

development of artistic uniqueness through something that could be called expressivity. Ingres was known to be a serious fellow, but in the end the last laugh is his.

Chuck Connelly

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I AM AN AVOWED FAN OF CHUCK Connelly. I say this at the onset, as anyone who is a fan of Chuck's must be in the camp of 80's narrative painting and a kind of cartoony expressionism. If you favor the ironic, polished or slick, if you favor an abstract or a mechanical image, then Chuck Connelly is not the guy for you. I am, however, guilty as charged.

Connelly became noticed during the 80's when Martin Scorsese featured Connelly's work in a segment of the film *New York Stories*. The film revolved around a Malcolm Morley-esque character played by Nick Nolte. Although you wouldn't think it relevant, Connelly has always seemed a bit trapped by this image. Romantic by nature, Chuck uses globs of paint, smears wet paint on wet surfaces until it turns gray or dirty brown, and employs a visual vocabulary of dizzying proportions evoking the highs and lows of a toy manic-depressive. He's like those aging Baby Boomers that constantly discuss their inner child whether you want to hear about it or not.

If you look at this work cynically, his visual language seems about ten years out of date, obsessed with loss

and more than a little solecistic. But that's when he's good. The fun begins precisely because he's painting against the grain. He's not afraid to show the chaos of his emotional life partly masked by the cartoony declarative statement *sans* the calculated neutrality of Pop Art. His silliness has an autobiographical purpose. It's a fully formed statement which is uniquely merged with a history of figure painting.

The current exhibition uses visual images mixed with words. This tendency was present at his last exhibition at Alexandre de Folin Gallery, but here it is carried to a more satisfying state of completion.

STOP, 1999 employs a photo from *Life* magazine from the early 60's. British Bobbies are holding back a crowd of mostly female Beatles fans. The word "stop" functions as a translucent barrier for the police, here hyped up as Keystone Cops. The word doubles as a conceptual prop, making you ponder on the nature of limits. The black-and-white photograph is interpreted in browns, dark blues, a shot of red on a seminally skirted figure, a green yellow on a arm. Dashes of pinks hold the heads together in check. It's like a hasty Robert Henry or George Luks meeting Wil Eisner's *The Spirit* from the Sunday funny papers.

FLIGHT 111, 1999 is a blue-gray plane crash, a specialty of Chuck's, paralleling Morley's boats and planes. The dappled sky is studded with question marks as evocative as the Riddler from Batman, but these marks also function in the spatial system of Romanticism, conceptual cipher receding within a metaphorical field. Plane crashes and question marks translate into "Why are we here?" and "What happened?" Again, the joke partly obscures the pain. Who is the Riddler if not Junior's introduction to

Epistemology and Metaphysics?

ALL ALONE, 1999 is a highly complex and impressive work evoking El Greco's *BURIAL OF COUNT ORGAZ, 1588*. It is a large rectangular painting with an arched top. The artist's composition uses figures to amass and cascade across the sky in a Baroque contrivance culminating in a God-the-father type. Dead center is a *memento mori*, a photograph of the artist's mother, obviously taken during the forties or fifties. For us dwellers of the millennium, these were archaic primordial times and her beauty has a frail poignancy. Such photos are a typical keepsake or object of retrieval. At the bottom of the painting is a dark blue void with a row boat and a tiny red figure straining at the oars. The words "All Alone" in off-white paint complete the piece. Taken directly it's powerful, but a little tawdry. The words function like the closing titles to *Rocky and Bullwinkle*: "Don't miss our next exciting adventure!" They comment on and counter the work's iconography rendering an initial layer of irony, but then he is able to deliver a type of brushwork few people can articulate.

There's more. A series of small paintings that spell out "F-You and You Too." A stunning portrait of his wife who's surrounded by a gooey juicy red. Two tiny paintings of the artist and his model (a woman turning the corner, perhaps his wife again?) In an era of contained, easily reproduced images, Connelly's paintings are sculpted out of paint, and just a little bit off kilter. They lull you into the sense that we know this world of childhood and can feel comfortable here. His strength is that the more we ponder them, the more we know we are mistaken.

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