



WALKING NAKED IN THE WORLD
Connie Bostic Retrospective



In Connie's Studio
photo by Lindsay West

In progress are paintings for the 2021 exhibition *Our Story*, sixteen paintings paying tribute to Black women of the 1940s and '50s who cared for white children, just as the civil rights struggle was gathering.

Cover
Falling Off the Landing
from the series *Bedtime Stories*
acrylic and collage on canvas, 70" x 50"



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Connie Bostic Retrospective

August 19–October 8, 2023

Upstairs Artspace
Tryon, North Carolina

upstairs
[artspace]



Connie and Rocky the rooster by Alice Sebrell, 2002

"This photograph was taken in Connie's back yard. Connie really loved that rooster. I remember talking to her on the phone numerous times and hearing Rocky crowing in the background. I was enchanted, never having lived with a rooster myself."

Alice Sebrell is director of preservation for the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center (BMCM+AC) in Asheville. She and Connie Bostic have collaborated on many exhibitions and publications for BMCM+AC including The Shape of Imagination: Women of Black Mountain College (2008-2009), Pat Passlof: Selections (2012), and Cynthia Homire: Vision Quest (2014).

A Legacy of Powerful Artmaking

...a venue
for challenging
ideas and noncommercial
art forms
for over forty years.

It was 1990. I was graduating from the Atlanta College of Art, where the halls were abuzz with talk of a new art space “in some nowhere mountain town doing really cutting-edge stuff.” I had just been curated into a show at The World Gallery in Asheville, a town I’d never visited, where I was about to meet the gallery’s cofounder, Connie Bostic. I think about this moment a lot—before I got to know Connie, before I had set foot in the Upstairs Artspace—and how lucky we all are to benefit from the contributions both have made to the cultural life of this region.

There are so many things to consider when talking about Connie’s career. She has been a tireless advocate for the arts, both through her galleries, The World and Zone One, and in helping build the Black Mountain College Museum into the vital institution it is today. She has been dedicated to social justice issues from day one, opening one of Asheville’s first gay bars, working at the YMI Cultural Center and the Reed Community Center, helping women’s clinics confront anti-abortion protesters. And she brings that same hands-on vulnerability and fearlessness to her artwork, which addresses the personal and the political directly, with compassion and without apology.

We are proud to present this retrospective of Bostic’s intimate, unflinching work at the Upstairs Artspace. Founded in 1978 by Craig Pleasants in the top floor of his Tryon apartment, Upstairs Artspace has been a venue for challenging ideas and noncommercial art forms for over forty years. The UA first showed Connie in group shows in 2004 and 2009 and in solo shows in 2010, 2017, and 2021. Now we are thrilled to turn both floors over to her in celebration of a legacy of powerful artmaking and unfailing support of those around her.

Margaret Curtis

Margaret Curtis is a painter and a 2016-2021 Joan Mitchell Foundation Fellow. She has degrees from Duke University and the Atlanta College of Art. Her work has been widely exhibited and reviewed, and is held in numerous public and private collections across the nation. After many years in New York City, she returned to the Southern Appalachians of her youth. Curtis lives and paints in Tryon, NC, where she has worked on the board and exhibitions committee of the Upstairs Artspace on and off since 2010. She first met Connie Bostic in 1990 when still an art student in Atlanta.

Connie Bostic: The Thorns of Memory

by Arnold Wengrow

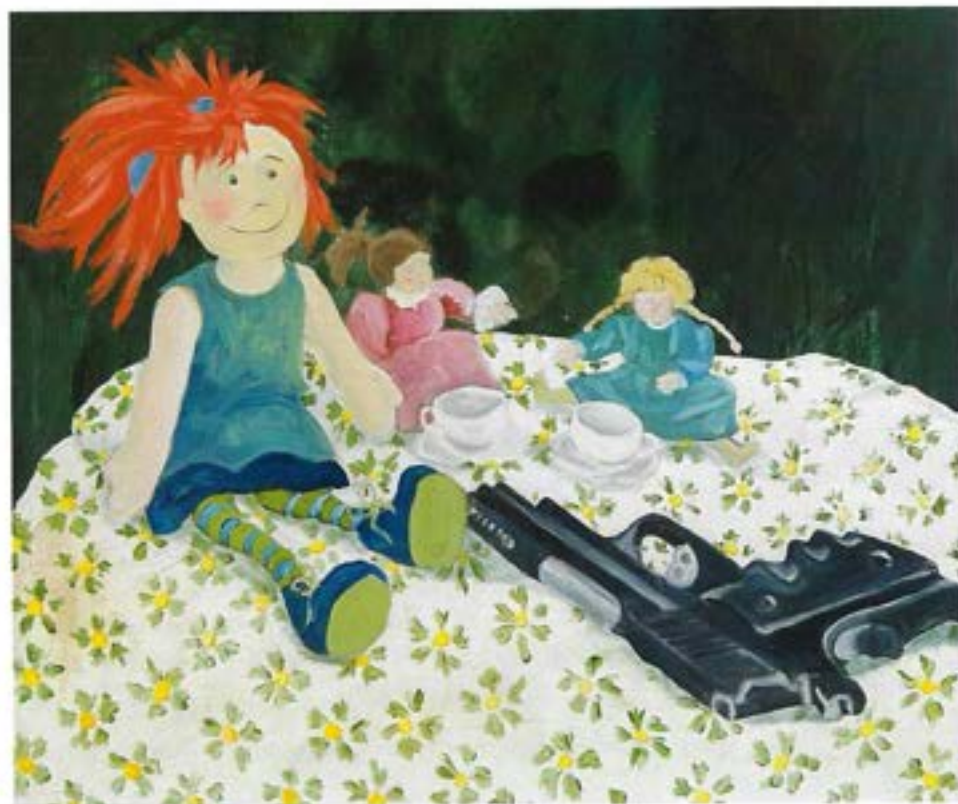
Connie Bostic is one of North Carolina's most prolific, most important, and most enduring artists. Since 1970 she has produced over 600 paintings, drawings, and mixed-media works of great originality. She continues to expand her vision into her eighth decade.

Bostic is North Carolina's most intensely personal artist. Few of her peers descend so steeply into their souls to find their themes and images. Few portray what they find there so boldly. Much of her work is autobiographical: what it means to grow up—specifically to grow up female—in a small town in North Carolina; what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society; what it means to lose children.

