

## De Looper in Washington, 1972-1975

Willem de Looper was born in The Hague, Netherlands on October 30, 1932, the youngest of three children: his brother Hans was born eleven years earlier, and his sister, Anneke, seven years earlier. He attended several different high schools, in a city that had been invaded by German military troops when Willem was six or seven. His father worked in banking; the family lived in an apartment over the bank he managed in the northwest section of The Hague where the Germans had their occupying headquarters. Visas were required to leave the neighborhood, adding to the tensions felt throughout the city even for non-Jewish residents.

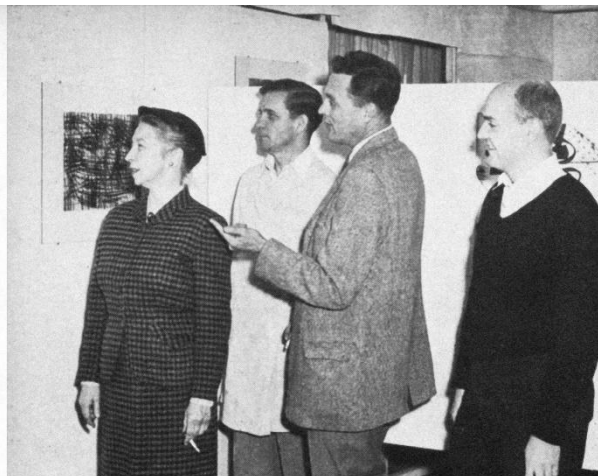
Willem's schooling was good, however, starting with a Montessori pre-school experience that provided knowledge of English, French and some German in addition to his native Dutch language. His life was fairly normal and even exciting for a boy who was interested in seeing soldiers moving about his city.

The war created uncertainty and hardships such as food shortages. During the winter of 1944-45 the family suffered serious deprivation and anxiety, becoming involuntarily transient. Willem's older brother, Hans, was conscripted to work in a Berlin factory, where he contracted diphtheria and returned to The Hague on a stretcher to face a lengthy rehabilitation.

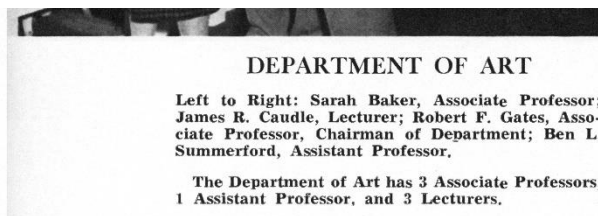
This marked a life-changing event for the thirteen-year-old. It would eventually be Hans who, after serving in the Dutch foreign service, joined the International Monetary Fund in its formative months, moved from Buenos Aires to Washington DC, and facilitated his younger brother Willem's settling in Washington at age eighteen. Willem says that Hans was and remained a kind of father figure

for him, and that his sister Anneke, who eventually settled in Switzerland, continued to play an important role in his life. Their parents remained in Europe and eventually divorced.

Willem stayed in Washington on a tourist visa for a couple of years before enrolling at American University, within walking distance from his brother's apartment. His interests were already solidified around jazz—he remembered hearing the music of Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa on armed forces radio in the Netherlands, and appreciated Dizzy Gillespie and especially Charlie Parker as soon as he heard them. He began to follow baseball during his early years at American University (AU). Although he says he wasn't athletic or particularly sociable, or even a good student, he managed to join the "most interesting" fraternity, the only one that accepted Jews. With his brother's encouragement, he changed from his initial major in economics to a major in fine art.



*Department of Art, College of Arts and Sciences, American University. Talon, 1956 yearbook*



Though Willem would never become a writer, he sought out a position as the "art editor" of AU's literary journal. A temperamental curiosity about the culture of his own time never left him. Robert Gates (1906-1982), Sarah Baker (1899-1983) and Ben Summerford (1924-2015) were influential teachers, the latter becoming his most important mentor. In art class, the sculptor William Calfee (1909-1995) was less sympathetic. As a student, and in the early years of his practice as an artist, de Looper favored drawing and experimented with

figuration across various subjects; for a time, he considered becoming an illustrator. Even before he came to the United States, he remembered copying American cartoonists such as Al Capp from popular

magazines that Hans sent him from Argentina. At AU, he made a series of drawings of baseball players, among many other subjects.

After graduating with a BA in 1957, de Looper was drafted into the United States Army and stationed near Stuttgart, Germany. He used his free time to travel throughout Europe, visiting art museums and studying the masters; he saw his first American abstract expressionist paintings at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. During this period, he reconnected with a girl he knew as a schoolmate from The Hague; they married and divorced during his two-year army stint.

