

Rapture Beguiled

The Art of Chuck Connelly

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Since the moment I encountered the work of Chuck Connelly over twenty years ago, I was compelled to change the way I look at painting, specifically from an expressionist point of view. My first viewing of Connelly's paintings was at the Lennon Weinberg gallery in the early 1990s before I discovered that Annina Nosei had shown him earlier. By the latter part of that decade he had moved on to Alexander de Folin, whose gallery lasted no more than two years. In that I was acquainted with each of the people championing Chuck, and knowing how professional, yet how different they were from one another, I became curious as to what the essential link could possibly be. What did they see in this artist's work that was so important? After a period of time, his contrarian manner of painting houses and humanoid animals began to widen my windows of perception. Connelly's approach to painting suggested for me a heightened form of sensory cognition where memory and history suddenly collide with the present—not merely the ostensible present, but a present filled with intervals of intense contemplation where the history of painting suddenly transforms into an inexorable, yet subtle experience. Rarely does one find paintings so unencumbered by academic intention. Connelly's artworks are not dependent on a text to understand them. His disparate, often inscrutable subject matter offers the viewer more than a revised technical acuity or some recurrent formal prowess. Rather his paintings indulge the unconscious

through an errant offbeat *Zeitgeist* fraught with ghoulish nightmares, often verging on the grotesque. Whether the viewer is prepared or not, his ostensibly bold and densely layered imagery tends to inhabit one's inner sanctum from the moment of perception. The sullen, often exacerbating aura embedded in a Connelly painting, such as *Homo* (1979), in which the graffiti is plastered against the yodeling visage of a jovial Santa, fully engages our process of seeing. The work doggedly transmits the kind of instinctual reaction present at the outset of its completion.

In league with international artists as divergent as Helmut Middendorf, Mike Kelly, Zeng Fanzhi, or even Odd Nerdrum, all of whom have worked in the genre of figurative expressionism in Europe, the United States, and China, Connelly goes unchecked into the intimate, often forbidden recesses of a personal, autosymbolic quest for meaning. No matter how many strident animals appear in fashionable dress or how many prim and proper ladies appear with their courtiers from Rococo salons, Connelly breaks through the pretention of proprietary codes and manners that guard the way people live their lives. He goes straight to the vanity and conceits that fend off denial in favor of moral proscriptions. His paintings stand side by side with the ironic content of an eighteenth century Flemish *nature morte* or an absurdly dramatic Pre-Raphaelite sentiment or a blithe characterization of Neo-Classic nobility. Connelly stands on the precipice between abject elegance, Eros, and his exorbitant rejection of social norms. In this sense, the artist's vision of the body is as disturbing as it is alluring, close but not entirely in stride with that of the French photographer Pierre Molinier.

Connelly's thematic concerns emanate from an awareness of art history both from a continuous and discontinuous or interrupted flow of development. More than likely, his awareness of painting is less involved with revealing its progress than with his ability to discover affiliations associated with memory. In this sense, Connelly holds an affinity (in contrast to an influence) with artists ranging from Gericault to Redon and from Soutine to DeKooning, who have uniquely delivered ongoing views of the human condition at various intervals of history. This epic saga in painting begins with Romanticism in the early nineteenth century, and then reappears during the Symbolist painting of the belle époque in early Modernism, only to reemerge again in late Modernism. While Connelly's romantic involvement in painting continues to proceed, the cultural context surrounding his work appears inconsistent with his position. The HBO documentary, for example, focused more on Connelly as a hyperindulgent artist rather than on the work itself. Titled *The Art of Failure: Chuck Connelly Not for Sale* (2008), the Emmy award winning film is symptomatic of the present shortcomings involved in coming to terms with his real achievements as a painter. On a larger scale, the real issue with the film relates to an inconsistent, exclusionary, and misinformed network of collectors, critics, artists, and dealers, who seemingly have little access to articulating the mind-boggling complexity present in Connelly's work.

Connelly not only makes paintings in which the subject matter appears indefatigably present, but also the process allows the character of his brush to speak autonomously. This suggests an absence of separation between the artist's subject matter and his boldly intuitive, yet precisely controlled sequences of painterly applications (a concept that goes back to

the seventeenth century Dutch guild painter, Franz Hals). Connelly's use of pigment reigns throughout his surfaces, which hold a remarkable plasticity embedded within each stroke of the paint. Take, for example, the painting *Animals in the Street* (1994), a brilliant upbeat transfiguration of the late nineteenth century Belgian painter, James Ensor. There is a sense of command in Connelly's pigments, a sense of isolation, even protectiveness. His materials are entirely under his control. They belong to no one else. At the moment of painting, the pigments appear to constitute his life's breath.

What Connelly paints and how he paints are inextricably bound together. The intensity of emotion carried within the action of these paintings is indirectly about relieving the weight of the world from his shoulders while depositing the remains on a frontal surface. Here we may discover the litany of the painter's experience, the remnants of the artist's mindful eye. These paintings are not for the faint of heart to see. They have been known to bleed and occasionally to weep, thus suggesting they are extensions of himself, his constrained body and expansive mind. To grasp this condition, the "human" condition, is to accept the sense of wholeness of his works. What may appear uncanny to viewers, even those trained to look at paintings (connoisseurs), is how complete each painting appears. This is not about academic composition in the manner that the art historian Earle Loran analyzed Cezanne, but closer to the poet William Carlos Williams' "embodiment of knowledge." In other words, the manner in which Connelly transports the knowledge of painting through personal longing on a physiological and emotionally-charged level occasionally finds a resolution in the artist's power of sublimation. These moments where personal conflict is steered into the *sturm und drang* of his exertion as a painter quite possibly constitute the bulk of his major work. Here I would reference *Artist and*

Model (1982) and *Couple in Bed* (2012), the second painted thirty years after the first. I have chosen these largely because of their complexity in terms of how they fit in the artist's oeuvre.