She may be North Carolina's most socially conscious artist. She invokes contemporary issues—gun violence, domestic abuse, racial injustice, poverty—with the same deep feeling as her autobiographical pieces. She appropriates images from newspapers or popular culture, and with her painterly technique and compositional strategies makes them uniquely her own.



From *In the Chicken Yard* series
oil on paper



Raggedy Ann, from *American Still Life* series, oil on canvas, 24" x 24"

A hallmark of Bostic's practice is work in series. She repeats an image in different contexts to interrogate its meaning. In the nine-painting series *American Still Life*, for example, she plants a gun in startling juxtapositions: nestling among children's toys; keeping company with a cup of tea and a bottle of wine. A face that may be a skull hovers in the background. It's one of Bostic's recurring images, a death's head as a watching presence.

Her two most compelling series, *The Bostic Girls* and the 240-panel *In the Chicken Yard*, capture girlhood in rural Spindale, North Carolina. In both series, full-length figures emerge from a ground of indeterminate space. With abstract, gestural brush strokes, Bostic pays homage to modernism's reverence for the flat picture plane.

Most of the girls of *In the Chicken Yard* and *The Bostic Girls* wear short pinafores with puffed sleeves and lace collars. Some are clutching a chicken. Some stand next to flowers as tall as they are. They are fragile, yet firmly planted. This contradiction—fragility and sturdiness—gives these works tension. They are thorns of memory,



Time to Make Dinner, from *American Still Life* series oil on canvas, 24" x 24"

to use Thomas Wolfe's words Bostic chose for her 144-panel installation at the Thomas Wolfe Memorial in Asheville, North Carolina.

What makes Bostic's work powerful is its multiplicity. Striking imagery. Idiosyncratic iconography. Sophisticated technique masquerading as folk-art directness. Thematic complexity. The gift to imbue paint with strong emotion. A sense of an unfolding journey throughout her career as an artist. In short, there is so much to see, so much to think about in the art of Connie Bostic.

Arnold Wengrow is an Asheville-based arts writer and theatre director.

She may be North Carolina's most socially conscious artist. She invokes contemporary issues—gun violence, domestic abuse, racial injustice, poverty—



Detail, from *In the Chicken Yard* series, oil on wood, 15" x 11.5"

Connie Bostic in Conversation with Robert Godfrey 2011

RG I don't know whether I should refer to you as the Bad Girl of Art as you have the reputation of speaking and painting your mind. As a person—a female—growing up in the South this seems something that may go against the grain of your own village. Perhaps, though, as an Irishman, I am just working from cliché. What's your take on your own persona?

CB I avoid confrontation whenever possible, but I do tend to speak my mind when I think it matters. As for the paintings, they just come. Here's a quote that I love—and I don't know who said it—"To be an artist is never to avert your eyes." I believe that. I was an outsider growing up—and still am to this day—but I've been lucky to finally find like-minded friends. But it took a while. I used to make a real effort to fit in—a wood-grained paneled station wagon and PTA when the kids were small. And earlier, in Spindale, North Carolina, teaching Sunday School and Bible School at the First Baptist Church. At 73, I don't try very hard.

RG Tell me a bit about your entrance into art. I understand you once managed a music hall.



Lucy, from *The Bostic Girls* series, oil on paper

CB Growing up in a small cotton mill town at the foot of the Blue Ridge there was no art. A fourth grade teacher, Miss Hall, showed the class some reproductions of a Rembrandt landscape and Rosa Bonheur's *Horse Fair*. That's all it took. I wanted to be an artist. There were no art classes in any of the schools I attended, and after two frustrating years at Gardner-Webb Junior College, I got married, moved to Charlotte, and had five children. They liked dogs and horses, so we had lots of both for about fifteen years. In 1970 we moved to Asheville where I started taking classes at the local university. I was the worst dilettante you ever saw. Growing up in the South in the '30s and '40s a woman could do nothing without male permission and approval. I had been told that I could not be an artist. Being an artist was for special people, male people. I did lots of things that I found interesting, like showing whippets, writing about horse shows, owning the finest gay bar in the southeast, and owning the Asheville Music Hall in lieu of calling myself an artist.

RG But you seem rather fearless. How did you manage to develop your world view?

CB I have no idea where my world view came from. My parents and grandparents did everything they could to instill the values and mores of our little community. Somehow it just didn't take.

RG Then how do you apply it, being so close to home?

CB Head on.

RG And your painting is without regard to taste or brand. Does that seem correct?

CB I tend to think of painting as a form of communication, a way of expressing things that are important



Hannah, from *The Bostic Girls* series
oil on paper

to me. How to make clear the message is what is important to me, not style or materials.

RG It seems sometimes you work in series, occasionally with a collaborator, and you possibly do stand-alone pieces. Is there something that forces these approaches?

CB Collaboration can be fun and challenging, and once in a while I do make one painting that stands alone, usually when I'm between series. I'll paint things like flowers just to keep painting. The flowers come in handy for charity auctions. But I keep saying that I'm going to stop giving stuff away! At any rate, working in series gives me a chance to explore the subject matter.

RG And like *The Bostic Girls* series, which provoked this conversation, that seems informed by experience and observation.

CB Look, I had three daughters and I now have four granddaughters. I have watched their struggles with big, life changing challenges and with the everyday problems that young girls face today. Growing up is not an easy thing. For me childhood was never a



From *In the Chicken Yard* series, oil on paper

time of innocence and carefree pleasures. There is much confusion and disbelief at the cruelty we see. And there is danger. Should they have to be told not to speak to strangers and that they can't go to the park alone! Should they be told to be afraid? It's too bad.

RG You've spoken about the issue of vulnerability regarding these paintings.

CB There is so much that is contradictory. They are told that they are to be lady-like, but to stand up for themselves. They are told that they are too young for many things that are held out to them as the ultimate goal. They are bombarded with images in the media glorifying girls whose attire and behavior are admired as glamorous and exciting. Yet these same behaviors lead to disastrous results for the average girl. And there are those who consider them prey.

RG Then would you call it a "coming of age" series?

CB No.

RG Didn't you once do a series on Annie Oakley?

