2015

Deane Galloway Keller 1940-2005

William B. Keller  
*University of Pennsylvania, wkeller@pobox.upenn.edu*

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Disciplines
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Comments
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By the time my brother Deane Galloway Keller began teaching at the League in the late 1990s, he had placed the large-scale draped figure at the center of his concern as a draftsman. This approach fully employed the training he received from the sculptor David K. Rubins (1902–1985); John Herron Institute of Art, Indiana University, Indianapolis), in the Florence, Italy, studio of Nera Simi (1890–1987), and from his father, Deane Keller (1901–1992), who studied under George Bridgman at the League in the summers of 1923 and 1924. Deane Keller was mentored in the Yale School of the Fine Arts by Edwin C. Taylor, who had arrived in 1908 from the mural studio of Kenyon Cox. Taylor was the drawing instructor under the school’s first director, John Ferguson Weir, and established the basic pedagogy Yale implemented until the arrival of Josef Albers in 1950. This studio pedagogy valued the enterprise of drawing from the live model and from works of Renaissance and later masters.

Deane Galloway Keller, much aware of this lineage of teacher relationships, taught in Studios 1 and 2 at a time when his own engagement with figure drawing was reaching an intense phase. He brought together for himself and for his students the strands of his earlier drawing and painting, informed and motivated by his reading of literature and history and his regular travel in North Africa, the Middle East, and Turkey.

Teaching hours naturally took time from his own work. Yet he felt privileged to share his training and experience in the charged environment of the League’s second floor.

The authoritative figures of Keller’s desert series were created during the period he taught at the League. In these drawings he aimed for a synthesis of domains, in his conception, of what is seen, known, and felt.

Keller’s lifetime project was drawing. Formal training started in the class taught by his father (professor of drawing and painting at Yale) and in the summer life classes organized mainly for his training. As a Yale undergraduate, he was exposed to senior faculty whose certainty in their own treatment of subject was virtually absolute. Forceful professors spark interest and commitment. Nevertheless, especially in the realm of craft learning (such as the study of human anatomy and drawing the figure), the master/apprentice relationship required Keller to yield to authority in order to learn the craft. In order to limit the yielding and
create his own core strategies, Keller broadened his study to include geology, literature, art history, and philosophy. In philosophy, he read across a spectrum of approaches but was most interested in systems of thought emphasizing individual responsibility: man stands alone. In this connection he encountered Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel. In another vein, John Wesley Powell and T. E. Lawrence—two blazing personalities—appealed to him as distinguished figures who connected modern life with geologic time and antiquity.

But Thomas Hardy’s novels of character and environment formed Keller’s early and sustaining inspirational resource for much of his work as an artist. Hardy’s Wessex of England’s south coast was understood by Keller to form, in his own words, “the expanded landscape against which man defines himself and acts out his destiny.” He placed himself in Hardy country, knowing of the Roman ruins underfoot.

Painting outdoors, especially in the early decades of his maturity as an artist, offered Keller a way to visualize his own place in the world. This stance is exemplified by his landscapes (first in watercolor, later in oil) of horizon broken by forms in the middle distance. In Maine, he found resonance on Damariscove Island, the early seventeenth-century fishing center and on Monhegan. And he knew the sloping fields
and shoreline of Andrew Wyeth’s Cushing, having photographed the Olson farm prior to his departure for Florence in 1964. Later, in Connecticut, in the fields near Native American sites along the Connecticut River in Middletown and Glastonbury, Keller studied the nature of place and human settlement in a series of compositions. These oils incorporate an established horizon beyond an area of open field or water, within which a natural or man-made form is placed. He had looked at Wyeth’s 1930s watercolors (e.g. The Lobsterman (Hunter Museum of American Art) as well as Hopper’s treatment of light. In the later landscapes, Keller rendered sky and earth in an overall atmospheric unity. In this he was influenced by Corot’s 1820s studies of Rome and environs such as the Le pont de Narni (Louvre).

But drawing was his main metaphor for feeling and thinking. Beginning in the mid-1990s, he developed a work process that allowed him to achieve something closer to his own aspirations. During Mediterranean travel, he sketched and
noted people in their natural environment, especially targeting gesture and movement. His sites of observation included ferry landings and markets in Egypt, where he found partially robed figures moving in and out of shadow. Back in the studio, and with the help of mannequins, casts, and the mirror image of his own features, Keller extracted these figures for his analysis while retaining a connection to their setting as first observed. Keller brought to these unposed figures momentum and dimension by retaining the energy of the sketchbook and by rendering the figures in monumental scale. They are presented on paper prepared with a middle value of earth-toned fine grit. The ochre and sienna evoke desert, heat, sun, antiquity.

Though worked up in the studio, the figures remain of the landscape. In this sense, Keller realized a new formulation of the exploration of the relation of man to landscape that he had begun decades earlier.

Deane Galloway Keller’s body of work awaits retrospective exhibition and assessment. Randy Melick’s foundational critical essay of 2007 was published by the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, where Keller taught for many years. Yet it was the totality of the League—its mission, history, setting, administration, faculty, students, and models—that meant so much. The Art Students League community values strongly held faculty approaches across a spectrum of perspectives. Supported by this community, he was able to address with freedom the learning and practice of the craft of drawing in service of the study and interpretation of the human figure.