Elaine de Kooning Paints a Portrait

Directed and produced by Betty Jean Thiebaud
Digitized from original 1976 16mm color film
Running time 17:40 min.
Courtesy of Wayne Thiebaud/Matt Bult

Showtimes: 10:00 10:40 11:20 12:00 12:40 1:20 2:00 2:40 3:20 4:00 4:40 5:20 6:00 6:40

Elaine de Kooning narrates the film in a voiceover recorded after it was shot. Her on-screen comments and those of the sitter, Aristodemis Kaldis, are inaudible.

There is something, I know when I go through museums, the Metropolitan, the Louvre, the Prado, I'm always drawn to portraits. I'm fascinated by them, but I also find them rather repellent. And even when I'm surrounded by my own portraits, I'm fascinated by them because I know what I'm struggling after in each portrait, but there's also something about them that makes me very uneasy. It's some kind of invasion. I almost feel my portraits—portraits I've made—are now invading my privacy. When I have them around—to have all these people looking at me—it's oppressive, and I always find portraits oppressive. But I find them, well, fascinating.

You spoke before of, let's say, Frans Hals or Rembrandt, the difference between their portraits. Well, for years I found Hals's portraits intolerable. He's a fantastic virtuoso; he's immensely skillful. He does things with great dash and sweep. And Rembrandt's, on the other hand, even though they are also very virtuoso, there is something struggled over about them; there is something more compressed about them; there is something more penetrating about them, for instance. Hals's portraits to me don't seem to penetrate. They seem to be very much on the surface. And the portraits that excite me personally are portraits that penetrate, that expose. [Elaine shown moving a large portrait.] Goya portraits that I saw at the Prado were very intense and a kind of exposure; they were compressed.

I was discussing this with Bill de Kooning, the fact that Hals's portraits bothered me, irritated me, even though they were so skillful. There are these group portraits where he has, maybe, ten burghers. And they really are magnificently composed; he's conscious of everything—the black costumes, the white ruffs around their necks, the color of their skin; the grey background—but it doesn’t seem to get deep into things. [Adding red paint to canvas] Bill said he had visited the Hals Museum, I think it was in the Hague, and he saw two group portraits that Hals had painted in his 80s in the poorhouse, and so when I went to Paris this summer, I took a little side trip to the Hague, just specifically to see those two paintings. And they did have this great mystery about them. What Bill had said about them was if Hals had never painted anything in his whole life but those two paintings, one would recognize him as a great artist. And they were magic. And that's what it seems to me a portrait has to be; it has to grab onto some kind of magic.
One reason that I’m interested, have been my whole life, in painting portraits, is, as far as I’m concerned, portraits are, in a way, anti-ideological. I, myself, am personally, temperamentally, hostile to ideological art. I can look at ideological art, some of it, and respond to it very strongly, even passionately. I can be thrilled by Mondrian’s work; I can be excited by work that has a very structured idea before the painting began, but my whole approach to painting, whether it’s abstract painting or portraits, is that I place a value on ideas that are difficult to put into words. Ideological art always can be translated into words. Of course, the element that makes Mondrian, let’s say, great—a particular painting of Mondrian’s, is the kind of tension of space. So that someone else, some beginner who thought, “Well, that’s simple—vertical and horizontal, and primary colors,” to work in that way, he wouldn’t get the tension of a Mondrian, even though, theoretically, it looks as though it does not demand craftsmanship. Whereas, to a work like Rubens’, one would have to have a long apprenticeship. There would be no way to step into that state of mind without having quite a few years behind you of just work with the brush.

So often I find among students now-a-days, that they will have very sophisticated approaches. They’ve read art magazines, particularly college students, they’ve studied the various movements in art, they are abreast of things, contemporary art movements and art movements of the past; they can rattle them off. They know the names of different artists and the styles—they can recognize them, so intellectually they are quite sophisticated, but when it comes to simply picking up a brush and sticking it into some paint and dragging that brush across the canvas, they are very ill equipped; they are very amateurish. And then, on the other hand, there are some young people who were interested since early childhood in drawing and painting, who might not have had access to this kind of art history, but they will be much more adept with just handling the brush—the tools. There is an element of craftsmanship, as far as I’m concerned, to art, and often ideological art does not demand any particular craftsmanship. And the other thing about ideological art is that it’s very exclusive. It says, I will take this area and work within these specified limitations.