When he came to the United States, Willem was already acquainted with both the traditional and contemporary worlds of European art and classical music. As a boy in The Hague, he says he gravitated to American magazines and music. In Washington he developed an ever-expanding expertise in all kinds of jazz, attended jazz clubs and amassed a world-class collection of LP recordings.

He also systematically listened to and annotated classical music recordings and created an intricate, beautifully hand-written notebook listing great composers and their major works. While there wasn't much first-rate classical music to be heard in Washington until quite late in the century, de Looper was fortunate that one of the few established venues for both traditional and experimental classical music was developed at the Phillips Collection, where he worked for many years, often attending the regular museum-sponsored Sunday concert series that began in 1941.

In time, the Phillips Collection (also known as the Phillips Gallery) on 21<sup>st</sup> St NW near Dupont Circle would become his artistic home. At the age of twenty-seven de Looper established a footing at the family-run Gallery, where over a period of twenty-eight years he advanced from guard to chief curator. The Phillips Collection, founded by the collector Duncan Phillips (1886-1966) and his artist wife, Marjorie (1894-1985), remains one the most beloved private institutions for modern art in Washington DC, and indeed in the United States. From an early time, the museum worked to foster its own culture in the

service of living artists. Duncan Phillips tried to find artists to fill staff positions, from guards to art handlers. De Looper's talent for facilitating many aspects of his boss's needs and whims, without requiring much credit, gave him a secure base from which to function increasingly as a professional museum curator, without taking on so much institutional responsibility that he couldn't continue his artistic practice in the studio. De Looper came to know virtually all the major actors in new art and some in music in his ever-changing city while he worked quietly to develop his own style as an abstract painter.

His modesty and self-contained air, even at his most jovial or genuinely enthusiastic, protected him from any undesired status as an influential leader. The uncertainties of his early life left their mark on his personality. He remained self-effacing and, while not shy, was always more of an observer than an assertive presence.

#### DE LOOPER AND WASHINGTON COLOR FIELD PAINTING

De Looper's exposure to the Washington color field painting phenomenon began during his years at AU. One of the visiting professors there was Jack Tworkov, whose abstract expressionist style was directly related to the inventions of de Kooning, and whose skills as a colorist influenced all his students.

The Phillips Collection in its early years created an informal art "school," that became affiliated with, and gradually morphed into the AU art department. Another seminal influence on the Washington color painters' development was the Washington Workshop Center for the Arts, created in 1945 by Leon Berkowitz (1911-1987), with help from his wife, Ida Fox, and their friends Elaine and Willem de Kooning. The Center was located near the Phillips; it provided a meeting place for Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland (who taught at the Center), Tom Downing (1928-1985), Howard Mehring (1931-1978), Paul Reed (1919-2015) and others. Its influence extended into the art department at Catholic University--where Noland and Downing's teaching stints especially impacted artists and students who gathered at Berkowitz's Center—as well as to artists at American University's small art department.

Many of the abstract painters who gravitated to the Center for the Arts, including Berkowitz himself, would go on to develop fully mature bodies of work in the style of color field painting. De Looper's foray into the genre would have its fullest expression in the late 1960s, the moment before the paintings in the present exhibition were made. In his earliest years as a serious artist, de Looper had a deep familiarity with the kind of painting that begins with unprimed canvas or linen and utilizes acrylic paints that would soak into the surface of the ground. (Sam Gilliam and Gene Davis, both of whom were friends of de Looper's, never allied themselves with this "school," and yet both were inevitably influenced by, and even defined by it.)



*Franz Bader Gallery, Franz Bader Gallery records, 1925-1995, Photographs, 1925-circa 1990, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*

One of the most important protagonists of the developing gallery scene, Franz Bader, (1903-1994), was a former bookseller who immigrated to the United States from Vienna, Austria, in 1939, fleeing Hitler's army. Bader was a cultured man who established a bookstore-cum-art gallery in downtown Washington that flourished, if quietly, for over forty years. From the year he arrived in DC until 1953 he managed the Whyte Gallery, then established a gallery in his own name that he ran until his death. De Looper showed twice at Bader's gallery in 1961, his drawings in a solo show and later as part of Bader's annual Washington artist exhibitions. It might be said that de Looper and Bader, though

thirty years separated in age, together formed one of the rare threads of real continuity in the District of Columbia's visual art life in the post war years until nearly the end of the twentieth century. His old-world mentorship to many certainly extended to the younger Dutch artist, as it did for Jacob Kainen (1909-2001), an artist whose work Bader showed in his early years and frequently as time went on.

