

Anne Connell: A Little View

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September 19 – October 27, 1999
The Art Gym
Marylhurst University
Marylhurst, Oregon

Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to present a selection of Anne Connell's paintings at Marylhurst University. This will be a rare opportunity for Oregon audiences to view her recent work. We have many people to thank for bringing the exhibition to fruition: the collectors for lending these exquisite works, Miller Block Gallery in Boston and Robischon Gallery in Denver for their cooperation and assistance, and finally Anne Connell for the care she has given this project and, most importantly, for the paintings themselves.

2 The fact that we have been able to accompany the exhibition with a color catalogue is entirely due to the generosity of the artist's friends and supporters from around the country. We are grateful for the contributions of Terence S. Sweeney, the Carpat Foundation, Inc., Miller Block Gallery, Robischon Gallery, Lan Fenders, Robert and Molly Hsieh, Katayama Framing, Caroline Locher, Dr. Harold Nevis, Linda and Peter Parshall, John and Kathleen Rasmussen, Paul Campanella II and sons David and Paul, Stacey Steers and David Brunel, and Miles Turner. We also thank Christopher Zinn, Executive Director of the Oregon Council for the Humanities, for his deeply considered and insightful essay.

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Terri M. Hopkins
Director and Curator, The Art Gym

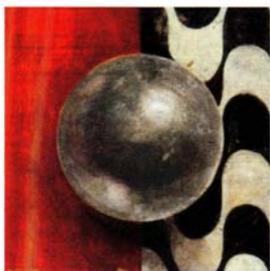
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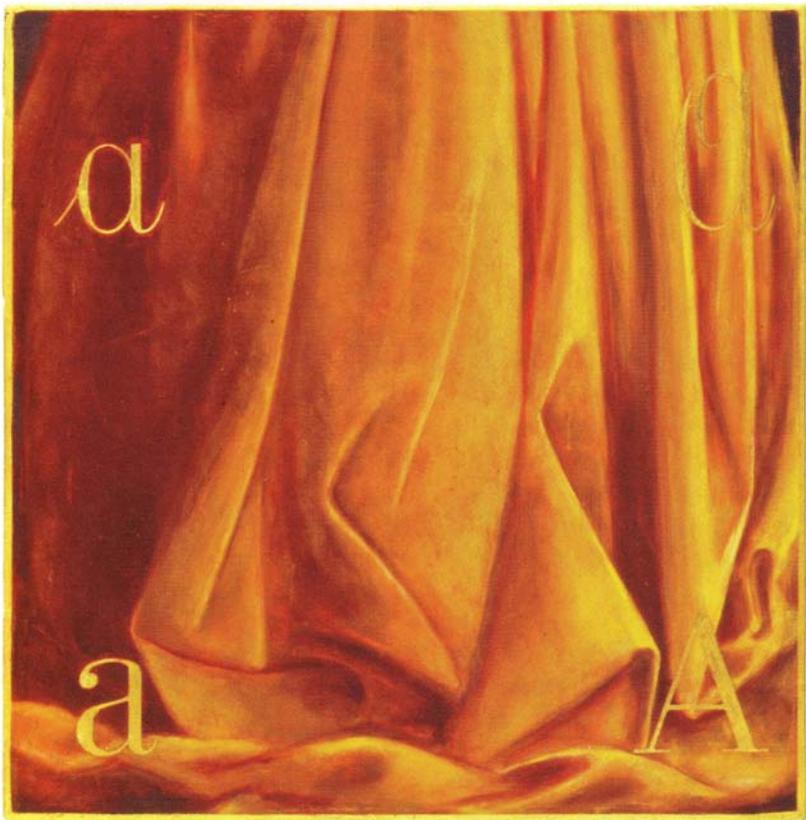
A Little View



Eloquent Objects

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ANNE CONNELL paints with oil and gold leaf on wood panels, producing carefully crafted objects that are beautiful to look at and intriguing to think about. Because she uses techniques derived from Italian painters of the fifteenth century—for example, the application of gold leaf to key parts of the composition, or the architectural elaboration of enclosed space—her paintings seem like souvenirs from an earlier visual world. Many of the paintings have titles in Latin or Italian, and feature images and details borrowed from the canon of northern Italian painting, although the images and details she chooses are seldom in themselves canonical: stairs, fruit trees, floor tile patterns, archways—the furniture, as it were, among which the Sieneese or Paduan painter would lodge his intercessors and miracle workers.



