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*AUGUST 2021*

"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

**Dorothy Dehner at Rosenberg & Co.**



*Installation view, Dorothy Dehner at Rosenberg & Co. Courtesy of Rosenberg & Co.*

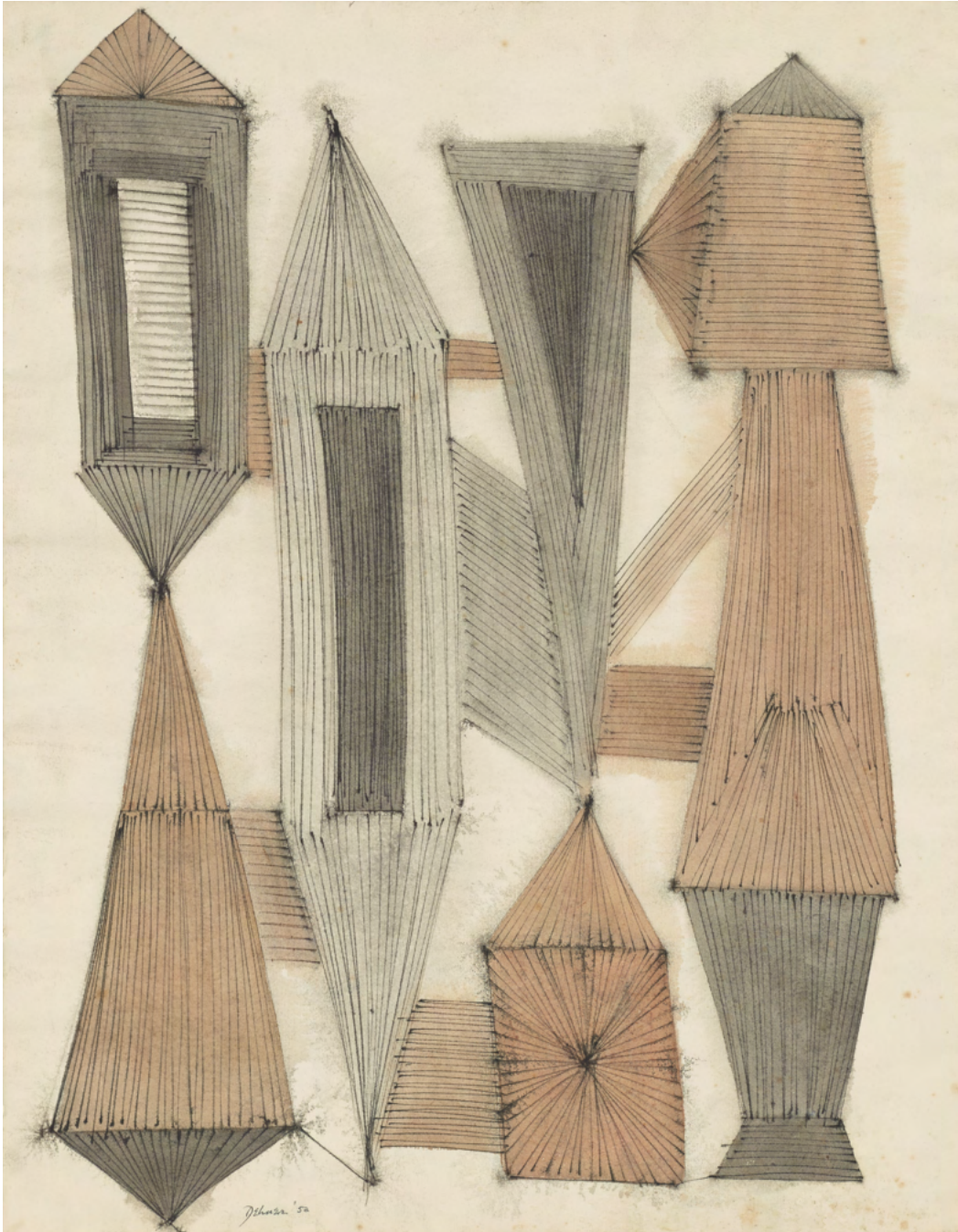
Dorothy Dehner

Rosenberg & Co. (<http://www.rosenbergco.com/>)

