

ANNINA NOSEI GALLERY

# CHUCK CONNELLY

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Chuck Connelly's Architecture  
by Robert Becker

The Metropolitan Museum of Art bought my favorite painting by Chuck Connelly. Called «Ausborg» and executed in 1983, this work connects Connelly's early, figure-oriented paintings, with the most recent fantasy abstractions. «Ausborg» is Connelly at his best. It's a city-scape dominated by precarious, imaginary architecture and bathed in a glowing chiaroscuro that casts its eery shadow over forbidding street-canyons. In the foreground, on the edge of the metropolis, stands a vintage Connelly «torture» structure, of monumental stature in an Olden-burgese fashion: a funnel-shaped base with a corkscrew erection that scratches the bottom of the heavens. The picture's subjects are constructed of solid blocks of colors, mostly grays, and made from a thick icing of oil paint. Everything that sets Connelly far above the transient herd of East Village «nightmare» illustrators, each element of his unique and memorable «signature» — honest, poetic expression with a dash of intelligent manipulation that carries the work beyond pure self-indulgence — and all of his strengths as a craftsman and storyteller, are present in the picture.

I saw mostly figurative paintings when I first visited Connelly's tiny 10th Street studio four years ago. They were beautiful and enticing — but very sad. Anxiety, frustration and pathological, personal torment were on the faces of these figures, in the awkward poses of their twisted bodies, in the tense situations in which they reside and especially in the manner that they were set to canvas. He had painted figures resigned to a «life» of excruciating cruelty. Animals with human heads, humans missing limbs, crying children and laughing cripples centered alone on cold featureless backgrounds or stuck in claustrophobic closeness, left to knock elbows with their own. An Edgar Allen Poe-like imagination had spawned these monsters. Tubes and tubes of succulent oil paint covered the surfaces of each canvas, with a pallet of mostly grays, blues and greens. He had recreated the richness and lusty sensuality of a Soutine, marked by an ironic, desperate snicker. The brushwork with which the paint was

applied was fast and confident, but a confidence born of blinding obsession, not experience. Their purpose was not to shock, but they were indeed shocking paintings. In 1982, Connelly left New York to live in Dusseldorf. I didn't see a painting of his — except for one printed on a postcard he sent me — until his return the following year. Whether through the influence of the Germans, the loneliness of living for a year amongst people who didn't speak the same language, or some natural process of artistic maturation, his pictures had taken a turn from the emotional — anger and fear predominant — to the sophisticated. Formal considerations now outweighed his own insecurity. In the new pictures, Connelly had replaced the figures, the «self-portraits», with «architecture». He made a leap, in a single year, from narration and allegory to a representational stasis constructed from abstract forms. If someone had told me that Chuck Connelly had dropped the grotesque from his paintings, I would have been certain he had made a big mistake. However, his show at the Annina Nosei Gallery in the fall of 1984 was dumbfounding. The artist had managed to retain his personal language, and at the same time infinitely widen his conceptual possibilities. The hard edge of geometric shapes — cubes, rectangles, triangles and circles — replaced the oscillating curves of the figure, strengthening the relationship between color through more striking contrast. The paint surface thickened all the more. At first he satisfied himself with the gray, black and white of his cityscapes — single buildings with gaunt, open windows, or clusters of these structures together. As his confidence grew, the brighter colors emerged. He was now willing to set simple red against simple yellow. The buildings gave way to building shapes; the windows disappeared. Eventually, the pictures became studies in fields of depth and narrative lighting. Finally, the curve was reintroduced and Connelly's architecture became surreal and very grand. The shift of imagery has never compromised Connelly's expressive power. Use of geometry has not meant reduction to the extent of the «color field» or «minimalist» schools. By eliminating the shocking and grotesque, the pictures are purified. With no human subjects the viewer is not limited to feelings of sympathy or disgust. Yet anxiety, confusion and ambiguity are ever present none the less. Frustration is no longer in the eyes and on the faces of his portraits, it has become the response of the viewer who tries so hard to find logic in Connelly's composition. The artist's imagination confounds attempts at interpretation, but the viewer is seduced into trying anyway.