Both works involve a male and female. The earlier painting suggests something in the process of happening, while the later painting illustrates that it has already happened. The paintings contain a subliminal eroticism at either end. Neither of these paintings are signed, but rather given a black dot that functioned as a kind of logo, symbolic of the artist's alter-ego, Fred Scaboda, a fictitious character he invented in 1973 while attending Jefferson High School in Pittsburgh. Four years later Connelly decided that Scaboda would reemerge as an anti-signature for an artist who painted images largely appropriated from printed magazines and newspapers. While the Warholian influence most likely prefigured his decision at the outset, the Scaboda paintings have continued intermittently into the present, though less frequently than they appeared in the eighties. This is to suggest that both *Artist and Model* and *Couple in Bed* originally came from external print sources. This, however, does not dispel the probability that the adjustments and changes within the act of painting created an effect quite different from the neutral high contrast silkscreen painting generated in *The Factory* by Warhol. A close examination of the Connelly (a.k.a. Scaboda) paintings reveal a layering and development of the forms that imply an intimate involvement with the subject matter, which was anathema to the more distant industrial approach employed by Warhol. This is to further suggest that Connelly sought a resolution in these painting by way of sublimation where the inner conflict plays against the neutralized, anonymous images taken out of context from mass media publications.

The completion of a Connelly painting is determined by the final touch, anointed before leaving the studio to confront the material world. Nothing appears unturned. Each painting—despite its divergent subject matter—whether the houses in the *East Oak Lane* series (2005–2007) or the harrowing paintings from 1990, such as *Ezekiel's Wheel* and *Power Authority*—finds a connection in relation to the whole through the artist's strophic accuracy, a type of mannerism where each work is given a culminating inscrutability, an exhaustive, unequivocal tactile resonance. In terms of style, there is a structural consistency that binds the thematic diversity, which is neither obvious nor superficial.

On the morning of the summer solstice, a red king snake appeared on the window ledge of my country house, as I was deeply entranced in looking at reproductions of three large paintings by Connelly I had seen in Newark a few days earlier. Somehow the encounter between the snake and my perusal of the paintings seemed a perfect match, a ploy of some sort, as the snake signaled an uncanny aura with scales in contrasting colors, not atypical of some of Connelly's most extraordinary works. This would include two large works from 1986, titled *Ascending Man* and *St George and the Dragon*, and another more recent mystically endowed work, *Edge of Heaven* (2012). In each of these paintings there is a clear insinuation of an apocalyptic event transpiring between heaven and earth. The figures are portrayed exceedingly small, nearly impossible to detect upon first glance. A diminutive St. George is painted off-center while standing beneath a dragon with its three swirling, snake-like heads. One can only speculate how this celebrated warrior saint

could possibly conquer such a huge, reptilian creature despite the crucifix on the handle of his sword.

In another Scaboda work, titled *The Disease* (1981), a theatrical encounter of figures, mostly male, hover around a nude male figure seated on the edge of a table. There appears to be a personification of forces between good and evil, as the male and female standing figures on the right offer compassion in contrast to the more sadistic smile of the male figure standing on the left. Whereas the other paintings are more eschatological, *The Disease* is darker, seemingly without hope. In addition to the other male figures crouching to the left side of the table, one may notice a dark silhouette in the background approaching the oddly grinning patient with bright quizzical eyes who occupies a central place in the painting. Is the patient really sick? If not, what does he represent? One wonders if this shadowy figure approaching the patient from behind is a symbolic alter-ego or possibly a manifestation of death coming to greet him. There is little doubt that this is one of Connelly's most disturbing and conflicted paintings. Whereas the allusion to the forthcoming AIDS crisis might be regarded a conjecture, given that the year of the painting is slightly earlier than when the news of this tragic illness hit the popular media, the consequences suggest a prophetic content. In the years that followed this painting would become exceedingly difficult to ignore.

In the title of this essay I speak of rapture as a way of thinking, perhaps feeling, in relation to the work of Chuck Connelly. I have never been certain that any of his paintings were premeditated either in terms of their completion or their impact upon viewers. One can scarcely doubt that

he indulges not just in ordinary still-lives, houses, wintry scenes, flowers, childhood recollections of animals connoting people in everyday life, or, for that matter, the overwhelming anxiety and foreboding impact of moving from the industrial to the post-industrial years in Pittsburgh. There is little doubt that the painter's imagination takes over in many of his paintings, especially those that originate from magazine and print publications. Here, Fred Scaboda, either denies or transcends ordinary ways of seeing, and thus represents a vision of a world beyond the TV-world that dominates many American living rooms. These paintings deliver in a way that is, at times, both heartbreaking and unfathomable. They reveal the tumult of lives burdened by power. They describe neighborhoods and thoughts about people trying to live from day to day, seeking survival and guidance to carry them on.

Even so, there is rapture in these paintings. Their sophistication goes beyond ordinary language and is impossible to discern through art language. They are paintings that beguile the senses, and, in doing so, escape the fashionable trends that eventually hold forth at auctions. Connelly is a true original—an artist who can only paint what he knows through the honesty of what he perceives and imagines. There are interior symbolic values that emerge in the process of how he organizes his paintings. He is a raconteur artist, telling us, showing us, what he himself would like to believe.

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