

Artist Biography with a Bias

by Phillip Barcio

Elaine de Kooning deserves to be memorialized through biography. Without her efforts, 20th Century art history would have unfolded in dramatically different ways. She was what we might now call a super-influencer. She encapsulated all three personality types outlined by Malcolm Gladwell in his bestselling volume, *The Tipping Point*, on why certain things spread through the culture like viruses.



De Kooning was a connector—someone adept at making introductions that help people maximize each other’s potential. She was a maven—a specialist with the ability to share expert information with the masses in easily understandable ways—and she was a salesperson—

someone with the charisma to inspire others to invest materially in her convictions.

Her dedication to personal artistic excellence was legendary. In her studio, she routinely worked 60+ hour weeks. Besides that, she lectured, taught, and wrote more art reviews than many dedicated art writers complete in their entire career. Her reputation as a painter was exceptional enough that she was chosen to paint several official portraits of President John F. Kennedy. Her prowess as a writer changed journalism by convincing art media power brokers that an artist can be an authoritative, fair, insightful spokesperson for the work of other artists.

Most importantly, de Kooning was a generous, classy human being. She never yielded to cynicism, conspicuously overlooking the flaws of others, focusing instead on their strengths. She shared her possessions and wealth. And she encouraged other artists, connecting them with teachers, collaborators, dealers, curators, editors and collectors, creating relationships that helped many talented but underestimated individuals persevere through difficult times.

For those reasons and more, I was looking forward to reading *A Generous Vision: the Creative Life of Elaine de Kooning*, by Cathy Curtis, the first attempt

at a biography of this artist (Oxford University Press, 2017). But instead of the exhaustive exploration of her professional genius this essential artist deserves, Curtis presents little more than a barrage of anecdotes, offering a judgmental vision of de Kooning the person, and a stingy vision of the artist, writer, and tastemaker. Worse, I found the book to be sexist and full of opportunistic jabs that place de Kooning in the shadow of male artists, especially her more celebrated husband.

Its hyperbolic, diminishing perspective is established in the first two sentences:

“Everyone knows that the painter Willem de Kooning was one of the titans of twentieth-century art. But few people realize that his wife, Elaine de Kooning, was a prime mover among New York artists at mid-century.”

I would be surprised if even a fourth of Americans alive today have encountered the work of Willem de Kooning, let alone would describe him as a “titan.” But the bigger issue here is that the author began an artist’s biography with a statement about another artist, an ungenerous trait that continues throughout *A Generous Vision*.

We learn much about Willem, but most of what we learn about Elaine boils down to gossipy minutia, about which Curtis frequently moralizes. Consider this comment following a biographical detail about Elaine’s mother:

“Marie was twenty-seven when she wed Charles Frank Fried on September 4, 1915. (Whether she felt ambivalent about marriage or lacked earlier suitors is unknown.)”

Or this remark Curtis makes about Elaine’s birth:

“Christened Elaine Marie Catherine Fried, she was born at home on March 12, 1918—a long three and a half years after the wedding. Perhaps that’s why Marie lavished so much attention on her.”

Chastising someone for the age at which they married and for how long after marriage pregnancy occurred isn’t just judgmental or passé—it’s medieval.

And this condemnatory strain continues throughout the book.

Curtis comments relentlessly about the rate of cigarette and alcohol consumption amongst de Kooning and her associates, going far beyond the role of a biographer—which is to state the facts of a person’s life—delving instead into that of a proselytizer, passing personal judgment over how much smoking and drinking is an acceptable amount.

Most insidious are the petty assumptions Curtis employs. When detailing de Kooning’s portraiture of JFK, she writes, “The dowdy jumper and blouse Elaine wears in photographs of the sittings suggest that she was intent on blending into the background.” Later, after quoting her as saying that in their later work, artists use “the part of the brain that dreams” Curtis pretentiously clarifies that “dreaming is actually a function of the entire cerebral cortex.”

In no other situation did de Kooning ever seek to be perceived as demure in the presence of powerful males. Nor was she a buffoon who did not understand brain function—she was being poetic. This would be obvious to any sympathetic observer.

Curtis has an inherent bias toward her subject, a fact crystallized by a passage near the end of the book:

“[Elaine] included Monet in a group of artists called “The Magic Ones”: Bill, Gorky, van Gogh, Giotto, Giacometti, Matisse—and herself. In her view they shared “a quality of grace—as though they can do nothing wrong—a quality little children have.” It was a curious statement to make about her own work, an aspect of the wishful thinking that was her ballast against depression.”

Elaine de Kooning fits naturally on that list of names. But because her biographer does not believe that to be true, this book is full of stories about what parties Elaine threw, who Elaine slept with, what Elaine was wearing, how much Elaine spent at the liquor store, how many cigarettes Elaine smoked, how much money Elaine borrowed and how inadequate Elaine was as a housekeeper, according to her chauvinist husband.