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FLOWERFIELD, 1983

(OIL ON CANVAS, 72x96")



EGG PROCESSOR, 1983

(OIL ON CANVAS, 108x90")





FACTORY, 1984

(OIL ON CANVAS, 72×60")



UNTITLED, 1984

(OIL ON CANVAS, 90×108")





UNTITLED, 1984

(OIL ON CANVAS, 108x90")



CABINETS, 1984

(OIL ON CANVAS, 60x72")





ROLLER COASTER, 1984

(OIL ON CANVAS, 90x132")



ROLLER COASTER CAR, 1984

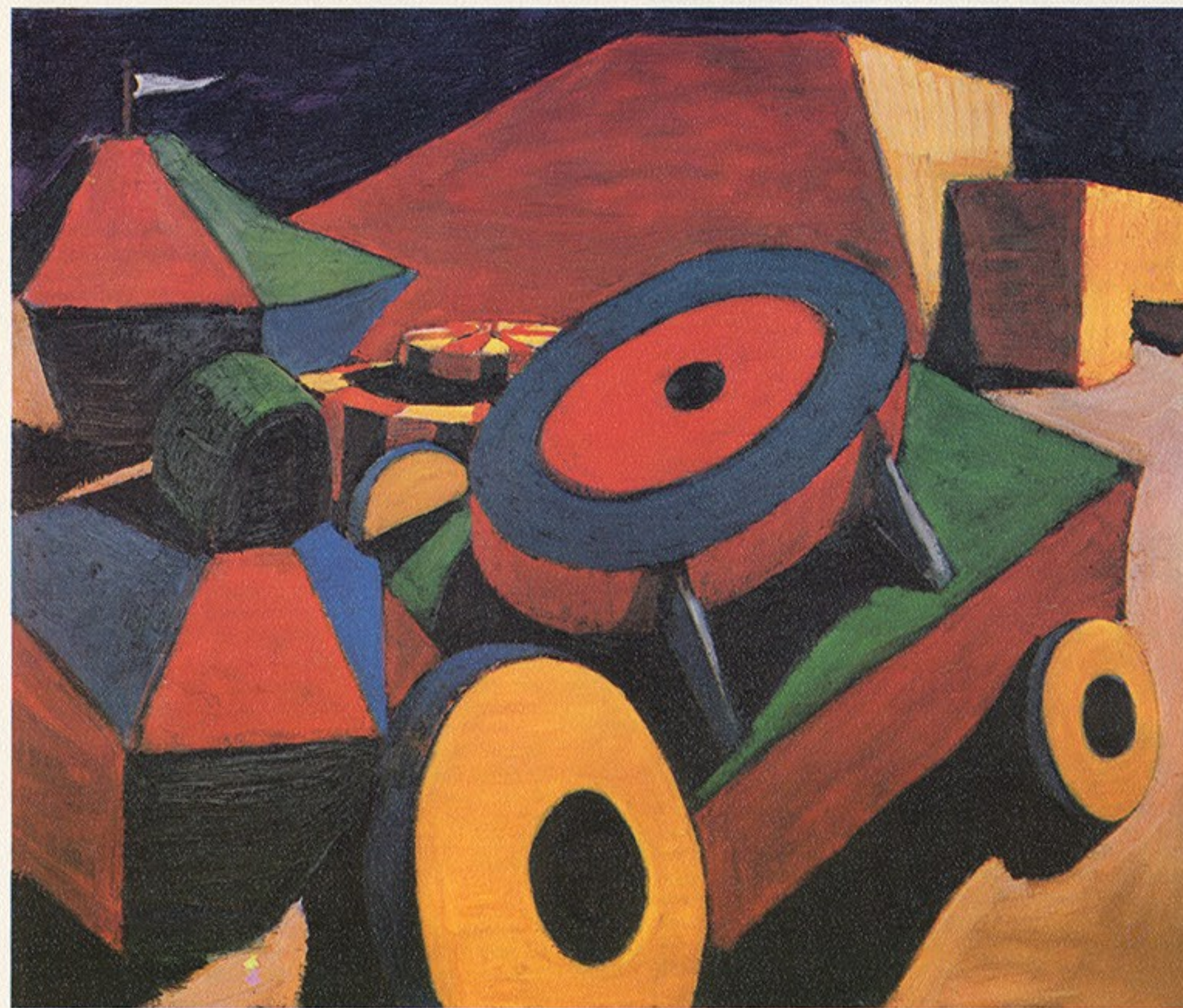
(OIL ON CANVAS 90 1/2x108 1/4)





UNTITLED, 1984

(OIL ON CANVAS, 68x48")



COLLISION, 1984

(OIL ON CANVAS, 60x72")



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Statements by Chuck Connelly  
from an interview with Robert Becker

I'd really like to get a point where I don't feel like I'm under pressure to make "good" art or "bad" art. In my own mind I've invented this strange pressure. But I don't know what's good anymore... What finishes a painting? I don't know. I haven't finished enough yet. I'm too tough on myself. It's getting warped. I've quit this drinking and I quit... I don't know if I'm going crazy or if I'm getting nitpicky and lost in the wrong things. I've forgotten about theme. What happened to theme and narration? What am I dealing with except for formal issues?

