Peter H. Gordon, ed., *Diamonds Are Forever: Artists and Writers on Baseball.* San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1987. This catalog presents a variety of artists and writers on the subject of baseball across many different styles.

[6] This category is set forth by the authors of this particular book, not by Elaine herself.

[7] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," (*Art News,* December, 1952): p. 22.

primarily a verb, not a noun – an event first and only secondarily an image."[8] She conveys *action* and *movement* and *physicality* through the gestural style of her paint but also through her choice of dynamic – and in this case athletic – subjects.

There is a correlation between Elaine's sports paintings and her portraiture. In addition to the expressionist painting style evident in both series of work, anonymity versus individuality is also considered. In some of her portraits, she constructed familiar personalities with their faces completely blotted out (her "faceless" men) as if the portrait, contrary to its traditional intent, should be an anonymous form. Her sports paintings are, in many cases, anonymous or semi-anonymous groupings of sports figures. Individuals are not identified by recognizable facial features or personal physical characteristics. A numbered jersey or a name mentioned in a painting's title may be the only indication of an individual player. In other cases, identifying information is omitted altogether.[9] In contrast, sports figures in general – and especially in America – are typically elevated to a form of celebrity, implying ultimate recognition by a large public audience. Rather than highlight this celebrity status, Elaine was interested in the groupings that happen in team sports, making the players individually anonymous but part of a collective purpose.[10]

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[8] Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 175.

[9] Identifying information is most often omitted in the basketball paintings, where titles are reduced to generalizations like "Basketball #40."

[10] For this reason she was not attracted to the sport of tennis for example. For more on this see "Sports as Seen Through the eyes of an Artist" *The New York*

Team players are commonly transformed from their collective identity into individually-named heroes and are just as recognizable to their fans as are entertainment stars or other cultural, intellectual or political figures. In most cases, media images establish the renown of sports figures, and Elaine acknowledged working with newspaper and magazine images she would collect from the newsstand. Unlike the portraits where physical likeness is still an objective, even when not expressly conveyed by facial distinction, the sports figures are recognizable in an everyday popular media context by their participation in a specific sport and by the symbols related to this participation; the number on the back of a jersey, for instance, or the equipment they use while playing. These details might signify an individual personality in the midst of the collective team identity.

However, Elaine's sports works incorporate masculinity and energetic *masses* as a central subject more than the specific personality or personalities of the participants. Her primary interest is the forms as they relate to one another and the dynamic movement of the entire scene rather than a strict representation of a single figure. A grouping of participants (the team) eclipses the athletic celebrity of any one individual figure, and this is the objective of team athletes, themselves, while playing their sport. American Hall of Fame basketball player, Bill Bradley describes the collective intent of a team sport in his book, *Values of the Game*:

> Imagine what happens when you've got an entire team of players who are passionate about the game. In my Knicks days, there was no feeling comparable to the one I got when the team's game came together – those

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Times (Friday, May 8, 1981) p. C30 and "Yankee Stances" *The New York Post* (Oct. 4, 1980) p. 15, both from uncataloged material filed at the MoMA.

> nights when five guys moved as one. The moment was one of beautiful isolation, the result of the correct blending of human forces at the proper time and to the exact degree. With my teams, before the crowd, against our opponents, it was almost as if this were my private world and no one else could sense the inexorable rightness of the moment. [11]

This quotation summarizes what Elaine achieves in her sports works; a delicate merger of individual human forces within the group dynamic – the "private world" and isolation Bradley describes versus the public game. The primary focus of her work, as perceptively noted in the exhibition catalog cited earlier, is "The Action," and the individual players themselves form the framework for this action.

While the action is central to her work, characters and narratives are still present and important, which is why, in some cases, I refer to them as "anonymous portraits." Athletic celebrity is a product of media projection of physical prowess. The images gathered and relayed by media sources conveying sports-related events become archetypal and provide for audiences a certain familiarity to the game and its players. Elaine describes the "fine line" affiliation between her portraiture and her sports works in her written "Statement" from 1959:

> Portraiture has always fascinated me because I love the particular gesture of a particular expression or stance. I'm enthralled by the gesture of the silhouette (for portraits or anything else), the instantaneous illumination that enables you to recognize your father or a friend three blocks away or, sitting in the bleachers, to recognize the man at bat. Working on the figure, I wanted paint to sweep through as feelings sweep through. Then I wanted the paint to sweep the figure along with it – and got involved with men in action – abstract action, action for its own sake – the game. And finally, I wanted the paint to sweep through, around, over and past, to hack away at contours and engulf silhouettes.[12]

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[11] Bill Bradley, *Values of the Game,* (New York: Artisan, a Division of Workman Publishing Co., Inc., 1998): p. 21.

[12] Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 176.

In a sports scene, gesture becomes personified by the participatory figures. Elaine captured a scene such as that of basketball players in her 1953 work *Scrimmage* (Figure 50) in mid-action and the brushstrokes throughout the canvas serve to mimic the lines of the bodies of the players. Here we see that the faces of the players have been deliberately blurred, similar to those in her "faceless" portraits. (Figures 14, 16, and 17) But the intent is different. Rather than blurring the face to achieve the immediacy of recognition afforded by the "gesture of the silhouette," the lack of detail in the sports paintings serves to "hack away at contours and *engulf* silhouettes." In the sports works the individual is engulfed within a sea of brushwork and anonymity. The pieces emphasize the movement and what Elaine called the "abstract action" of the game itself. As Sherman Drexler remarked, the game of basketball itself is a jumble of images and there is "the excitement of being involved but not knowing the outcome."[13]

The Abstract Expressionist group as a whole functioned in a team-like fashion and this correlation between Elaine's involvement with sport and her direct involvement with Abstract Expressionism is quite significant. The New York City artists of the 1950s shaped the Abstract Expressionist group as if it were a team by gathering in designated locations like the Cedar Bar and the Artists' Club, exchanging ideas related to the field of art, and being photographed as a group (a team) in the famous "Irascibles" photograph, printed in the January 15, 1951 issue of LIFE Magazine. (Figure 45) Elaine explains in her written "Statement" (see above) that she "got involved with men in action – abstract action, action for its own sake – the

[13] Conversation with Sherman Drexler, March 21, 2008.

game." This description of the sports contests she ultimately paints sounds remarkably similar to established definitions of gestural painting, termed "Action Painting" by Harold Rosenberg. Her involvement with the Abstract Expressionists early in her career as an artist informs her choice of subject matter here as well as the techniques she employed to paint those subjects.

In some of her baseball works, Elaine does make a direct reference to a specific player. This introduces an element of uncertainty as to whether she is intending an abstract view of the sport itself or a more identifiable portrait. For example, *Campy at the Plate* (Figure 46) depicts Hall of Fame catcher, Roy Campanella, playing with the 1950s Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team. Campanella was one of baseball's pioneer African American players: he was the first black catcher in Major League Baseball history. He was also part of the team nicknamed "the Boys of Summer" that included other exceptional players such as Duke Snider, Gil Hodges, Jackie Robinson, and Pee Wee Reese. "Campy," as he was affectionately nicknamed, was highly acclaimed for his handling of the Dodgers' pitching staff. As author Shelly Mehlman Dinhofer explains, this scene by Elaine is of "Campy" crossing the plate after hitting a home run, as indicated by the greeting he receives from a fellow player and the next player waiting for his turn at bat – Carl Furillo – who is designated by the number 6 on the back of his jersey.[14] In this scene, the action of the home run and its relationship to teamwork are central, but the identity of the figures is also noticeably important. In another work, *Baseball Players,* 1953

[14] Shelly Mehlman Dinhofer, *The Art of Baseball,* (New York: Harmony Books, 1990): p. 88.

(Figure 51), Elaine identifies the catcher in the scene with a number 29 on his jersey.[15] Here again, the scene is of a specific moment – that of an opposing player sliding into home plate – and the action of the work takes precedence over any individually referenced portraiture.

It is also clear from the passage in her "Statement" (1959) that Elaine had a thoughtful interest in temporal movement in and of itself. She describes the "paint sweeping the figure along with it." In her work, *Basketball #40* (Figure 49), there is the distinct impression that the scene is not one solitary moment captured in one particular instance but, rather, there is a time-lapse feeling to this work, a "jumble of images" as Sherman Drexler described. The colored splashes that outline the figures and follow the contours of their movements serve as an afterimage or the blur that is left when we see something move at high speeds. The colored trails of the moving figures are ghosts of the action that had occurred just seconds before. The players are hovering, jumping for the ball, but we can envision the crouched moment before their lift. We imagine their arms arcing through the air in a race towards the ball (the blue and purple strokes creating that motion with paint).

Not only is the sports series by Elaine relatable to her own portrait paintings by weighing gesture against recognition, but we also know that she was strongly interested in the tradition of art history and this influence is as evident here as it is in her portraiture (see Chapter 3). Traditionally, sports-related subject matter has

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[15] I have been unable to identify the players or even the teams depicted in *Baseball Players*. The work resides in the collection of the Telfair Museum in Savannah, Georgia. The museum provided the accession record sheet and a brief written document about this painting; however, neither identifies specific players or teams.

fascinated artists since ancient times and even earlier. The history of the iconography of sport is studied in some depth by William A. Baillie-Grohman in his volume, *Sport in Art* originally published in 1919. In his introduction, Baillie-Grohman asserts that, "It has been said that as the chase of wild animals was made the subject of the very earliest pictorial designs, sportsmen can rightly claim to have given the first impulse to art."[16] If Elaine, then, was captivated by the rudimentary human endeavor of athletes, it is not surprising that she was later attracted to the cave illustrations that show the sport of the hunt (see Chapter 6). Her interest included any and all themes of energetic human exercise throughout the timeline of history.

Aside from the earliest depictions of hunters on the cave walls, Greco-Roman sculptors, for example, investigated the male form in the midst of motion as in the very famous *Discus Thrower (Diskobolos)* attributed to the sculptor, Myron. (Figure 52) In early Greek and Roman sculptures the musculature of the figure – the torque and body position of the athlete and the anatomy of the body itself – was the main focal point for the artist. In Elaine's work, there is a theoretical visualization of motion; she illustrates energy using gestural brushwork and blurred details. The idea of sweeping forms and dynamic figures is captured through style rather than mimetic representation.

In his 1908 "Notes of a Painter," Henri Matisse described the element of motion in art. He said:

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[16] William A. Baillie-Grohman, *Sport in Art: An Iconography of Sport,* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1919): p. 1.

> In abandoning the literal representation of movement it is possible to reach toward a higher ideal of beauty. Look at an Egyptian statue: it looks rigid to us; however, we feel in it the image of a body capable of movement and which despite its stiffness is animated. The Greeks too are calm; a man hurling a discus will be shown in the moment in which he gathers his strength before the effort or else, if he is shown in the most violent and precarious position implied by his action, the sculptor will have abridged and condensed it so that balance is re-established, thereby suggesting a feeling of duration. Movement in itself is unstable and is not suited to something durable like a statue unless the artist has consciously realized the entire action of which he represents only a moment.[17]

This passage easily relates as well to Elaine's sports works as it does to that of the ancient Greeks. What could be a more precarious position than that of two basketball players in mid-air competing for possession of the ball and control of the game at that particular moment? There is the implication of duration, while only looking at the momentary, and Elaine has carefully considered the positions of her figures with respect to this duration and in many cases trumped the identity of the figures with the importance of that temporal interval and the movement that comprises the scene. Elaine once wrote about the temporal aspect of art. She said, "Nature is the present, and art is the future."[18] She captures the future by blurring the details of the present moment; the composition is less about "nature" and more about the idea of pushing past the present moment. In other words, her figures are in a state of flux.

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[17] Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" (1908) reprinted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968): p. 133.

[18] Elaine de Kooning, "Subject: What, How, or Who?" 1955, reprinted in *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): pp. 143-144.

The idea of movement through both space and time was an idea that began to flourish in late nineteenth and early twentieth century art. Philosopher Henri Bergson, for example, proposed ideas of passage, and scientific theories of general relativity in the early part of the twentieth century integrated time into the physical construct of our natural world as a fourth dimension. Artists began to consider ideas of flux when representing nature. Gerald Silk discusses the idea of passage in conjunction with Futurist artist, Giacomo Balla:

> This interest in time in art became a concern of the Futurists, but their solution was far more radical: eventually, they developed the "simultaneous" or "synthetic canvas" in which disparate moments, events, and locales appear together in a single, undivided piece. To the Futurists, the "simultaneous" work of art was a far more appropriate expression of the modern world, because revolutions in communications and transportation were transforming man's conception of space and time – an alteration also recognized by modern poets and philosophers, such as Henri Bergson, Jules Romains, and even Walt Whitman (to mention but a few) who stressed the "vitalist" and dynamic core of reality.[19]

Silk considers movement and change again in his book *Automobile and Culture* from 1984. In this book, he explains how the new technology of the automobile – and its subsequent representation in art – is indicative of change and progress. The intent of capturing motion was of particular concern to artists of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The automobile, for example, inspired artists in the wake of the industrial revolution to convey temporal (and intangible) ideas like speed, force and energy. But, as Silk explains, the automobile was also used in many cases, to "symbolize a society in transition, and to represent the birth of the

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[19] "Fu Balla e Balla Futurista," *Art Journal,* Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter 1981): p. 330.

modern age."[20] Movement and speed became a special indication of transformation. Artists were interested in signifying the future in their work, rather than, as Elaine specified, nature as the present. In Elaine's work, flux is suggested using a sequence of suggested athletic moments, actions spreading across a timeline, and extending into a future.

Elaine's *Scrimmage* (Figure 50), even though different in intent from ancient work, is comparable to Greco-Roman art with respect to subject matter and the grouping of the figures. In *Scrimmage*, the canvas is divided into two distinct sections by the arrangement of figures. On the left are two athletes who are noticeably separate from a group of clustered bodies on the right. Douglas Schultz describes Elaine's compositional format in this work. He says:

> In *Scrimmage* de Kooning addresses a traditional compositional problem in the grouping and relation of figures. At the right she has placed a large and compact group of struggling figures, dominated by the central figure who lunges forward and whose outstretched limbs form powerfully thrusting diagonal movements. At the left a much smaller unit of two figures appears to pull back from the central group. The work thus presents a kind of dynamic asymmetry in which the major grouping of figures sets up a lateral tension across the surface of the canvas. De Kooning unifies the composition by directional brushwork and also by counterposing diagonal elements in an overall *X* pattern.[21]

The "dynamic asymmetry," as Schultz designates, creates an overall *X* pattern, but the positioning of the figures also simulates ancient techniques of varying body positions used in the decoration of pediments of Greek temples. With a limited

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[20] Gerald Silk, *Automobile and Culture,* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984): p. 55.

[21] In Reilly Rhodes, ed., *Sport in Art from American Museums: An Inaugural Exhibition of The National Art Museum of Sport,* (New York: Universe, 1990): p. 106.

architectural space in which to work, ancient artists would many times utilize figures in all permutations of body positioning, such as lying, sitting and standing poses, adjusting to the decreasing areas furthest from the center of the pediments. (Figure 53) While I am not insinuating a direct, one-to-one parallel here, Elaine utilizes many rotating and extended passages of the basketball players in the midst of competition to evoke a desired tension and arrangement within the picture plane.[22] The stretched body of the most forward player in the right hand group has been highlighted with white so that he is more conspicuous against the neutral montage of the other players. His body creates a diagonal thrust through the picture plane, from left to right across the canvas. To emphasize and heighten the tense energy of the game, Elaine forces her players into a more limited area with this oblique composition, which recalls a restricted architectural area that is limited by diagonals.

She uses diagonals again in *Basketball #86* (Figure 47), but in this case she does not use body position as much as color choice. The two central figures in this work, clashing in a competition for a hovering ball, are chest to chest but one is shown in the dominant color of blue, the other in yellow. The color of the uniforms suggests the opposing teams and this color distinction also divides the entire canvas diagonally. The yellow paint is carried through to other figures towards the bottom left corner of the canvas and across to the bottom right, and the contrasting blues and greens dominate the upper left half of the scene. This demarcation of a

[22] I do not suggest that she specifically used temple pediment decoration as a source, but rather that her spirit of permutation parallels that of the ancient Greek artists.

diagonal lies against a grid of rectangular forms in the background of the scene and creates an overall geometric abstraction that brings to mind Abstract Expressionist patterning. Author Clifford Ross articulates the emotional consequence of such abstractions. He states:

> Abstract Expressionist images invoke; they do not depict. They confront; they do not describe. Even [Willem] de Kooning's *Women*, although focused around a recognizable image, present themselves more as the aesthetic detritus of a collision with the subconscious than a depiction of it. Reinhardt's unified symmetrical structures, Newman's commanding fields of color, Pollock's skeins of flung paint, and Motherwell's iconic shapes all serve the same end. The Abstract Expressionists, through various stylistic methods, had turned art into a heroic, one-on-one confrontation with the subconscious.[23]

Elaine's work exhibits those qualities that Ross explains as confronting the subconscious. The sports paintings do not merely depict or describe: instead, the energy of the scene is exploited in order to reveal the overall shifting atmosphere of the game and the engaging, competitive spirit of its participants. Elaine has effectively captured the primal subtext of masculine competition.[24]

The heroic athleticism of Abstract Expressionism is considered by Elaine in her writings about other artists. In her article, "Hans Hofmann Paints a Picture" from 1950, for instance, she describes Hofmann as "working with astonishing speed, never sitting down, constantly in motion between his palette and his easel, applying

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[23] Clifford Ross, *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics,* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1990): p. 18.