CB Not Annie Oakley. She was much



*Rachel, from The Bostic Girls series
oil on paper*

too respectable to be interesting. The work I did was about Martha Jane Cannary, aka, Calamity Jane. I was at a flea market fifteen years ago and came across a little book called *Calamity Jane's Letters to her Daughter*. The book contained heart-wrenching letters to a child that Calamity had given away because of her inability to care for her properly. I put the book away and over the years thought about it occasionally, but I couldn't find it. In the meantime I discovered that Calamity was illiterate and could not have written the letters. They were written by a woman who appeared



Calamity, oil on canvas, 45" x 36"

in 1954 claiming to be the daughter of Calamity and "Wild Bill" Hickok. The whole thing was made up. But looking further into the life of this woman I found that there was much information that was contradictory. She was either a low-down drunk and the most disreputable whore imaginable, or she was a crack shot, an expert horsewoman, an invaluable Indian scout, and brave. So I went to South Dakota to visit the Black Hills and some of the towns where she lived. There is little primary material, just a few newspaper accounts of her arrests. My favorite story is the one about her death which took place in a town about ten miles from Deadwood. Since she had nursed the undertaker in Deadwood when he was suffering with smallpox as a

child, her body was taken there and laid out in a white coffin and a white dress. The women of Deadwood, who would never have spoken to her on the street, were sneaking into the funeral home and snipping off locks of her hair. An old cowboy friend made a wire cage and put it over her head so that the ladies couldn't get further to her.

RG Mistaking Annie for Jane. Mea Culpa! I came across some images of what looks like chicken or chicken yard paintings. Intriguing to say the least. Maybe closer to home?

CB There are a couple of hundred wooden panels in the *Chicken Yard* piece. When I was a child we were given baby chicks colored blue, green, lavender or pink for Easter. They seldom lived, but my grandmother kept little bantam chickens and at one point my sister and I each had a pet chicken—she a hen and I a rooster. The rooster was beautiful! His feathers were iridescent/blues and thallogreens that flashed in the sun. He sometimes flogged my grandmother, but I carried him around in lieu of a doll. As he became more mature he began to jump on the backs of the hens. There would be great flapping of wings and squawking. This was my introduction to sex and all I knew for a long time.

RG Art criticism can be a mean goose. Or a variation of a publicity release. What attention do you pay it?

CB I put up a good front, but I'm very thin-skinned. Fortunately, there is not much attention, so there is not too much to worry about. Criticism from someone I respect is something to pay attention to. It is important to remember that when you exhibit work you are walking naked in the world—there will be repercussions!

The painter Robert Godfrey headed the Department of Art at Western Carolina University from 1985-2001. He now lives and works in Hudson, New York.



Alice, from *The Bostic Girls* series, oil on paper



Arizona Cemetery, from *The Cemetery* series
oil on canvas, 9" x 25"

In Search of Lost Time

by Kyle Sherard

There's a building that looks like a small barn on the Charlotte Highway, just after you pass Cane Creek Road and head east toward Gerton. This is the Fairview studio that the artist Connie Bostic has treated as a second home and the creative center of her life's work. I went there one time in 2011 thinking I was going to interview Connie Bostic for a *Mountain Xpress* arts column I was writing. Instead she made me a sandwich and offered me a beer, and I answered her questions as much as she answered mine.

We sat at her rustic kitchen table for more than two hours talking about downtown Asheville in the 1980s and 1990s, the artist and River Arts District pioneer Porge Buck, and Bostic's one-time gallery, Zone One. The gallery had an upstairs tenant who walked her pot-bellied pig up Biltmore Avenue on a leash. Death, family violence, literature, Proust, and the Book of Job slipped in between bites. I never took out my notepad. Come to think of it, I never wrote about that afternoon until now. Turns out, those topics accounted for much of what I saw then and see now in Connie's art over her long career.

While storytelling about the past is a theme of her work,
it is storytelling meant to engage the present.

The undercurrent of her creative impulse is
the need to speak out about
how we live now.

The studio has an interesting history. It began life as a car repair garage and then became a welding shop. Connie's son, Michael, did extensive renovations to the space. It looks nothing like it did when he started in 2007. Inside the studio, natural light pours down from lofted, north-facing windows onto an assortment of easels, paintings leaning against walls, and sketches tacked directly onto the drywall. Mugs, plants, and books are scattered about the kitchen. Stacks of semi-mutilated magazines bear witness to her snipping and clipping for her collages. Paintings are stuffed into adjacent corners. A human skull sits in the window. Decades of paintings, drawings, and collages hang everywhere. Some are from exhibits past. Some have never been shown. Many are still in progress.

At a later visit I arrived to find a series of rigid black-and-white faces surrounding a young girl who was clearly dying, if not dead. Bostic told me these men were responsible for a young girl dying following an illegal abortion in Spindale, NC, in the 1950s. Some of the men were directly involved. Others were in positions of power and did nothing to help. Her powerlessness was searing. Decades later, Connie was trying to speak for her, to posthumously hold some-

one responsible. Speaking up for the vulnerable, holding perpetrators accountable are enduring themes of Connie's work. Like many of her paintings, this one has yet another renewed angle and depth. My favorite series of Bostic's work comprises small paintings of roadside memorials and cemeteries. This collection is a collaborative effort, in a way, with the photographer Kora Manheimer—collaboration itself being another mainstay of Bostic's life's work. Manheimer photographed roadside Native American cemeteries while in Arizona. Bostic took these images to the

next level by darkening the colors and elongating the view into low-angled panoramas.

The paintings feature thin white crosses scattered in the background, with bundles of faded flowers and tripods with wreaths in the foreground. They're muted and sad, yet stoic. Like so much of her work, they contemplate place as a source for an individual's life. The place is universal and simultaneously just down the road.

I only met Connie in 2010, leaving decades of her previous work out of my reach. But I quickly learned

that her previous work was not what was important to her now. While storytelling about the past is a theme of her work, it is storytelling meant to engage the present. The undercurrent of her creative impulse is the need to speak out about how we live now.

Kyle Sherard is an assistant district attorney in Buncombe County and part-time book seller at Bagatelle Books. He wrote about the arts in Asheville and greater Western North Carolina for Mountain Xpress from 2011-2015.



Connie standing in the doorway of her studio in Fairview
photo by Lindsay West

Bostic is North Carolina's most intensely personal artist. Few of her peers descend so steeply into their souls to find their themes and images. Few portray what they find there so boldly. Much of her work is autobiographical: what it means to grow up—specifically to grow up female—in a small-town in North Carolina; what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society; what it means to lose children.



