Executed in 1956, Willem de Kooning’s *Saturday Night* is a canvas full of frenetic painterly activity. Befitting the title’s associations with a night out on the town, the painting's brushstrokes and planes of colors articulate a simultaneously sensual and dissonant cacophony. Thomas Hess, de Kooning’s most perceptive critic, picked up on this urban vibe, labeling this and similar paintings from 1956 “abstract urban landscapes.”¹ He perceived the grimy, chaotic streets of New York in these paintings. Other de Kooning titles from the period explicitly reference the urban world of cheap detective novels and *film noir*: *Gotham News, Street Corner Incident, Police Gazette.*²

This glimmer of the popular world of urban kitsch is important to *Saturday Night*, as it challenges the usual seriousness of 1950s discussions about Abstract Expressionism, the movement with which de Kooning is usually associated.³ While *Saturday Night* declaims its status as a painting with its emphasis on mauled and stretched pigment, it is also a canvas that seems to negate elevated notions of painting, or at least the expectations of authenticity tied to the medium in the 1950s. At this time, critics largely viewed abstract painting as a vehicle for the unmediated expression of the existential artist – an utterance outside of societal and mass cultural influences. The importance of *Saturday Night* lies in the ways that de Kooning turned this view against itself, how he employed the syntax of Abstract Expressionism in order to demonstrate its limitations. By de-emphasizing the handmade nature of his marks, de Kooning suggested that such gestural painting, which was considered emblematic of direct, subjective experience, is at best a fragmentary mode of expression. It is always mediated, always embedded within a larger


social field. The artist conveys this embeddedness, an idea antithetical to the high modernist tradition, by finding a way to visually approximate the debased and deferred pleasures of the city. In a sense, de Kooning is “slumming it” within the language of high modernism. As such, *Saturday Night* is a 1950s hybrid – stuck between the humorless, existential rhetoric of Harold Rosenberg’s notion of “action painting”⁴ and the glib, acculturated utterances of Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, both of whom incorporated found images from the media in their work.

Despite de Kooning’s reputation as an expressionist painter who makes marks, subtraction is an equally important gesture in his repertoire. For instance, he would often drag a scraper or other edge across his painted surfaces, thus stripping his brushstrokes of their immediacy and friction. The top right quadrant of *Saturday Night* dramatizes such a negation of the artist’s hand. De Kooning scraped down the prominent red passage until it reads as flat and semitransparent. The artist also blended the area to the right of this red passage – with its green, blue, and white patches – under a unifying haze. As such, these areas appear mediated, almost as if they are photographic reproductions of brushstrokes.⁵ Such scraped and flattened passages occur throughout *Saturday Night*. One small passage, however, is the exception that proves the rule: an oval of heavily impastoed black and white pigment, located just above and right of the painting’s center. If a *memento mori* is an object in a painting that prompts thoughts of death (a skull in a still life, for instance), then this particular passage serves as a *memento mori* in reverse. By reminding viewers of Abstract Expressionism’s vitality, tactility, and viscosity, this glob of paint emphasizes the mediation and flatness of the rest of the painting.

Throughout his career, de Kooning also employed strategies of collage to mock painting’s singular authenticity, and *Saturday Night* appears as such a collection of separate parts.⁶ This

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⁵ These mediated passages operate in a way similar to the found photographic images arranged under gauze or scrim in the “combine” paintings of Robert Rauschenberg. Rosalind Krauss has described these as akin to “a splinter under the skin.” Rosalind E. Krauss, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” *Artforum* 12 (December 1974): 36-43.

⁶ Formerly a sign painter in the 1930s and 1940s, de Kooning incorporated painted letters and other letter-like forms in his late 1940s paintings, such as *Zurich* (1947). Despite their hand-painted nature, these appropriated letters acknowledge collage traditions. In other paintings from 1956, de Kooning employed a technique of newspaper
process of painterly collage is not unrelated to his gestures of removal. The artist, for instance, isolated the impastoed oval, detaching it from its surroundings by scraping away paint. This is comparable to cutting out material from a source; both actions create the appearance of a fractured surface. Furthermore, de Kooning’s studio practice was based on a collage aesthetic. At any given time, the artist had a number of smaller drawings and oil sketches lying around his working area. He would often temporarily attach one of these examples to a larger painting, use this new element to rethink and change the canvas’s overall composition, and then remove the drawing. Of course, such a process created disjunctive pictorial effects.7 The blue line that begins to define an organic form in the lower left of the picture might well be one such passage. Additionally, de Kooning masked and covered elements within his paintings, thereby creating hard edges and awkward transitions. The pink stripe floating just beneath the blue sea of pigment at the painting’s bottom, as well as the way in which dashing brushstrokes halt along straight lines, dramatize the complex processes through which the artist manipulated his painted surface. For de Kooning, painting is like collage: disjunctive and additive.

