

Dorothy Koppelman

A Life of Art and Ethics



Dorothy Koppelman (1920-2017)

by Carrie Wilson and Dale Laurin

It is with great feeling we say that on October 25, 2017 Dorothy Koppelman—artist, Aesthetic Realism consultant, founding director of the Terrain Gallery, and one of the most important women in cultural history—died at the age of 97. Courage, strength of mind, keen, original perception, and deep human sympathy characterized both her life and her art.

Born in Brooklyn, Dorothy Myers came to Manhattan as a young painter, looking for what could enable her to become the artist and person she hoped to be. She had the great good fortune to find it. In June of 1942, while working with other artists on a **Win the War** parade, she met Chaim Koppelman, who told her he was studying in classes taught by the great American poet and critic Eli Siegel, and invited her to join him.

They were among the earliest artists to study the philosophy Aesthetic Realism which Eli Siegel founded, and to realize the tremendous value for art and life of its central principle: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” This magnificent idea inspired every aspect of Dorothy Koppelman’s rich, kind, historic life.

In 2002, at a celebration of Eli Siegel Day in Baltimore she said: “No one—no scholar, no artist, no person—in all the centuries ever saw this before: that we can learn about ourselves from the very technique of art!” She gave this example:

In an Aesthetic Realism Lesson I attended as a young artist, at a time I saw myself as very separate from most people, Mr. Siegel asked me: “Are you unique and related?” I felt a great relief seeing that I was. And I learned that is the purpose of every line in a painting: it separates and joins at once. Each apple in a Cezanne still life has a boundary, is unique, separate, and yet is joined with, related to, enhanced by every other red and yellow and green apple on that white tablecloth. We need to feel we’re more ourselves through seeing and liking our relation to other people, both near and far. That, Eli Siegel taught me, is the message of all art.

Painter and Printmaker

Through what she learned, her work became among the finest produced in America in the 20th century. Stuart Preston, writing in the New York Times in 1961 said: “Intensity of response



Dorothy Koppelman, “Conscience on Guard,” oil on canvas, 58”x 50”

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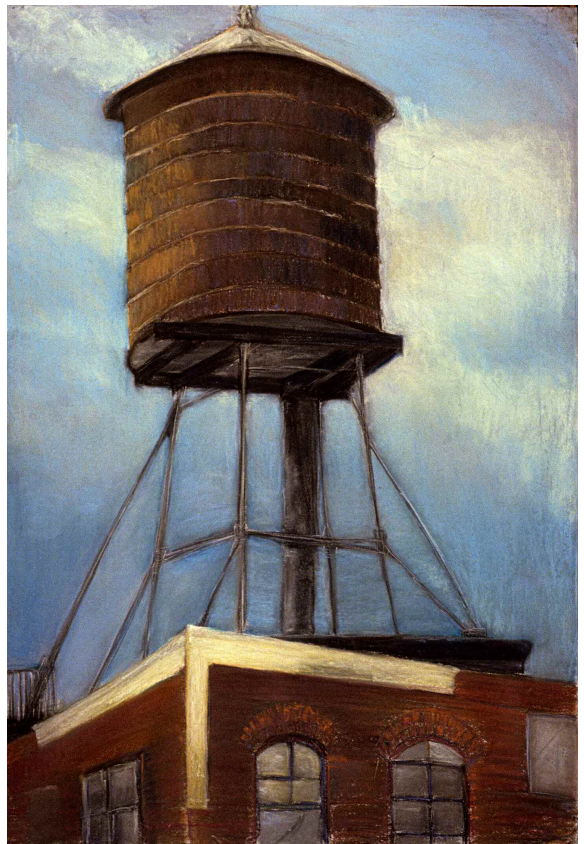
—ELI SIEGEL

characterizes each picture....The fact that they are good as well as moving depends on the vitality of her touch and the strength of her

color, both of which are out of the ordinary.” The Museum of Modern Art included her in their important 1962 exhibition **“Recent Painting USA: The Figure,”** and she was in exhibitions at the Whitney and Brooklyn Museums. Awards included a Tiffany Grant; and her folio, **Poems and Prints**, of 2000, is in the collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Her work is at once vigorous and tender. There are the water towers she loved for their humil-

ity and pride; powerful, almost abstract paintings of the wrecked fuselage of a plane; vivid domestic still lifes; and paintings of the human figure that boldly reveal intense, usually hidden feelings, such as *Conscience on Guard*. (image below, left) In a talk at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, artist Marcia Rackow, who teaches on the faculty of the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, said of it:



Dorothy Koppelman, “Proud & Humble,” pastel on paper, 22 1/2” x 34 1/4”

In this courageous work of 1986, Dorothy Koppelman gives dramatic form to the fight in every person—between being awake to what’s around us, or getting our importance by just wanting to be oblivious to everything.

We see the nude figure of a woman, her eyes closed, asleep. Surprisingly, her head is at the bottom of the canvas. She seems to be at once falling and caught in space.

White has stood for blankness and this woman is in danger of receding into blankness. The kindness of this painting is that this woman is not alone. That dog—standing for “conscience”—is on guard. It won’t allow her to put aside the world. And as it looks directly at us, it seems to be questioning us—be our conscience too!