[24] Her interest in primitivism will be discussed more fully in Chapter 6, regarding her series of cave paintings.

his paint with broad, lunging gestures."[25] In her article, "Two Americans in Action: Franz Kline and Mark Rothko" from 1958, she describes the two artists' work in forceful and confrontational terms:

> These large images are always aggressive: they have to be to enter life. They do not stay on the wall. They invade human affairs. Kline's paintings elbow their way through the room in which they are hung; Rothko's envelop in a vast, smothering embrace. The work of both has an element of violence – in Kline's work overt; in Rothko's, remote at first but increasingly evident.[26]

Later in this article, Elaine uses words like "ominous," "pervasive" and "threatening" to describe Rothko and Kline's work. We detect her interest in primal emotions and the potent correspondence between painting and viewer. In a summary of her descriptions of Rothko and Kline she curtly declares, "You do not have to pay attention to Action Painting. It pays attention to you."[27] Elaine's sports paintings challenge their viewers, forcing them into the action taking place on the canvas.

Elaine commented that the compositional structure of her sports scenes and the large scale in which she chose to depict them caused her to work "with elongated figures that were a reversion to my adolescent passion for El Greco, with colors flowing through and across the reaching forms."[28] Lawrence Campbell notes that El Greco's *The Vision of Saint John* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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[25] Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 67.

[26] Ibid., p. 169.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979): p. 255.

(Figure 41) was one of Elaine's favorite paintings.[29] It is not hard to see the resemblance in a side-by-side comparison with her basketball works. First and foremost, Elaine uses an outstretched pose in each of these basketball scenes, and the figures are elongated and reaching as Elaine herself described. The extraordinary height of basketball players in general mimic El Greco's extended and unnaturally attenuated limbs. The action, itself – the verticality of the jump – augments this elongation. Ultimately, Elaine portrays athleticism here as something akin to spiritual ecstasy or revelation. Basketball all-star Bill Russell describes a feeling of spiritual ascension in his memoir, *Second Wind,* from 1979:

> Every so often a Celtic game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even mental game, and would be magical. That feeling is difficult to describe, and I certainly never talked about it when I was playing. When it happened I could feel my play rise to a new level. It came rarely, and would last anywhere from five minutes to a whole quarter or more. Three or four plays were not enough to get it going. It would surround not only me and the other Celtics but also the players on the other team, and even the referees.[30]

Russell explains a mysticism that envelops the players of both teams and elevates the game to a new level of competition. He says that, "It was almost as if we were playing in slow motion. During those spells I could almost sense how the next play would develop and where the next shot would be taken."[31] Elaine's paintings adeptly capture this spiritual aspect of a contest or game with figures reaching

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[29] "Elaine de Kooning: The Portraits" in Bledsoe, Jane K., *Elaine de Kooning.* (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): p. 37.

[30] Bill Russell and Taylor Branch, *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man,* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1979): p. 155.

[31] Ibid., p. 156. I thank Dr. Gerald Silk for suggesting an inquiry of Bill Russell's memoir and his descriptions of the game.

heavenward or at the pinnacle of a defining moment; representations akin to El Greco's portrayal of a prophetic event.

There is further similarity in the style of Elaine's basketball scenes and El Greco's religious paintings. El Greco is known for the tremolo of his painting; the consistent vibration that is felt in much of his work. (See also El Greco's *Crucifixion,* c. 1600 and *Laocoon,* c. 1608-14) This vibrating motion is captured by Elaine in the basketball works as an innate quality of the game. The rhythmic pulsation of basketball is corroborated by Bill Russell. He says, "The game would take off, and there'd be a natural ebb and flow that reminded you of how rhythmic and musical basketball is supposed to be."[32] Elaine intuitively felt this rhythm, and subsequently conveyed in her work the flow of the game. Obviously, her style, including the roughness of the painted strokes and in some cases blank areas of canvas that accentuate pulsation and intensity, is much less controlled than El Greco's. However, both artists articulate a very similar cadenced tempo.

The traditional art historical sources that Elaine used in these sports paintings provide a parallel to the work of Willem de Kooning. It is well-known that a stylistic source for Willem's *Woman* series in the late 1940s and 1950s included ancient works such as the *Venus of Willendorf* figurine from c. 22,000 – 21,000 BCE and stylized votive statues like those from the Eshnunna (modern-day Iraq) c. 2900-2600 BCE.[33] The integration of ancient source material into a modern work

[32] Bill Russell and Taylor Branch, p. 156.

[33] Willem de Kooning cited the *Venus of Willendorf* as an inspiration for his Women series in an interview with Courtney Sale, in the film by Charlotte Zwerin, *de Kooning on de Kooning,* New York, 1980. It is not difficult to see the stylistic

evokes a sense of timelessness. The women Willem depicted became amalgamations of the modern pin-up girl and the timeless goddess figure. Elaine sought a similar combination of ancient and modern in her work by using the Greek tradition of sports figures, the elongation of El Greco and the gestural abstraction of the mid-twentieth century. Using a modern, geometric style of the Abstract Expressionist movement, Elaine suggests the ancient celebration of masculine competition (gladiatorial, Olympian). This integration of ancient and modern resurfaces in her later series of work based on a nineteenth-century statue of the ancient god, Bacchus, from the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris, as well as in her series based on the prehistoric cave paintings near Lascaux, France (See Chapters 5 and 6, respectively). In their writhing, vertical thrust, Elaine's sports paintings are comparable to the Bacchus series in energetic body positions, and there is the evident subtext of the hunt as sport (and dynamic motion) in her scenes inspired by the prehistoric caves.

The baseball pictures, which were executed by Elaine mostly during the 1940s and 1950s, display an aesthetic that is somewhat different from the basketball works and may result from the nature of the sports, themselves. Some of the baseball paintings suggest a pause in the action – the moment before an impending action like a pitch or a swing – that defines baseball as a game. As one review of Elaine's work reports:

> Her baseball sketches (in pastel, watercolor, pen and ink or pencil) perfectly capture the baggy clothes and loose, aggressively casual postures of the

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similarities between the facial features of the Mesopotamian votive statues and those of de Kooning's *Women*. (See also, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master*, p. 324.)

> players during those pregnant pauses that almost define the game – waiting for the pitch, standing ready in the outfield or conferring on the mound.[34]

For example, the image of *Casey on the Mound* (Figure 54) deals with the occurrence in the game when the pitcher is joined for a "meeting" on the field by coaches and/or fellow players. The title subject of the work is Casey Stengel, a celebrated player in the 1910s and 1920s but even more notable for his success as a manager. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he led the New York Yankees to five consecutive World Series championships, a record that still holds today.[35] The scene depicts Stengel in his role as manager as he approaches his pitcher for a conference on the mound. Stengel was noted for a signature style of coaching referred to as "platooning," where he would rotate players frequently, and he was

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[34] "New York Reviews: Elaine de Kooning, Spectrum Fine Art," *Art News* (October 1981): p. 218.

[35] "Casey" was a nickname adopted by Charles Dillon Stengel during his time as a baseball player. According to his memoir, *Casey at the Bat: The Story of My Life in Baseball as told to Harry T, Paxton* (1962), Stengel recounts that: "In baseball I went by the nickname of Casey. It was partly because I was from Kansas City, and people would call me by the initials of my home town – 'K.C.,' which turned into Casey. I think another reason the name stuck was because of the poem, 'Casey at the Bat,' which DeWolf Hopper was reciting on the stage all over the country… In the poem, Casey, naturally, made a big strikeout. Well, I was built very strong when I was a young ballplayer, and I'd swing too hard and miss the ball, and they'd say, 'Strikeout Casey.'" [From Casey Stengel, *Casey at the Bat: The Story of My Life in Baseball as told to Harry T. Paxton,* (New York: Random House, 1962): p. 11]. The poem "Casey at the Bat," by Ernest Thayer bears a timeless quality that may be superficially relatable to Elaine's sports paintings, however there is no indication that Elaine had directly researched the poem while creating her baseball paintings or *Casey on the Mound* in particular. For more about the poem "Casey at the Bat," see Jim Moore and Natalie Vermilyea, *Ernest Thayer's "Casey at the Bat": Background and Characters of Baseball's Most Famous Poem,* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1994.

often criticized for this continual shifting and pulling of players.[36] The moment that Elaine captures in her painting could be a critical juncture in the game, as one pitcher might be replaced by another. Pulling a pitcher in baseball is usually an effort to change the game's overall momentum. There is a loose quality to Elaine's style – details are left unfinished – that underscores the anticipatory energy of this moment. Even though there is a pause in the action, Elaine suggests the importance of this episode in the sequential movement of the entire game.[37]

Like the dynamic basketball paintings, Elaine sometimes illustrated the more energetic moments of baseball. H. K. McCullough describes one such painting from the Telfair Museum in Savannah, Georgia:

> In the Telfair's painting [*Baseball Players,* 1953 (Figure 51)], de Kooning captures a player at full tilt, sliding into home plate. The catcher from the other team, number 29, crouches with his back to the viewer, anticipating a throw. Beyond this figure's numbered uniform, there is little here to suggest a specific team or event; de Kooning, in fact, eliminates all details that are not essential to the action. She captures a sense of motion through broad swaths of her brush, reducing the players' limbs to a few loose strokes. Boldly applied daubs of green, gold, and blue animate the surface of the work and heighten the sense of excitement.[38]

Just as she swept the faces from her portraiture, in this work and others describing sporting events, she strips the motif of all unnecessary detail in order to spotlight

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[36] See Casey Stengel, *Casey at the Bat: The Story of My Life in Baseball as told to Harry T. Paxton,* (New York: Random House, 1962): p. 172.

[37] It is also notable that Elaine's baseball works are mostly situated horizontally while the basketball canvases tend to be vertical. The choice of vertical arrangement emulates the dynamic thrust of basketball while horizontality emphasizes the chronology of baseball.

[38] H. K McCullough, "Elaine de Kooning: Baseball Players" [entry 82] *Collection Highlights: Telfair Museum of Art,* (Savannah, Georgia: Telfair Museum of Art, 2005): pp. 234-235.

the action of the particular moment, what she considers the essential substructure and soul of the scene.

Elaine's manner of sweeping away superfluous detail redefines the space of the action so that it becomes framed in a particular way. More specifically, this redefinition of space reflects an outdoor/indoor dichotomy. Harold Rosenberg discusses societal masculinity in an essay, titled "Masculinity: Style and Cult," originally published in *Vogue* magazine in November 1967. He writes that:

> Old masculine pursuits, like baseball or wrestling, when carried on at night under the glare of fluorescent tubes, come to resemble spectacles on television and wind up in the living room. In the epoch of the picture window, outdoors and indoors have lost their separateness.[39]

In Elaine's works, outdoors and indoors also lose their separation. In the basketball works, for instance, Elaine paid particular attention to the body positions of the figures and their consequent groupings to achieve a balanced asymmetry within the canvases and a greater emphasis on the interaction between figures. Furthermore, color choices were made so that the scene was appropriately (and abstractly) divided, especially along the diagonal. She afforded little attention to the real space (the arena) in which the action was occurring. In the baseball works, there is a shaping of the space (a confinement) where the outdoors and indoors have "lost their separateness" to the point that the importance lies in the action itself and not the surroundings of that action. In the same essay cited above, Rosenberg declares

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[39] Harold Rosenberg, "Masculinity: Style and Cult," (1967) in *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973): p. 43.

that, "In America, masculinity is associated primarily with the outdoors."[40] The irrelevance of indoor versus outdoor situations in Elaine's paintings strips these sports activities of this typical masculine trait. She emphasizes instead graceful body positions, colors and the interaction between figures in the composition (the more "feminine" qualities of the composition).

Of course, it cannot be assumed that it was Elaine's conscious intention to blend these gendered characteristics. It may be more accurate to suggest, for example, that she framed the action of the scene in order to heighten the sense of immediacy. Ideas of masculinity are fully entwined with sporting competitions in America and Elaine's use of confining spaces and lack of details tend to strip the forms of distinctly masculine features while still clearly demonstrating that the figures are men. Sport in our society (and especially in the context of the 1950s) is comprised of mostly male participants.[41] In fact, Sherman Drexler commented that female athletes were essentially unavailable to Elaine at the time of conception of

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[40] Ibid., p. 42.

[41] Joel Zoss and John Bowman, in their book *Diamonds in the Rough: The Untold History of Baseball,* describe the role of women in sporting contests in history: "Given the history of mankind – the version, that is, in which men assumed the dominant role – it seems inevitable that women would be excluded from this realm of physical displays and competition. The exceptions are so few and special that they only confirm a generality: a dimly remembered female Olympics in ancient Greece, women in attendance at certain special nineteenth-century horse races or regattas, genteel tennis players in the late nineteenth century, some extraordinary swimmers and tennis players in the early decades of the twentieth century. True, women began to compete in the modern Olympics as early as 1900, but this breakthrough only serves to sharpen the distinction between such contests and the great team sports of the modern era. In this arena, women seem to still be lagging." [Joel Zoss and John Bowman, *Diamonds in the Rough: The Untold History of Baseball,* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004): p. 196-197].

the sports paintings.[42] So masculinity became an unavoidable element of these sports-related works. However, if we note Elaine's dismantling of the masculine "out-of-doors" construct, and her interest in elegance and interactive figural relationships, then the works are somewhat contradictory in gendered situation.

Linda Nochlin, in her article "Women, Art and Power," discusses the dichotomy of male/female in terms of action/passivity. In one example she identifies a work by Käthe Kollwitz as an opposition to Millet's *Gleaners.* Nochlin explains:

> A visual affirmation of feminine self-assertiveness and power, Käthe Kollwitz's *Losbruch – Outbreak* or *Revolt* – offers the most startling contrast to Millet's *Gleaners.* An etching of 1903 from the artist's "Peasants' War" series, the image can be seen as a kind of "anti-*glaneuses*," a counter-pastoral, with the dynamic, vertical thrust of its angular female protagonist, who galvanizes the crowd behind her, serving to subvert the message of passive acquiescence to the "natural" order created by Millet's composition. One might say that what Millet scrupulously avoided by resorting to the peasant woman in his representation, Kollwitz openly asserts through her: rage, energy, action.[43]

While the protagonists in Elaine's sports paintings are males, energy and action are nonetheless channeled by the female artist through her dynamic figures. By selecting male sports figures as subjects, Elaine is subverting the clear-cut role of the female artist (female artist should paint feminine scenes). Instead, she is asserting her freedom to pursue typically masculine themes such as action, movement and energy.

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[42] Conversation with Sherman Drexler, March 21, 2008.

[43] Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays,* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988): p. 23.

In a comparison between Willem de Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle* (Figure 55) and Elaine's *High Man* (Figure 48) we can see an immediate difference in gender construction. In Willem's work, he highlights those characteristics that are quintessentially and sociologically feminine, that is, the lipstick smeared lips and the voluptuous breasts; even the skirted legs and high heels are evident in his work. His figures are threatening and dynamic because of the enunciation of these feminine features. Elaine, on the other hand, softens the masculine features of the individual players by enveloping them in the larger action. As if emphasizing the team aspect of the sports represented, her figures are almost lost within the overall gesture and movement of the scene. In *High Man,* the bodies are silhouetted and the action is what is important. In Willem's work, the figure is clearly a woman and the bicycle – and what might constitute the "action" of the work – is indeterminate. In Elaine's work, the figures arch and sweep as if they could be ballerinas or some other typically feminine example of grace. Harold Rosenberg finishes his article "Masculinity: Style and Cult," by remarking that "True maleness is never without its vein of femininity…Total masculinity is an ideal of the frustrated, not a fact of biology."[44] Both Willem and Elaine's works serve to endorse this statement: each of their paintings exhibit feminine and masculine characteristics.