Just Another Little Split Tail Girl, from the *Spindale* series
oil on canvas, 19" x 12"



Celebration, from the *Dreams* series, oil on canvas, 50" x 46"



Self Portrait, acrylic on canvas, 22" x 18"



#1, from the *Our Story* series, oil on canvas, 60" x 40"



Detail, *The Ascension of the Waitress at the Big Apple Cafe*, from the *Dreams* series, oil on canvas, 49" x 49"



Portrait of the Artist's Daughter Ticker, oil on canvas, 20" x 18"



The Trip, from the *Dreams* series, oil on canvas, 41" x 43"

Tearing It Up: The Collages of Connie Bostic

by Jason Andrew

Collage has always been considered a degenerate art—the cutting, the tearing, the gluing, the layering—the very process involves an aggressive and assertive act. Whatever the method, the medium has come to have a celebrated history. The twentieth century hails Picasso for that scrap of burlap he slapped on a cubist still-life painting in 1912.

And yet, the history of the medium dates before Picasso. By Victorian times, paper was everywhere. Scrapbook kits, Valentine card kits, photographic cartes-de-visite and all manner of decorative papers became fixtures in affluent homes, and cutting them up became an obsession. The process of manipulating, swapping, lifting, and replacing to create unexpected and often bizarre images can be found dating back to these times in works by Kate E. Gough, Sarah Eliza Pye, and Mary Watson among others. While many of these artists were considered “ladies of leisure,” they created subversive and highly political artworks which are only now receiving the recognition they deserve.

It is this legacy of these “ladies” that Connie Bostic revives. Often dark and socially charged, Bostic’s collages offer haunting portraits of life in Southern Appalachia. Delving into the shadows of the region’s history, her work unearths the struggles of its people, the scars of economic inequality, and the weight of environmental degradation. Her collages pull from old magazine clippings, greeting cards, ribbons, and string to capture her humor and her interest in issues of our time.

Bostic grew up in her grandparent’s house with a grandfather who was the chief of police. Societal conflicts and politics were always at the heart of every dinner conversation in the home. Social consciousness

and advocacy became integral to her very being. In turn, subjects in her art range from women’s issues to visual responses to contemporary political events.

Growing up surrounded by the natural beauty of the area, Bostic developed a keen appreciation for the land’s history and its people. Bostic’s collages often feature found objects, photographs, and materials collected from the region itself—reflecting her commitment to the notion that art and life are intertwined. Through her work, she channels the essence of

Often dark and socially charged, Bostic’s collages offer haunting portraits of life in Southern Appalachia.

Southern Appalachia, capturing the essence of its landscapes, traditions, and folktales. Moreover, Bostic taps into the degenerate history of the medium of collage to shed light on poverty, economic inequality, and the challenges that have plagued the area and our society at large for generations.

But her art is far from provincial. She regularly engages in a loose form of mail art practiced by Ray Johnson, sending a postcard with a collage and quirky inscription out to her many friends around the globe and encouraging them to write back.

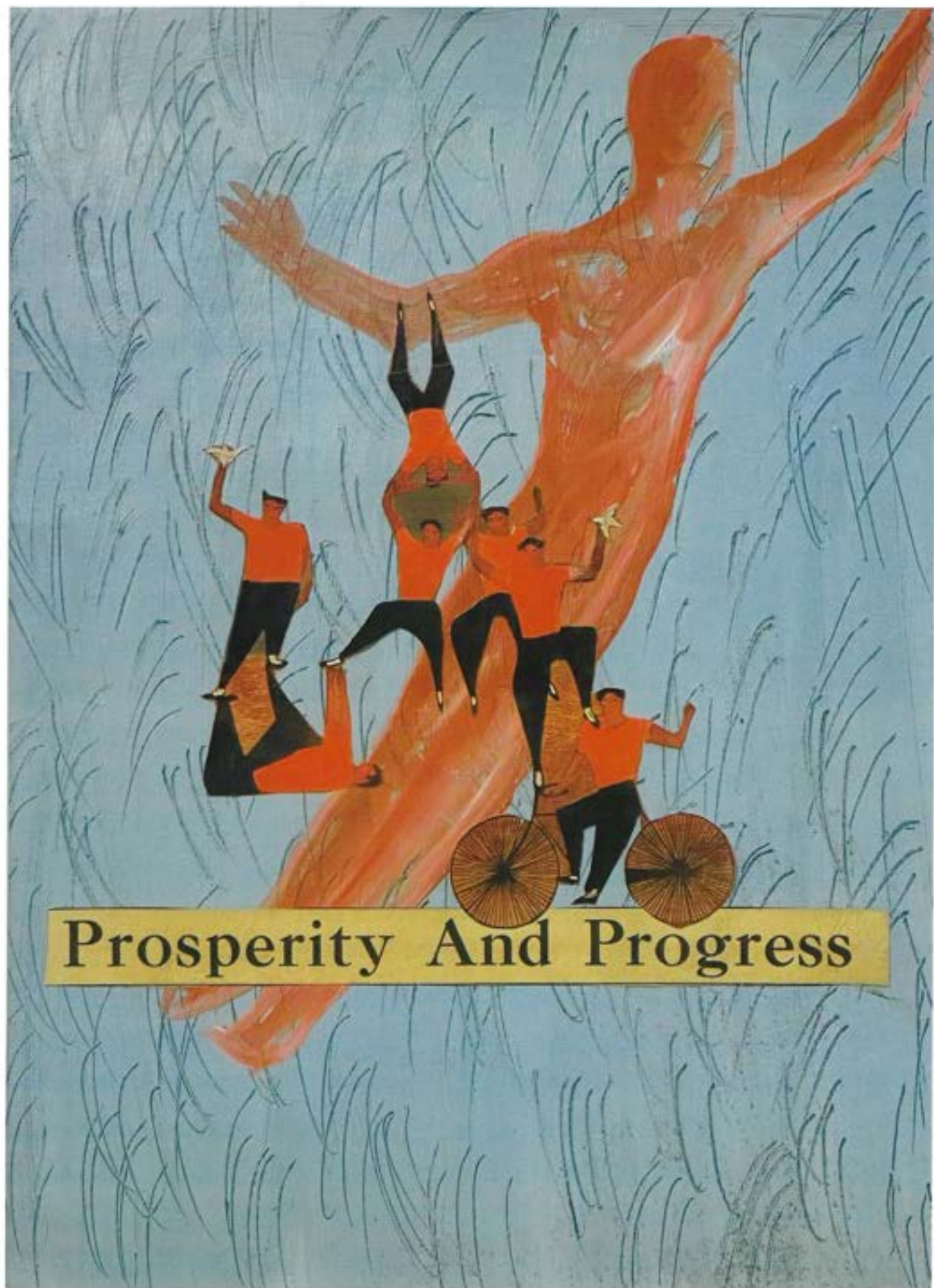
In a work like *Prosperity And Progress* (2010), the very title offers an optimism that feels ironic. And yet Bostic offsets this feeling with the fleeting leap of Merce Cunningham—a silhouette so gracefully borrowed from that now famous photograph by Hazel Larsen Archer of the dancer in mid-air at Black Mountain College.

