LOT 25
THE GERALD L. LENNARD FOUNDATION COLLECTION
WILLEM DE KOONING
1904 - 1997
UNTITLED X
oil on canvas
77 by 88 in.  195.6 by 232.5 cm.
Executed in 1975.

ESTIMATION 8,000,000-12,000,000 USD
Lot vendu: 12,565,200 USD

PROVENANCE
Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York
Acquired by the present owner from the above in December 1983
EXPOSITIONS
Austin, University Art Museum, University of Texas at Austin, de Kooning: Paintings, Sculpture, and Lithographs, October - November 1976
Houston, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, de Kooning: Recent Works, January - February 1977
Kassel, Museum Fridericianum, documenta 6, June - October 1977, p. 92, no. 2 (text)

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

NOTE DE CATALOGUE
"De Kooning's paintings of the Seventies are an annihilation of distance. The close-ups are about closeness, a consuming closeness. These paintings are crystallizations of the experience and amazement of having body and mind dissolve into another who is all delight." (David Sylvester, About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948-1996, London, 2001, p. 34)
Exceeding the confines of a vast canvas through its spectacular explosion of unrestrained expression, Untitled X from 1975 encapsulates the full force of Willem de Kooning's abstract vernacular. Through each visceral swath, smear, drip and blow, the artist here asserts his total mastery of his medium. Indeed, the means of execution remain so compelling, so thoroughly captivating, that Untitled X stands as nothing less than the inescapable and irresistible culmination of the artist's output. Executed in the year that de Kooning sensationally immersed himself in painting after a long absence, this work belongs to an outpouring of creativity that produced an illustrious corpus of large-scale, color-saturated canvases that rank among the finest achievements of his prodigious career. Of this group, all produced in just six months, the present work is truly exceptional for the sheer force of its painterly conviction, the staggering variety of its luscious brushstrokes, emphatic mark-making and violent flecks of paint, all conveyed in a breathtaking palette of navy, cream, scarlet, and violet. While jagged cascades of serene blues fuse with cool fluid pearly white, maroon and orange thunder to the surface in assertive brushwork.
In the autumn of 1975, de Kooning held a major exhibition of new paintings with his dealer, Xavier Fourcade. Untitled X was a highlight of this show – among just sixteen other paintings from this year – which heralded this dramatically passionate new period of the artist's oeuvre. Included in this seminal exhibition were other masterpieces from de Kooning's 1975 output, including …Whose Name Was Writ in Water (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York) and North Atlantic Light (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam), underscoring the importance of the Xavier Fourcade show and its inclusion of the present work. As Dore Ashton described in a review of the show at the time: "De Kooning's recent paintings at the Fourcade Gallery absolutely required sustained attention. There could be no quick perception, no general impression that could cover the wealth of experience reflected… While de Kooning has for a long time
managed to combine the near and the far in synopsis, in these new paintings the articulation is emphatic. He establishes his distance – both from his particular moment in time and from any general audience – and he maintains the singularity of intimate detail. In short, he offers a distinct, a unique realm in which imagination prevails.” (Dore Ashton, “75/76 New York,” Colóquio: Artes, no. 29, October, p. 14) Later describing this exact period, in 1981 de Kooning recalled: “I couldn’t miss. It’s a nice feeling. It’s strange. It’s like a man at a gambling table [who] feels that he can’t lose. But when he walks away with all the dough, he knows he can’t do that again. Because then it gets all self-conscious. I wasn’t self-conscious. I just did it.” (The artist cited in Judith Wolfe, “Glimpses of a Master,” in Exh. Cat., East Hampton, Guild Hall Museum, Willem de Kooning: Works from 1951-1981, 1981, p. 15) Just two years later, the present work was included in documenta 6 in Kassel, a quinquennial contemporary art exhibition that in 1977 was curated by Manfred Schneckenburger: “…documenta 6 did not confine itself to far-reaching media criticism; it also undertook an investigation of the media qualities of art, of the ‘self-reflection of artistic media,’ as Schneckenburger wrote in his introduction to the catalogue. Thus paintings about painting were presented…The resulting self-referential character of many of the works exhibited explored both the limits and the opportunities of art in a postmodern event society.” (documenta 6, October - June 2007, www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_6). This self-referential quality is beautifully exemplified in Untitled X, in which the oleaginous dips and furrows of paint assert their own materiality forcefully.