Anne Wagner approaches the work of three specific women artists in her book, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* from 1996, with the basic presumption that a gendered construct for an

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[44] Rosenberg, "Masculinity: Style and Cult," (1967) in *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973): p. 47.

artist and her subsequent work is complicated by historical situation and cultural context. Wagner states that:

> My treatment…demonstrates the conviction that just as images are not transparent to social identity (or anything else), neither are people. In this I follow current thinking that sees sexual identity and behavior as learned and performed in both exemplary and imperfect ways. The protocols of visual representation, while they have other meanings and purposes, are also marked by such performances, in ways that the maker may or may not intend. Likewise I take notions of sexual identity to be "in circulation," historically, locally, culturally, thus unfixed from universal status or value. Not that one can freely "choose" sexual identity, but it does not follow from this lack of freedom that gender saturates and suffuses the self in an entirely determinant way. To take identity as a rather more unstable construct is to express the modern understanding of the relation between the self and the social, the two great preoccupations of the modern age: it offers a formulation capable of capturing their incommensurability of scale, the opacities they present to the understanding, the possibilities extended and withheld by economic relations and representations that simultaneously encourage and deny the fiction of individuality with equal force.[45]

Wagner's proposition of the uncertainty and changing quality of sexual identity makes it easy to see how straightforward gender constructs become convoluted in Elaine's paintings. There is, however, the sense that Elaine's sports paintings relay a nuanced gender fusion – dynamic action juxtaposed with a lyrical presentation: elegant figures interacting as a choreographed whole.

Author Michael Leja notes, in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism,* that in 1956 Willem de Kooning said to an interviewer in regard to the Woman series "maybe… I was painting the woman in me."[46] In a similar vein, the sports images

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[45] Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): pp. 26-27.

[46] Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): p. 266.

by Elaine could be a representation of the male characteristics within herself – or at very least, her envy of maleness. She was an avid swimmer and a participant in an artists' baseball league in East Hampton, and she may have drawn on this direct involvement in sport for her work.[47] In a remark about her choice of subject matter she professed that she "never liked football because of the uniforms – baseball uniforms are very cool, not macho."[48] It is true, in fact, that Elaine had a more intimate relationship to the sport of baseball. First and foremost she was Brooklyn-born with a strong sense of pride in her hometown. Her participation in the artists' baseball league, while probably unusual for a woman in the 1950s (although several other female East artists living in East Hampton did participate), afforded a specialized knowledge of the sport.[49] Most notably, though, in 1953 and 1954 Elaine traveled with the New York Yankees and the Baltimore Orioles, providing her a first-hand sense of the game and the intricacies of the sport.[50]

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[47] In the introduction to *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* Rose Slivka writes, "In the early artists' baseball games, now charity events in East Hampton but started in this period simply for fun, Elaine was a memorable baseman, scoring home runs galore by hook or by crook, mostly by crook. Her teammates included the sculptor Wilfred Zogbaum and the painters Joan Mitchell, James Brooks, Charlotte Park, John Little, Larry Rivers, and Howard Kanovitz, among others." [see Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 27]

[48] "Yankee Stances" *The New York Post* (Oct. 4, 1980) p. 15, from uncataloged material filed at the MoMA.

[49] No substantial information could be found regarding this artists' baseball league in East Hampton. Other female artists were possibly involved in the league, however, it would still be the case that cultural inclusion of females in organized sporting activities was generally rare at this point in history.

[50] "Sports as Seen Through the eyes of an Artist" *The New York Times* (Friday, May 8, 1981) p. C30 from uncataloged material filed at the MoMA. Not

The heroic atmosphere of baseball in the 1950s was epitomized by the two New York teams: the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Yankees. As Shelly Mehlman Dinhofer writes, "The grandstanding, the heroics, and the despair of the four so-called Subway Series, as well as the remarkable ability of the players, remain chilling and exhilarating memories."[51] Fine art and competitive team sport historically reside at opposite ends of an entertainment spectrum. In the case of the 1950s, the underlying spirit of both were surprisingly similar. Art was becoming more physically performative. Additionally, the emotions surrounding baseball at this time paralleled the feelings elicited by the Abstract Expressionist artists in New York, who have since been crowned the kings of the modern era in America and have been written about using words like "triumph" and "heroic." As was articulated in a *New York Times* article, Elaine's sports series fused subject matter with style and "the ambition… was to do for baseball something akin to what Degas achieved with horse racing."[52] Just as Edgar Degas made horse-racing equivalent to an impression of the moment in his time, Elaine succeeded in merging the art world and the athletic world by assimilating the Abstract Expressionist gesture with the expressionist gesture of contest.

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much is mentioned in any sort of detail with regard to this assignment. Even her close friend, Sherman Drexler, was unaware of Elaine's travel with the teams, although that fact has been documented in the few excerpts described above.

[51] Shelly Mehlman Dinhofer, *The Art of Baseball,* (New York: Harmony Books, 1990): p. 80.

[52] "Sports as Seen Through the eyes of an Artist" *The New York Times* (Friday, May 8, 1981) p. C30 from uncataloged material filed at the MoMA.

Ideas of heroism permeate art history and a famous example of the merger of art, sport and masculinity occurs in the work of Thomas Eakins. According to one author, "Eakins became the first artist to depict the masculine sphere (today called macho) of sports in which he portrayed unidealized young American men in ordinary attitudes and activities."[53] Eakins was enamored with human anatomy, believing it was the most beautiful thing on earth. For him, the heroism in his painting was in preserving the daring achievements of musculature on canvas. Eakins strove for a correspondence between science and art in all of his work, and underlying his images was homage to the brilliance of the human body. In a catalog of Eakins' work, Marc Simpson explains:

> He shaped his figures in light of thorough anatomical knowledge and psychological observation; and he calculated detailed effects beyond the range of observation in the depiction of color and motion. Simultaneously he established novel iconographies of pointedly modern activities. Yet for all his experimentation, his goals did not vary: to paint the American figure with a power and an artfulness comparable to the greatest contemporary French academic masters.[54]

Elaine's sports figures, on the other hand, are not anatomically accurate (or decisively masculine in form) but rather are enmeshed in a sea of brushstrokes and color.[55] The heroism in Elaine's work is in the painting technique itself – the

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[53] John Esten, *Thomas Eakins: The Absolute Male*, (New York: Universe Publishing, 2002): p. 15.

[54] Sewell, Darrell, ed., *Thomas Eakins,* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001): p. 27.

[55] As both Drs. Susanna Gold and Gerald Silk have pointed out to me, this presents a contradiction, where the brushwork can be both feminizing, in its softness and elegance, and masculine if associated with Abstract Expressionist gesture. I believe this to be the crux of Elaine's art, where conflicting ideas of gender abound.

Abstract Expressionist style – that emphasizes (or is consequently emphasized by) the dynamic movement that she conveys. The technique itself shields the identities of individuals to the point where the weight of the work is in its gesture. Rather than conveying the sports figure as the iconic "hero" of the painting, as Eakins had done, Elaine refers to the 1950s construct of the Abstract Expressionist artist as hero.[56]

The sports series of paintings by Elaine are not only exquisite representations of Abstract Expressionist gesture, but they are also shaped by a gender construct of the female artist examining a male subject. The combination of writhing, twisting, energetic forms, gestural painting technique and gendered undercurrent is demonstrated throughout much of Elaine's career, and the sports works especially parallel her culminating series of bulls, bison and cave paintings. (See Chapter 6) One author has written:

> No longer recognizable as such, the basketball players become a vertical mass of energized, colorful brush strokes. As she had done with her *Bullfight* series, she captured the dynamic quality of the image rather than a photographic likeness of it.[57]

Elaine's sports works reveal another manifestation of gendered provocation while retaining the immediate interest of movement, contest and action.

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[56] For more on the construct of the Abstract Expressionist artist in the climate of the 1950s, see Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America.* (National Gallery of Art, Washington: Harvard University Press, 1983), Clement Greenberg, "'American – Type Painting'" in *Art and Culture,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

[57] Robert McVaugh, *Abstraction, Non-Objectivity, Realism: Twentieth Century Painting from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,* (Hamilton, NY: Colgate University, The Picker Art Gallery, 1987): p. 44.

CHAPTER 5

THE BACCHUS SERIES

"I always do my best painting when I'm just totally obsessed with an image, when every work seems to initiate a new work, and when I can think of nothing else but the possibilities of more and more images in a series. Well, that's how it was with the Bacchus sculpture. I was enchanted." –Elaine de Kooning[1]

Elaine's Bacchus series is one of her most extensively studied series. The works are based on a bronze sculpture in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris by the 19th century artist, Jules Dalou. (Figure 56) Elaine happened upon the sculpture during a 1976 trip and she was so intrigued by it that she returned every year for the next five years, making hundreds of on-site sketches. Between 1976 and 1984 she produced over 60 major Bacchus paintings. Several important museums and galleries, such as the Georgia Museum of Art (University of Georgia, Athens, Figure 57) and the National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington D.C., Figure 58) have examples of these large Bacchus paintings as well as sketches, prints and studies in their collections. Each work varies in color and stylistic detail; some are more abstract while others accentuate the subject matter more directly. In this series, Elaine examines the interaction between the masculinity of the subject, variations of color that convey atmosphere and emotion, and a gestural, abstract expressionist system of brushwork. Helen Harrison describes: "In this series, as in her ongoing fascination with portraiture, sports figures, bulls, and bison, subject

[1] Lee Hall, *Elaine and Bill: Portrait of a Marriage,* (New York City: Cooper Square Press, 1993): p. 299.

matter and technique are interactive."[2] Like her other series of works, the Bacchus paintings are obsessive investigations of male musculature and body positions and their relationship to color and paint stroke. Not unlike the sports paintings and her portraiture, she is again interested in the inherent energy and strength of the Dalou sculpture.

Elaine unintentionally misinterpreted the subject of this sculpture as Bacchus, the Roman God of wine and intoxication. A catalog of Jules Dalou's work identifies the sculpture in the Luxembourg Gardens as *The Triumph of Silenus;* it portrays Silenus who is the foster father and mentor of Bacchus.[3] Author John M. Husinak describes the sculpture as follows:

> This mythological scene of rigidly-choreographed gaiety combines, in addition to the corpulent Silenus, five lifesize nude figures, three male and two female, two children, a donkey and monkey, plus draperies, various fruits, a basket and a tree stump. This ensemble is tightly packed into a great pyramid, with decided forward impetus, which emphasizes Silenus' precarious perch at its summit.[4]

According to mythology, Silenus was overweight and balding and when intoxicated, needed to be carried by donkeys, satyrs or companions.

Although Elaine misidentified the central figure in this composition, she instinctively understood the underlying significance of the sculpture in terms of its

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[2] Helen A. Harrison, "Witness to Imminent Drama: Elaine de Kooning and the New York School," catalogue essay, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System Gallery (Washington D.C., June 21- September 6, 1994): p. 12.

[3] *Sculptures by Jules Dalou (1838 – 1902),* Mallett at Bourdon House Ltd., London, April 28 – May 9, 1964.

[4] John M. Hunisak, *The Sculptor Jules Dalou: Studies in His Style and Imagery,* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977): pp. 86-87.

masculinity and vigor. Elaine was not interested in the sculpture's detailed narrative as much as she was captivated by its visual dynamics. In fact, she herself stated on a number of occasions that she simply stumbled upon the sculpture in the gardens and it intuitively fascinated her.[5] Her preoccupation with the image is from one particular viewpoint and she always captured the sculpture from that specific angle. Despite this consistent viewpoint, there is tremendous variation in color and in the levels of abstraction in each canvas. Each work in the Bacchus series is a unique study in experimental modifications of painting; using a specific theme to explore technique is characteristic of Elaine's overall career.

Elaine remarked that, "In the first Bacchus paintings I was very careful about the pose. Later they began getting freer and freer."[6] In the first few Bacchus works (Figures 58 and 59), the sculpture is quite distinct from its background, and it is painted with some restraint using a color palette of grays for the sculpture.[7] The background, while already a collection of gestural brushstrokes, retains the naturalistic coloring of blue sky seen through a green landscape. Peeking through the green are bits of beige that possibly indicate the architecture beyond. There is an Impressionistic quality of flickering light, and we get the sense of both

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[5] In an essay by Rose Slivka (from Bledsoe, Jane K. *Elaine de Kooning.* Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992), Elaine is quoted as saying that the sculpture was "one of those wonderful exuberant statues you see wherever you go all over Paris," p. 39.

[6] Robin White, Interview with Elaine De Kooning at East Hampton, NY. *View* (Spring 1988) vol. 5 no. 1: p. 18.

[7] She seems to reinterpret the medium of Dalou's sculpture by painting it gray. Looking at her painting, we might thing the original sculpture is some sort of gray stone, however, in actuality, the sculpture is bronze and has a patinated green coloring to it.

atmospheric qualities and the physical location of the sculpture in the gardens. Elaine's later pieces in the series become increasingly experimental. She paints her later Bacchus works with larger, flatter areas of color, thereby lessening the distinction between the sculpture and the background. Her color combinations become more and more unusual and therefore unnatural. (Figure 57) Varying color palettes activate each canvas in an entirely different way so that some works seem light and airy with combinations of yellows and lavenders (Figure 62) while others feel dark and mysteriously shadowed with blues and dark greens. (Figure 61) Some works feel modeled and three dimensional while others flatten out so that the sculpture feels less like a solid, real-life object and more like a sketchy, outlined pattern on the surface of the canvas. (Figure 62)

The Bacchus series is obviously indebted to Impressionism. Elaine is interested in light and how color can describe it. She explained in an interview that she was triggered by the naturalistic situation of the sculpture in the gardens and how the light flickered through the foliage surrounding it.[8] The Bacchus paintings can be compared to an Impressionist series like that of the Rouen Cathedral by Claude Monet. (Figure 63 and 64) In both cases, the subject matter remains constant while changing conditions of light, weather and atmosphere are illustrated.[9]

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[8] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material (Interviews and talks given by the artist) from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #5. This particular interview was conducted in the artist's studio in anticipation of an upcoming exhibition of the Bacchus works at the Gruenebaum Gallery in New York City. She talked about wanting to convey the "light flying through the image" in her Bacchus works.

[9] The Rouen Cathedral series by Monet seems to me a visually comparable series to Elaine's Bacchus works in that the building (the Cathedral) is solidly fixed

The frontal situation of the Bacchus sculpture is comparable to the frontal façade of the cathedral.[10] When Elaine stumbled upon this work in Paris, she immediately began making on the spot, en plein air sketches and watercolors of this image as she was concerned with capturing its momentary qualities.

Not only is the quickness of her technique like that of the Impressionist artists, but the resulting canvases with a variation of color is much like those of Monet's series and other Impressionist work. Elaine uses black to sketch the outlines of the subject; however, it is not used in any significant manner to suggest shadows or modeling. Instead, she employs blues, greens, purples and other colors. In 1876, Edmond Duranty described the Impressionist use of color as an attention to luminosity:

> As far as method of coloring is concerned, they have made a real discovery, whose origin cannot be found elsewhere – neither with the Dutch, nor in the pale tones of fresco painting, nor in the light tonalities of the eighteenth century. They are not merely concerned with that fine flexible play of colors which results from the observation of the most delicate value in tones which contrast with or penetrate one another. Their discovery actually consists in having recognized that full light *de-colors* tones, that the sun reflected by objects tends (because of its brightness) to bring them back to that luminous unity which melts its seven prismatic rays into a single colorless radiance: light.[11]

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and has distinguishably frontal characteristics like the sculpture Elaine chooses. Other series by Monet, such as his footbridge, his poplars, and his haystacks, also parallel the Bacchus series in the consideration of changing atmospheric conditions, quick technique, and variation in color of a fixed subject.

[10] In some cases Monet alters the cropping and framing in his Rouen Cathedral paintings, however, the general perspective is largely consistent; the cathedral is usually painted from one particular angle of sight and Monet focuses on its façade.

[11] "The New Painting: Concerning the Group of Artists Exhibiting at the Durand-Ruel Galleries" (1876), reprinted in Linda Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874-1904: Sources and Documents,* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966): p. 4.

Duranty expressed what the Impressionist painters have understood and tried to reproduce as the phenomena of light (rather than shadow) and concludes that: "in some of these canvases we can feel the light and the heat vibrate and palpitate."[12] Elaine's works flicker in a similar manner, with vibration and palpitation, and her colors are catalysts for communicating the passage of light through the surrounding vegetation and onto the sculpture.

