Between 1949 and 1951, de Kooning elucidated his aesthetic theories in three lectures, given by fellow artist Robert Motherwell and curator Andrew Carnduff Ritchie. Read the text of “A Desperate View,” and “The Renaissance in Order,” from 1949, and “What Abstract Art Means to Me” from 1951.

“I feel I am getting more myself in the sense of I have all my forces. I hope so, anyhow. I have this sort of feeling that I am all there now and, you know, it’s not even thinking in terms of one’s limitations, because they have to come naturally. I think whatever you have, you can do wonders with it, if you accept them,” de Kooning tells art critic David Sylvester in a charismatic interview from 1960 on the artist’s early years in New York and his relationship to figuration. “I have a bigger feeling now of freedom. I am more convinced, you know, of picking up the paint and the brush and drumming it out.”

Watch de Kooning at work and discussing his return to painting figures in these two brief video clips.

de Kooning’s process and relationship to drawing was the focus of two exhibitions in 2001. Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York brought together previously unexhibited large-scale drawings to explore the artist’s method of tracing his paintings onto vellum to retain a catalogue of his stylistic development. The Corcoran Gallery of Art in D.C. hosted the traveling exhibition, In Process, focusing on the laborious tracings and reworkings at the center of his practice.

de Kooning’s final twelve paintings, executed in 1987, were brought together and exhibited publicly for the first time in 2001 by the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. The bright colors and bold, expressive brushwork represent a final, cumulative creative burst of an illustrious career.

In 2011, MoMA brought together 200 paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings for the first comprehensive retrospective of de Kooning’s monumental career, tracing his development from his days as a student in the Netherlands in the 1920s through his Abstract Expressionist hey-day and his final paintings in the late 1980s. View the interactive digital archive of the exhibition.

The Princeton University Art Museum worked with the de Kooning Foundation on a 2017 exhibition focusing on the symbiotic relationship between drawing and painting in the artist’s oeuvre through work produced in the 1960s and ’70s.

Skarstedt Gallery, London debuted the first de Kooning show in the UK in over twenty years in 2017, focusing exclusively on his late paintings in the 1980s, which are characterized by a fluid luminosity and gentle translucency at odds with the dense, textured abstractions earlier in his career.

In 2021, the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris will present Soutine/de Kooning, which will present de Kooning’s work in dialogue with the Russian painter Chaïm Soutine, whom de Kooning discovered in New York in the 1930s and returned to as an influence for the next twenty years.
One of the twentieth century’s most influential artists, Willem de Kooning began his artistic training in night school courses at the age of twelve in Rotterdam before stowing away on a ship to New York in 1927. Following a job painting murals for the Works Project Administration during the depression, de Kooning helped establish New York as the successor to Paris for post-war avant-garde painting. While his instinctual and energetic approach made him a central figure of the Abstract Expressionist movement, alongside contemporaries Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, de Kooning resisted its emphasis on the permanent dissolving of pictorial space and figuration. The tactile density of brushwork and paint in Untitled returns to the artist’s abstract roots and the desire to convey emotion through a gestural, spontaneous application of paint. With a flurry of activity that threatens the boundaries of the canvas edge, the painting demonstrates de Kooning’s continued oscillation between the poles of representation and abstraction in his lifelong desire to explore the material possibilities of paint and record his honest sense of the world.

On view August 19 – November 22, 2020