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THE RADAR ART

BY STEVE CARTER

JOURNEY TO ABSTRACTION *The artistic evolution of Connie Connally has taken her from figurative to abstract...and the adventure's not over yet*

Connie Connally is still on a high from a recent working holiday in Italy, her first visit there. Painting on the go in both oil and watercolor, Connally recorded her *en plein air* (literally "in open air") impressions in sketchbooks and on canvas, occasionally with a camera. "You just see things so much more in depth when you're really *looking* at the surroundings and the environment, and how you're connecting with it," the artist enthuses. "It was great fun--the light just changes so quickly...you're looking at things and thinking, 'should I paint what I'm seeing, or paint what I saw just a few minutes ago?' It's really challenging in that regard. You're painting what you see, but also still painting that emotional connection." Back home in Dallas, readying for an upcoming exhibition at Craighead-Green Gallery, Connally's eager to get to work.

Once in her studio, Connally will surround herself with the fruits of her on-site efforts and begin creating in oil on canvas; it's a process she first put into practice in graduate school. "I take all my sketches and paintings that I've done out in the field, set them up in the studio and start responding to them," she explains. "These additional larger pieces are more like an emotional response than actual 'taking down the information' note-taking, so to speak. The plein air pieces are beautifully responsive to your connection with the environment where you are—you can't even get close to that by taking a photograph and bringing it back to the studio."

The body of work assembled for the exhibition, which runs from March 31 to April 30, is comprised of canvases documenting both her trip to coastal Italy and visits to the waterfront of Santa Barbara, California. Connally's fascination with harbor scenes is predicated, in part, on what she terms a lot of "linear information." Vertical lines, sailboats, moorings, buoys and palm trees all provide interest, which is redoubled by their reflections in the water. "There's a crisscrossing of patterns," she observes, "and I've found that building of linear structure works beautifully for me." The abstraction of her work over the last several years stands in sharp contrast to her decades as an illustrator and portraitist, although her dedication to discovery is constant.

Connally's restless passion for art has been a given for as long as she can remember. Raised in Duncan, Oklahoma, drawing was an every day activity for her; she was especially good with figures. "Drawing was one of those things that was a part of my life from the get-go," she recalls. "Honestly, I've never thought of myself as anything other than an artist...I've always been headstrong in one direction and one direction only." After three years at Oklahoma University, Connally finished her bachelor's at Wichita State and embarked on a career in illustration, specializing in

fine art paintings for advertising agencies around the country. Although successful, she knew her artistic goals lay elsewhere, noting, "Eventually my love for the gallery and the fine arts held out, and I made that transition."

Next, Connally made a name for herself as a portraitist. By the mid-90's, keeping up with commissions had become a full time concern. In 2001, she first exhibited her *People I Know*, a mammoth tour de force comprised of 90 individual portraits assembled as a single work. The piece seemed to have a life of its own, and long legs, making the rounds of galleries; it eventually showed at 13 venues from San Diego to New York, garnering critical raves. Ironically, by the time the Dallas Observer named her "Best Portrait Artist in Dallas" in 2003, Connally had been awarded a full scholarship to SMU's Meadows School of the Arts Master's program and was moving away from the figurative, exploring abstraction and the unfamiliar.

"One of *the* major reasons I went back to school was to open myself up for feedback and other people's input," Connally admits. The artist's transition from figurative to abstraction proved to be a little frightening, akin to letting go of land. "One of the things I bargained with myself about was learning to be a little more fearless, be a better risk taker and not always trying to figure out what the outcome was going to be," she says. "It's a process of learning to let the destination go, and just push forward, letting the *journey* be what the aim is..." Other inspirations for Connally's explorations were the canvases of abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning, and an exhibition of Joan Mitchell's work that happened to be visiting the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth at the time; Mitchell's own path from figurative to abstraction was exactly what Connally was facing.

Connally's epiphany occurred while she was working on a plein air piece at SMU. "I'd started on the painting in Taos and then brought it back to my studio," she says. "It was called *Thistles and Fire*—it was based on reality, but letting go of the reality, and just letting that emotional connection that you make, there's this little spark that happens...when you start to paint there's a calligraphy, a language that you create with the way that you draw, just like the letters we use to make our words. I think abstract artists in particular create a kind of iconography with themselves that creates a language that means all those emotional things you're responding to when you're out in the environment. My response to nature has been the rhythm that happens in nature, how that connects with my rhythm, and that rhythm's translated into lines, in my case a very rapid, fluid line..." Indeed, in a work like *Koi Pond*, the artist's intense palette and expressive gesture fuel the canvas with a churning energy that's brilliantly palpable and evocative.

Beginning a painting, Connally typically has only a general idea of what may unfold. She admits that the specter of a blank canvas "...is so scary, and it's always a battle, but you just have to start. And then once you do, at some point you have to let go and let the painting be what it needs to be; the painting's really the boss and it's telling you what needs to happen next. And that's when you have to be your most fearless, and not push for that expected outcome." As her art continues to evolve, Connally expects a reconciliation of her disparate directions, speculating that the figurative and abstract will eventually marry. Her sense of discovery remains vital: "I love the idea of having very little idea about how I'm going to get started, and no clue whatsoever how it's going to finish. It's an adrenaline rush to let the painting come about on its own nature, and you're just hanging on for dear life and hoping it all comes out in the end. That's a lot more fun."

Discover ConnieConnally.com, and don't miss her upcoming exhibition at Craighead-Green Gallery, March 31-April 30.