Kainen, born of Russian immigrants, came to Washington from New York, where he had been immersed in the vanguard artistic scene as a close friend of Arshile Gorky, and in active involvement in the Works Project Administration's arts program. He was hired by the Smithsonian's Division of Graphic Arts in 1942, remaining there until 1970. He worked as a painter, printmaker, teacher and mentor in the city for fifty years and became another factor in the underlying cultural continuity that was so necessary to its development. Kainen's work, while never influenced by color field painting, exerted a discernable if subtle influence on de Looper's. In both palette and structure, many of de Looper's paintings resonate to many of Jacob Kainen's. This seldom recognized connection is perhaps one of the most important in the development of de Looper's oeuvre.

Jefferson Place Gallery, located on a little side street just off lower Connecticut Ave, NW, was founded in 1957 as an artists' cooperative by five AU faculty members and was directed by Alice Denney. De Looper showed there almost annually, beginning in 1966 until the gallery's closing in 1974. Its presence in Dupont Circle solidified the neighborhood as a hotbed of artistic activity throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Also, in Dupont Circle on 21<sup>st</sup> Street NW was the ground-breaking Washington Gallery of Modern Art, founded in 1965 as an offshoot of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. It hosted the seminal exhibition, "Washington Color Painters," organized by Gerald Nordland and responsible for the secure establishment of the movement's original members—Louis, Noland, Gene Davis (1920-1985), Downing, Mehring and Reed. It wouldn't be until the early 1970s that de Looper fully embraced some of its precepts.

That the Nordland exhibition excluded the painter Sam Gilliam from its roster may be a factor in Gilliam's lack of identification with the Color School, but this didn't mean that he wasn't deeply involved in Washington's artistic evolution. De Looper and Gilliam were both included in the early exhibition at

Jefferson Place in 1966 and became good friends and colleagues; in 1968 Sam and Dorothy Gilliam joined Willem and his soon-to-be wife, German-born Frauke Weber (1939-2018) on a trip to Europe.

Frauke's presence in Willem's life would become crucially significant in his development both as confident man and artist. She matched her husband in energy and dedicated herself to his practice. Frauke was born in Winsen, Germany, near the port city of Hamburg; she was employed as a secretary at the German Embassy in Washington when they met. She was an avid student of culture and music and became an intellectual partner to Willem, encouraging him to travel and broaden his world. Willem took Frauke to the Netherlands to visit his family; the next year, the two married and took up residence in the apartment building on California Street in Northwest Washington where they would live, and where the artist kept his studio, for the rest of their lives.



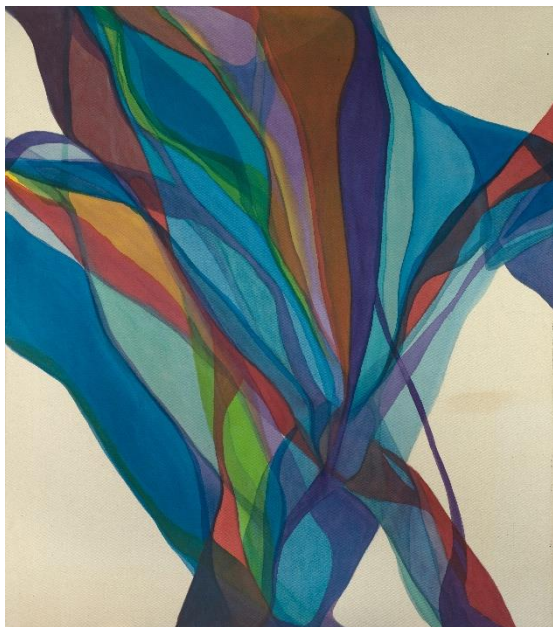
*Willem and Frauke de Looper, 1977. Photographer unknown. Fraser's Stable Gallery, Washington, DC  
Photo courtesy of the de Looper Foundation*

Willem and Frauke knew everyone. They were particularly close to such influential reporters and critics of the cultural scene as the art journalists Paul Richard of *The Washington Post*, Ben Forgey of the *Washington Star* and *Washington Post*, and Ben's wife Gabriella. Willem was also a valuable friend and mentor to several gifted artists such as Michael Clark

(now Clark V. Fox, b. 1946), Carroll Sockwell (1943-1992), and Wil Brunner (b.1946). They never forgot the de Loopers' support.

