

## FINANCIAL TIMES

October 1, 2017

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FTWeekend

### Critics' choice

Life&Arts



'Untitled XXIX' (1986)  
by Willem de Kooning

The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and DACS, London

#### De Kooning: Late Paintings

Skarstedt, London

Old men as explorers? Late work by the greats – Picasso, Matisse, Monet, Turner – has almost always been met with derision and incomprehension at the time of its making, followed by acclaim for its

visionary, pioneering insistence.

Dated 1983-87, de Kooning's final works, mostly red, yellow, blue arabesques leaping on delicately tinted white grounds, are classic instances of late style: pared down, audacious, defiant, bringing a lifetime's mastery to remain fresh

and eloquent. They have not, however, been universally admired. In 1987 de Kooning demonstrated the first signs of dementia, and by 1989 he was declared mentally incompetent. Contrasting with the lush painterliness of the rest of his oeuvre, was the last works' extreme

simplicity, even emptiness – like the reduced vocabulary in Iris Murdoch's last novels – already influenced by his illness?

On the evidence of the clear, strong, large-scale paintings, all untitled, in this first UK show of the work since 1995, de Kooning was as thrillingly just-in-control as ever. Driven by his outstanding quality as a draughtsman, these compositions of looping ribbons, dramatic arcs, calligraphic lines in translucent, prismatic colours playing across smooth surfaces have an overall impact of luminosity, fluidity, movement, freedom. Sometimes particular abstract shapes hint at the slippery figuration or landscape elements recalling his earlier work.

There are myriad references, from pop to Mondrian to the language of advertising, but the obvious, acknowledged influence is Matisse's cut-outs and rhythmic "Dance" panels. How fascinating that de Kooning, for whom all his life Picasso was "the guy to beat", should finally turn to Matisse, and produce the most serene, upbeat, unambiguously beautiful paintings of his entire career.

skarstedt.com

October 4-November 25