



Richard Koppe:  
*Falconer*, 1951,  
oil on canvas,  
32¼ by 42 inches.  
University of  
Illinois at Chicago.

## Westward Homes

By Michelle Grabner

THE VAST SUBURBAN landscape that separates Chicago from rural cornfields boasts an array of nonprofit art venues. The Elmhurst Art Museum (EAM), for example, is a small but impressive complex that incorporates a rare midcentury architectural masterpiece. Mies van der Rohe's 1952 McCormick House, one of only three Mies residences built in the United States—complete with glass walls, open floor plan and modular wall system—was a prototype for a community of single-family tract dwellings intended for the Chicago suburb Melrose Park. In the end, prohibitive cost and conservative tastes thwarted this scheme to erect unconventional postwar homes for the middle class. In 1994, the McCormick House was purchased by the EAM and moved a few blocks from its original wooded lot to be joined to the museum, where it now hosts an ongoing series of exhibitions by artists, designers and architects titled "In the House."

Chicago-based artist Laura Davis's installation *Histrionic Restoration*, presently on view, includes a selection of found and handmade props convincingly commingled with a selection of

period furnishings from the museum's collection. The result is a humorous tangle of fictitious storylines challenging Mies's "less is more" mantra. Davis wittingly disrupts the pristine geometric volume by inserting an exercise bike, an untidy desktop, discarded copies of *Life* magazines, an unzipped cocktail dress draped over the back of a Barcelona chair and a concrete swan gazing through the glass wall from the home's exterior.

Concurrently, EAM visitors can also take in a scholarly exhibition of work by the artist Richard Koppe (1916-1973), who worked in Chicago from 1937 until the end of his life. Organized by chief curator Staci Boris, the survey includes some 70 paintings, drawings and prints, with emphasis on mid-career work. This in-depth examination expands on a 2013 show at the Chicago gallery Corbett vs. Dempsey, which focused exclusively on Koppe's early and late works. Boris has, in effect, answered the challenge voiced in critic Kyle MacMillan's *Art in America* review of the Corbett vs. Dempsey show: "This exhibition was not large or comprehensive enough to allow for a complete reappraisal of

CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW  
"In the House:  
Laura Davis" and  
"Richard Koppe," at  
the Elmhurst Art  
Museum, Elmhurst,  
Ill., through Jan. 11.

MICHELLE  
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Alison Ruttan:  
*10 Square Damage*  
in *Monochrome*,  
2014, wood, metal,  
plastic and latex  
paint.



Edra Soto: *Gräft*,  
2013, wood and  
latex paint.

Both works  
at Terrain  
Exhibitions,  
Oak Park, Ill.

Koppe's career, but it certainly whetted the appetite to see more, especially his culminating, likely legacy-defining paintings."

Koppe's explorations of linear abstraction, surrealist imagery, de Chirico-like classicism, Miró-inspired form-invention and existential self-portraiture confirm the historical link between the early 20th-century European avant-garde and Chicago's New Bauhaus (established by Moholy-Nagy in 1937), where Koppe studied. At the same time, the artist's enigmatic psychological investigations also prefigure the Hairy Who and other Chicago Imagists. A striking comparison can be made between Koppe's late self-portraits and Jim Nutt's exaggerated and absurd portrait studies and paintings. In addition, the exhibition features photographic documentation and curious artifacts from Koppe's 1948 commission for the once-famous downtown restaurant Well of the Sea, where his playful underwater motifs adorned textiles, tableware and enveloping murals.

AT THE COLLEGE of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, another western suburb, the newly opened Cleve Carney Art Gallery recently presented a project by Chicago artist Amy Vogel. Titled "A Paraperspective" and billed as a collaboration with artist Joseph Grigely, the exhibition strove to avoid being a conventional survey or retrospective. Writing from a familiar proximity, Grigely (who is Vogel's husband) laid out the artistic/curatorial rationale in his catalogue essay:

["A Paraperspective"] attempts to define a historical body of work by examining both its public and private side. It is an exhibition that includes unrealized projects;

projects that simply failed; experiments with different media and subjects that never got past being experiments. Some of the work, while "finished," has never been shown before—it spends its life in storage, and is being exhibited as if in storage, where the storage rack is itself both exhibition infrastructure and sculpture. Some work is packed for shipping; some partially unpacked. The goal of the exhibition is to destabilize the very idea of an oeuvre as a definitive body, and to represent it instead as a set of unstable relations—between finished and unfinished work, between draft versions and final versions, between the signature "style" and the experimental projects, and in Vogel's case, between individual work and collaborative projects.

Clearly Vogel's project suggests that conditions shape alternative criteria for success outside the major art capitals.

Although not a collecting institution, the Riverside Arts Center, named for the town in which it is located, regularly showcases ambitious exploratory projects by Chicago-area artists. A recent solo exhibition by Erin Washington featured new paintings that investigate temporality through the use of fugitive materials such as chalk, berry juice and blood. Intensely layered, Washington's works have a seductive quality. The imagery hovers between abstraction and representation, with the largest canvas in the show supporting a grid of numbers. Curated by artist Karen Azarnia, the exhibition also included the atypical *A [person] can't just sit around* (2014), a hovering lawn chair made airborne by silver Mylar balloons. An antidote to the artist's earnest paintings, it gave an ironic wink to their transcendental aspirations.

Oak Park, an affluent first-ring suburb pressed up against Chicago's crime-ridden West Side, boasts the finest collection of Frank Lloyd Wright architecture on the planet. In addition to several acknowledged masterpieces, Wright's "bootleg" homes (designed on the sly, while he was working for Louis Sullivan) also dot the village. Queen Anne-, Colonial- and Tudor-style specimens sit kitty-corner to paragons of his horizontally assertive Prairie Style. This includes Wright's home and studio. It is an iconic structure: first, because it was the birthplace of a new vision of American architecture; second, because it fostered a formal vocabulary steeped in the influence of nature, Montessori teachings and a full embrace of the suburbs as a viable site for advancing culture.

So it is not surprising that Oak Park is congenial to artist-run project spaces today. One of Chicago's most influential commercial venues, Shane Campbell Gallery, got its start in the Campbell family's Oak Park home, showing notable artists such as Rebecca Morris and Mark Grotjahn. Since 2011, artist Sabina Ott and writer John Paulett have been running Terrain, inviting artists to employ the patch of yard in the front of their house as a site for installing work. More recently, they have added Terrain South, an empty lot down the street. And, of course, since 1999 my husband, artist Brad Killam, and I have welcomed over 200 artists in our tiny home exhibition space, The Suburban. ○

Atlas is a rotating series of columns by writers from Chicago, Bangkok and Cairo.