Despite the literal and figurative removal associated with de Kooning’s aesthetics of subtraction and collage, the painting’s energy and frenzy still convey a carnal sexuality. In the years leading up to his urban abstractions in the mid-1950s, de Kooning was primarily painting images of women, the most famous being Woman I (1950-52). He worked on this particular canvas on and off for over two years – repeatedly painting, scraping down the canvas, and repainting. The end result shows its age and offers viewers something residing between an ancient fertility god and a brazen pin-up, comprised through the style of frenetic brushstrokes visible in Saturday Night. This latter work, despite its lack of an identifiable woman, is likewise a sensual painting with its orgiastic frenzy, organic curves, and fleshy pink hues. So while de Kooning violently fractures and disperses one of his canonical women across the surface of Saturday Night, her radically abstracted parts nevertheless maintain a sense of carnality.

7 See Richard Shiff, “Water and Lipstick: De Kooning in Transition,” in Willem de Kooning: Paintings, 33-73, esp. 54. Additionally, the cover of the recent de Kooning biography (see footnote 2) features the artist standing in front of a collage of painted fragments.
Saturday Night’s flatness and collage elements clearly converse with Cubism, a movement which de Kooning admired. Furthermore, many of the most important Cubist works are, in fact, portraits of women – Pablo Picasso’s *Ma Jolie* (1912), for instance. Some critics have interpreted this painting as a flattened, angular representation of Picasso’s lover that is drained of three-dimensional, curvy carnality; she is more diagram than portrait. In emulation of Cubist practice, *Saturday Night* is also organized around a loose grid; two black vertical lines anchor both the painting’s top and bottom portions, providing a foil for the many horizontal brushstrokes. Yet with the painting’s fleshy and frenzied sexuality, de Kooning could reclaim a paradoxical sense of Cubist lustfulness; he could have the loose, diagrammatic grid of Cubism and a debased eroticism.

Ultimately, *Saturday Night* dramatizes a sexist urban visuality – a flat, disjunctive site of dispersed and deferred desire. The painting can approximate a momentary glimpse of a fetishized body part, whether spotted on a crowded city bus or street, whether real or in an advertisement. For the artist, the city is a place of artificial and collaged desires, and *Saturday Night*’s cool blues and fleshy pinks – collaged together into a flat, chaotic field – suggest this experience. Even de Kooning’s Cubist grid seems to be in a hurry. By reorienting the canvas to make his painterly drips move from right to left (thus defying gravity), the artist suggested the mobility of the viewer or the painting itself. Despite its stasis on the gallery wall, the painting always threatens to slide out of view.

In 1960, de Kooning declared “content is a glimpse,” thus acknowledging the fleeting qualities of imagery in his paintings. *Saturday Night* is obsessed with such glimpses, but ultimately dramatizes a frustrated and frenzied urban vision. While in dialogue with the action painting of

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10 A text derived from an interview with David Sylvester conducted in 1960 is thus titled. See Willem de Kooning, “Content Is a Glimpse” (1963), reprinted in *Willem de Kooning: Pittsburgh International Series*. 
Jackson Pollock, the canvas also crosses over into the world of everyday life, comparable to Rauschenberg’s use of found images in his combine paintings from the 1950s or Warhol’s blurry, photographic silkscreens from the early 1960s. If these two artists used photography as a kind of brushstroke, de Kooning’s work, in a sense, allows for brushstrokes to take on qualities of photography – at a slight remove from reality and its immediacy. With Saturday Night, the artist both speaks and negates the language of Abstract Expressionism. As such, the painting looks both inward and outward – back to modernist notions of authenticity and autonomy and forward to postmodern ideas of fragmentation and mediation.