I'm conscious of the finish. If I look in my sketchbook at the drawings I make, I feel much more comfortable with them than the paintings made from them, because they're clean and simple. If the painting looked like the drawing I'd be so happy. But the painting has so many subtleties — the color, the edges, the surface — and I begin looking and picking it apart... You have to get away from the painting for so long 'til you can say, "That one's good".

I'm trying to find a riff that I can unconsciously get into so that I never get lost. I can hit a pattern and keep doing it. Form gives it strength. But I don't know if I'll ever reach that state of confidence. It's a rhythm I think, both in the paintings form and the way I work. I want to find the pattern so I know I can take any subject and make it work.

When I'm not painting or drawing something specific, I stare at my pictures and line them up and then look at other pictures and I have a piece of paper ready so that if I have an idea I start sketching. They never really become finished drawings, just chicken scratch. They're never the king of drawings you might frame. But that's all right because if I get a good riff then I work on the riff until it becomes natural — second nature. I look for a mark, a pattern, a repetition — maybe like a staircase — I get to know the formation so well. It's just something that accidentally comes and I keep drawing it 'til it's simple. Memorize it so it's like a skeleton to pictures.

Once I get the form, I'd like it to look like a kid could color it in. Simple coloring. I want it to be basic so that anyone could understand how it looks and what it is, and, if they want to do it they could. I mean so that they think could do it. The things that I like best in any painter are the simple solutions. Those are the ones that are most beneficial to people, the ones others can grasp and use themselves.

If you spend too much time with a painting, you see useless things you don't have to see. That's because the first thing — the drawing or even just the idea — that germ is always the best. And it's damned impossible to get that onto a huge canvas, especially when you have a sketch for it. You have to come in with nothing.

I don't know what's up or down half the time. It used to be so cut and clear, especially in college, when I started thinking and formulating. "You're the best", and "I'm the best", and "These are the rules", and "The rules are mine". I've seen a few artists' work that gave me some ideas; I used them to guide me. But as my work progresses and I see the work of others and now being in the East Village, the rules are changed every day. There aren't any rules.

I would like my paintings to just be shapes that could be strong or not strong. They could stand or they could be floating, and you don't know for sure.

I don't look at anything. I don't see a train or a tree. People say, "Oh, you've been to Coney Island". Never been there. I don't get out of my area at all. I dream. I live in a fake world anyway. I drink fake beer.

I want to be the most substantial painter there is. And there are times when I feel I have it, but then I get lost. If I can't find my way out of the muck, I'll never get it.

The reason to paint now isn't something inside that says, "I'm a lonely boy in a corner". My reasons are now formal. I have to find formal answers and create formal problems and that's the reason to go on. I just want to solve these little riddles that seem to multiply after I do a painting. That's a better reason to work than all the other stuff. Like Picasso and all his analytic Cubist painting. Because he did all of that, he had a certain freedom. All the hard structural ideas kept his freedom together and gave it strength.

December 1984

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## BIOGRAPHY

BORN:  
1955 Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

EDUCATION:  
1977 B.F.A., Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, P.A.

ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS:  
1982 Galerie Arno Kohen, Düsseldorf, Germany.  
1984 Serra di Felice Gallery, New York City.  
Annina Nosei Gallery, New York City.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:  
1979 Cheltenham Art Center, Philadelphia, PA.  
1980 Cheltenham Art Center, Philadelphia, PA.  
1981 P.S. 122, Long Island City, N.Y.  
1983 Serra di Felice Gallery, New York City.  
Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York City.  
1984 "American Neo-Expressionists", Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT.  
"Summer Group Show", Annina Nosei Gallery, New York City.  
"New Narrative Painting", Tamayo Museum, Mexico City.  
"New Landscape Painting", Palazzo Ducale di Gubbio, Gubbio/Italy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:  
Yvonne Friedrich, "Lollypop Mit Kopf Auf Stengel", *Rheinische Post*, Dec. 17, 1982.  
Annelie Pohlen, "Hiroshima und Danach", *Kunstforum International*, Feb., 1983.  
Ellen Handy, "Emergence", *Arts*, Vol. 58, No. 5, Jan., 1984.  
"Openings: Chuck Connelly", *Esquire*, Vol. 101, No. 5, May, 1984.