Through her art, Bostic confronts uncomfortable truths and ignites conversations about the pressing issues faced by the Appalachian community and beyond. No other medium has allowed her more flexibility and serenity than collage. From the second-floor room above her painting studio, she works from stacks of collected materials. From these disparate parts she creates collages that offer a convergence of pain and resilience, humor and absurdity—serving a stark reminder that art can be a powerful force for change. With every torn piece of paper, Bostic sheds light on the darker corners of society, sparking a call to action for justice and compassion.

Jason Andrew is an independent scholar, curator, and producer specializing in postwar American art based in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

Right
Prosperity And Progress, 2010
Mixed media collage on painted paper
15"x 11" (19" x 15" framed)

Collection of Jason Andrew
and Norman Jabeut, Brooklyn



Prosperity And Progress

Beauty Out of Suffering

by Arnold Wengrow
Citizen-Times, Asheville, NC
June 8, 2008

An exhibition of new paintings by Connie Bostic at the Pump Gallery in the River Arts District is the first solo show in seven years by this influential Asheville artist. She named the exhibition "The Devil's Existence" from a Flannery O'Connor quote: "New Orleans is a place where the devil's existence is freely recognized."

The gallery's advertising postcard shows only a satellite weather map with some excerpts from Katrina Advisory No. 25 about "devastating damage expected" and "human suffering incredible by modern standards." So without any of Bostic's images or an explanation of the show's subject, the card might not stimulate you to go. That would be a mistake.



Waiting, from the Katrina series, oil on canvas, 36.5" x 29"

Bostic has transformed grim news photos of storm scenes and victims into powerful art. She does with Katrina what Goya did with *The Disasters of War* and Manet with *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian*—she creates beauty out of human suffering.

"I was only in New Orleans for a few days years ago, before Katrina," Bostic said, "but I fell in love with the place." The photos of the hurricane in newspapers, magazines and television "were everywhere," she said. "These images wouldn't leave me. They wouldn't go away. So six months after the hurricane, I just started this body of work."

Although she knew people from New Orleans, the images were her only connection to the city and the catastrophe. "You could think about somebody who was in the hospital and suffering and the morphine pump was empty," she said, "and there was nobody to do anything about it."

Stuff with a message

Bostic's *Katrina* paintings exemplify her interest in making more than pretty pictures. She started taking art classes after moving to Asheville in 1970 as a young wife and mother. But she perceived women were not taken seriously as artists. "I was interested in stuff that had a message," she said, "stuff that said something, not just landscapes and little bowls of flowers."

Robert Godfrey, then head of Western Carolina University's graduate art program, encouraged Bostic to take herself seriously as an artist, and she eventually got a graduate degree in art from WCU. Brenda Coates, who teaches contemporary art history and theory there, said Bostic is "a painterly painter" as well as one who makes statements. "She loves the feel of the paint," she said, "the texture of it, its colors, the way it goes onto the canvas. She also has the ability to move that process into some thought-provoking subjects."



Corpse, from the *Katrina* series
oil on canvas, 12" x 14"

She terms Bostic a neo-expressionist. While Bostic's work depicts recognizable people and places, the artist "expresses a mood," Coates said, "rather than just copying a figure or a scene. She takes it past representational." Bostic has become the matriarch of the visual arts in Asheville, Coates said, not only for her continued commitment to painting but for her commitment to helping young artists find their way. "I think you'd find lots and lots of artists in Asheville who would say she was their inspiration," Coates said.

Bostic has transformed grim news photos of storm scenes and victims into powerful art. She does with Katrina what Goya did with *The Disasters of War* and Manet with *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian*— she creates beauty out of human suffering.

Asheville Artist Connie Bostic's *Bedtime Stories* Conjures Dreams and Pain

by Arnold Wengrow
Citizen-Times, Asheville, NC
June 22, 2011

Connie Bostic may be Asheville's most intensely personal artist. Few of her peers descend so steeply into their souls to find their themes and images. Few portray what they find there so boldly.

Take *Bed of Pain*, for example, a mixed-media painting in a new solo exhibition, *Bedtime Stories*, at the Flood Gallery at Phil Mechanic Studios in the River Arts District through June 29. Like other pieces in this show, Bostic incorporates a real nightgown into a thickly painted panel. The shape suggests a narrow bed.

The nightgowns in these paintings are mostly brightly colored and float like kites above a distant earth. But in *Bed of Pain*, a pale gown with a blue tint is splayed and plastered against what is clearly meant to suggest a rumpled white sheet.

The body that departed this nightgown definitely writhed and sweated its imprint into this bed. So far, so literal. For all these paintings, Bostic provides a wall label citing a memory or dream that inspired her imagery. "The reoccurring dream I had as a child was one of falling off the landing of the stairs at my grandmother's house," reads the label for a work titled, straightforwardly, *Falling Off the Landing*.

That's a risky thing for an artist to do. Reading these labels, you might think, "OK, I see what she wants us to get" and move on. But if you hang around, you might see more than the artist herself sees. Or something completely different.

With *Bed of Pain*, Bostic gives an aphorism, rather than a bit of autobiography. "Pain can be colorless and all consuming," she says. "It can also be color-coded." You might wonder if this artist really does experience pain in colors, the way people with synaesthesia see letters or numbers in colors. You might feel uncomfortable thinking about this sweat-drenched bed. Is Bostic letting us too near some illness she or a loved-one endured?



Bed of Pain, from the series *Bedtime Stories*
collage and acrylic on wood door, 8' x 2'

Autobiographical artist

At age 75, Bostic is one of Asheville's preeminent artists. Her longtime volunteer work for the Black Mountain College Museum and other organizations has made her an elder stateswoman of Asheville's arts scene. She may be more visible, however, as a champion of other local artists than for her own work. She is not represented by any galleries, does not participate in studio strolls and hasn't had a solo exhibition in Asheville since 2008.