Richard Bretell remarks that a major innovation of the Impressionists is their radical use of color. Bretell proposes:

> For many, the value of Impressionism lay not so much in its touch or its achievements in composition, but in the radical new way its artists saw color. Rather than conceiving of a picture as the representation of a series of discrete, separately colored three-dimensional forms in illusionistic space, the Impressionists sought a visual field of vibrating color sensations. This philosophical dematerialization of pictorial reality is crucial to the idea of Impressionism and its central achievement, the Impression.[13]

The "dematerialization of pictorial reality" was an extremely important concept for certain Abstract Expressionist artists who were breaking down visual reality into a composite of color and form – freeing line and shape from the more typical purposes of defining objects.[14] In 1937, Meyer Schapiro considered abstract art

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[12] Ibid., p. 5.

[13] Richard R. Bretell, *Impression: Painting Quickly in France, 1860-1890,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000): p. 59.

[14] Some Abstract Expressionist artists began with visual subject matter and proceeded to abstract from nature. Artists like Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning predominantly worked in this manner, and sources from nature were starting points for much of their painting. Arshile Gorky references visual recollections from his life in Armenia as a source for some of his work, and Willem de Kooning paints his most famous *Woman* series, inspired by the human figure. In

with relation to Impressionism in his essay, "Nature of Abstract Art." Schapiro asserts that "whereas the later schools attacked the Impressionists as mere photographers of sunshine, the contemporaries of Impressionism abused it for its monstrous unreality."[15] According to Schapiro, several aspects of 19th century modernism are foundations for new tendencies of mid-20th century abstraction.[16] Elaine's Bacchus works function in an historical line drawn from the late 19th century through Abstract Expressionism.[17] In her series she uses Impressionistic techniques to liberate formal elements from precisely representing reality. Instead of focusing solely on subject matter (the sculpture itself), the technique of painting becomes inseparable from content. The shifting colors and subsequent lighting and atmosphere mingle with the form of the sculpture in one energetic mass. There are no discrete forms in space but instead the canvas presents a union of "vibrating color sensations" that parallels Bretell's description of Impressionism.

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other cases, Abstract Expressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko tend towards pure abstraction in their signature work. Pollock, for instance, used a dripped line without referencing any real world objects and Rothko's color field works are evoking emotion rather than illustrating nature. Although the titles of Pollock's drip paintings in some cases allude to nature (i.e. *Lavender Mist*, *Autumn Rhythm*) it has been determined that many of his titles were added after the work was complete.

[15] Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art,* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978): p. 190.

[16] Other scholars have since reiterated Schapiro's claim that the seed for abstraction (and Abstract Expressionism in particular) lies with the Impressionist artists. See for example, Irving Sandler, "The Influence of Impressionism on Jackson Pollock and his Contemporaries," *Arts* 53, no.7 (March 1979): pp. 110-111 and Michael Leja, "The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction," in Tucker et al., *Monet in the 20th Century*, pp. 98-108, 291-93.

[17] I am referring, here, to the stylistic connection and obviously not a strict chronology.

Impressionism is frequently discussed with respect to the concept of time. French philosopher, Henri Bergson contemplated the notion of passage or duration and this idea is imbedded in much of the scholarship of Impressionism. Richard Bretell summarizes:

> What kind of time is there in Impressionism? We see trains – stopped in stations, raring to go, rushing over bridges, and scoring the landscape with their plumes of white steam. We see pedestrians in various combinations as they move through cities and suburbs. We see the flux of seasonal and diurnal time. We see wind, rain, fog, snow, hoarfrost, and other weather conditions that define the seasons. We see clouds of all sorts, and water in virtually every form – placid, unrushing, falling, breaking over rocks, gliding. We see boats, ships, canoes, and barges. We see factories, some of which pour smoke or steam into the sky. All of this seems like modern time.[18]

Overall the Impressionist style evokes sensations of moving, shifting, and changing over time. One discussion of Monet's "Rouen Cathedral" series states:

> In the façade of the Rouen Cathedral, which seems to have gone through centuries with almost no change, Monet discovered a vital fluency, a fluid presence, changing from second to second. He watched the façade as the hours passed with a rhythm of their own; it was as if he could feel the pulse of the cathedral façade in the midst of timelessness (la durée).[19]

In Elaine's Bacchus series as in the work of the Impressionists, there is a sense of passage and fluidity. By means of the conception of light created with color, Elaine makes the Bacchus sculpture feel as though it flashes and changes, shifting from moment to moment, much like Monet had done with his "Rouen Cathedrals." Similar to the cathedral façade, Dalou's bronze sculpture has been situated in the Parisian gardens for more than a century. Elaine has added a sense of flux to a fixed

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[18] Bretell, p. 61.

[19] Anne Dayez, *Impressionism: A Centenary Exhibition,* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974): p. 31.

object by painting it with quick brushstrokes and by altering color combinations. *Bacchus #62* (Figure 60), for instance, painted with soft lavenders and brilliant golden yellows, suggests vivid sunshine passing over the scene. *Bacchus #63* (Figure 61), on the other hand, is painted with dark blues and greens and feels draped in cloud cover or shadows. Despite color variations that drastically change overall mood, each piece in the series seems to convey distinct periods of time.

The Bacchus paintings describe the twisting forms of figures which further energize the work. Ann Schoenfeld explains that Elaine's later work in the Bacchus series "reveals fully her feeling for the image – its vital spirit. Color, freed from naturalism and now more spontaneous, defined the totality of her experience."[20] Elaine has combined her quick, on-the-spot investigations with an Expressionist instinct for feeling (Schoenfield's "vital spirit") and in doing so her work becomes something more than either pure optical naturalism or pure abstraction.[21] Like her sports paintings, the Bacchus works possess a dynamic motion that is dependent on both subject matter and technique. Here her subject matter (a bronze sculpture), like the Rouen Cathedral façade, may be innately stationary; however, she infuses it with the "vital spirit" needed to reconstitute its energy. The resulting picture captures motion and gesture more than optical naturalism.

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[20] Ann Schoenfeld, "Distinct Visions: Expressionist Sensibilities: An Exhibition of Three Milton Avery Distinguished Visiting Professors in the Arts," (Bard College Center, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, March 16 – May 6, 1983): p. 14.

[21] Henri Bergson also discusses élan vital as an innate spirit or impulse of mankind.

Elaine discussed the correlation between her earlier basketball paintings and her Bacchus work. When asked in an interview about the similarity between the upward thrust of the Bacchus work and the similar motion of the basketball paintings, Elaine responded, “It’s always related I think. I think this is true for most artists that when you switch from one idea to another there’s always an underlying theme.”[22] She describes the underlying and unifying factor of the works as “turbulent energy” and explains that the Bacchus works “are related to the basketball figures in that the figures climb one over another and also in the ambiguity of forms. We don’t know where one starts out and leaps off.”[23] I have already discussed the attention to dynamism in the sports paintings (see Chapter 4: The Sports Paintings) where energetic motion is defined by both subject matter and gestural painting technique. The individual details of the Bacchus sculpture are similarly distorted by paint strokes and the action – the overall feeling of a turbulent energy – takes precedence over discrete features. Her Bacchus paintings offer instinctive recognition rather than a description of every particular detail, a quality she exhibits in many of her portraits. (see Chapter 3: Portraiture)

Elaine explained her reasons for working from one particular perspective in all of the Bacchus paintings. She said that at first, she had completed sketches from several different angles; however, she eventually took interest in one specific point of view that best captured the figures in a certain relationship. She described how obsessing on a particular angle is liberating because “you find variety possible in

[22] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs, DVD #5.

[23] Ibid.

it."[24] She added that painting the same image again and again was "a way of liberating the part of the mind one dreams with."[25] These remarks indicate that a constant subject matter allowed her freedom to modify other aspects of the work. The subject was merely a catalyst for the liberation of style.

The process of repetitive investigation is unmistakable in the work of Josef Albers. Albers systematically explored color with respect to form (and its subsequent spatial effects) in his extensive "Homage to the Square" series. As mentioned earlier (see Chapter 2: Abstraction and the Black Mountain College Paintings), Elaine worked closely with Albers at Black Mountain College during the summer of 1948. While Albers had not yet developed his most famous "Homage to the Square" series, he was solidifying the theories that he eventually explored.

In 1950 Elaine wrote her article, "Albers Paints a Picture" for *Art News* after observing Albers' production of one of the *Homage to the Square* paintings. In her article she claims that Albers methodology is often confused with Piet Mondrian, but is in fact completely opposite. She explains how Albers does not use sensibility but rather intellectual consciousness in his work. She describes:

> As Mondrian worked for months over one painting, Albers always makes his directly, never changing a color or form once it is put down. But although physical execution takes only one night, the real evolution of a composition by this artist is through a long, tortuous series of sketches.[26]

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[24] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material (Interviews and talks given by the artist) from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #5.

[25] Ibid. Elaine described her process of discovery of this sculpture as well as her working method in great detail in the interview.

[26] Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 84.

Albers used constant, geometric forms and methodically varied colors in order to evoke different spatial illusions and integrations. Elaine employs a similar technique by keeping the Bacchus subject matter constant while varying the color combinations that describe the sculpture. Rather than focusing solely on abstract spatial interactions, Elaine's work investigates motion and consequent energies through color choice and dynamic figural forms. Elaine, herself, adopts Albers' working method for her own Bacchus series. Judging from the vast number of sketches and final paintings that resulted from her extensive study, it is easy to assert that she was not altering the forms very much once they were instinctively applied to the surface. Her process, like Albers', involved a "long, tortuous series of sketches."

Both Albers' and Elaine's methodologies are decidedly scientific and it is not irrelevant to also mention Buckminster Fuller's approach to architecture as an additional analogy. Fuller was also at Black Mountain College during the summer of 1948, and both Elaine and Josef Albers attended his seminars.[27] Fuller was interested in creating structures that could bear a maximum load using a minimum of materials and expense. This desired outcome required a trial of investigatory constructions. Much like Elaine's Bacchus series, or Albers' Homage to the Square, Fuller relied on systematic variations to arrive at the structure that would eventually be his geodesic dome.

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[27] The three were photographed together during one of Buckminster Fuller's seminars. [See Vincent Katz, ed., *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002): p. 148.]

Elaine remarked that painting the same image again and again was "a way of liberating the part of the mind one dreams with."[28] With this statement she implies a pathway to the subconscious that is related to the Abstract Expressionist artists' interests in Surrealism and existentialism. Of course, liberating the mind parallels the Surrealist technique of automatism. Existentialism, an ideology made famous by philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, also implies freedom by purporting that an individual is responsible for his or her own destiny. Elaine's process of painting in series entails a freedom by which she is ultimately relaying a more personal, emotionally-generated work. By keeping the subject matter constant (and allowing variety to be initiated from the artist's interpreted version of the subject), the substantial differences that arise from one canvas to the next are a product of the artist's own imagination and control.

Mary Lee Sullivan discusses Elaine's Bacchus works with respect to a more specific facet of Sartrean existentialism. According to Sullivan, Sartre's idea of the reciprocity between existence of self and other parallels Elaine's use of masculine imagery.[29] Sullivan feels that Elaine's male figures are a displacement of the feminine self (the artist), while also channeling the Sartrean other – masculinity –

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[28] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material (Interviews and talks given by the artist) from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #5.

[29] Sullivan writes, "Interestingly, an analysis of Sartre's theories adds another dimension to the creative drama, the possible specular interplay between de Kooning and her masculine imagery." From "Questions of Gender and Subjectivity in Elaine de Kooning's Bacchus Paintings," in *Archaeologia Transatlantica* XVI (Tony Hackens and R. Ross Holloway, eds.) Belgium: Art and Archaeology Publications, 1998, p. 102.

for the benefit of a totality. Like her portraiture, where self (artist) is intertwined with sitter, the investigation of masculine form in the Bacchus series is as much an act of self-recognition (identifying with the existential "other") as it is a discussion of the struggle between masculine and feminine.

As an addendum to the existential implications in Elaine's work, it is worth noting that Friedrich Nietzsche introduces the dichotomy between Apollo and Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/86). Nietzsche describes an idealized and stalwart Apollo who is balanced by the drunken, pleasure-seeking Dionysus to form a metaphorical basis for the human condition. In one passage, Nietzsche even refers to Silenus in his description of this balance:

> The wisdom of Silenus cried 'Woe, woe!' to the serene Olympians. The individual, with all his restraint and proportion, succumbed to the self-oblivion of the Dionysian states, forgetting the precepts of Apollo. *Excess* revealed itself as truth. Contradiction, the bliss born of pain, spoke out from the very heart of nature. And so, wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollonian was nullified and destroyed. But, on the other hand, it is equally certain that, wherever the first Dionysian onslaught was successfully withstood, the authority and majesty of the Delphic god exhibited itself as more rigid and menacing than ever. [30]

While there is no indication that Elaine was directly influenced by Nietzsche or his specific writings, the portrayal of a reveling Silenus (mistaken as Bacchus/Dionysus) combined with the unwavering consistency of the subject matter (both in perspective as well as the bronze solidity of the medium) parallels Nietzsche's dichotomy between Dionysian states of drunkenness and Apollonian

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[30] Reinhold Grimm and Caroline Molina y Vedia, eds., *Friedrich Nietzsche: Philosophical Writings,* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997): pp. 25-26.

resoluteness.[31] Elaine instinctively derives the metaphorical struggle of existential human condition from the physical energies suggested in the sculpture versus its established rigidity.

As mentioned earlier, Elaine mistakenly identified the topmost figure as Bacchus instead of Silenus, companion and mentor of Bacchus. The misidentification is understandable since both characters are very similar in temperament. Both are drunken merrymakers. Furthermore, what is more important in Elaine's Bacchus work is the visual dynamics of the interactive composition where the topmost figure (whether Bacchus or Silenus) becomes the "hero" in the work – he is the pivot point of the action and the catalyst for the gyrating motion of the overall scene. In her written "Statement" from 1959, Elaine asserts that, "I've often thought of my paintings as having an axis around which everything revolves" and the axis of the Bacchus paintings is dependent on this principal figure.[32] Like an inverted cyclone, everything revolves around this point, maintaining the visual equilibrium of the piece while also metaphorically balancing humanity (Nietzsche's Apollo/Dionysus dichotomy).

Mary Lee Sullivan points out that certain depictions of Dionysus, the Greek manifestation of Bacchus, are sexually ambiguous. She writes:

> Ancient vase paintings present Bacchus, known to the Greeks as Dionysus, in a sexually ambiguous light, at times characterizing him as virile by depicting the god as a goat or bull and, at other times, as an effeminate youth,

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[31] As Gerald Silk pointed out to me, other Abstract Expressionist artists read Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy.*

[32] Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 176.

> beardless and dressed in a woman's gown. These very different images of the god perhaps result from conflicting characterizations within the Bacchus myth.[33]

Sullivan further describes how Bacchus is both closely tied to the power of the phallus because he was raised by Zeus but is also connected to the feminine realm since he was nursed by nymphs.[34] The important idea here is the connection of masculine and feminine within this mythology. Sullivan concludes that:

> In her Bacchus paintings, Elaine de Kooning has realized the Bacchus myth as a reference to both worlds, the exclusive male center of the Abstract Expressionist movement and the marginal world of the struggling female artist.[35]

There is a notable reference to both genders here, and Rozsika Parker, in her essay titled "Images of Men" remarks that:

> Relationships between men and women are unequal and fraught with antagonism. It is (perhaps) inevitable that women's images of men in art as much as in literature should be about the effects of differences of power between the sexes; about the fear and hatred it can generate, and about the desire to reveal, challenge, transform or destroy the imbalance.[36]

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[33] Mary Lee Sullivan,"Questions of Gender and Subjectivity in Elaine de Kooning's Bacchus Paintings," *Archaeologia Transatlantica* XVI (Tony Hackens and R. Ross Holloway, eds.) Belgium: Art and Archaeology Publications, 1998: p. 107.

[34] Ibid. Sullivan references two sources for her investigations of this myth: Robert J. Gula and Thomas H. Carpenter, *Mythology: Greek and Roman*, 1977, p. 42-49 and Michael Jameson, *The Asexuality of Dionysus, Masks of Dionysus,* 1997, p. 44-64.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau, eds., *Women's Images of Men,* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society Limited, 1985): p. 44.

