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Aspen Daily News

"If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen."

Aspen Art Week brings out the heavy hitters

O'Keeffe, de Kooning works coming to town

By Geoff Hanson

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In 1951, Dutch abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning, one of the most important painters of the latter half of the 20th century, pivoted toward a new direction in his work.

He set out to create several large-scale paintings of the female form which came to be known as the "Woman" series. Key pieces would include the paintings "Figure in Landscape I" (1951) and "Woman I" (1952), which is part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

One of the sketches de Kooning made for the "Woman" series was "Untitled (Head)" (1951), an oil and mixed-media work measuring 13 by 14.5 inches.

"It is the very beginning of De Kooning's engagement with the 'Woman' series," said Phil Alexandre of the Alexandre Gallery in New York. "Although he did figurative work when he was much younger, this is his return to the figure and an immediate precursor to the large women paintings."

The art collector Edith Halpert, owner of a gallery called The Downtown Gallery in New York City, bought "Untitled (Head)" for herself in 1956 from Sidney Janice, de Kooning's dealer. The painting remained in Halpert's collection until her death in 1970.

The work was passed onto her family, from whom Alexandre obtained the painting. It has not been shown publicly since the 1960s — until this week.

"Untitled (Head)" arrives at the Aspen Art Fair as part of the 2026 Aspen Art Week events, beginning Monday and running through Sunday.

The Alexandre Gallery will also be presenting a Georgia O'Keeffe painting called "Piece of Wood II" (1942), an oil on wood piece. The O'Keeffe and de Kooning works are collectively valued above \$6 million.

Alexandre felt the Aspen Art Fair was the right venue for the paintings based upon his experience at the fair last year.

"Last year we brought the work of a Wisconsin-based landscape painter, Tom Uttech, who is relatively unknown but a master painter, and we sold everything we brought," Alexandre said. "The work resonated with the people who choose to live in or visit a place like Aspen. ... What

ALEXANDRE

we experienced is that we had very sophisticated collectors who have no difficulty acquiring what they want if they see it.”

Alexandre added that the confluence of all the events in Aspen during Art Week makes it a “really dynamic place to be for both seeing art and for artistic dialogue.” He highlighted Aliza Nisenbaum, whom he called “one of the most important contemporary painters.” Nisenbaum is participating in a panel with Jane Panetta, the head of the Museum of Modern Art, to kick off Art Week.

That sentiment is being echoed by artists, collectors, curators, museum directors, gallery owners, advisors and scholars who are descending on Aspen this week from all over the world for Aspen Art Week.

“Aspen has become a must-do calendar event for many gallerists, collectors and art enthusiasts,” said Kiki Connell, of Kiki Connell Projects, an art curatorial and advisory firm. “Everyone seems more relaxed in the mountain setting, forging personable relationships that can’t always happen at larger fairs. Art Week offers viewers an intimate and yet global look at the current art world.”

“I come because of the Aspen Art Museum, the AIR program, Anderson Ranch, and the artists I’m interested in who are doing residencies there or creating really interesting projects,” said Wendy Cromwell, founder of Cromwell Art LLC, an art advisory company. “The fairs are bringing in some of the best galleries around the world, many of whom are of great interest to my clients.”

Anita Heriot, president of the Fine Art Group, the largest independent art consultant firm in the world, said that almost everyone in the art world has some tie to Aspen.

“So many of the major art foundations are in Aspen during Art Week,” Heriot said. “Many artists and collectors have homes there. We always go where our clients are located and our clients are located in Aspen in the summer.

“Everyone in the art world is in some way related to something going on in Aspen during Art Week.”

Art Week was created by the Aspen Art Museum in 2021 as an extension of its ArtCrush Gala, which has been happening since its 2005 founding by former Art Museum CEO and director Heidi Zuckerman.

Art Week immediately became synonymous with all the arts events happening in Aspen the last week in July, which, at that time included the Intersect Art and Design Fair and other art events happening in town.

History of Art Week

Anderson Ranch Center President and CEO Peter Waanders believes today’s Art Week is less a new creation than the latest chapter in a story that stretches back more than seven decades.

According to Waanders, there’s a direct link between Art Week and Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke, who came to Aspen in 1946 and birthed the concept of the Aspen Idea of mind, body

ALEXANDRE

and spirit and founded the Aspen Institute.

“To me, Art Week traces back to Paepcke’s original vision in 1949,” Waanders said. “It was about bringing creative people together, bringing leaders together and creating conversations. Walter Paepcke was an enormous supporter of the arts.

“Aspen became an ideas incubator. People stepped outside their normal worlds but surrounded themselves with world-class thinkers and artists. That’s really what Art Week still is.”

Aspen Art Museum

ArtCrush remains one of the most important fundraising initiatives for the Aspen Art Museum. Art Week culminates in the iconic gala and auction where more than 50 pieces of art donated by renowned artists will be auctioned on Friday night.