Aenigma

A dozen years ago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Painting in Renaissance Siena" exhibit helped to rehabilitate beauty as a measure of visual edification while also reawakening an appreciation for the sumptuous coloring and intimate scale found in northern Italian art. When Anne Connell composes a painting based on a mosaic floor pattern in Venice's Basilica di S. Marco (*San Marco*), or fills her frame with a drapery detail from a Florentine fresco (*Aenigma*), her work is recognizable as a sustained act of piety toward the visual culture of the Renaissance. Perversely, though, Connell omits from her own scenes the saints, sinners, and heroes that provided visual and thematic coherence in those earlier paintings. She draws our attention instead to comely surfaces and luminous tones (just glance, in this exhibit, at the gilded doors and pink masonry of *The Piazzetta*, or the crimson slippers in *Saint Martin Is Knighted*) that recall an earlier age's eloquence in gold and ultramarine without replicating its beliefs. Looking at her paintings is like going to Mass, once you've lost your faith, simply because the gestures, vestments, sounds, light, words and smells somehow encourage your love of the world.

Because Connell samples patterns and images from Italian Renaissance paintings and disposes them in unfamiliar ways, her compositions often appear elliptical or implausible. In *Transitus*, for example, the crisp edges of the playing card and the cherry stem make it look as if these things were being shuffled about on a marble floor or laid atop one another, rather than being painted onto a surface. The tower in the lower right hand corner, though, is ringed round with a cloud of white paint worked over gold. Disparate modes, in other words, combine in a single painting to give us objects in relief and, at the same time, their opposite—continuous transitions of shade, color and outline all over a flat surface. The effect is heightened by the disproportion among the grouped objects. The



Transitus

playing card, for instance, is measurably as large as the tower, and no perspectival system is invoked to resolve this apparent absurdity. In one respect, then, the painting marks its distance from its Renaissance precursors by refusing to alleviate our awareness of the illusionistic surface. When we are invited to look into the picture plane, as in *The Piazzetta* or *An Obscure Presentiment*, invariably some significant element is either intruded—the red ball in the first painting—or withdrawn—spatial harmony in the second. We are left with only a grouping of quotations as when, in *Transitus*, Connell finds her labyrinth at Chartres, transports her tower from a painting by Bellini in the Frick Collection, and imports her cherry stem from the National Gallery in London (see her annotation to the paintings, pages 19 and 20). Composing in visual citations, lifting them from their original contexts to put them to new uses, she lets her painting serve as the gathering place for these far-flung tokens. Hence the title, *Transitus*, connoting traffic, the transition from one place or state to another, but also loss, as in "things change," whether for good or ill.

Thus, while it's important to gauge the depth of her involvement in the aesthetics and vocabulary of the Quattrocento, we should also look after Connell's affiliations with the art of this century. She can, for instance, seem studiously postmodern. After all, she quotes intently from an arbitrarily limited archive, and observes procedures and arrangements that emphasize the artificiality of painting and highlight the beauty of technique without necessarily leading anywhere. She shares with an otherwise unrelated artist like Jasper Johns an affection for flags and cards and an interest in earlier techniques for treating the painting's surface (gold leaf for her, encaustic for him). Like Johns, too, she depicts "things the mind already knows" in puzzling ways, revealing new, public meanings while concealing more private ones. And like so many painters in the



The Piazzetta

modern era, her paintings seem to be consciously about the artifice of painting as a way of talking about the artificiality and interminability of representation—and seem to make of this difficult thoughtfulness their primary message.