By appropriating an image of Bacchus, Elaine attempts to reveal, challenge, transform and maybe destroy the imbalance between the sexes.[37] Her attraction to the Dalou sculpture may have been intuitive; however, her own position within a male-dominated art movement also plays a part in her usurping an image of physical struggle that has underlying, gendered implications. There is a parallel to the antagonism between sexes that Parker discusses. Furthermore, it is interesting that Bacchus, as Sullivan points out, is sometimes connected with the bull, another image on which Elaine fixates in an extensive series of work (see Chapter 6: Bulls, Bison, and Caves). The bull symbolizes strength, machismo (the strong matador, the vigorous bullfight), and primitivism. Other artists, ranging from ancient cave painters to more modern artists such as Pablo Picasso have embraced the image of the bull for a variety of reasons. Picasso, for instance, assimilated the animal to denote power and sacrifice. As one text suggests, "In most religions, and in most eras, the bull has been an emblem of kingship, worshipped almost universally for its powerful fighting ability and fertilizing power."[38] Elaine is engaging a universal mythological symbolism in her Bacchus series to reveal ideas of power, struggle and

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[37] The idea of a sexual power struggle has been alluded to in previous chapters. It has been mentioned, for instance, that Elaine mainly chose male sitters for her portraits and images of men for sports paintings. In these other instances, I believe that the struggle of male versus female was not quite as transparent as it is in the Bacchus series, which references gender by virtue of the God, himself. This struggle is further illustrated (in a more symbolic way) by her representations of bulls, bison and caves.

[38] Neil Cox and Deborah Povey, *A Picasso Bestiary*, (London: Academy Editions, 1995): p. 29. A more complete discussion of Picasso's use of bull imagery is handled in Chapter 6. For further information on this topic, see also Ries, Martin, "Picasso and the Myth of the Minotaur," *Art Journal,* vol. 32, no.2 (Winter, 1972-73): pp. 142-45 and Gottlieb, Carla, "The Meaning of Bull and Horse in Guernica," *Art Journal,* vol. 24, no. 2 (Winter, 1964-65): pp. 106-112.

masculinity. The fundamental masculinity of her Bacchus work contrasts her situation as a female artist and serves as a reevaluation of gender and its societal obligations.

Joseph Campbell's ideas of heroics and mythology in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* profoundly influenced the Abstract Expressionist artists and in an interview, Elaine referenced Campbell's book.[39] In 1949, the same year the book was written, the author was invited to lecture at The Club, which was a regular gathering of Abstract Expressionist artists in New York City. In particular, Campbell asserts that all stories of mythology, religion and adventure have a common, underlying thread that is internally found in the self rather than externally situated in the world or a god. He finds an existential substructure to all stories of mythology. As he describes:

> Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the heropath. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.[40]

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[39] Pollock-Krasner Study Center, East Hampton, NY. Elaine de Kooning interviewed by Jeffrey Potter for "An Oral History of Jackson Pollock," July 22, 1980. This book was popular among many artists at this time.

[40] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949): p. 25. This passage also connotes the myth of the Minotaur. Twentieth century artists such as Andre Masson and Jackson Pollock were enticed by this story, perhaps because of the heroic implications suggested by Campbell, but perhaps also because of the ideas of Jungian psychoanalytic theory that have been connected with it. In either case, there is a relationship between the myth of the bull, suggestions of heroic masculinity and mid-twentieth century trends in art.

At the core of Elaine's Bacchus works exists the idea of the mythological hero integrated with existential "self." The visual arrangement of the viewpoint she chooses to study is frontal, where the assumed Bacchus figure is at the topmost point of a pyramid, his body thrusting backwards and foreshortened. The other figures attempt to support Bacchus, as he becomes unstable in his drunken state. Despite this tipsiness, he is implied as the most essential figure in the composition and the embodiment of an heroic existence (definitively in a "heroic" position). In an intriguing analogy, it should be noted that several of the Abstract Expressionist artists were also known as struggling but ultimately triumphant and debauched drunks. Elaine, herself, consumed a fair amount of alcohol, and the arrangement of reveling drunks was most likely quite familiar for her.

In the conclusion to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell states:

> The modern hero, the modern individual who dares to heed the call and seek the mansion of that presence with whom it is our whole destiny to be atoned, cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding. "Live," Nietzsche says, "as though the day were here." It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal – carries the cross of the redeemer – not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair.[41]

We know that Elaine thought of the role of the artist in grand terms. According to her, the artist should have a rebellious personality and just as Campbell avows of the hero, Elaine thought that the artist cannot wait for his/her community approval. In an interview regarding the state of art in the 1960s, Elaine was asked how she felt

[41] Ibid., p. 391.

about the development of Pop Art. She said that "The true artist is a rebel and is not concerned with public opinion."[42] According to Elaine, Pop Art was immediately accepted and that it was, for this reason, a mediocre form of artistic expression. In her many articles for *Art News,* she colors artists with lofty words such as "magic" and "legend," and even describes a trend in the 1940s as a "transformation of consciousness."[43] She mentioned in another interview some advice from Willem, who told her to "work as though every stroke may be your last," suggesting that the artist's mark is vital and requires complete attention and commitment.[44] The Bacchus work associates these grand ideas of the artist/hero with a visual theme. By studying and revisiting the theme, Elaine reveals her universal beliefs about art in general.

Visually, Elaine further examines the subconscious of the artist in a Surrealistic manner.[45] André Breton, author of the *First Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) and designated leader of the Surrealist movement defined "Surrealism" as:

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[42] Pollock-Krasner Study Center, East Hampton, NY. Elaine de Kooning interviewed by Irving Kaufmann for local radio station. Not dated.

[43] Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): "Renoir: As If by Magic," p. 151, "Gorky: Painter of His Own Legend" p. 89, "Two Americans in Action: Franz Kline and Mark Rothko," p. 165.

[44] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material (Interviews and talks given by the artist) from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #2.

[45] Surrealism and existentialism are intimately linked. Psychoanalysis, which investigates the human mind in great depth, relates to the individual's ultimate responsibility for his/her own existence. By probing the mind using psychoanalytic techniques, a person can theoretically find resolutions to his or her psychological deficiencies or conflicts.

> Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.[46]

The dark lines that wind through each Bacchus work (Figures 57, 58, 60, 61, and 62) serve to sketch out the essential lines of the sculpture but they also feel subconsciously generated and without a predetermined plan. These dark lines seem like an experiment in Surrealist psychic automatism. We know that many of the Abstract Expressionist artists were influenced by Surrealism.[47] Elaine, too, flirted with Surrealist imagery and form, most remarkably in an untitled graphite sketch from her early career (c. 1947, Figure 65) and, less explicitly, in the anthropomorphic forms of her Black Mountain paintings. (Figures 1, 2, and 6) Although these earlier works seem more controlled than automatic, they still evidence Surrealism. Her graphite sketch, for instance, is a conglomeration of biomorphic forms – subconsciously-derived shapes – amassed in a bizarre manner that references a dream world rather than reality. Marcel Jean, in his *History of Surrealist Painting*, declares irrationality and dreamlike mental states as a pivotal foundation of Surrealism. He says:

> From the very beginning of its investigations, *Surrealism* excluded the rational and logical in favor of the irrational, which was itself envisaged

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[46] Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968): p. 412.

[47] During the 1940s many young Abstract Expressionist artists were introduced to Surrealism at Peggy Guggenheim's *Art of This Century Gallery*. As a result, several Abstract Expressionist artists, including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Arshile Gorky, began a phase of their careers that has been characterized in scholarship as "surrealist."

> originally simply as an aspect of hallucination. From visual sensation, the basic element of Impressionism, we pass with Surrealism to "hallucinatory sensation," offering new and immense possibilities of development.[48]

Elaine's *Untitled* sketch from 1947, as well as her Black Mountain work, demonstrates subconscious or irrational stimulus rather than optically naturalistic sources.

Regarding the Surrealist influence on mid-twentieth century American artists, H. H. Arnason and Marla Prather maintain that, "The Americans were less concerned with the new method of tapping into the unconscious than as a liberating procedure that could lead to the exploration of new forms."[49] Because the technique of automatism for the Surrealists was a method of tapping into the unconscious, there is an autobiographical undercurrent in most of their artistic endeavors. Elaine's Bacchus work also references autobiography in that she explores both masculine and feminine forms that are indicative of her own personality. Elaine's approach to painting is also liberating. However, unlike the Surrealist painters, her technique is not completely automatic, for the sole purpose of tapping into the unconscious. Instead, she uses a loose style to explore form through color variations and attention to the energetic subject matter.

As mentioned earlier, Elaine chose a writhing male figure as the center of study in these works. I have emphasized the importance of her interest in movement, and she consistently chooses the male body as its vehicle. The energy

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[48] Marcel Jean, *History of Surrealist Painting,* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959): p. 117.

[49] H. H. Arnason and Marla F. Prather, *History of Modern Art (Fourth Edition),* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998): p. 410.

demonstrated by the Bacchus sculpture would probably not be found in a singular image of a female in 19th century art, and the energy is what is in fact important; she described the tumbling action as particularly significant. She said that: "I didn't want the image to be clear per se, but I wanted to give the effect of it, these tumbling figures, although they were frozen."[50] An early series of watercolor Bacchus sketches by Elaine (from the collection of the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, Georgia, Figures 66, 67, 68, and 69) evidences the attention to dynamism over recognizable form. The drunken debauchery of the central god affords an interpretation of gyration and uncontrolled (or uninhibited) motion. Completed in 1976-77, during her years serving as the University of Georgia's first Lamar Dodd Visiting Professor of Art and in the beginning stages of her six-year investigation of the Bacchus image, these sketches offer a sea of brushwork rather than a defined representation of the sculpture. Instead of establishing form with a strong outline of the image itself, she first considers color choice and how the paint strokes are abstractly applied to the surface. A colleague in Georgia described how Elaine taught by example, remarking that, "She showed students that it is sometimes important to paint something over and over in order to learn."[51] Working in series provided a means to conduct rational investigations. Author Catherine Fox submits, "As her fascination with Bacchus may suggest, Ms. de Kooning was more involved

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[50] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material (Interviews and talks given by the artist) from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #5.

[51] Ed Lambert, UGA Art Professor quoted in Catherine Fox, "Elaine de Kooning: Portrait of the Artist," *The Atlanta Journal* (Wednesday, April 15, 1992): p. B6.

with a sensuous response to the material world than with the spiritual exploration of her peers."[52] There are spiritual instances that emerge in Elaine's work, however, her method begins in the material world of color, shape, and painted marks.

Curiously, though the paintings in the Bacchus series are dynamically rendered, the subject matter itself – the sculpture by Dalou – is definitively frozen in place (both as a sculpture and also in its place in the garden).[53] Elaine was asked to comment in an interview about "a static, massive sculpture" that she dealt with "as ephemeral, moving, transitional, changing."[54] Elaine responded that everything as she perceived it appeared to be in motion because of the shimmering light. She added that "you couldn't quite see what was going on and I liked that ambiguity."[55] The ambiguity allowed a more spontaneous interpretation of the scene. Because there is not a prevailing clarity to the composition to begin with, Elaine could compile the writhing bodies with a freer sense of drawing and color.

In 1959 Elaine wrote that:

> Working on the figure, I wanted paint to sweep through as feelings sweep through. Then I wanted the paint to sweep the figure along with it – and got

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[52] Ibid.

[53] One author observes the sculpture's static quality: "The composition is so rigorously calculated that it appears at variance with the riotous theme. In this respect, Rodin's criticism of Carpeaux's *Ugolino* is equally applicable to the Silenus: 'Although it is a powerful work, it is static. There is too much straining after architectural composition; that keeps him from solving his problem." [John M. Hunisak, *The Sculptor Jules Dalou: Studies in His Style and Imagery,* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977): p. 87.]

[54] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material (Interviews and talks given by the artist) from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #5.

[55] Ibid.

> involved with men in action – abstract action, action for its own sake – the game. And finally, I wanted the paint to sweep through, around, over and past, to hack away at contours and engulf silhouettes.[56]

Elaine's Bacchus works achieve this outcome of overwhelming figural silhouettes in sweeping gesture. More than her other work, the Bacchus series is a study of the way an object is integrated with its surroundings because of the effects of light and implied dynamism and the resulting existentialist interplay of male versus female as they are metaphorically caught up in the struggle. Elaine said, "In choosing subjects or styles, the artist only has partial control. His reasons are never completely deliberate or logical. They are also passive and psychological – a matter of compulsion."[57] In the Bacchus series this subconscious compulsion leads Elaine to an image – the Dalou sculpture - that adeptly unites many themes already explored in her career to this point (masculinity, power, energy) and that she will further synthesize during the last decade of her life.

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[56] Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 176.

[57] Ibid., p. 149.

CHAPTER 6

BULLS, BISON, AND CAVES

"I felt a tremendous identification with the Paleolithic artists. I found myself deep in the caves imagining that I was one of them, looking for surfaces smooth enough to paint on, noticing chunks of yellow clay on the ground that would be perfect to draw with." –Elaine de Kooning[1]

Elaine's career as an artist culminated in the 1980s with a series of works that were inspired by Paleolithic cave paintings from southern France and Spain.[2] Each of these works – in media ranging from ink on paper to lithograph prints to large-scale acrylic on canvas paintings – contain sketchy outlines of distinguishable animals like bison and horses on fields of color and gestural paint strokes. This final series summarizes many of the themes present in her overall career. The cave paintings unify Elaine's powerfully gestural painting style with her love of human endeavor, masculine subject matter, art history, and dynamic motion. The cave painting-inspired work captures the spirit of an ancient civilization, but it also

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[1] Jane K. Bledsoe, *Elaine de Kooning,* (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): p. 40.

[2] This thesis will not recount all of the historical information about the prehistoric caves themselves. I will only focus on details from the caves that are specifically relevant to Elaine and her art. For general information about the cave paintings, their discovery and their place in history, see Clottes, Jean. *Cave Art.* London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2008. For a specific account of the Lascaux Caves in France, see Windels, Fernand. *The Lascaux Cave Paintings.* London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1949 and Ruspoli, Mario. *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record.* London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1987.

encapsulates the spirit of Elaine's entire career as an artist. As she said, herself, all of her talents came together with these cave works, combining her "love for graffiti, her love for the abstract stroke and her love for animals."[3]

The cave paintings cannot be fully examined without first establishing a brief inventory of her earlier work of bulls and bison.[4] (Figures 70, 71, 72, 73 and 74) In 1957, Elaine moved to Albuquerque to teach at the University of New Mexico. For several years afterward, she worked with imagery inspired by the culture of the southwest. She returned to this imagery in 1984 when she was invited to participate in Mount Holyoke College's artist-in-residence print-publishing program. At Mount Holyoke she completed five lithographs of bulls and bison inspired by the Lascaux cave paintings, which she visited in 1983. (Figures 75, 76, 77, 78 and 79) In 1985, she produced a large number of prints of isolated animals and animal groups. (Figures 80, 81, 82, 83, 84 and 85) She commenced working with the animal imagery on large-scale canvases with acrylic paints. (Figures 89, 90, 91, 92 and 93) Elaine's earlier bull paintings examined together with the later animal prints and cave paintings reveal an interrelated series, even though several decades elapsed

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[3] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material (Interviews and talks given by the artist) from the library of LTV in East Hampton. Elaine's love for animals began in the late 1950s when she moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico for a teaching appointment at the University of Mexico. Here, she was introduced to the profound images of western landscapes including bulls, bison and Mexican bullfights.

[4] These earlier works have not yet been discussed in this thesis because they do not belong with any of the other categorical series I have already considered. While there is somewhat of a chronological ordering of this thesis – for example, the Black Mountain Abstractions were early in Elaine's career, the Sports Paintings began shortly thereafter, and the Bacchus series occurred mid-1970s – she worked on portraits during most of her life and the Cave Paintings found their roots in earlier animal imagery, specifically the bulls from the late 1950s.

when she was not working with any animal imagery. Clearly the earlier work informs the latter. This series in its entirety also completes the interaction of themes around which she based much of her art; ideas including masculinity, movement, the gestural application of paint, and the way in which her early associations with the Abstract Expressionist artists consequently shaped her entire career.

It was only shortly after her close association with the Abstract Expressionist group in New York City that Elaine relocated to New Mexico. The New York artists' quick application of paint and their devotion to abstraction was fresh in her mind. Elaine was not interested in complete abstraction, however, and imagery was important to most of her work from the late 1950s and forward. Imagery became a catalyst for personal exploration, including associations between masculine and feminine ideals. The image of the bull was a mechanism for such an inquiry. Her own account of the discovery of the bull imagery is as follows:

> In '57 I made my first trip west of the Hudson, and it was a revelation. The ruddy earth, the naked musculature of the Rockies, the brilliant colors of the sky behind them at twilight, the massive horizontality of the environment – it was all overpowering, and my painting responded. I went to Juárez to see the bullfights, which immediately struck me as a heightened image of Southwestern landscape – the panorama of the arena, the heraldic colors.[5]

Elaine describes the motivation for her work – the dominant details of the landscape and environment west of the Hudson – with extremely masculine terminology. She carefully chooses phrases like "naked musculature," "ruddy earth," and "heraldic colors" indicating strength, dominance and intensity. It seemed she had arrived at

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[5] Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979): p. 255.

this description with the mindset of her prior masculine Abstract Expressionist interactions and role models.