The Terrain Gallery

Dorothy Koppelman will be seen as pivotal in world culture for her founding of the Terrain Gallery and all that came to be as a result. It opened in 1955 *continued*

under her direction, with Eli Siegel's historic 15 Questions: **"Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?"** as its basis. These questions, published in the opening announcement, were sent to hundreds of artists, critics, and others, and published in **The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism**. In 2005, remembering that time, she wrote:

The atmosphere in America in 1955 was not one of free and open discussion, and the idea of talking about beauty at all was not au courant. We did it anyway.

In every show, comments on the walls described what made the work successful. And there were groundbreaking talks showing that "the making one of opposites" is the cause of beauty in the art of all times and places, and is what we hope for in our lives.

Prints, drawings, paintings and photographs, both figurative and abstract, were shown together. Chaim Koppelman, himself an eminent printmaker, who began the Printmaking Department at the School of Visual Arts, was the Terrain's print curator. Artists such as Leonard Baskin, Ad Reinhardt, Will Barnet, Robert Conover, and Bob Blackburn exhibited side-by-side with those much less known. William Clutz remembered gratefully, *"Opportunities for young, unknown artists were almost nonexistent in 1956, and Dorothy was courageous and kind, in a pervasively abstractionist era, in showing an unknown's figural street scenes."*

There were innovations too as to media. The Times noted: "The Terrain Gallery held one of the first exhibitions honoring photography as fine art"; and in 1965, it was first in presenting an entire exhibition of silkscreens by Alex Katz, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg and others—printed by Steve Poleskie at Chiron Press.

An exhibition of which she was particularly proud was in 1967, *All Art Is For Life and Against the War in Vietnam*—with work by 105 artists: a benefit to aid children burned by napalm.

Reviews of shows were praising, yet the point of view which made for their excellence was omitted. One exception was in 1957 when reviewer Bennett Schiff wrote with integrity:

There probably hasn't been a gallery before this like the Terrain, which devotes itself to the integration of art with all of living according to an esthetic principle which is part of an entire, encompassing philosophic theory...Aesthetic Realism, as developed and taught by Eli Siegel, a poet and philosopher whose work has received growing recognition by such people as William Carlos Williams....It is a building, positive vision.

The Aesthetic Realism Foundation

As more and more people wanted to study Aesthetic Realism, in 1972 Dorothy Koppelman felt there should be a foundation teaching this vital education, and so the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, a 501(c)(3) educational foundation was established. She was its first Executive Director, and among its faculty of consultants, teaching other artists, with Chaim Koppelman, in the trio *The Kindest Art*. They proudly continued their own study in professional classes for Aesthetic Realism consultants and associates, taught by Chairman of Education Ellen Reiss.

At the Foundation there are exhibitions, public seminars and dramatic presentations, individual consultations, and a rich curriculum of classes. For over 35 years, Dorothy Koppelman taught a greatly respected monthly workshop for artists, the *Critical Inquiry*. She gave unforgettable seminars on the lives and work of Courbet, Van Gogh, Hopper, Pollock, and many others.

In 2007, she was guest speaker at the Piero della Francesca Foundation in Sansepolcro, Italy. Said the Foundation's president, Lia Navarra Baldesi, *"You have brought us something new. Now, through Eli Siegel's philosophy of opposites I will see art as having an ethical meaning, as having an effect on people's lives."*

Because of Dorothy Koppelman's vision of a gallery where people could learn about Aesthetic Realism and the true relation of art and life, thousands of people have felt understood as they never thought they would. We had the privilege to know her, work with her, study with her, and to benefit, as so many others have, from her critical good will and honesty. We are proud and grateful that she was our friend.

We conclude with a statement representing the beauty of the mind of Dorothy Koppelman, who wrote, in *We Have Been There: Six*

Artists on the Siegel Theory of Opposites:

I believe that all art arises out of gratitude, a deep pervasive feeling that you are glad something exists outside you and that something can complete you. If an artist doesn't say, "Thank God you exist" to any object he is looking at, he will miss the essence and skimp the job. Every artist has to have, as part of his beginning equipment, a desire to be just to what is not himself.... When an artist is looking at an object at his seemingly most humble, it is then that he is most proud and most grateful to the forces of the world that made him and things the way they are.



Dorothy Koppelman, "Light Shadows," oil on canvas, 56" x 48" (Tiffany Grant for Painting, 1965)



Dorothy Koppelman, "Poor Pink Bird," intaglio, 5 1/4" x 7 1/4"

Authors Carrie Wilson and Dale Laurin are consultants on the faculty of the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, and coordinators for the Terrain Gallery. Ms. Wilson is an art historian with a degree from Barnard College. She is also a co-teacher of the Critical Inquiry, a class for artists inaugurated by Dorothy Koppelman, and is included in Who's Who in American Art. Mr. Laurin is an architect and speaker in the series "Architecture and You." Both have written extensively on art, including articles for Journal of the Print World.

You can learn more at dorothykoppelman.net, aestheticrealism.org, and terraingallery.org. The papers of Dorothy and Chaim Koppelman, and the Terrain Gallery, are in the Archives of American Art.