



ELAINE DE KOONING (1918-1989)

Untitled (Totem Pole)

oil on canvas stretched over cardboard cylinders

97 x 12 3/8 x 12 3/8 in.

246.38 x 31.43 x 31.43 cm

c. 1960

27843

PROVENANCE:

Family of Elaine de Kooning

EXHIBITION:

West Palm Beach, Florida, Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens, *Discovering Creativity: American Art Masters*, January 10 - March 17, 2024

A major figure in both the Abstract Expressionist and American Figurative Expressionist movements of the 1940s and 1950s, Elaine de Kooning's prolific output defied singular categorization. Her versatile styles explored the spectrum of realism to abstraction, resulting in a career characterized by intense expression and artistic boundary-pushing. A striking example of de Kooning's explosive creativity is *Untitled (Totem Pole)*, an extremely rare sculptural painting by the artist that showcases her command of color.

She created this piece around 1960, the same period as her well-known bullfight paintings. She left New York in 1957 to begin teaching at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and from there would visit Ciudad Juárez, where she observed the bullfights that inspired her work. An avid traveler, de Kooning drew inspiration from various sources, resulting in a diverse and experimental body of work.

Elaine de Kooning, the wife of Willem de Kooning was a prolific and versatile painter, writer, and teacher. Although she was a major figure in both the Abstract Expressionist and American Figurative Expressionist movements of the 1940s and 1950s, de Kooning eschewed developing a singular style and instead painted in a range of modes from realism to abstraction. "Style is something I've always tried to avoid. I'm more interested in character," she said. Her paintings feature loose, thick brushstrokes in bold hues executed in an energetic, improvisational mode. "A painting to me is primarily a verb, not a noun," she famously declared, "an event first and only secondarily an image."

Highly noted for her skill as a portraitist, she often painted friends and contemporary figures, notably including a commission to paint President John F. Kennedy. Born on March 12, 1918 in Brooklyn, NY, she went on to study at Hunter College and the American Artists School. De Kooning quickly gained prominence in the burgeoning art scene, becoming a member of the infamous Eighth Street Club alongside Franz Kline, Clyfford Still, and Hans Hofmann, solidifying her place within the canon of American Expressionism. She is regarded as being instrumental in developing contemporary American art, shaping young artists through several teaching positions held at influential institutions like the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University. De Kooning died on February 1, 1989 in Southampton, NY.

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