## WILLEM DE LOOPER'S METHOD

De Looper's paintings of the 1960s bridged his transition from drawing to fully abstract painting. He established his approach as a firmly non-illusionist artist, initially choosing imagery that evoked flowers while keeping his surfaces planar and strictly unmodeled. The paintings were already imbued with the fashionable abstract tenet of "flatness" dictated by the proponents of abstract expressionism like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, but their curvilinear forms suggested organic entities. Several paintings of the mid-1960s directly evoke Morris Louis's floral paintings.



*Harp, 1965. Acrylic on canvas, 57 x 50 inches. Collection of the Frauke and Willem de Looper Foundation*

The work of early 1960s evinces de Looper's lifelong fascination with the paintings of Arthur Dove and John Marin, two American modernists collected in some depth by Duncan Phillips. De Looper's move into an "all-over" stained composition evoked the soak/stain methodology of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler's color field painting. De Looper had started using acrylic paints as early as the late 1950s, and always preferred thin washes and translucent overlapping in his work.

During his earliest years experimenting with the medium, he sprayed, sponged and poured paint, as well as using brushes, eventually choosing rollers as his favorite tool.

But he was never fully committed to the use of raw canvas as his departure point; by 1970 he employed new techniques to make the prepared surface more subtly malleable. He did adopt the on-the-floor method employed by Frankenthaler and Louis. Before he began laying paint on a given canvas



with acrylic-soaked rollers, he pre-stretched it and laid it on the floor, where he worked sitting or on his knees. The works in this exhibition were made that way. They are all characterized by carefully controlled textures, and the distinctive evanescence, or thinness, of their facture.

In an interview in 2008 with Jack Rasmussen, Director of American University's Katzen Art Center, de Looper spoke about his paintings of this time: "I used the roller as a measure in twelve inches, and I liked that you could see it as a measure against the infinity of the canvas. So I could vary its form layer to layer and give distance to these layers as well...I also used the floor...And I was able to make accents also with the tip. I've never found the roller to be anything less than very flexible, and I've painted little paintings with the roller that you wouldn't think you could do, because it's so clumsy, you see this big thing on a stick, but I could manipulate it very nicely. You can make the edges harder or softer." ["Willem de Looper, American University Museum, Washington, DC, April 1-May 18, 2008."] The artist Wil Brunner, who worked at the Phillips alongside Willem for a decade, says he introduced him to the roller by giving him a small "radiator roller" that could be used very much the way that a brush is manipulated by the hand.



*Willem at home in his studio, ca. 1975. Photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of the Frauke and Willem de Looper Foundation*



*Untitled, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 95 1/2 x 71 1/2 inches. Collection of the Frauke and Willem de Looper Foundation*

The group of paintings represented in the present exhibition are some of de Looper's finest. "Untitled," 1972, is closest in overall approach to the stain paintings of Frankenthaler and Louis. It could also be said to evince the artist's long and deep exposure to the paintings of Mark Rothko. Here de Looper is interested in both flatness and in the use of horizontal banding to suggest landscape. One senses a subtle reference to the lower foreground, the middle opening up into illuminated sky, and an upper region of clouded sky. But this is not a literal depiction. As beautifully evocative as this canvas

is, it refers more to de Looper's experiments with color field painting than to the kind of compositional structure he would soon adopt and continue to refine in his fully mature work. Indeed, all the other canvases in this exhibition exemplify one of several high moments in the painter's career. Their use of horizontal bands establishes a kind of signature. "Wide Ruins," "Verde," and "Untitled" (August, 1975),

reflect the experience of the Western landscape of New Mexico that he would return to over the years.



*Wide Ruins, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 100 inches. Collection of the Frauke and Willem de Looper Foundation*

As his style progressed through the 1980s and 1990s, the artist began to introduce sharp diagonals, collage-like interlocking shapes, and internal drawing elements into his canvases, adopting imagery related particularly to the minimalist painter Robert Mangold (b. 1937), whom he credited, and often seeming to refer to Kainen’s painterly language.

