Elaine de Kooning

Directed and produced by E. Deidre Pribram
Executive producer Muriel Wiener
Digitized and excerpted from original 1986 color VHS tape
Running time 7:11 min.
Courtesy Muriel Wiener

Showtimes: 10:30 11:10 11:50 12:30 1:10 1:50 2:30 3:10 3:50 4:30 5:10 5:50 6:30

All narrative is by Elaine de Kooning, in voiceover and on camera. Comments by sitter, Aladar Marberger, are inaudible.

Whenever I paint a portrait, I paint the person alone; I never do a smiling portrait because smiles are a response to another human being and anyone in a portrait is alone. A portrait is just a response to someone’s solitude. [Camera focusing on self-portraits.]

I mean, I’m not interested in someone’s role playing that most people hide behind—you know, their daily occupation, and chit chat and trivial pursuits. But actually, there are very important drives for each of us, and our essence, our character, and that’s, in a sense, larger than life.

[Narrating as she paints. Aladar is seated in chair at left.] When I had Aladar sit for this portrait, I found a spot where light came from both sides so that there was a shadow going down the center of his face, because I divide all sitters into two kinds of people—there are full-faced people and profile people, and Aladar is a profile person. And having that line go down the center of his face emphasizes that quality of his profile.

[I] began with a charcoal drawing that was going to be the beginning of the painting, but then the drawing itself began to have so much of his character that it became an identity in itself, and I just couldn’t paint over it; it would be eradicating the drawing to cover it with paint. So I left it as an image in itself and then I began another one as a beginning of a painting, and that also became a complete portrait. It’s exactly the same pose, as you can see, and exactly the same lighting, but somehow all of the relationships are totally different. [On screen] And then I came to this and I thought, well, I’m not going to start with charcoal because, again, I’ll get bogged down in the charcoal image, so I began with paint. And I was laying in the blue paint and then laid in the color of the pants and just drew the trousers here and the socks and the leaves and put things around, and a bit of skin color and the skin color out here, and suddenly his face was there, and I hadn’t intended to paint it; I was just working with little bits of color here
and there. And suddenly there it was. It was an image that had finished itself, crystallized itself, so I left that.

When I’m painting a portrait I don’t think face, shirt, pants, socks, floor, leaves; I think rust color, yellow, green—you know, I keep going through in terms of color. Also, I think in terms of the stroke of the nose this way, these going this way. [Gestures at areas with her thumb.] And here, this flurry of paint.

When I’m doing a portrait, I don’t think of anything but colors and forms and so on, but however I’m feeling emotionally, the image is just drenched with that. And, also, I’m picking up his feeling.

[Painting forehead] As a painter, when I look at a sitter and paint, I identify totally with the sitter. And so it’s as though the sitter is painting the portrait and I’m responding.

And now this third one that I’m working on, I want to have some of the free-wheeling quality of that one, but also the structure of that one there. And so in each case it’s another aspect of Aladar. I’ve done this with portraits before. I like to do exactly the same colors, exactly the same pose, exactly the same size, and it’s incredible how different each of the images is. [Camera pans over various portraits.]

It’s the difference between painting something directly from life or pulling something totally out of your imagination. Of course, doing a portrait also utilizes memory, for instance, this Zen portrait, the one where Aladar appeared while I was just working on the paint, and I was not concentrating on trying to get Aladar’s face. That’s Aladar from a year ago; that’s Aladar before he had AIDS. That is a pure memory portrait, not of what I was looking at at the moment, but remembering.

When I did President Kennedy’s portrait—you know, I went down to Palm Beach in ‘62—by November 22nd, when he was assassinated, I had 35 canvases and I had about 50 drawings of him. And seen all together, it was a portrait, you know, I mean, there was just every aspect. And that would be my idea of a portrait. I stopped painting the day he was assassinated, you know, I just stopped on the work.