Robert Godfrey, retired professor of art at Western Carolina University, who taught Bostic in graduate school, agrees that she is an autobiographical artist. "She brings a lot of herself to all of her work," he said. "She has feelings the outside world doesn't necessarily see. She's much stronger, much more introspective than people realize." Where Bostic may see pain as colors, Godfrey finds another surprising sense perception in *Bedtime Stories*. "There's almost something like an odor that comes out of them, something both visual and olfactory," he said. Romantic paintings, like a filmy pink nightgown drifting among wispy white clouds, are perfumey. Gritty ones, like a blood-red gown hovering before a thunderhead, are loamy.

Godfrey sees power in what he calls the "indeterminacy" of Bostic's visual autobiographies. The meaning of her paintings can't be pinned down. "Her narratives will be never resolved," he said. "She's always going to want to bring back a memory, not in a nostalgic way, but with a certain sense of resignation."

If the *Bedtime Stories* paintings look head-on at her subconscious, Bostic says she is working now on a series that "will be much harder to face than those were. They are about a young woman I knew when I was in my early teens who died in 1953 at age twenty-five of an illegal abortion." This is an artist unafraid to tell very personal stories, bedtime or otherwise.



Falling Off the Landing, from the series Bedtime Stories

"Her narratives will be never resolved.
She's always going to want to bring back a memory,
not in a nostalgic way, but
with a certain sense of resignation."

—Robert Godfrey

As a gallery owner and as an arts writer for the weekly alternative newspaper *Mountain Xpress* and the website *Audience/The Asheville Arts Review*, Connie Bostic illuminated the Asheville art scene with her discerning eye and forthright commentary.

Drifting Toward Diabetic Coma

by Connie Bostic
Mountain Xpress
February 4, 2009

Cupcakes have become the “in” thing in the culinary world: They’re sweet, have lots of gooey frosting, are easy to eat and hassle-free, no plate or fork required. They do, however, lack the elegance of a torte or the substance of a pound cake. But what does all this have to do with the local art scene?

In 1987 the *Asheville Citizen-Times* published Robert Godfrey’s classic piece, “Is Asheville in Danger of Becoming Cupcake Land?” In this short essay, Godfrey posed the question, “How does a community avoid what is simply popular culture and wedge in ideas and artifacts which are challenging, perhaps controversial?”

Having recently visited seven of Asheville’s commercial galleries, I think there’s little question that our fair city has edged closer to confection. There are plenty of well-crafted paintings, but few that would provoke a lengthy philosophical discussion. All but one of these galleries seemed to be taking the “something for everyone” approach: a *mélange* of artists working in totally different styles, with different intents and uneven results. In most cases, there was nothing to tie the work together. Indeed, in some cases, there was little indication that the gallery had any vision or purpose beyond trying to sell something.

“How does a community avoid
what is simply popular culture
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perhaps controversial?”

—Robert Godfrey

Owning an art gallery is not as easy as it might appear. There’s a lot more involved than just getting dressed up for an opening and smiling at potential patrons. Decisions on which works to show and how many risks one can afford to take with exhibits can be heart-wrenching: Should you use your costly space to showcase work that’s not readily accessible, that requires more than a fleeting glance in order to be understood?

Some artists, of course, have instant, broad appeal. They execute their work in the color scheme that’s currently in favor, and they demand no serious contemplation from collectors. In short, the work is marketable: The gallery can keep the lights on and pay the rent. Galleries must take these things into consideration; no one is served if they close their doors.

Artists face the same dilemma: Should they make art that challenges and maybe even disturbs, but feeds their own souls and honestly expresses their ideas? Or should they tone it down, producing something pretty that enables them to pay their studio rent on time?

At no time in recent memory has the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce sent out a brochure that did not promote Asheville as an art mecca. Hotels, restaurants, gas stations and shops all benefit from the perception that Asheville is an “arts destination.” Extensive—and expensive—studies and surveys have been conducted by HandMade in America, Appalachian State University and the North Carolina Arts Council to document the local arts scene’s economic impact—but is that really why we should value art and artists?

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Robert Godfrey and Kevin Hogan are two of Asheville's most mature and professional artists, yet neither has exhibited work here in years. When I asked him why, Godfrey just said, "No comment."

Hogan, meanwhile, remembers that twenty years ago he'd be asked, "Why don't you show in Asheville?" Now, he says, he's asked, "Why is there no place in Asheville for you to show?"

"Eventually, if people come here because of all the art hype and see that it's all hype and no substance, they will stop coming."

—Kevin Hogan

Hogan believes there's a growing awareness among collectors of the overcommodification of art here, coupled with an absolute lack of representation for art with a serious intellectual aspect. "It's just a market, a grocery store," he says. "There is no focus on quality—all we have is Bob Ingle. It may be OK for peanut butter, but for art with any real meaning, we have to move past Laura Lynn. Eventually, if people come here because

of all the art hype and see that it's all hype and no substance, they will stop coming." Hogan, however, says he hangs on to the old-fashioned notion that "the commercial world taints the work."

Ursula Gullow, a young painter who's active in the local arts community, says, "Asheville artists can be isolated." A graduate program at a nearby college or university, she maintains, "could bring visiting artists with influence from the larger art world to inspire and encourage us. This is a small town—everyone wants to be safe and polite—and so no one pushes the envelope. There is no serious dialogue or criticism of other artists or of the galleries."

Gullow has many ambitious and perhaps unrealistic ideas about how to improve the situation for local artists: better press coverage of non-mainstream arts events; expanded outreach and more challenging museum exhibits; meaningful grants and health care for artists whose work is not commercially viable. Arts education, she believes, is the key to collectors being willing to explore art that's edgy or dark. "But a commercial gallery with tunnel vision won't stop

people from making their art," she notes. "It just might force them to find more interesting and creative outlets to produce and sell their work."

Still, a new year always brings new hope. JoAnna Fireman, for example, creates small ceramic sculptures. Raw and vulnerable, they depict creatures half-formed or in a state of disintegration. "The intention of my work is to awaken the senses and the heart-disturb, to provoke and ignite the imagination ... enticing the viewer to wonder about our place in the family of things," her artist's statement reads.

Fireman's work is showing in the Blue Spiral's Focus Gallery this month. The gallery has shown courage in hanging these intriguing little in-your-face pieces. Now let's see if there's anyone here with the courage and insight to buy one.

