

ARTS & LETTERS

GALLERY-GOING

Composing Without Composure

By JOHN GOODRICH

**WILLEM DE KOONING:
PAINTINGS 1975-1978***L&M Arts***JOAN BROWN: THE AFFAIR***George Adams Gallery*

Joan Brown's lifework can seem like a prolonged determination to join two untamable forces: her own feelings, along with high traditions of art. The results — her double portrait of herself with her third husband in the style of Henri Rousseau; a Matissean self-portrait in the pose of Manet's "Eva Gonzales" (1870) — are always entertaining and often poignant.

The five large canvases currently at George Adams date from the period right after Brown's trip to Italy in 1976. The exhibition title, "The Affair," suggests a continuous narrative among four of the canvases, and one finds in them a couple flirting, embracing and then parting. But the real interest lies less in the storyline than in the paintings' astringent mixture of earnestness and whimsy.

In "The Last Day of Summer" (1976), the artist has painted herself enthusiastically embracing a human-size version of Michelangelo's "David." The statue stares stonily ahead, groping her

breast with a propitiously free hand; the artist waves off another paramour (a mortal one) offering a glass of champagne. In "The End of the Affair" (1977), the painter sits pertly on a bed in a revealing negligee, her legs intertwined with those of a mysterious figure covered head to foot with Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the shadows, her sated lover dresses before a mirror.

These are more than just swaggering fantasies about couplings with a higher muse, however. Brown's colors impart a visual weight and an earnest edge to the goofy scenarios. The royal purple, fiery orange, and brooding red of "The Kiss" (1976) make mountains loom and shadows lengthen with operatic fervor.

The art world is accustomed to artists wearing either their tortured or celebrated feelings on their sleeves, but Brown wears all of hers. The artist died in 1990, at age 52, in a freak accident while installing one of her works, but her feelings have an afterlife in these intense, offbeat works.

De Kooning until June 3 (45 E. 78th Street, between Park and Madison Avenues, 212-861-0020). Brown until June 16 (525 W. 26th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-564-8480).