#### DE LOOPER AS CURATOR

When Willem de Looper began his tenure as attendant at the Phillips Collection in 1957, its founders, Duncan and Marjorie Phillips, held firm control of the museum. Its premises were quirky and non—institutional. In 1921, the Phillipses converted their large, though certainly not palatial, brick home on

21<sup>st</sup> Street NW just off Dupont Circle into a place welcoming to visitors. The California artist Richard Diebenkorn, stationed at Quantico Marine base during the Second World War, remembers the pleasure of sitting for hours in comfortable armchairs, smoking, while he contemplated paintings in their drawing-room setting. The Phillips' brilliantly selected, if slightly eccentric, collection of European and American art consisted exclusively of pieces that Duncan Phillips (and occasionally Marjorie) liked. He focused on certain styles or movements in depth, though they might seem contradictory; he was as fascinated with American social realists in the Ashcan School as in later figures, such as Gifford Beal and Yasuo Kuniyoshi, or the experimental modernism of Marsden Hartley, Oscar Bluemner, and others.

Duncan Phillips held a tight rein on all activities. He often reinstalled his rooms, exerting his strong and remarkably brilliant taste for unusual juxtapositions and affinities. When Willem began his tenure there, and for the several years he overlapped with Duncan Phillips, it was his privilege to see and absorb the founder's taste and knowledge. The artist would become a close ally of the redoubtable administrator Elmira Bier, who virtually ran the museum for many decades and was uniquely knowledgeable about the Phillipses' activities, acquisitions, and intentions from almost the beginning of their collecting life. Especially after Marjorie Phillips's death in 1972, ten years after her husband's death, Elmira Bier and other members of the museum's staff began to have substantive influence on how things were done at the museum. Willem also worked closely with curator/director James McLaughlin (1909-1982), from whom he learned a great deal.

When Duncan and Marjorie's son Laughlin (1924-2010) assumed the directorship in 1972, staff members such as Willem increasingly assumed responsibility for decisions regarding exhibitions and acquisitions, as Laughlin came from the world of magazine publishing and relied heavily on his specialist staff members. De Looper continuously proposed and executed adjustments in installation configurations, or rotations of work by artists in the collection who were little known to the public. In

1979, it was de Looper who was primarily responsible for the definitive exhibition of Franz Kline's color paintings; in 1980 he was responsible for an important show of Philip Guston's late works—making him one of the first to recognize this chapter in American art that would exert an electrifying influence on the development of art in the 1980s and 1990s.

After 1982, when Willem was named Curator at the Phillips, he necessarily became heavily involved in the facility's renovation and addition of a new building known as the Goh Annex and a small new sculpture garden. Although his name was seldom publicized with respect to either of these projects, he had a say in deciding on works acquired, installations changed, and exhibitions organized. He quietly exerted his sensibility, preferences and discoveries on virtually every aspect of the Phillips's zeitgeist during the 1970s until his retirement in 1987. His presence made possible the important Morris Graves retrospective in 1983, a Lyonel Feininger exhibition in 1985, and a retrospective of paintings and drawings by Leland Bell in 1987. It is a sign of de Looper's unassuming nature that guest curator Eleanor Green gets sole credit for the seminal 1987 retrospective, "John Graham: Artist and Avatar." Willem's indispensable hand in that project went unacknowledged in the accompanying catalogue.

After de Looper's departure from the Phillips, he curated an important group exhibition of Washington artists at the Shippee Gallery in New York that included himself and Wil Brunner (b. 1946), Kevin MacDonald (1946-2006), Shahla Arbabi (b. 1945) and Denise Ward-Brown (b. 1953). This was a remarkable gesture in the context of his time and his stature as an artist. All these artists had at some time worked at the Phillips, as guards or in other positions. Willem's impulse to act as both artist and curator is a mark of his life commitment to his field, in all of its aspects.

## THE LATER YEARS

De Looper continued to show regularly in Washington at Jones Troyer Fitzpatrick, Kornblatt, and Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman galleries, among others. And, following in the footsteps of his friend and mentor

Jacob Kainen, in 1991 he began to work seriously in the medium of printmaking. He worked in Palo Alto, California with Smith Andersen Editions, and in Riverdale, Maryland, at Pyramid Atlantic. In 1996 a major retrospective exhibition with a scholarly catalogue was mounted by the University of Maryland. This occasion inspired the artist and his wife to organize the artist's inventory. [illus. UMD] He died in January 2009. In the years before her death in 2018, his widow Frauke set up provisions for an ongoing foundation. That holds the artist's papers and many of his works of art.

Willem de Looper was a dedicated and successful artist with the discipline and obsessive focus it takes to achieve an extraordinary body of painting. His contribution to his cultural environment as a curator, mentor and inspirational figure in the life of many other artists perfectly complement his artistic creations.

Adapted from the full catalogue essay written by Jane Livingston that accompanied the 2024 exhibition, *Willem de Looper: Paintings 1972-1975*.