Art critic Lawrence Campbell poetically describes Elaine's *Juárez* from 1958 (Figure 72) as "darkly violent" and "a hymn to electrically charged movement."[6] The *Juárez* paintings are solitary images of bulls drawn with black lines and camouflaged in a sea of bright colors and violent brushwork. These earlier works of single bulls are large in scale; some are close to five feet high and six and a half feet wide. The dramatic energy of the animal is emphasized. The black strokes of the animals buck and thrust against the colors surrounding and intermingling with it. As discussed in Chapter 4 in regard to her series of sports paintings, movement for Elaine was not only about interactive energies but it was also a base primitive mechanism that motivates human endeavor. In the sports paintings, Elaine analyzed the writhing masculine form in order to illustrate the energy underlying human efforts. Her bulls are also indicative of strength and prowess and masculinity in American culture.

The use of the bull motif is prevalent throughout art history. The theme is dealt with in ancient caves, the Mycenaean and Minoan civilizations, and Roman mythologies. More recent artists such as Goya and Manet use the bullfight as a subject for their painting. More contemporary to Elaine herself is twentieth-century artist, Pablo Picasso, who utilized the theme of the bull in many works throughout

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[6] Lawrence Campbell, "New Blood in the Old Cross-Section," *Art News* (January 1962): p. 40.

his career.[7] In a book entitled *A Picasso Bestiary,* authors Neil Cox and Deborah Povey reveal symbolism and lore related to different animals illustrated by Picasso in his art. Cox and Povey establish in their introduction that:

> The aim of this strategy is not to argue that all Picasso's works are deliberate copies of, or variations on, the earlier works described – although a few of them are – but rather to show how consistently certain long-established themes continue into his art. The book is concerned with the way that traditional symbolism persists, yet changes and adapts according to new demands and concerns. We have discovered that Picasso's depictions of animals both comply with tradition and deviate from it to fulfil [sic] more personal ends and ambitions.[8]

Elaine's use of long-established themes like bulls and cave paintings also fulfills personal aims and ambitions. In her work, she filters a symbolically masculine theme through her experience and feminine viewpoint.

Helen Harrison sees the *Juárez* paintings (Figure 71, 72 and 74) as a testament to Elaine's "newfound independence" after separating from Willem in 1957.[9] When Elaine moved thousands of miles away from the Abstract Expressionist epicenter of New York City, she disconnected from it physically but not emotionally or stylistically. Her paintings of bulls continued to capture the Abstract Expressionist interest in action. The loose brushwork and vivid color

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[7] There is no indication that Elaine used Picasso's bull paintings as a source for her own work. I make this comparison in order to point out important iconographical similarities. Nevertheless, *Guernica* (1937) was shown in the United States in 1939, and it is likely that Elaine, along with many other Abstract Expressionist artists, saw this work at this time.

[8] Neil Cox and Deborah Povey, *A Picasso Bestiary,* (London: Academy Editions, 1995): p. 7.

[9] "Witness to Imminent Drama: Elaine de Kooning and the New York School," catalogue essay, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System Gallery, Washington D.C., (June 21- September 6, 1994): p. 12.

combinations unite the imagery with its background, underscoring what Harold Rosenberg deemed the "revelation contained in the act."[10] The bull is a defining symbol of the resonance of masculinity threading itself through Elaine's career, and, alternatively, may also signify a resistance (a bull-headedness) towards the male-domination in Abstract Expressionism or the critical backlash against women artists in a male-dominated art world. Elaine sought physical independence from the masculinity of the New York City art world, but she was re-examining it with her style and subject matter.

Consequentially, early Abstract Expressionist content reflects Surrealist tendencies, including violent or mythological animal imagery. Jackson Pollock's *Pasiphaë* from 1943, for instance, references the myth of the goddess who fell in love with the white bull that Poseidon had sent to her husband, King Minos of Crete.[11] Pasiphaë hid herself in a wooden cow in order to consummate her relationship with the bull, ultimately giving birth to the Minotaur, a creature with a human body and the head of a bull. The Minotaur was a common subject for the Surrealist artists in their search for bestial sexuality and subconscious meaning; the mythological beast caged in the labyrinth can be a metaphor for the human psyche. Abstract Expressionists followed the Surrealists in their pursuit of psychic, emotional content.

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[10] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* (December, 1952): p. 23.

[11] Other artists found the myth of Pasiphaë alluring; Andre Masson, for instance, painted the same theme in 1936.

Both Picasso and Elaine include the bull as central imagery in their art because of its wealth of associations and personal (subconscious, emotional) meanings. Neil Cox and Deborah Povey begin their discussion of Picasso's animal imagery by focusing on the bull's various meanings:

> In most religions and most eras, the bull has been an emblem of kingship, worshipped almost universally for its powerful fighting ability and fertilizing power. It has thus been intimately associated with creation, birth, death and renewal.[12]

Both Picasso and Elaine capture a timeless quality in their paintings by equating the bulls to universal values and raw emotion. In a work such as *Guernica* from 1937, Picasso uses the bull to symbolize a broad-spectrum of political ideas in the context of human suffering.[13] Elaine does not associate her animals with heinous events like the bombing of a civilian town. Instead, her animals radiate a general sense of vigor and life.

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[12] Neil Cox and Deborah Povey, *A Picasso Bestiary,* (London: Academy Editions, 1995): p. 29. The authors of this book note that they dedicate the first chapter to the bull because of the complexity of its imagery and meaning in Picasso's work.

[13] The exact meaning of the bull in Picasso's *Guernica* is the subject of much debate. Martin Ries, in his article "Picasso and the Myth of the Minotaur," says that "the bull in *Guernica* presides over the catastrophe aloof from human suffering, not as a symbol of 'darkness and depravity' but of the natural forces of the universe, of creativity, fertility and regeneration, existentially unconcerned with moral issues." [*Art Journal,* vol. 32, no.2 (Winter, 1972-73): pp. 144-45]. In another article, Carla Gottlieb reevaluates several opposing theories, including one that identifies the bull as symbolic of the Spanish People, a protector, and another where the bull "signifies the cruelty and brutality which overshadow our time." ["The Meaning of Bull and Horse in *Guernica*," *Art Journal,* vol. 24, no. 2 (Winter, 1964-65): p. 106]. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully engage in this debate, however, each interpretation does suggest raw human emotion and a broader political or social context.

Cox and Povey mention that the Greek God, Dionysus, is commonly shown in the guise of the bull and is a deity of vegetation and in some cases, a personification of the sun that ripens and fertilizes the crops.[14] As discussed in Chapter 5: The Bacchus Paintings, Elaine focuses on a sculpture she identifies as Bacchus for a series of work she produced during the 1970s and early 1980s. In this series, the sculpture of Bacchus (the Roman equivalent of Dionysus) is a catalyst for the study of dynamic motion through variances in color and gestural paint strokes. The early bull paintings demonstrate a similar radiance and motion that is both emotionally symbolic and life-affirming.[15] Elaine's vigorous style of painting parallels her perception of the animal as vital and beautiful.[16] In one interview she said, "As a matter of fact, of all the animals, I think the most incredibly beautiful in a very mystical, metaphysical way, is the fighting bull."[17]

Elaine's bulls reveal the energy of a kinetic form. With the exception of *Standing Bull* from 1960 (Figure 70) her early bulls are positioned with heads down and backs arched in dynamic, mid-*corrida* thrusts. (Figures 71, 72, 73 and 74)

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[14] Neil Cox and Deborah Povey, *A Picasso Bestiary,* (London: Academy Editions, 1995): pp. 29-30.

[15] One of Elaine's prints from 1985 (Figure 85) shows a bull with a sun in the background. While I am not suggesting that this was an intentional parallel to the Dionysian bull as a personification of fertilization, it does exhibit an interesting visual correspondence.

[16] Elaine had been admiring animal forms since her childhood. She once commented that, "All through the years, ever since I was ten years old, I made it a practice to go to zoos and make drawings of animals, contour drawings." [Robin White, Interview with Elaine De Kooning at East Hampton, NY, *View* (Spring 1988) vol. 5 no. 1: p. 6].

[17] White, p. 8.

Several of these paintings titled *Juárez* refer to the Mexican town just across the New Mexico border where Elaine experienced bullfighting spectacles. Roland Penrose describes the *corrida* as a ritualistic event:

> Though superficially the crowd may resemble the spectators at a football match their interest is profoundly different. The performance they have come to see is a rite rather than a sport… The sacrifice of the bull becomes the symbol of triumph of man over brute force and blind instinct. Courage and skill are balanced against the tempestuous onslaught of exasperated fury. In the wake of the encounter follow suffering, cruelty and death. The festive costume of toreador endows him with the qualities of the priest and the athlete. By his courage he becomes the hero admired and reverenced by all; he can equally earn their merciless scorn should he show himself cowardly or incompetent in his dangerous task. In his skill he bears resemblance to the artist.[18]

Entwined with the energy of the bullfight are emotions such as suffering and triumph, heroism and defeat. Elaine was obviously attracted to such emotions; the same characteristics admired by Abstract Expressionist artists on the whole. By isolating the image of the bull, the artist acts as toreador taming the wild animal, seeking the approval of the crowd (audience), and characterizing heroics and triumph rather than weakness.

For much of the 1960s and 1970s Elaine did not paint the subject of the bull; however, in the last years of her career, she reintroduced the bull imagery in her cave prints and paintings. (Figures 75-79 and 89-93) With self-proclaimed interest in the study of earlier art, Elaine treated cave paintings as the quintessential

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[18] Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981): p. 15.

historical precedents.[19] By reinventing this prehistoric art form, (Figures 86, 87 and 88) she reiterated her belief that everything in art is "now" or in essence, timeless.[20] She once commented that she was not interested in new media because it became dated too quickly. She said that new media (using plastics and light, for instance) is more about advances in technology than in technique. New media generate pictures that could not have been produced even a decade prior. According to Elaine, reliance on technology and new materials for art lacked passion.[21] To her, the caves, on the other hand, represented simplicity, purity and directness (perhaps even rawness) that exemplifies passion and human emotion. Many artists turned to such prehistoric imagery in order to capture a universality of meaning.[22] Louise Bourgeois, for one, visited the Lascaux caves in the 1950s and came away "moved by the sight of those great hollows of darkness, eroded by millennia of rainwater."[23]

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[19] Susan C. Larsen Collection, Oral History relating to the American Abstract Artists Group, 1973-1978, 13 sound cassettes, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., donated 2001.

[20] She stated that "Art is always *now,*" in one interview. She said that "time doesn't exist for artists and progress doesn't exist in art. Willem said 'we never got better, we only got different.'" (LTV, Series of DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton.)

[21] Karl E. Fortress (1907-) Collection, taped interviews with artists, 1963-1985, 205 sound cassettes, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., donated 1978-1985.

[22] Abstract Expressionist artists like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Adolf Gottblieb and others appropriated prehistoric and mythological imagery in their paintings from the 1940s. Sherman Drexler, close friend of Elaine, fellow artist, and her companion to the caves, is working with this imagery today.

[23] Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979): p. 166.

Upon her return, she produced a series called her *Lairs* – a wire mesh, covered with latex, then papier-mâché and plaster.[24]

In a lecture for a series sponsored by the Art Barge on Long Island, Elaine remarked that one thing that struck her about seeing the ancient caves in Southern France was that it seemed as though the prehistoric artists found a form in the rock and then reiterated it with their drawing. A rock might suggest the curving back of a bison, for instance, and the artist would complete the image of the animal on the wall. She noted that the artists of the caves used suggestive configurations in the rock as their starting point. Her own art operates with subject matter as the suggestive starting point. Her different series are inspired by shapes and forms like dynamic athletes, a statue of a Roman God or a human figure. Elaine uses these themes as the cave artists used a particular piece of rock, and her work becomes fully realized when the gap between style – the gestural paint strokes, the dynamic background, and the colorful fields of abstract shapes – and subject matter is diminished.[25]

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[24] Like the Abstract Expressionists, Louise Bourgeois also has Surrealist roots and the *Lairs* can be understood as symbolic representations of the human subconscious. For a recent discussion of Bourgeois, see Frances Morris, ed. *Louise Bourgeois.* New York: Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2008. Morris notes that the artist's visit to the Lascaux caves "was perhaps the source of Bourgeois' interest in concealed interior spaces and troglodytic structures – several works are entitled *Lair* – but the generic subterranean feel of many of these may also relate to the crypt-like basement studio of West 20th Street." (p. 14).

[25] LTV, Series of DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton.

The primitivism of the cave paintings also attracted Elaine. In the scholarship of modern art, "primitivism" is a loosely defined term that refers to the interpretation of art from other cultures and in some cases the appropriation of cultural imagery. However, this term tends to be applied generally and it neither describes a particular school of art nor delineates specific cultural sources.[26] Instead, scholars analyze "affinities" between primitive art and modernism.[27] Authors discuss the emotions and stylistic qualities evoked by modernists who assimilate "primitive" ideas. Robert Goldwater introduces what he calls "the primitivist impulse of the twentieth century" and explains that "there is a movement from the inspiration of particular primitive forms and styles toward a wider, more general, and more indigenous primitive ideal."[28] Goldwater and others have identified the "primitive" ideal as originating from earlier periods in history but he warns that a definition must be discursive. Goldwater, in his book *Primitivism in Modern Art,* divides the term into types, such as Romantic Primitivism, Emotional Primitivism, Intellectual Primitivism and the Primitivism of the Subconscious. These designations suggest a nuanced approach to a definition. He remarks in the conclusion of his book:

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[26] In fact, the term "primitive" is sometimes considered so problematic and difficult to accurately define that authors and scholars refrain from using it at all.

[27] For more discussion on this, see William Rubin, ed., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern,* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

[28] *Primitivism in Modern Art,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938): p. xxiii.

> In attempting a definition of the artistic attitude whose course we have been following, we do not mean to set down an exclusive description. It would be possible to collect the final residue after filtering out all those manifestations which are not common or typical, or which may be found accompanying other attitudes in art besides the primitivist, no matter how important or characteristic they may be for certain phases of primitivism, and this meager residue could be reduced to an epigram. Such an attempt, though it might arrive at a paradigm which would serve as a base in the search for exceptions, would hardly find any other useful purpose. It will have been obvious throughout that the unity of this study lay more in the various attitudes and intentions which were being described than in the formal, or even the psychological similarity of the works of art created in accordance with these attitudes.[29]

Goldwater contends that the idea of primitivism is based upon attitudes and intentions rather than a clearly defined set of formal criteria. Art critic Clement Greenberg, on the other hand, discusses the term "primitive" by relating it to unsophisticated art of bourgeoisie (low) traditions. He describes primitivism as a folk aesthetic in which the accidental "charm" of the work lies in its "abstract or decorative qualities not knowingly sought by its makers."[30] Greenberg implies a quality of naiveté in what he calls "primitive" art. Both Goldwater and Greenberg insinuate an underlying intent that is both relatively simplistic and yet culturally universal.

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[29] Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938): pp. 250-251.

[30] Greenberg, in his essay, "'Primitive' Painting," writes: "Like his predecessor, the twentieth century 'primitive' tends to be of humble social origin, but temperamental and psychic factors rather than social ones are what usually prevent him from acquiring artistic sophistication, given that correct drawing and shading – meaning realistic, academic drawing and shading – have, with overripeness of Western naturalism, become so much easier to learn." [*Art and Culture,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): pp. 130-131].

The importance of Elaine's appropriation of ancient cave imagery lies in its fundamental universality and the overall message of cyclic existence. As Goldwater reminds us:

> This attitude toward the formal simplification (or supposed simplicities) of primitive art is related to another kind of simplification of form, and an accompanying expansion of emotional meaning, that has its own primitivist connotations without benefit of any exotic association. Different, though related, programs of abstract art… and the paintings created in consonance with them, contain a strong emphasis on the "simple," a quality they seek out since they place a high value on it for its own sake.[31]

In this passage, Goldwater explains that the simplification sought by modern artists removes objects from their context and focuses solely on aesthetic form and consequently emotional meaning. The Abstract Expressionists were praised for conveying raw emotion to the spectator without reliance on the intermediary of narrative and Elaine's work follows in this pursuit. She once said:

> When I went West, the color experiences of New Mexico convinced me that "feeling" was the thing… From my Southwestern perspective, all the colors in New York and in New York art suddenly seemed to me to have a common denominator.[32]

In her early bull paintings and the later cave work, silhouettes of animals are enveloped in thrusting markings of paint, and this juxtaposition of the subject with gesture motivates us to consider the style as a greater focus in these works. Elaine offers both the intangibility of pure emotion (communicated through energetic

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[31] *Primitivism in Modern Art,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938): p. 164.

