Elaine de Kooning on the Joop Sanders portraits

Directed, produced, and filmed by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders
Digitized and excerpted from original 1984 color VHS tape
Running time 8:45 min.
Courtesy Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

Showtimes: 10:20 11:00 11:40 12:20 1:00 1:40 2:20 3:00 3:40 4:20 5:00 5:40 6:20

Elaine de Kooning (EDK) and Timothy Greenfield-Sanders (TGS) are conversing as TGS films the drawings.

EDK: These were just studies that I made of him. I used to love to do contour drawings.
TGS: Well, they’re wonderful. God, they’re so good! They’re extraordinary.
EDK: Aren’t they? They’re very interesting. [Gestures around the eyes and nose] I was interested in how much the shadows delineate of the masses, of, you know, the structure. And the eyes, you know, Joop has such abstract eyes [gesturing around eyes on the right of the sheet].
TGS: It’s true. And this was over a period of a year.
EDK: This was over a period of a year, yeah. I think this is a beautiful one.
TGS: Very good. He probably hasn’t seen these in years.
EDK: I don’t think he has seen them since then. Oh, here’s another.
TGS: Wonderful.
EDK: [Gestures in front of sheet] See how with figurative work, that really my considerations are always abstract.
TGS: Yeah, absolutely.
EDK: Joop as a minister [laughing], except with a bow tie. [Gestures up the bridge of the nose] But I did paintings using this... the eyes—the straight line going across. Joop dozing. I did a painting from this.
TGS: And would you pose for each other alternately while one was painting the other? Or you’d pose and paint at the same time?
EDK: No, we were very strict.
TGS: One week was your week and one week was—
EDK: No, no, one day. One day each week Joop would pose for me all day long. Do anything I told him. And I would sometimes make drawings all day and sometimes I would paint all day and sometimes I’d do both. Since both of us were painting ... [picks up drawing]. This is my absolutely favorite drawing. I think Joop looks this way now.
TGS: He does!
EDK: It has Joop’s elegance, I think. And that gesture. I did a very good painting on this; a painting on paper.

TGS: Based on this? It’s wonderful. His hands are so good, too.

EDK: Aren’t they? Yes. And the expression in the eyes, and Joop’s sense of humor and his cultivation, I think it all shows through. I’d like to do Joop again now, after—this is almost—

TGS: This is very interesting. Where have I seen this? You know, this is exactly the pose that we have.

EDK: Yes, this one I did two or three paintings, I did the two or three paintings from this drawing, not from Joop himself. [Painting at drawing and back at TGS]

TGS: In the painting that we have, Elaine, which is that, in the corner here there’s sort of an angelic figure—

EDK: Oh, that was tacked up on my wall. [Gestures to top right corner of drawing]

TGS: I see, so there’s no more meaning than that it was just there.

EDK: No, just that is was there. But for instance [points to collar], this was very important to me, you know, that shape.

TGS: These are really extraordinary to see.

EDK: Yes, well, I never painted during that year—I never painted directly from Joop, I painted from my drawings; I spent all of my time doing drawings. Oh no, at the end of the year I did one painting directly from him, I’ll show that to you.

This one I liked, too. [Gestures around the legs and clasped hands.] You see how young he was in this one.


EDK: Yes, always very beautiful.

EDK: 8H pencil. Very hard pencil.

EDK: There was this movie actor at the time, Leslie Howard, and this one looks very much like Joop as Leslie Howard. And I love this hand, for instance.

TGS: Oh, it’s elegant.

EDK: You see, when I look at this drawing there’s so much information for me in this drawing that I could do a painting from this drawing right now. I mean, the way this arm [outlines arm with finger] you know, I love that. And the way the trousers make this conformation. And this arm here [outlines arm with finger].

TGS: There is so much care in all of these. And I think today there is so little care in people [unintelligible]—

EDK: Well, people don’t think in terms of drawings anymore. Some of these drawings are just falling to pieces, but I’ll mount them and that will take care of them forever. ... Here’s another one that, you know, I was interested in the idea of the face filling up the entire surface.

TGS: Extraordinary, this one.

EDK: Yes, this is very powerful. This is another one that I did a painting from. I was interested in the neck going up through the nose, you know, and this formation, and the eye just hanging there. [Gestures up the nose to the eyes.]

TGS: How did it come about that you decided to do each other?

EDK: Well, first we began to make drawings of each other and then we decided, why be half-assed?

TGS: Formalize it.

EDK: Yes, do it very seriously. Because it was so hard to get anyone to pose. I would get my brothers to pose for me for a couple of hours, maybe once a month. And we each wanted to be able to just work all day long without stopping.

TGS: And this was 19—?

EDK: ’47. This is another one that I did a painting from... a painting that I like very much; it’s a painting on paper. [Holds up drawing; Joop is wearing a loosely tied scarf.]

TGS: Wonderful. You really captured the eyes so well, and the nose.
EDK: Well, and the structure of the mouth, you know, all of these planes around the mouth, and the complexity of the planes and the light play around the nose and around the eyes. [Gesturing around mouth and eyes] Even this aspect—

TGS: And also just the feeling for the clothes.

EDK: Yes, yes, that to me was very important.

EDK: This looks like Joop now, I think. [Gestures to drawing on left]

TGS: It does.

EDK: And then this is the last one that I have in this.

TGS: That’s fabulous to see.

EDK: Yes, I think Joop would be interested in seeing these, yes.

TGS: He would love it, yeah. It would be very interesting to do it again, actually, to do them again, it would be fascinating.

EDK: It would be, yes. ... Well, now, the way I do portraits is to do them directly from—paint directly from the person. I don’t do the drawings anymore. [Closes portfolio]

TGS: Is that because you don’t need to anymore?

EDK: No, it’s not that. It just is that now I’ve evolved a whole different way of working. I mean, I could go right back to it. But for one thing, to make a drawing might take me two hours; I can do a full-size portrait, life-size in two hours. I have learned a few tricks in 35 years. I mean, certain capabilities I’ve developed.

TGS: What was the story about Hirshhorn who said, “Can you do a painting in two hours?”

EDK: No, he said—I did a portrait of him, a full-size, life-sized portrait, full-figure, in two hours flat. And he asked me how much it cost and I told him and he said, “Pretty good pay for two hours work.” And I said, “Uh, two hours and 25 years, Mr. Hirshhorn.” And he found that acceptable. [Laughing]