Beginning in 1969, de Kooning devoted himself primarily to sculpture, producing clay and bronze figures in his first foray into three-dimensional art, the tactility and sensuality of which would later inform his approach to oil paint and is beautifully embodied in the artist’s famous declaration: ‘Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented.’ Within both mediums, de Kooning pressed the antithetical dialogue between improvisation and control, resulting in a gestural tension that animated his surface to the extreme. When sculpting, de Kooning often closed his eyes while working with clay, allowing touch and not sight to dictate the form. In similar fashion, the physical immediacy of Untitled X appears virtually to project off the picture plane and comprises a remarkably sculptural landscape of lustrous paint. The paintings of the mid 1970s, as perfectly epitomized by the present work, represent the most direct references to liquidity and flow in the artist’s oeuvre. Here, de Kooning forges a variety of planes of paint to coalesce in and out of each other across the canvas. While the impastoed surface is a signature characteristic of de Kooning’s work of the 1950s, one of the revelations of the artist’s later work, as in Untitled X, is the utter sophistication and variety of his paint handling. Jennifer Field writes that the supreme quality of paint application and texture of surface are “…the result of de Kooning’s practice of mixing his paints with safflower oil, water, and either kerosene or another solvent, which he would whip into a ‘fluffy consistency.’” (Susan F. Lake, Willem de Kooning: The Artist’s Materials, Los Angeles, 2010, p. 265 cited in Jennifer Field, “A Kind of Transfiguration,” in Exh. Cat., New York, The Museum of Modern Art, de Kooning: A Retrospective, 2011, p. 419) Using spatulas and knives, de Kooning defined his composition through muscular gesture, energy and movement, evoking the drip method of his peer Jackson Pollock. And yet, in many of these seemingly spontaneous abstractions, de Kooning often developed schematics and drawings to guide the final composition, approaching the works in a more prescriptive manner than the paintings reveal. As noted by Field of these 1975 works: “De Kooning began these abstract paintings from figural drawings…he would enlarge drawings, done on paper or vellum, by freehand at the easel, either using the original as a reference or holding a photo of an old drawing in his left hand while copying it in charcoal on canvas with his right…De Kooning combined techniques at various stages of a painting, recycling drawings and paintings on paper either in whole or in parts.” (Ibid., p. 423)

De Kooning created this magisterial work in the epic oceanic environment of his beloved Long Island, and while it remains determinedly and resolutely without figural content, it nevertheless communes an essence and memories of contextual experience. He began spending summers in East Hampton in 1959 and even then frequently considered giving up his Broadway loft entirely, following the lead of his contemporaries Pollock and Arshile Gorky who had already escaped the urban commotion of Manhattan in favor of the countryside. By summer 1961, de Kooning had purchased a small house in Springs, East Hampton and the following winter, found property nearby that was perfect for a studio. In 1963 he had moved entirely out of New York and immersed himself in the light-filled, calming
atmosphere and coastal landscape that so closely evoked memories of his native Holland. The ocean became a part of his daily regime and de Kooning was captivated by the spectacular light of the long beaches and its effect on the reflections on the water. As he related in a 1972 interview with Harold Rosenberg, this play with light and colors are almost inexpressible: “Indescribable tones, almost. I started working with them and insisted that they would give me the kind of light I wanted. One was lighting up the grass. That became that kind of green. One was lighting up the water. That became grey…I got into painting in the atmosphere I wanted to be in. It was like the reflection of light. I reflected upon the reflections on the water, like the fishermen do.” (The artist in Exh. Cat., Basel, Kunstmuseum Basel, De Kooning Paintings, 1960-1980, 2005, p. 152)

With his move to Long Island, de Kooning responded intimately not only to his oceanic surroundings, but to the elements of light and air, an enchantment with his rural environs that is on spectacular display in Untitled X. Much like Henri Matisse, de Kooning reveled in the beauty of the coastal landscape, imbuing the present work with an incandescent luminosity much like the crackling and glorious light of Claude Monet's Impression: Sunrise or Matisse's Luxe, Calme et Volupté. Although Matisse’s composition is more legible in its presentation of seascape and figures, de Kooning similarly infuses his painting with the quality of sunlight glinting off clear water, refracting in a riotous explosion of rich color and sophisticated handling of paint. Here, the artist flexes his artistic genius in a wholly unique and utterly unparalleled muscular gesture that reveals a complete command of medium and composition. Swaths of lavender undulate in front of and behind crags of brown paint, the juxtaposition of which evokes a luminous oceanic vista surrounded by a variety of vegetation. The warm bright orange and tangerine in the top right corner call to mind the sun rising brilliantly over Long Island. The wide brushstrokes pulling the royal blue paint across the canvas smear into the creamy whites and pale pinks and purples, creating new shades of mauve and ivory utterly unique in each different passage. Drier pulls of de Kooning’s brush reveal colors ‘beneath,’ building sumptuous strata of pure color. Nowhere is de Kooning’s grand ability as a master of color and gesture more poetically asserted than in the virtuosic and richly saturated Untitled X. The present work emphatically reinforces one of the most vital characteristics of de Kooning’s prodigious and celebrated oeuvre: his continual, unrelenting insistence upon exploration, freedom, and growth.

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**Fig. 1**

Above: The present work installed alongside Willem de Kooning’s ...Whose Name Was Writ in Water (1975) and Jasper Johns’ Corpse and Mirror (1976-77) at documenta 6 in Kassel, Germany, 1977 Photo © documenta archiv / Photo: Ingrid Fingerling Art © 2019 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Art © 2019 Jasper Johns / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**Fig. 2**

Floor plan from the 1975 Fourcade Droll exhibition New Works: Paintings and Sculpture
Fig. 3


Fig. 4


Fig. 5


Fig. 6


Fig. 7

Willem de Kooning, Untitled (Composition with Figures), circa 1975. Private Collection Art © 2019 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY
Fig. 8