I wanted art reviews. De Kooning wrote more than a thousand. Yet Curtis includes not a single one in its



Elaine de Kooning *Charging Bull #7, 1959*

entirety—just snippets. I wanted pictures. This book contains 31 color images, 28 of which are paintings by Elaine de Kooning. But her oeuvre includes thousands of works, encompassing dozens of aesthetic evolutions. Curtis points out that no comprehensive collection of de Kooning’s articles exists, and that most of her paintings are in private collections, making a definitive catalogue difficult.

That only begs the question. Why not have completed the difficult task of tracking a subject’s creative output before writing her biography? Analyzing an extraordinarily full life means focusing on those aspects of the examined life that were extraordinary. An opportunity missed here.

This book reminds me of how de Kooning used to marvel at critics who looked only at the superficial subjects of her paintings without looking at the brushwork, the energy, and the feelings those elements evoke. *A Generous Vision* continues that tradition. It is a good read for anyone looking for superficial data, hearsay, and judgmental commentary about 20th Century social norms. But it is, regrettably, of little use to those seeking to understand de Kooning as the intellectual leader she was. ■

Phillip Barcio is a fiction author and art writer, recently transplanted to Chicago, whose work has also appeared in *Hyperallergic*, *Tikkun*, *IdeelArt Magazine* and other trustworthy publications.

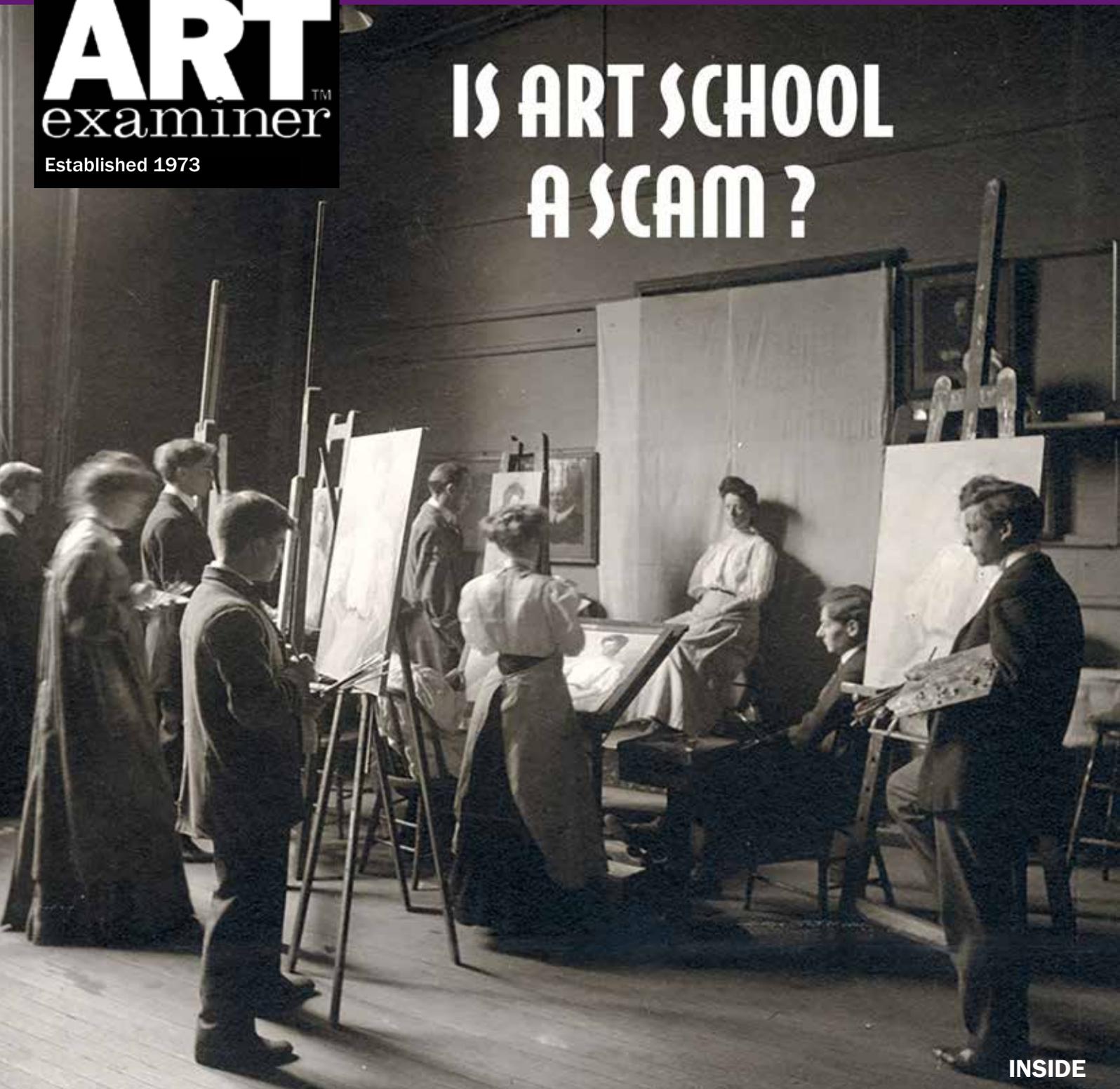
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