As a way of identifying some of her characteristic themes, I want to look again at Connell's encounter with Renaissance art, beginning with the solitude of the encounter itself. In *Saint Martin Is Knighted*, Connell captures a detail from a fresco by Simone Martini, who was admired for having transferred to fresco painting the density and detail found in manuscript illuminations. Over the tableau of skirts and feet derived from the earlier painting, she applies a brocade of gold stars, making a surface as decorative as it is pictorial. Connell's conduct would be consonant with fourteenth and fifteenth century artistic practice, when painters like Simone Martini, working among the craft guilds, would make for their patrons objects whose beauty derived from the quality of the materials used as much as from the cleverness of their assemblage. Likewise, patrons observed no distinction of rank among different artistic forms, whether finely cast or skillfully carved statues, beautifully worked gold medals, or carefully rendered frescoes. The most direct way to heighten a painting's aesthetic worth was to apply gold leaf or other valuable substances to its surface, and patrons often negotiated with artists the amounts of gold leaf that would be used in particular commissions. Not until at least a century later was the illusionistic skill of the artist valued above the cost of the materials applied to the painting's surface.

Martini could reach an agreement with his patron about where the gold should be applied in the overall design because painter and patron were participating in a common artistic culture deeply rooted in both religious piety and mercantile exuberance. Although Connell's finely tipped gold leaf stars recall

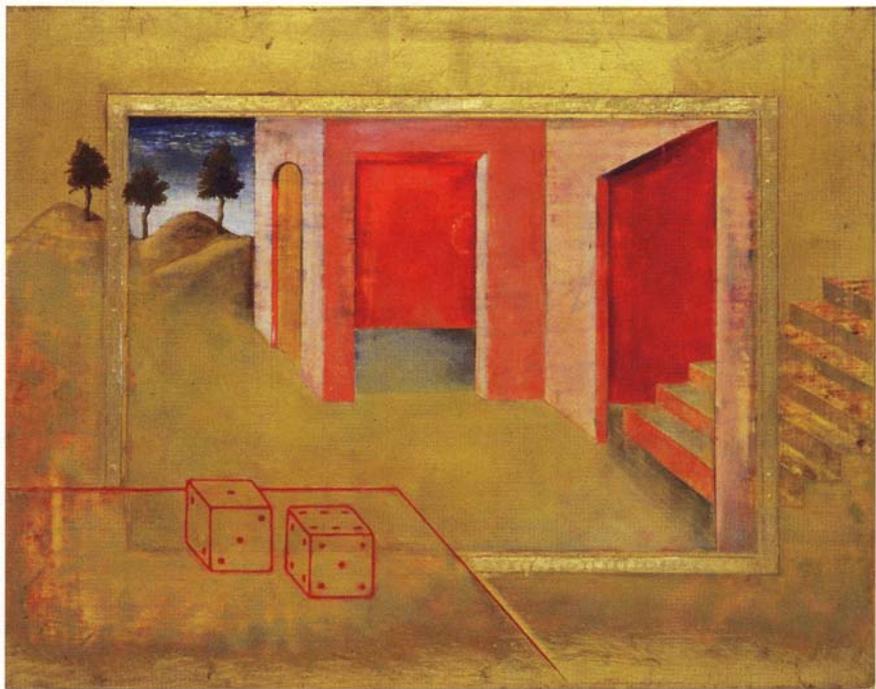


Saint Martin Is Knighted

that earlier, convivial aesthetic, she also expresses our distance from it with her truncated version of the celebrants' bodies and clothes. *Saint Martin Is Knighted* is the fresco we get if we look straight ahead and not, as it were, up. It expresses two aspects of her and our isolation. Just as we can no longer participate in the rituals of ennoblement and beatification depicted in the upper portion of the painting, so we no longer share directly in a well-understood culture of visual excellence. In these senses, *Saint Martin Is Knighted* is about this artist's solitude, about the virtue of keeping her eyes to the ground. (For another treatment of this theme, look at *Aenigma*, which takes from the very lowest portion of Benozzo Gozzoli's remarkable fresco of angels worshipping the very lowest portion of an angel's raiment.)