Asheville-based painter Connie Bostic formerly owned Zone One Contemporary gallery on Biltmore Avenue.

Asheville's *Energy Loop*

by Connie Bostic

Audience/The Asheville Arts Review

June 2009

A city can be defined by its public art. The Statue of Liberty is synonymous with New York. The Eiffel Tower is a universal symbol for Paris.

But the Parisians didn't immediately warm to "the odious column built up of riveted iron plates," as some leading citizens called it. And New Yorkers had trouble raising money to install Miss Liberty, a gift from France. "If the money is not now forthcoming," the fund-raising committee warned, "the statue must return to its donors, to the everlasting disgrace of the American people, or it must go to some other city, to the everlasting dishonor of New York."

Works of public art may be the same from their creation till the end of their lives, but the public's perception and appreciation of them can change over time. Here in Asheville Dirk Cruiser's *Energy Loop*, the city's first public sculpture, has suffered years of neglect and disrespect. Now that it has finally found a permanent home, will it take its place as a symbol of our city's artistic vitality? Can it become, like Douglas Ellington's art deco cupola on City Hall, an icon of Asheville's history?

The case of Chicago might be instructive. Few cities in the world can match its treasure trove of public art. The collection runs the gamut, from representational statues of generals, statesmen and explorers to abstract works by modern masters. A monumental sculpture by Picasso is simply known as *The Chicago Picasso* along with Alexander Calder's equally abstract *Flamingo*, it is immediately identified with the Windy City.

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Yet when these now beloved icons were installed, controversy raged. Ugly and insulting, citizens said. They objected to their initial cost and ongoing upkeep. Screams about government waste and accusations of elitism were rampant. Indeed, to many Chicagoans in 1967, Picasso's fifty-foot abstract steel bull seemed insulting. Only recently has it come to symbolize another time in the history of a town that Carl Sandburg called "Hog Butcher for the World."

Sculpture for downtown Asheville

Before *Energy Loop* was installed in 1983, the only thing resembling public art in Asheville was the Vance Monument, erected in Pack Square in 1898. It was mostly paid for by one patron, George Pack. Not until 1975, however, was there any idea that Asheville needed public art. That was when the Women's Auxiliary of the Buncombe County Medical Society donated \$1,000 to a new organization called Quality Forward for "a work of public art or sculpture for downtown Asheville."

In the deserted, boarded-up environment that was Asheville's downtown in 1975, there seemed little reason to pursue public art. So nothing happened until 1978, when the Akzona Corporation, then Asheville's most important—and Dutch-owned manufacturer—commissioned international architect I.M. Pei to design its new corporate headquarters for Pack Square. Thus began the long, slow process of bringing downtown back to life.

When the Akzona Building, now the Biltmore Building, was completed in 1980, a sculpture for Pack Square didn't sound like such a ridiculous idea. Quality Forward moved forward with its goal of art in downtown. It added another \$1,000 to the funds from the Women's Auxiliary and held a competition. It enlisted an impressive panel of judges: architect Charles T. Young of the I.M. Pei firm, who was the supervising architect for the Akzona project; Harvey Littleton of Spruce Pine, known as the father of the contemporary art-glass movement; Edwin Ritts, then director of the Asheville Art Museum; Sally Rhoades, chair of the Asheville Area Arts Council; and Norma Price, a long-time Asheville City Council member.

The call for entries was brief, simply asking for an outdoor sculpture. There was no mention of style, size or material. Proposals came in from eighteen artists in a wide variety of

styles, from Wayne Trapp's modernist works to the decidedly post-modern work of Scott Fair. The judges chose four finalists and ultimately settled on Dirk Cruiser's *Energy Loop*.

Dirk Cruiser

Dirk Cruiser was not a household name in the then small Asheville arts community. Relatively new in town, Cruiser was a quiet married man with two children. In the early 1970s Cruiser's parents retired to Western North Carolina from New Jersey. Soon after, Cruiser sold his graphics design firm in California and moved his family to the same wooded area near the Swannanoa River. He and his wife, Karen, built their cabin-style home with their own hands, hiring professionals only for the excavation and electrical work.

In California Cruiser carved shore birds that frequented the coast near where they lived. He continued working in wood after coming to the mountains, carving native birds and making doll houses and children's toys.

"Art did not consume Dirk,"

Karen Cruiser said in a recent interview. "His whole life was art. He saw art in everything around him and everything he made was created with artistic integrity. He made models of our house with minute details before we left California. He put the same time and craftsmanship into making a child's toy as into a sculpture. He built most of the furniture for our house." She reminisces with pride that Cruiser "divided our twelve-acre property into different areas of woods and meadows so that on a walk we were greeted with surprises along the way. He loved walking along the Swannanoa, especially at night."

For most of his career Cruiser worked in the basement of his home. "He was very private about what he was making in the many hours he spent in the basement, sometimes until 3 a.m.," Karen Cruiser said. A new piece would appear upstairs without

comment, with the expectation that she would ignore it for several days. After she had lived with the new work for a while, her husband would ask, "Have you noticed anything new around here?" Then, and only then, they would discuss the new work.

A devotee of Carl Jung, Cruiser believed in the living energy of all things. He planned everything he did very carefully, his wife said, but was fully aware of the constant changes of life. The twists and turns of the Swannanoa River that he loved may have been a metaphor to him for these fluctuations and the inspiration

Energy Loop is another

expression of

Cruiser's philosophy.

It climbs toward the heavens

and drops gracefully back

toward the earth.

It replicates the meandering

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for much of his work. He knew that no matter how carefully things were planned, life did not proceed in a straight line.

Energy Loop is another expression of Cruiser's philosophy. It climbs toward the heavens and drops gracefully back toward the earth. It replicates the meandering cycles of life. Cruiser was very excited to have won the Quality Forward competition, his wife said. He had exhibited his work in local and regional shows, but this was his first public commission.

Twists and turns

The road to the construction and installation of *Energy Loop* was, like the sculpture itself, filled with twists and turns. The original site, in front of the Jackson Building, had to be abandoned because city engineers discovered the sidewalk could not support the weight of the steel beams

and concrete required to anchor the work. The city then proposed that Quality Forward move the piece up the street to a new brick sidewalk in front of the recently-vacated Pack Library building. This option, however, required another \$7,000 to re-do the sidewalk after the installation. In the end the Quality Forward sculpture committee decided that *Energy Loop* would be placed on a grassy area in City-County Plaza.