[32] Lawrence Campbell, "Elaine de Kooning paints a picture," *Art News* (December 1960): p. 42.

brushwork and vibrant color) and the universality of meaning (symbolized by the animals themselves). Lawrence Campbell writes:

> For Elaine de Kooning, the colors in these recent paintings [her bull paintings] do not have "shapes." They are large movements, rushing, sliding, scattering, pouring, a glissade, an excitement of oranges, and a blue which, in such surroundings, takes on a shrill, loud quality, a kind of high-pitched thud, also yellows, alizarins, purples, chartreuse greens and black. Asked why her strokes of the brush were "form" rather than strokes combining together to make form, she replied: "For me drawing is always a force which compresses whereas color seems to expand beyond its bounds and becomes decontrolled and therefore risks being trivial. But I feel I am able to control this expanding quality with my brush-strokes. Color then becomes a kind of super-drawing."[33]

Color is the catalyst for motion, which is subsequently inherent in all activity. Elaine's work swells to the capacity of representing not only the outward, veiled image of a bull or a cave drawing, but the underlying symbolic strength embodied by the dynamic animal form.

Artist Susan Rothenberg draws a similar parallel between human and animal in her early paintings of horses. (Figures 94 and 95) These works are noticeably similar to Elaine's in subject and in their absorption of the subject into a gestural background. Informed by Abstract Expressionist predecessors, Rothenberg is considered a Neo-Expressionist and frequently comments on similarities between herself and Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock. However, she also admits to "putting herself 'right out of the ballpark in terms of the New York art scene.'"[34] Her work is not only a gestural expression of pure emotion but

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[33] Ibid., p. 62.

[34] Joan Simon, *Susan Rothenberg,* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991): p. 27.

it also hypothesizes on universal humanity. She said that her original horse image was "related to a kind of cave painting idea" and we see the same intent of merging the universal themes of past and present in Elaine's work.[35]

Michael Auping remarks, "If Rothenberg had embarked on what the German Expressionist Franz Marc had once called the 'animalization' of art, she had also set out on a course to humanize it in her own peculiar way."[36] According to Auping, Rothenberg suggests a human aspect for her animals through scale and their body positioning. As he describes:

> Stumbling around and splayed across their ambiguous pictorial space like fragile characters from a Beckett play, Rothenberg's horses are not so much a red herring as they are a kind of disguise. Manifestations of a covert expressionism, they illustrate the artist's desire to "reinvent the body to express an emotional state."[37]

He proposes that Rothenberg's horses were probably informed by the body politic of 1970s performance art, much of which was feminist and autobiographical. Elaine's work is similarly autobiographical and the bulls and cave paintings represent a masculine form controlled and conveyed by a female artist in a search for collective unification between generations that, while delineating gender also transcends it. In a monograph on Susan Rothenberg, just this point was made about art starting in the mid-1970s. Author Joan Simon maintains that:

> Many feminist artists were also approaching the issues of ritual and identity, searching back to primitive symbols to inform their art with both an

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[35] Ibid., p. 28.

[36] Michael Auping, *Susan Rothenberg: Paintings and Drawings,* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992): p. 17.

[37] Auping, pp. 17-19.

> immediacy and a connection to a larger past involving an intimate entwining of self, nature, and culture.[38]

Primitive symbols provided a starting point to search for universality in culture, gender, identity and art.

Several authors who have examined prehistoric cave paintings suggest issues of ritual and identity entwined with gender. Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin dedicates an entire text to issues of gender and rock art. In one particular chapter entitled, "Engendering and Degendering Paleolithic Europe's Cave Paintings," Hays-Gilpin asserts that, "Assumptions about gender have pervaded rock art studies since their inception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."[39] She finds the geological situation of the caves to have a cross-cultural gendered connotation. She suggests that caves have long represented the female because "their dark, enclosed spaces, often associated with water, provide reasonably 'natural' analogs for vaginal openings and wombs."[40] Ann Sieveking believes that the decoration of cave walls is not accidental or purposeless, but that the imagery is categorized and juxtaposed according to gender (an idea originally proposed by André Leroi-Gourhan and Annette Laming and specifically concerning the cave of Lascaux).[41] According to Sieveking:

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[38] *Susan Rothenberg,* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991): p. 49.

[39] Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin, *Ambiguous Images: Gender and Rock Art,* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004): p. 43.

[40] Ibid., p. 60.

[41] Ann Sieveking, *The Cave Artists,* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1979): p. 57.

> In a major work published in 1965, Leroi-Gourhan contended that the spatial organization of Paleolithic mural art depended on factors of opposition; these he chose to characterize as masculine and feminine, with various animal species grouped into each category. Thus the horse and other animals of secondary importance to it, are male, the bison with its constellation, female. Neither element will ever be found without its counterpart, although the relative numbers of each may vary very much.[42]

Sieveking believes that certain areas (positions) in a cave were also chosen for masculine or feminine representations, indicating a preconceived spatial (and gender-oriented) plan.[43] Mario Ruspoli discusses the sexuality of the images as "extremely discreet and modest." Animals perhaps indicate "preliminaries to mating" – the mysteries of reproduction – rather than the sexual act itself.[44] While this thesis does not judge or argue the historic accuracy of these assertions, gender nevertheless underscores these cave images. Elaine does not reference any direct sources that regard gender in relation to the cave art (i.e. a specific cave or instance in the prehistoric work); however she instinctively broaches similar issues in her own work by tackling the already gendered subject of prehistoric cave art.

According to Nancy Campbell, who was Elaine's colleague in the printmaking workshop at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, "her Lascaux images are her most personal works – the most directly felt and experienced."[45] It is not surprising that these works are so personal since they were completed towards

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Sieveking says, "Actual feminine representations are generally in central positions, actual masculine examples in marginal and end situations." Ibid., p. 58.

[44] Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record,* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1987): p. 86.

[45] From an email correspondence with N. Campbell, who articulated some of her own personal experiences with Elaine.

the end of her life. But furthermore, Elaine believed that the prehistoric images, while overtly masculine in subject matter (strong animals, possibly an indication of hunting or other ritualistic events), were created by women and children. She came to this hypothesis because the hand prints on the cave walls (Figures 96 and 97) that seem like an artist's signature are very small and she even remarked that, while in the caves, she felt a connection to her "sister painters."[46] In a print from 1985 (Figure 83), Elaine specifically illustrates the hand prints she found so alluring. Two outlines of hands are included in the composition and although they are integrated among the animals and other patterns, the hands stand out as mysterious and important.

Women throughout history have been connected with nature, an idea stemming from the construct of "mother earth." In Linda Nochlin's article, "Women, Art and Power," the author talks about women's "identity with the realm

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[46] This idea was first conveyed to me by Sherman Drexler, a close friend of Elaine's who accompanied her to the caves in Southern France. (Interviewed by Lisa Strahl (March 21, 2008 at Tracks Restaurant in Penn Station, NYC). It is corroborated in an interview of Elaine, herself. (LTV, Series of DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton). Some scholars have also reached this same conclusion. See, for instance, Michel Schmidt-Chevalier, "Were the Cave Paintings in Southwest France Made by Women?" *Leonardo,* Vol. 14, no. 4 (1981): pp. 302-303. Mario Ruspoli maintains, "Often they are the hands of women or adolescents – and at Gargas there are imprints of the hands of children aged two or three, who must have been carried into the sanctuary by their parents and hoisted up at arm's length to reach the right height for stenciling." [Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record,* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1987): p. 90.] Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin says that "the sizes of footprints and handprints in many painted caves show that adults and children were clearly together." She, however, makes no assessment as to whether the adults were male or female. [Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin, *Ambiguous Images: Gender and Rock Art,* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004): p. 59.]

of nature."[47] The naturalistically rudimentary characteristic of the cave paintings provides a logical intermediary for Elaine to explore her own gendered identity. Linda Klinger, in her article "Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theories of Authorship," discusses identity construction in/through works of art and in one instance cites the words of performance artist Carolee Schneemann who said that:

> I assumed the carved figurines and incised female shapes of Paleolithic, Mesolithic artifacts were carved by women… that the experience and complexity of her personal body was the source of conceptualizing, of interacting with materials, of imagining the world and composing its images."[48]

Similar to Elaine, Schneeman attributed a prehistoric artifact to the hands of a female artisan, challenging the typical patriarchal construct of art history. Elaine confronts this construct by also asserting that a female has constructed very masculine imagery within the caves. There is an apparent gender crossover. Schneemann supposes that female artists would be more suited for creating images of the female body. Elaine, however, more radically assumes that females would be adept at capturing the feelings and emotional impact of animal imagery, and in particular the masculine endeavor of hunting.

There is also a connection between this series' emotional underpinnings and the existentialism that was rampant during the 1950s Abstract Expressionist period. Abstract Expressionist scholar Meyer Schapiro in his article "The Liberating Quality of the Avant-Garde" (1957) references existentialist self-interest saying that

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[47] *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays,* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988): p. 2.

[48] Richard Hertz, ed., *Theories of Contemporary Art,* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993): p. 191.

"the arts have become more deeply personal, more intimate, more concerned with experiences of a subtle kind."[49] He later explains that, "The painting symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and deep engagement of the self within his work."[50] When Harold Rosenberg discusses the canvas as an "arena in which to act" and stipulates the significance of an encounter between what is in the artist's mind and the material with which the artist works, he is describing a unification of internal (individual) impetus and external processes.[51] But Schapiro clarifies it best when he states:

> The artist came to believe that what was essential in art – given the diversity of themes or motifs – were two universal requirements: that every work of art has an individual order or coherence, a quality of unity and necessity in its structure regardless of the kind of forms used; and, second, that the forms and colors chosen have a decided expressive physiognomy, that they speak to us as a feeling-charged whole, through the intrinsic power of colors and lines, rather than through the imaging of facial expressions, gestures and bodily movements… The idea of art was shifted, therefore, from the aspect of imagery to its expressive, constructive, inventive aspect.[52]

Elaine's cave paintings exemplify the correlation between expressive imagery and technique. In a work such as *Cave #54, Sand Wall,* from 1985 (Figure 90), measuring more than six feet high and nine feet in length, the artist puts herself (and consequently the viewer) at the center of a dynamic scene. Outlines of animals are loosely demarcated in deep blues and reds against a background of shifting paint

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[49] "The Liberating Quality of the Avant-Garde," *Art News,* (Summer 1957): p. 37.

[50] Ibid., p. 38.

[51] "The American Action Painters," *Art News* (December, 1952): p. 22.

[52] "The Liberating Quality of the Avant-Garde," *Art News,* (Summer 1957): p. 37.

that fuses the composition. The artist (or the viewer) is situated in the midst of swirling energies created by the animal forms and the paint itself. Elaine underscores expression as a primordial standard.

In 1947 Barnett Newman wrote that "Undoubtedly the first man was an artist."[53] In his essay, he hypothesizes that the aesthetic act preceded social necessity and that man's first expression was an aesthetic one. Newman correlates man's yearning for artistic communication to the animal kingdom and various examples of animalistic actions that can be equated to poetry, gesture and symbolism. He articulates:

> The human language is literature, not communication. Man's first cry was a song. Man's first address to a neighbor was a cry of power and solemn weakness, not a request for a drink or water. Even the animal makes a futile attempt at poetry. Ornithologists explain the cock's crow as an ecstatic outburst of his power. The loon gliding lonesome over the lake, with whom is he communicating? The dog, alone, howls at the moon. Are we to say that the first man called the sun and the stars *God* as an act of communication and only after he had finished his day's labor? The myth came before the hunt. The purpose of man's first speech was an address to the unknowable. His behavior had its origin in his artistic nature.[54]

Newman clearly finds the link between animal and man in their quest for origins. He concludes that their similar existential pursuit was to establish meaning through emotions rather than basic survival instincts. Elaine stated in one interview that, "After seeing the caves… I almost feel as though my desire to go back is like trying

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[53] Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968): p. 551.

[54] Ibid.

to touch home base. How did it all begin?”[55] The existential interest in origins and genesis was something familiar to other Abstract Expressionist artists and Elaine also approaches this mysterious subject here. The cave work acknowledges the beginning of all mankind while also emphasizing that the mystery of origination had not been solved. In an essay about *Cave #54, Sand Wall,* the idea of a unity is described. Author Ronnie Cohen says:

> Nature’s oneness and the infinity of existence are among the symbolic ideas raised by the compelling imagery of bulls, horses, and reindeers merging with free-flowing orange, red, yellow, pink and blue passages surrounding them. The painting raises the question as to whether the magical creatures, as they appear to be, are being propelled into the atmospheric multi-hued ether entering the great divide between past and present, space and matter, tangible and intangible realms, or have they already perhaps crossed it?[56]

As Cohen later remarks, there is no easy answer to this question. Elaine introduces dichotomies (philosophical inquiries) of past and present, space and matter and the basic methods of survival and activity (the tangible) versus artistic endeavor (the intangible). If Elaine believed that the Paleolithic cave paintings were created by women or children, there is also a gendered differentiation between those who hunted for survival (men) and those who stayed behind (women).

In Elaine’s cave paintings, the feeling of an innate importance is conveyed by the large scale of the culminating works like *Cave #54, Sand Wall* (Figure 90), her 5.5 by 7 foot *Green-Gold Wall (Cave #45)* from 1985 (Figure 89) or her even

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[55] Robin White, Interview with Elaine de Kooning at East Hampton, NY, *View,* (Spring 1988, vol. 5 no. 1): p. 16. She also declares in this interview that “These are the kinds of questions that art should really deal with, not with materialism.”

[56] Ronnie Cohen, Essay accompanying *Cave Wall #54, Sand Wall,* Spanierman Gallery, LLC, New York, 2007.

larger triptychs, *High Wall (Cave #112)* (Figure 93) and *Morning Wall (Cave #61)* (Figure 92), both from 1987, the largest of which is 9 feet by 19 feet in size. Elaine interpreted the fact that the ancient Paleolithic paintings were hidden in deep caves to mean that they were "very important, secret, sacred."[57] The monumental scale of her paintings conveys this sense of importance. Like other large-scale Abstract Expressionist work, for example, Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis,* her work comments on the strength and impact of mankind based on the sheer size of

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[57] LTV, Series of DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton. Scholarship about the prehistoric caves substantiates this view of the caves as sacred spaces. According to Fernand Windels, the caves "can be nothing else but Paleolithic sanctuaries." He says, "The theory that they were cave dwellings is ruled out by the very conditions which obtain in most of them. Though the Lascaux cave is spacious and relatively dry, we have seen that the position of some of the chambers below the entrance makes it extremely cold in the winter… The paintings and engravings themselves, too, bespeak serious intention; there can be no question of mere pastime or individual fancy." [Fernand Windels, *The Lascaux Cave Paintings,* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1949): p. 49.] Arthur Frederick Ide also remarks that "It is doubtful, that the caves found, especially in Lascaux and Altimira, ever housed, for any period of time, people." Ide cites the dangers inherent in the caves – waterfalls, chasms, narrow passageways – to be the main reasons for not being suitable as shelter. Instead he suggests that these caves, and the imagery they held, were intended "for the eyes of the gods." [Arthur Frederick Ide, *Woman Before History Was Written,* (Dallas: Monument Press, 1985): pp. 74-75] Mario Ruspoli corroborates that certain images of shamans and fertility scenes "make it seem plausible that 'magic' rites were performed in the sanctuaries." [Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record,* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1987): pp. 88-89.] Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin, in her more recent text, *Ambiguous Images: Gender and Rock Art,* describes some of the more popular explanations for the cave images, including "'totemism': the notion that 'primitive tribes' believe themselves to be descended from powerful spiritual beings symbolized by animals and other natural features or forces," hunting magic, which "was supposed to consist of employing 'sympathetic magic' to kill prey by making and symbolically damaging, or 'killing,' images of the desired prey," or fertility magic, "addressing concerns about the reproduction of animals and humans." [Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin, *Ambiguous Images: Gender and Rock Art,* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004): pp. 45-47.]

the canvases.[58] Her directional paint strokes and scattered outlines of animal forms on this large field conjure up ideas of vast landscapes. With a sweeping horizontality to her brushwork, she implies an expansion beyond the canvas' edges and into the world.[59] The impact of the work draws from its connection to the ancient civilization's struggle to survive, the energy of the moving animals, and the force with which the artist has linked both the Paleolithic source and her own work. Like Newman's work, Elaine's art penetrates the heart of humankind's existence and perseverance by simplifying it into a universal message. In Newman's work, that message is both abstract and symbolic (the verticality of the "zips" proposing evolutionary upright-ness of humanity, the visual parallel to spectroscopy relating to scientific discovery, etc.). In Elaine's, the message is rooted in basic animal imagery but implies the cyclical nature of the world; it emphasizes that progress is pretense whether in art or in life. She calls attention to the similarities between the modern world and its ancestral heritage.