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An Obscure Presentiment addresses the theme even more explicitly. A border of gold frames a view of an open courtyard. At the back, a doorway opens on a passage with a red wall. A stairway ascends to the right while, to the left, the eye sees distant hills topped by three trees. The wall to the right of the inner frame dissolves, letting us see the stairway continue upward and out of the picture. Two red lines meet in the lower left hand corner, intruding another plane into the picture. A pair of red dice sits atop this ghostly table, showing seven. The little scene is indeed obscure, though less so when aligned with the original from which, Connell tells us, it is drawn: Sano di Pietro's *Saint Bernardino Resuscitating a Drowned Child*. Part of a predella devoted to the life of a contemporary Franciscan saint, the original shares its architectural elements with Connell's painting. However, the courtyard in Sano's painting is crowded with actors attempting to save a drowned child, pictured in the painting's foreground as lying in a tub of water. Descending the stairs from the right is the devout man who, arriving at the tub, implores the intercession of Saint Bernardino, hovering above



An Obscure Presentiment

the scene. The entire composition, reading from right to left, depicts the action moving across the courtyard in three parts, from desolation to, as it were, resuscitation. To the left side, Sano instead depicts the restoration of the child to life, its hands now pointed heavenward in thankful prayer. By comparison, in place of the restored child, Connell shows us those ominous dice. *An Obscure Presentiment* grasps a world structured, like Sano's, by disturbing possibilities—a child can drown when left alone—but without Sano's depiction of providential and merciful relief. Where, in the earlier painting, gold figures the richness of divine grace, here it indicates the poignancy of probable loss, the fearful chance, not that something might happen, but that nothing will.

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If Connell's paintings do indeed conduct a conversation with Renaissance art, and if they also partake in current attitudes toward representation, they do so on the way to developing an expressive vocabulary that has its own meanings and purposes. The pearls clinging to the folds of fabric in *Vox Clandestina* or resting atop the scattered materials of *Hortus Conclusus* are emblems of value, whether of the material or spiritual kind. Similarly, dice play a signal role in Connell's work, most tellingly in *Thither*, where a die sits on one side of the horizon, and a villa rests on the other. Both are exquisitely rendered, and their comparable magnitude suggests that they together represent the promise and the uncertainty of the material world.

That theme is further borne out in the way that Connell handles the materials out of which her paintings are made. Indeed, the fact that the surfaces of her paintings are rendered with extraordinary care can preempt our perception of their other qualities. We can admire the way in which objects like those pearls and red balls are built up out of paint on wood so as to appear almost three-



Thither

dimensional, and infer that the artist works this slowly and carefully in order to fix in time and space a perception of beauty. But we should also detect in these surfaces a certain velocity of expression that is in some sense personal and fleeting. Often, entire areas of her paintings are rubbed out or painted over, and she scores and scratches her surfaces in paintings such as *The Purity of Sentiment* in ways that suggest that the struggle with her materials is an emblem of the struggle with the material as such. In the wonderful recent painting, *A Little View*, whole segments display layers of surface marking and rubbing that echo, in their way, the lovely interlocking pattern that forms the painting's visual foreground. It's important to see that Connell scrapes and incises just as readily as she layers gold leaf over carefully drawn designs, that she combines those qualities that Alberti terms *diligenza congiunta con prestezza*, "diligence-with-quickness." It's an aspect of her painting that helps to keep their meaning incomplete and their effect unfinished, so that, gazing at *A Little View*, we sense the struggle that may have taken place in the painter's studio between the composition and dissolution of the elements with which she works.

These, then, are some of the elements of her vocabulary, the building blocks of her themes. They are composed out of the materials of her workshop even as they are derived from paintings made by the artists whose techniques she emulates. All this is a way of saying that from these exquisite objects there emerge voices, that these carefully arranged compositions are in fact emblazoned with the sounds of their makers' murmurings. In this sense, Anne Connell practices *prosopopoeia*, the ancient art of giving voice to the non-human world, the art of making things speak and of speaking through things.