May 15 through August 20, 2021

By **JONATHAN GOODMAN**, July 2021

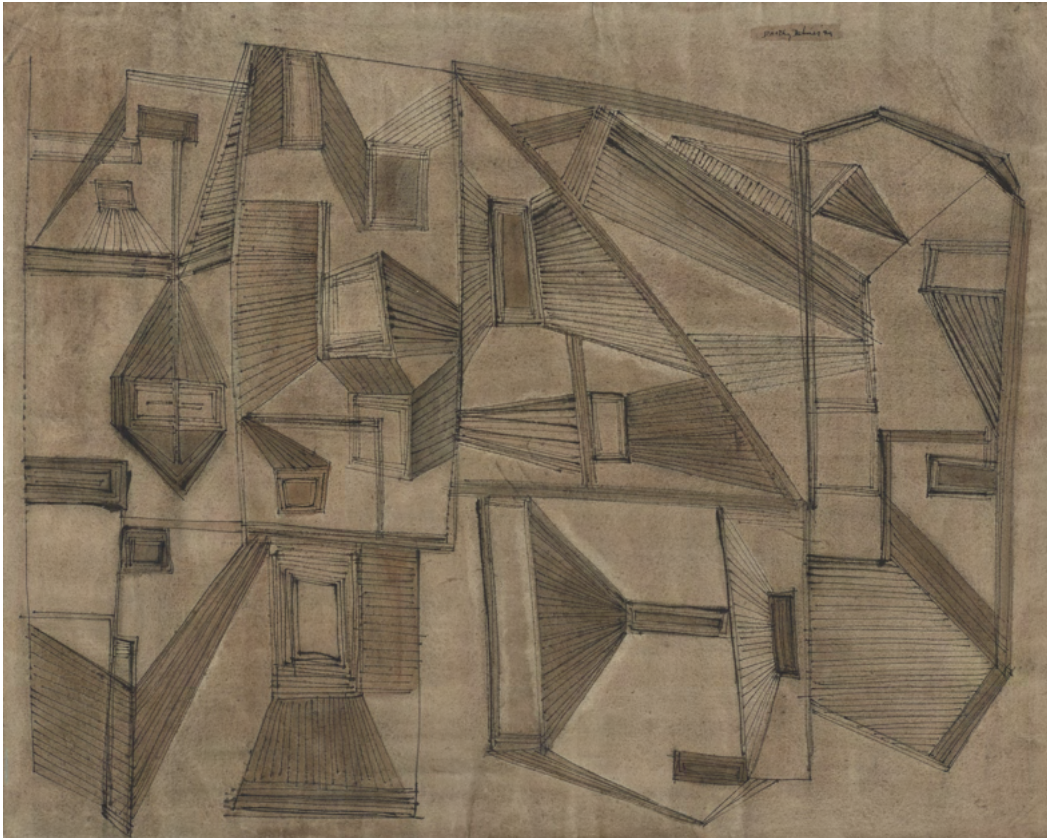
The mid-20th century artist and sculptor Dorothy Dehner is a true original, and in a better time, without the aggressive presence of her husband David Smith, she might have gained the recognition she deserved. As it now stands in her current, very strong show of works on paper and sculptures, it is possible to see her as a particularly gifted independent presence. It is time to recognize her unusual gifts, which tended toward a linear abstraction, unlike the organic nonobjectivism more popular at the time. Dehner's skills were such that she may have been misread as peripheral, and she was someone for whom recognition may not have been entirely important. As a result, we have missed the work of a remarkable artist.



*Dorothy Dehner, Bolton Landing #46, 1950. Courtesy of Rosenberg & Co.*

The drawings are dominated by linear forms and are quite precise, differing considerably from the free-flowing style dominant in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the years when Dehner produced these works of art. Interestingly, the works defy serial repetition,

being one-off, independent visions of her imagination. *Bolton Landing #46* (1950), consisting of watercolor and ink on paper, is a group of four figure-like abstractions, whose colors are mostly brown and gray. Consisting of geometric, often triangular forms, the four vertical shapes are both purely nonobjective vertical Bposts, to be viewed without the semblance of figuration, and abstract persons frontally presenting themselves to the viewer. At the time the drawing was made, Dehner was living in Bolton Landing with Smith, but it is clear here, and throughout the show, that she was her own person, making art that stood up unusually well to the strong presence of her husband. This particular work is a remarkable indication of Dehner's capacity for an abstraction hinting at the figure even as she leans in the direction of a nonobjective style.



*Dorothy Dehner, City Life, 1949. Courtesy of Rosenberg & Co.*

*City Life* (1949), another watercolor and ink work, is composed on brown paper of a multiplicity of forms. It looks like a random arrangement of stairs and windows and blinds, with each component of this relatively small drawing fitting into its neighbors like a jigsaw puzzle. Groups of narrow lines define the forms, and the architectural bent of the piece gives a sense of the random structures one experiences in quick succession walking down an urban street. Design in these works is particularly strong; the drawings hold together in entirety even when they include more than a few elements. Also, and again, the abstract elements in the work are as prominent as the partial buildings they suggest. In an untitled work from 1953, the architectural elements of the façade of a building are clearly defined. Doors and windows are more than alluded to; their presence is actual, rendered so that we have a real sense of a building. Here too Dehner celebrates city life, in ways that pay attention to the details that make the building's exterior highly interesting as it rises from the sidewalk upward.



*Dorothy Dehner, Big Rooster, c. 1974. Courtesy of Rosenberg & Co.*

Dehner was not only an outstanding draftsman, she was also a remarkable sculptor whose work shows only minimal influence on the part of her husband. The sculptures on show are later, from the 1970s, and demonstrate the conscious influence of modernist composition. The wooden work *Big Rooster* (c. 1974), just over three feet tall, is a balancing act of triangles with an open mouth crowing at the top of the work. As happens so often in both Dehner's drawings and three-dimensional work, the artist works the cusp between a recognizable form and a self-sufficiently non-figurative shape,

although in the case of this work, the title makes the subject clear. In *Weathervane* (1975), the horizontal alignment of wood and open space results in a work of extreme elegance. Yes, it does imply a weathervane, but it also results in a form similar to the building support for a roof--a top piece travels gracefully downward, suggesting the downward angle of a top of a home. At the same time, the overall shape of *Weathervane* is wonderfully abstract, causing the gaze of Dehner's audience to regard the construction in pure terms. This is likely the source of the artist's success: its compelling inhabitation of a space neither entirely figurative nor completely abstract. Dehner regularly addresses the balance between these ways of seeing, in a fashion that is elegant, linearly formalist, and entirely her own. **WM**



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