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[58] Elaine never specifically refers to the evocation of sublimity in her own work; however, the idea inherently exists in the largeness of the canvases and the implications of universality in the subject matter.

[59] There is a correlation between the earlier bull paintings and the cave walls in the horizontality of the canvases. Elaine said in an interview that before she moved to New Mexico in 1957 she had been working on vertical portraits and her basketball paintings. She said, "Then I went out West in '57 to teach at the University of New Mexico. I had an adobe house, and I was surrounded by the Rockies, and everything suddenly was horizontal and brilliant (after the greyness and verticality of the city), and my canvases all became horizontal. The Southwestern landscapes were the first horizontal canvases I ever worked on." [Robin White, Interview with Elaine de Kooning at East Hampton, NY, *View* (Spring 1988) vol. 5 no. 1: p. 7-8.]

Another idea that stems from these existential inquiries is Elaine's interest in the implication of death. Confrontations with death can be considered with respect to aggression and involve allusions to contest, courage, fearlessness and heroism. Anthropologist Matthew C. Gutmann describes masculinity in terms of dominance and competition in his article, "Trafficking in Men: The Anthropology of Masculinity." Gutmann says, "With their male genes, men are said to inherit tendencies to aggression, family life, competitiveness, political power, hierarchy, promiscuity, and the like."[60] He later dedicates a section of the article to ideas about power and he contends:

> An important contribution of anthropological studies of masculinity has been to explore the subjective perceptions of men about being men, including the relation of being men to claiming, seeking, and exercising various forms of power over other men and over women.[61]

The usurpation of power involves the ability to face an enemy, thereby demonstrating the quality of courage.

Ideas of aggression and dominance exist in the contest of bullfighting. Elaine's earlier bull paintings were responses to the sport of bullfighting, which is a power-struggle that ultimately ends in death. She said of these earlier paintings of bulls that:

> These new paintings are not intended to be still images. In my last show there was a content of stress. The paintings were claustrophobic. I felt the paintings were pushed in, "against the wall." The colors were very heavy. But the bullfight paintings are the opposite of these. Still the bull is something beset. The mountains surrounding Santa Fe seem to have the

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[60] Matthew C. Gutmann, "Trafficking in Men: The Anthropology of Masculinity," *Annual Review of Anthropology,* Vol. 26 (1997): p. 394.

[61] Ibid., 398.

> muscles and bristled hides of stampeding bulls. It seems important to me that in the center of this spectacle, in the ring, the bull is confronting death.[62]

The bulls are symbolic of mortality but, more importantly, the courage of realizing a universal premise of mortality. Themes of hunting or ritualistic sacrifice, which are speculated by some to be the subject matter of the Paleolithic caves, are also themes regarding death. In a conversation about her visit to the caves, Elaine also mentioned the courage it must have taken the artists to travel so deep inside the dark and unknown caves.[63] Of course, since Elaine believed that the artists of the cave paintings were women, she was then assigning to these women a typical masculine trait of courage.

Elaine also mentions the matadors of her bullfighting experiences with respect to courage and their confrontation of death. She said:

> I saw some matadors outside the chapel before they entered the ring and they looked as though they were practicing how to become invisible. Their faces seemed veiled with fear. And their eyes were like the eyes of prizefighters after the first few rounds – gazes filled with water and passionate intention. The bull is an image of explosive power. The movies never give you such details as the fighters' eyes and such qualities as the tremendous speed and lightness of the bull.[64]

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[62] Lawrence Campbell, "Elaine de Kooning paints a picture," *Art News* (December 1960): p. 62.

[63] LTV, Series of DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material from the library of LTV in East Hampton. Arthur Frederick Ide describes the risks of the caves: "Not only was access and egress difficult for the artist of the past, but working conditions were extremely difficult and hazardous, for there is no natural light in the caves, the air is dangerously thin, and there is little ventilation… The primitive artist, at the very best, would have gained access by crawling carefully into the cave's great chamber, and then working only for limited periods of time under the most adverse of conditions." [Arthur Frederick Ide, *Woman Before History Was Written,* (Dallas: Monument Press, 1985): p. 75.]

[64] Campbell, p. 63.

In this passage, Elaine assigns both masculine and feminine attributes to both matador and bull. She describes the matador as displaying fear (which is the opposite of typical masculine displays of courage), and the bull exhibiting "lightness" (with implications of feminine grace and elegance).[65] This unusual juxtaposition indicates Elaine's desire to reform the construct of male versus female. In the circumstance of patriarchal aesthetics, this reformation is novel. As one pair of scholars explains:

> In their studies of the language of art history and criticism, feminist scholars began to explore the concepts of "greatness" and "genius" and why women never succeeded in acquiring either accolade. As with earlier anti-essentialism, definitions of "art" were rejected. To feminists, they were seen as limiting and oppressive: privileging "high" art over low, "fine" art over craft, men's art over women's.[66]

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[65] Furthermore, in a recent text discussing fear as a cultural construct in America, author Peter N. Stearns considers fear as it applies to entertainment (specifically, horror movies): "Fear in entertainment resulted, first, from the growing convergence of gender socialization. For boys and girls attending the same schools, participating in similar activities, a felt need, however atavistic, for new ways to demonstrate gender identity clearly fed the escalation of fears in entertainment. Boys could show they were boys by sneering off fear, going to the bloodiest movies possible, riding the most challenging items amusement parks had to offer. Girls were girls because they could show their greater anxiety, depending on their manly escort to cajole them onto the roller coaster or to tide them through a blood and guts film." Later he states that "males flocked to fear sites far more frequently than females" suggesting a desire to conquer or confront fearful situations. [Peter N. Stearns, *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety,* (New York: Routledge, 2006): pp. 148-49.] Confronting fear is a way to define oneself as male and, although the situation Stearns describes is specific to a more modern time frame, this trait of facing anxious situations and even death with courage is typically qualified as masculine.

[66] Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed., *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics,* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): pp. 10-11.

While Elaine was not creating art with the explicit intention of feminist commentary, her inversion of typical male/female paradigms indirectly questions the accepted patriarchal system of aesthetics.

Elaine said, "In a real sense, it seems to me there's only one single idea running through one's life, even if we find an infinite way of expressing it."[67] In her case, every aspect of her painting career was building towards her final series of cave paintings. Elaine even commented that "the cave image is a kind of culmination of my whole life's work."[68] All of her struggles of philosophizing, intellectualization and experimentation culminate in this series that incorporates all aspects of her work from her abstract brushstroke to her interest in movement to her gendered undercurrents. Rose Slivka remarks that:

> The Paleolithic artist drew, it is thought, not a representation or a shadow of the physical world but a real world. E de K's paintings and drawings have a corresponding imaginative force. She enlarges the Paleolithic world, revivifies it, as she creates her own. Her work has scientific and historical authenticity in its own intuitive grasp of what happened then and how it is now.[69]

Elaine believed that art was always in the present: "Art is always now," she said.[70] In one interview she stated that "time doesn't exist for artists, progress doesn't exist

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[67] Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979): p. 260.

[68] Robin White, Interview with Elaine de Kooning at East Hampton, NY, *View* (Spring 1988) vol. 5 no. 1: p. 6.

[69] Jane K. Bledsoe, *Elaine de Kooning,* (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): p. 44.

[70] LTV, Series of 7 DVDs including segments of "Conversations with Artists" and other archival material (Interviews and talks given by the artist) from the library of LTV in East Hampton, DVD #1.

in art." She explained how Willem once said, "We never got better; we only got different."[71] Her overall outlook on art is established in this series as she appropriates a prehistoric subject matter, modifies it, and generates a contemporary summary of over fifty years' of her work as an artist. The meaning is clear: time is not the most important factor for the artist but rather the idea of adaptation and change. Using the animal images from earlier, prehistoric painters, Elaine demonstrates that nothing in art progresses qualitatively ("better" or "worse"), but rather changes occur methodologically (style, technique, subject matter, and how ideas are conveyed). In describing her first reactions to the cave walls Elaine said:

> I felt a tremendous identification with the Paleolithic artists. I found myself deep in the caves imagining that I was one of them, looking for surfaces smooth enough to paint on, noticing chunks of yellow clay on the ground that would be perfect to draw with. How alive their animals must have looked to them in the flickering light of animal fat lamps…and I loved their high-handed way with scale, juxtaposing and overlapping huge and tiny creatures, with fragmented images – a series of heads or hooves, and always, always in profile. The cave walls, with their splotches of red and yellow or calcium deposits, their rolling turbulent forms and intricate cracks and crevices, seemed to be teeming with animals before I saw my first actual prehistoric drawing. When I did see it, a crude and powerful bison, I was overwhelmed by its unexpected immediacy. Millennia fell away. The approach was much closer in spirit, in its directness to today's art than periods much closer to us.[72]

Some scholars of Paleolithic art offer the idea that the images deep inside the caves might not have been meant for viewing. Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin suggests that "perhaps the act of making images was more important than the resulting

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Jane K. Bledsoe, *Elaine de Kooning,* (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): p. 41.

pictures."[73] Elaine's art assumes a similar significance, where study and creation of a series on the same subject underscore the making of the images and their symbolic presence. Elaine emphasizes that time can be irrelevant in art. In her series of cave paintings, she transcends time in order to demonstrate how motion and emotion can embody the sophistication of human endeavor.

[73] Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin, *Ambiguous Images: Gender and Rock Art,* (Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004): p. 45.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

REVEALING THE WHITE GODDESS

“In terms of common sense, nature is objective reality and art is subjective reality. Nature is what we have, and art is what we want. Nature is the present, and art is the future.” –Elaine de Kooning[1]

Poet Frank O’Hara called Elaine de Kooning “the White Goddess: she knew everything…and we all adored (and adore) her.”[2] In this quip, O’Hara references author and poet Robert Graves’ essay about a metaphorical goddess who represents the universal idea of poetic myth. Elaine, for art, represents analysis and investigation. Author Bill Berkson writes, “Part of Elaine’s ‘white goddess’ aspect in the 1960s was her curiosity about young people who had just then come on the scene.”[3] Elaine’s interests extended beyond personal relationships into realms of science, engineering, art history and other disciplines; her overall querying spirit prompted her “White Goddess” reputation. Elaine’s oeuvre integrates the many sources of her investigations. She worked in series, systematically studying

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[1] Elaine de Kooning, “Subject: What, How, Who?” in *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 143-144.

[2] Quoted in Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 19.

[3] Bill Berkson, “The Portraitist,” *Modern Painters* (vol. 12, no. 2, 1999): p. 42.

selected subject matter as catalysts for her overall style of painting. Portrait subjects, athletes, gods and bulls all become vehicles for dynamic brushwork and a synthesis of subject matter and style. Elaine carefully entwined a gestural painting style with overtly masculine subject matter. Throughout her career, she reconciles the masculine impulse from her Abstract Expressionist roots with her experience as a female artist. Although she balked at descriptions of artists as "male" or "female," her art demonstrates an elegant balance of the two genders.[4]

If we think of the traditional concept of the canvas as a mirror, then Elaine projects herself onto the canvas with both feminine and masculine characteristics. Her self-described comfort and interest in representing men rather than women is reflected back to us in her art. Furthermore, her position as a female artist in a male-dominated art movement at the beginning of her career consciously and subconsciously shaped her work throughout her life. Linda Nochlin describes the ongoing battle of women in the art world:

> The acceptance of woman as object of the desiring male gaze in the visual arts is so universal that for a woman to question, or to draw attention to this fact, is to invite derision, to reveal herself as one who does not understand the sophisticated strategies of high culture and takes art "too literally," and is therefore unable to respond to aesthetic discourses.[5]

Elaine not only draws attention to the idea of the male gaze, but she subverts the entire construct into a "female gaze." Her masculine subjects recipients of her gaze

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[4] See page 1, Chapter 1 of this thesis for Elaine's remarks regarding gender in the contemporary art world. Elaine de Kooning and Roslyn Drexler, "Dialogue, Eight Artists Reply, Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News* (January 1971): p. 40.

[5] Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays,* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988): p. 29-30.

as a female artist, but they are also a cross-gendered presentation of the artist, herself.

In her many different series of work, there are similarities that emerge time and time again. Elaine said in an interview that "a single idea runs through one's life."[6] For Elaine, there is a dynamic, explosive weightlessness in all of her work. She tackles each of her subjects – portraits, sports scenes, Bacchus, bulls, and caves – with a sense of freedom, emphasized both stylistically and rhythmically. In an artistic statement she said:

> I want more than composition in painting. For one thing, I want gesture – any kind of gesture, all kinds of gesture – gentle or brutal, joyous or tragic; the gestures of space soaring, sinking, streaming, whirling; the gestures of light flowing or spurting through color. I see everything as possessing or possessed by gesture… If the gestures are inhabited by landscapes, arenas, bodies, faces or just by colors, it makes no difference to me. However, if red is blood or wine or a rose or a box of matches or a muleta or earth, if red is smeared or dripped or dragged or glazed or spattered or trowelled on, it makes all the difference in the world to red. Red can be tormented or serene or ecclesiastical. Red can be anything it wants. Likewise yellow, blue, green, black, etc. Every color has a million ideas about itself – but fortunately desire has veto power, otherwise nothing would ever get painted.[7]

Her work is threaded together by the freedom of gesture and the masculine subject matter it describes. By studying the iconography of Elaine de Kooning's art as I have in this thesis, it is apparent that her work is not tethered to her relationship with Willem nor is it merely peripheral to the Abstract Expressionist movement.

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[6] Pollock-Krasner Study Center, East Hampton, NY. Elaine de Kooning interviewed by Jeffrey Potter for "An Oral History of Jackson Pollock," July 22, 1980.

[7] "Statement" (1959) by Elaine de Kooning, in *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings,* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): p. 176.

Instead, Elaine's career demonstrates ideas of movement, gesture, form and subject matter interwoven as "one single idea" running through her life.

As testament to the lyricism of Elaine de Kooning's art, a dance company paid homage to her paintings during the 1992 retrospective exhibit mounted by the Georgia Museum of Art, Athens.[8] In a performance entitled "Lyrical Faith," dancers moved to what they considered the rhythmic inspiration provided by Elaine's painting.[9] Style in particular was the motivation for the dancers who described that they would explore the feelings evoked by the works. During the performance, slides of specific pieces were projected onto a screen on the stage. The merger of the intrinsically static paintings with the expressive motion of the dancers speaks volumes about Elaine's success in using gestural brushwork to express dynamism and elicit an emotive response from her viewers. The dance performance in 1992 mimics the sentiment of the photographs taken by Hans Namuth of Jackson Pollock's spontaneously choreographed "action painting." In keeping with other Abstract Expressionist results, Elaine's work epitomizes the fluctuation between motion and stillness that was nascent in 1950s art. Volatile work vibrated with potential energy.

In an interview with Phyllis Tuchman Elaine remarked:

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[8] Programs and publications for this dance performance are included in the archival files at the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens.

[9] In a short article about the performance, author Mark Hodges writes, "The visual nature of the program will be the main focus, stemming from the fact that de Kooning's art is so active in nature." [Mark Hodges, "Dancers interpret de Kooning," *The Red and Black,* (April 23, 1992): p. 8]

> Always when I look at anyone's art, I get flashes of the person. If I walk into a room and there's a painting by Joan Mitchell, I say, "There's Joannie." Or Grace, if it's Grace Hartigan. And to me all art is self-portraits.[10]

Elaine's work has this unique quality of self-affirmation. Though preoccupied with a number of different subjects at different points in her career, Elaine injected the energy of her own existence into each subject. Her work provides a glance at the artist, herself, who was marginalized during the Abstract Expressionist years because of her gender and yet successfully retained the gestural mechanism of 1950s throughout her career. Her work is a self-portrait; a disclosure of The White Goddess. In her art, her methodology is carefully entwined with her interests, both academic and artistic, and the resulting package is a swift movement through ideas.

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[10] de Kooning, Elaine Collection, Elaine de Kooning interview conducted by Phyillis Tuchman, August 1981, for Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project, 1 sound cassette and transcript on microfilm, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, [Microfilm reel 4937].

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