Last year, ArtCrush raised more than \$4 million to support the museum’s exhibitions and educational programming.

“ArtCrush has been, and always will be, one of the most important nights of the year for Aspen Art Museum,” Nicola Lees, CEO and artistic director of the museum, said. “It is our biggest fundraiser and since its founding has evolved into one of the leading benefit auctions worldwide.”

The model of funding for AIR marked a shift in fundraising toward more concept-oriented projects as opposed to focusing solely on finished pieces of work.

“Traditionally, arts philanthropy has focused on material, infrastructural and production-oriented causes,” Lees said. “AIR proposes a different model — one that asks donors to invest in ideas rather than physical spaces or the acquisition of artworks. This reflects a broader shift where funding is directed toward process and experimentation, rather than fixed outcomes.”

Waanders said AIR resonates with the philosophy of the ranch, which focuses on process over final product.

Cromwell said that the more process-oriented programming informs her work as an art advisor.

“Being an art advisor isn’t just about transacting,” Cromwell said. “It’s not just about selling art. I’m not an art dealer and I don’t represent artists; I represent collectors. Being able to bring knowledge back to my clients is a constant process of self-improvement.

“The most meaningful experiences are ephemeral, like a performance in the woods. Once I’ve experienced something like that, it becomes part of my understanding of an artist’s practice. It’s a feedback loop.”

ALEXANDRE

Intersect Aspen Art and Design Fair

Long before the Aspen Art Fair arrived at the Hotel Jerome, the Intersect Aspen Art and Design Fair, originally launched as the Aspen Art Fair in 2009, began bringing leading contemporary galleries to the valley.

For Art Week, the Aspen Ice Garden is transformed into a 16,000-square-foot gallery with museum lighting, creating a five-day immersive experience in a traditional and progressive art fair setting.

In addition to the mix of modern and contemporary galleries, this year's events will include a VIP art preview, an opening night reception, a presentation of the 2026 Intersect Aspen Art and Design Artist Award, fair tours, artist talks and more.

Tim von Gal purchased the fair and rebranded it in 2021 as the "Intersect Aspen Art Fair." In 2024, the word "design" was added to the name of the event.

"We added design to the name and focus of the fair because it is an essential characteristic of a sophisticated and aesthetically oriented community like Aspen," von Gal said. "For the past several years, we've presented some top design galleries and had wonderful design elements as part of our contemporary art gallery presentations. Collectible functional art is truly an alluring category we are building upon."

"Intersect Aspen especially embraces the idea of connecting galleries with ideas and culture, not just the marketplace," Waanders said.

This week, Intersect Aspen will host 39 exhibitors representing more than 150 artists at the fair. Thirty artists will be in attendance. Prices range from under a thousand to over a million dollars.

Intersect Aspen is holding 10 artist panels and discussions on topics ranging from photography Colorado artists, social consciousness, the environment, architecture and more.

Aspen Art Fair

The inaugural Aspen Art Fair in 2024 represented both a significant new arrival and the latest chapter in Aspen's decades-long evolution as an international art destination and a crucial addition to Art Week.

Occupying Hotel Jerome from July 29 through Aug. 1, the fair will bring more than 35 internationally recognized galleries, museum-quality works and specially curated projects to Aspen.

The fair is also incorporating programming that reflects Aspen's cultural history. Chase says one of this year's major additions is a panel series exploring the town's artistic legacy, including a conversation on Aspen's pioneering role in photography, moderated by Andrea Jenkins Wallace, director of Anderson Ranch Photography, that looks at the Hotel Jerome and the Center of the Eye to Aperture Magazine and Anderson Ranch. Another panel will examine Herbert Bayer's enduring influence on Aspen's visual identity.

ALEXANDRE

“This is only the beginning,” Chase said. “There are countless stories to tell about Aspen’s cultural history, and we hope this becomes an ongoing part of the fair.”

The Aspen Art Museum, Intersect Aspen and the Aspen Art Fair have created an artistic ecosystem that extends far beyond commerce but is part of a much larger conversation about art.

Commerce, art history and process all converge in de Kooning’s “Untitled (Head).” The artist created the piece as a sketch for a larger series of work he had in his mind.

The painting represents de Kooning’s own process. Seventy-five years later, that process meets commerce at the Aspen Art Fair. It is the circle of artistic life, alive and well at Aspen Art Week.

Since Aspen’s modern founding by Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke, ideas have always been sacrosanct in Silver City. And the money has always followed.

Aspen Art Week continues to adhere to that formula and has become a must-attend destination in the art world.

Cromwell said the allure of Aspen Art Week “is the combination of museum exhibitions, commercial art fairs, artists performing and speaking, and all of these events happening simultaneously. Art is deeply connected to context. You have to travel to understand where it lives. The opportunity to experience art outside a major urban center is unique — to experience art in Aspen is transformational. There’s just something in the air.”