I like art to be very inclusive, the way I like parties to be inclusive. I don’t like exclusive parties; I don’t like parties that just are for this particular clique or group of people. I don’t mind it if it’s a haphazard group that just happened to come together, but if it’s a carefully thought out party and 20 people are going to be invited for some specific reason, and all sorts of other people are going to be left out, then I’m not interested in it. And in the same way, I like the idea that anything might enter into the art that I’m interested in making. For years my exploration, in terms of painting, took me, let’s
say in the ‘50s when I was very much involved with the abstract expressionist movement through Bill de Kooning and through Arshile Gorky—Well, Gorky died in 1948, but somehow his spirit, to me personally, was still around in the ’50s and it’s still around now. And something about Gorky’s approach to art has always haunted me from when I first met him, when I was 17—I met Bill de Kooning and Gorky at the same time. And there was an interchange. For a while their work was mutually reflective; they seemed to have a communal look, even though they did have separate characters, there was a lot in common in their work. ... I used to go to museums with—to the Metropolitan, let’s say—with the two of them, and they would stand and discuss certain paintings, you know, and make the observations about a given painting to each other, and it was a symbiotic relationship. This is something that happens in an ideal school situation. It’s not just the relationship between the student and the instructor, but the symbiotic relationship between these students, how they affect each other. And this, in small, they’re creating what happens in certain art movements. ... There was a period of time when all of my portraits became over life-sized; that, I think, happened because I was asked to do John F. Kennedy’s portrait, you know, when I went down to Palm Beach in 1962 and made sketches from life. [Adds brown to hair] Well, first of all, the idea of a man who happens to be President of the United States, well, that’s already, right there, he’s bigger than life. He’s not just another man; he’s the President, so that element is bigger than life. Then this particular president, John F. Kennedy, was quite extraordinary, because he, himself, he was a man about 6 foot, 6 foot 1, but he seemed much bigger. [Camera focuses on sitter] He was kind of radiant, but because I was working from the initial sketches that I made for the two weeks when I worked directly from life, but those sketches were smaller than life, and so I completely lost any sense of relationship of the size of the painted image to the size of the actual person I was supposed to be painting. So the paintings, without my realizing it, almost, became larger and larger, until finally, I was working on a standing portrait of him and his feet—his toes were right at the bottom of the canvas and his head was right at the top of the canvas, and the canvas was 10 feet high and to me it looked life-size [laughing]. Well, it was, of course, way over life-size. And I was scampering up and down the ladder to do this painting.

When he was assassinated on November 22, I was still right in the midst of all these portraits. I, myself, felt I had not succeeded in getting the portrait that I wanted. So, from then, until now, I’ve been absolutely enslaved by portraits. Before this I would do—be involved with other kinds of paintings, but I just have been absolutely tenacious about it because I was so frustrated with that. And so, the portraits that I did in the years following, all were over life-size. And then I began to become very aware of it. Then I began to pull the portraits back toward life-sized. Rembrandt’s portraits, for instance, are compressed—they
are smaller than life-size. An academic rule of thumb is that a life-size portrait should be $7/8$ life-size, that it should be smaller than life-size. Of course, when any rule is ever given to me, then the first thing that I want to do is break it, needless to say.

[Camera pans down sitter’s body to hands] You had brought up one other interesting point, which is the idea of the center of interest of a portrait, and that can be anything. For instance, when I did my faceless portraits, then the center of interest was the sense of bulk—just the gesture of the entire figure. Then, it could also be—the center of interest could be the light of the person and it wouldn’t have to be detailed at all but just suggested; it can’t be so many things. And also, the whole idea of the likeness of someone that you see off in the distance. You know, we all recognize people that we know; if you saw your father two blocks off, you wouldn’t have to see anything, you just would recognize him. And I’m interested in that element, whatever it is, that you see in a glimpse.

Then also, one can think of the portrait as being an image that occurs all at once on the canvas, like that standing portrait that I have in the present show of Kaldis. [Adds window frame to portrait] Well, I actually happened to have done that very, very fast in terms of the way I applied the paint. I’ve painted Kaldis—I did the first portrait of Kaldis in 1952 and I’ve painted him at least once every year. So, I’ve got, you know, many, many portraits. I know Kaldis inside out; you know, I did say painting Kaldis is like painting an unmade bed [laughing]. He’s, you know, so expressive, and his clothes seem to express what his hair expresses—he’s lavish and he’s disorderly. And underneath the disorder there is a tremendous order and energy and vigor.

When I first began to do self-portraits, which was in ’47, I was interested in them, but now the idea of doing self-portraits, I look in the mirror [laughing]—I say, “oh, it’s you again,” I’m bored with it. To look at myself now—I don’t want to study myself too closely. [Laughing] I didn’t mind when I was in my twenties, but now I like to keep this kind of hazy distance, you know, I don’t want to go into detail. [Sitter shown clapping] I like to look at myself in a soft-lighted mirror, you know, and squinch a little bit. It’s one of nature’s little kindnesses that as you get older your eyes—you see less, you know, and so everything kind of has this pleasant scrim over it. But if you want to be—you know, I mean Rembrandt wanted to just get into all of that thing of getting older, you know, which I’m not interested in doing. [Laughing] I’m interested in the idea of getting younger.