As in many other cities under similar circumstances, there were outraged objections when the maquette for the work was unveiled. According to newspaper accounts, some of the most vocal opposition was from the United Daughters of the Confederacy. They insisted that any public sculpture near the Jackson Building, where the monument shop of W.O. Wolfe, Thomas Wolfe's father, had stood, should depict Wolfe's marble angel. One UDC member commented in the newspaper that she didn't deny that *Energy Loop* was art but it did not belong on Pack Square.

Other letters to the editor suggested that there was room for the Cruiser sculpture in the land fill, or that if that was the best the committee could come up with, "perhaps we had all better move." The lead editorial in the *Asheville Citizen* for January 2, 1983, titled "There's Room On Square For Many Kinds Of Art," gave *Energy Loop* its support. The writer commented, "It is a thing of curves and shifting shapes; it represents nothing in particular, perhaps, but it says everything to people who appreciate its message."

According to Karen Cruiser, the artist was annoyed and upset by the criticism, but stoically said, "Art is open to interpretation." Cruiser was quoted in the *Citizen* that his purpose was "to objectify on a human scale the course of individual, community, national, cultural, and planetary life, which . . . when seen within their respective time frames are brief but extraordinary surges of vital energy."

It was clear early on that the original \$1,000 from the Women's Auxiliary of the Buncombe County Medical Society, with the additional \$1,000 from Quality Forward (plus a small amount, less than \$200, donated by downtown merchants), would cover only the proposed honorarium for the artist, not the cost of constructing the work. Quality Forward asked Betty Holden, wife of Warren Wilson College president Ben Holden, to take on the task of raising additional funds. She told a reporter for the *Citizen*, that she and her husband recognized Cruiser "as a fine artist and a solid, likeable person and we think very highly of him."

Her belief in Cruiser and his work was crucial. She raised \$16,000 from private donors. The Asheville Area Arts Council gave another \$500. The North Carolina Arts Council contributed \$5,000. Work began.

A beauty for the city

Cruiser first constructed a full-sized replica of the sculpture in cardboard as a pattern for the fabricator, Candler welder Jack Carver. Interviewed for the *Citizen*, Carver admitted that he was not an "art fancier" and that he "was a little leery at first." But he wanted the job, he said, because it was "something unique." Carver became a committed fan of *Energy Loop*, however, noting that there was no tax money involved. "The city's getting a good deal," he told the *Citizen*; "It's going to be a beauty." Cruiser spent day after day in the welding shop, overseeing each step of the work.

Finally, in July 1983, eight years since the original contribution, Governor Jim Hunt unveiled the sculpture during the fourth Bele Chere Festival to the music of the Smoky Mountain British Brass Band. Still a lightning rod for controversy, *Energy Loop* drew more letters in the *Citizen*, both pro and con.

But gradually the attention slowed and Asheville slowly began to accept

the sculpture. As tourists stopped to photograph the piece and newcomers from more urban areas came to town, the citizens of Asheville apparently decided that *Energy Loop* was simply a part of downtown. A generation of Asheville children discovered how much fun it was to climb up the sculpture's smooth slopes. *Energy Loop* was a part of their lives, something they felt comfortable with and enjoyed.

In the late 1980s Cruiser continued to create sculpture, including a large outdoor work for Florida Atlantic University. He also built himself a studio near his house and began to paint. Warren Wilson art teacher Dusty Benedict, a close friend of Cruiser's, said recently that the artist was always frustrated that his recognition as a craftsman overshadowed his reputation as a fine artist. "Dirk had a great sense of humor but he was dead serious about his work," Benedict said; "He was committed to getting it right. His skill as a woodworker was remarkable. He was obsessive about perfection."

In 1992, Cruiser organized an exhibition of his paintings for the Weizenblatt Gallery at Mars Hill College. He said at the time, "I switched from wood sculpture because I felt I was setting out ideas and feelings important to me but people could see only the 'crafty' appeal of wood, the sensuousness of finely finished walnut and cherry. North Carolina is a craft-aware area anyway."

Cruiser pushed his work toward an integration of painting and sculpture. In his statement for the exhibition, he wrote, "These paintings are attempts to find the possibilities and limitations of a new medium." After making sculpture for twenty years, he said, "I discovered the medium was no longer quite in tune with the message. Finely finished walnut was a bit too elegant for a view of the world that had become a little grainy." Instead, he said, he was turning to "spray-paint from K-Mart and Bondo,

the dent-filler that does wonders for old cars. The results were gritty and immediate."

In a review in the *Citizen*, Western Carolina University art historian James Thompson wrote, "Having worked as a graphic designer and as a sculptor, Cruiser brings to his first exhibition as a painter sophisticated understanding of rich surfaces and depths, both illusionistic and actual." If abstract art still appeared arbitrary and arcane to the *Citizen's* readers in 1992, Thompson reassured them that even "the most avid fan of trompe-l'oeil realism could not fault" Cruiser's complex craft. His works employed "the imagery of machinery and technology as both stimulating structure and labyrinthian prison."

Cruiser died unexpectedly in 1996 at age fifty-two. The following year, Benedict organized and curated a retrospective exhibition of his work, both paintings and sculpture, at Warren Wilson College. Cruiser considered his sculpture, especially *Energy Loop*, Benedict said, to be his most important work.

For a number of years *Energy Loop* was out of the news. Then in 2000 a plan surfaced to create a new park in the area from the Biltmore Building to the County Court House and City Hall. Once more *Energy Loop* became the center of controversy. There were claims that years of deferred maintenance had rendered the work without value. It did not fit with the new concept of the park. Local artists and others rallied to preserve Cruiser's and Asheville's artistic legacy, however, and the piece was removed and restored. Now, after more years of debate, it finally stands, fully restored and with quiet dignity on a small prominence in the new plaza next to the Health Department Building across the street from its former home. Perhaps the sculptor's old friend, Dusty Benedict, said it best: "Cruiser's *Energy Loop* moved Asheville into the 20th Century."

WALKING NAKED IN THE WORLD
Connie Bostic Retrospective

Upstairs Artspace
Tryon, North Carolina
August 19–October 8, 2023

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From the *Our Story* series, oil on canvas, 60" x 42"
Collection of Dewayne Barton and Safi Martin



Left
Untitled, from the *Pipeline* series
oil on canvas, 17" x 19"

Back cover
Day 9, from the *Katrina* series
oil on canvas, 12" x 14"