– Christopher Zinn



The Purity of Sentiment



Vox Clandestina

Annotation and Checklist

Aenigma 1997

oil and gold leaf on panel, 9 x 9

Private collection

aenigma -atis n (Latin): riddle, mystery

The drapery detail is from Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco of angels worshipping, in the apse of the Cappella dei Magi (1459), in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence. The letters are from a modern Italian alphabet-learning game.

Hortus Conclusus 1998

oil and gold leaf on panel, 8.5 x 8.5

hortus conclusus (Latin): enclosed garden

The labyrinth is based on a garden maze published by J.V. De Vries at Antwerp in 1583. The small silverpoint drawing on the "label" at upper left, of a star-of-Bethlehem, is a partial copy of one of Leonardo da Vinci's botanical studies, now at the Royal Library, Windsor Castle.

A Little View 1999

oil on panel, 12 x 15

The small landscape detail is adapted from Piero della Francesca's *Portrait of Battista Sforza* (ca. 1465-75) in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence; it may represent Volterra. The ribbon pattern can be seen in groin vaults in the Bargello and elsewhere.

An Obscure Presentiment 1999

oil and gold leaf on panel, 6.5 x 8.25

The central image comes from the Saint Bernardino Predella (specifically, *Saint Bernardino*

Resuscitating a Drowned Child; private collection) by the Sieneese painter Sano di Pietro (datable to the 1470s).

The Piazzetta 1998

oil and gold leaf on panel, 7 x 9

Private collection

The town square is adapted from *Saint Dominic Resuscitating Napoleone Orsini* by Bartolomeo degli Erri (active 1460-1479) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Purity of Sentiment 1999

oil and gold leaf on panel, 16.5 x 16.5

The robed figure and the hare both come from Francesco del Cossa's 15th century fresco, *The Court of Borso d'Este under the Sign of Venus* in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara. The white pattern on the right is a variation on the heraldic partition line known as counter-embattled or crenelle.

Quarto 1997

oil and gold leaf on panel, 12 x 9

quarto: 1. the page size of a book made up of sheets each of which is folded twice to form four leaves, or eight pages, about nine by twelve inches in size 2. a book made of pages folded in this way
quarto *adv* (Latin): for the fourth time
quarto *m* (Italian): fourth; quarter

The drapery detail is from Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco of angels worshipping, in the apse of the Cappella dei Magi, in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence.

Saint Martin Is Knighted 1998
oil and gold leaf on panel, 20.75 x 20.75

Collection of Jonathan and Barbara Lee

The detail is from Simone Martini's fresco cycle of stories from the life of St. Martin of Tours in the Cappella di San Martino in the Lower Church of the Basilica di S. Francesco in Assisi.

San Marco 1997
oil and gold leaf on panel, 9 x 12

Private collection

This painting was inspired in part by the mosaic floor of the Basilica di S. Marco in Venice.

Semé 1997
oil on panel, 9 x 9

Collection of Marilyn Murdoch and Dennis Katayama
semé (French): *heraldry* having a design of many small figures; dotted, as with stars
sine *prep* (Latin): without

Thither 1997
oil on panel, 4.5 x 5.5

Collection of Stacey Steers and David Brunel
thither *adv* to or toward that place; there
—*adj* on or toward that side; farther

The small villa comes from Lorenzo di Credi's *Annunciation*, in the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome.

Transitus 1996
oil and gold leaf on panel, 9 x 9

Private collection

transitus -us *m* (Latin): crossing, passage; passing; traffic; crossing over, desertion; period of change, transition

The labyrinth in the center of the painting roughly reproduces the plan of a labyrinth in the stone floor of the Cathedral at Chartres. The small tower in the lower right corner comes from Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* (ca.1475), in the Frick Collection, and the cherry stem is an adaptation from one in Cosimo Tura's *An Allegorical Figure (The Muse Calliope)* (ca. 1460), in the National Gallery, London.

The Vocation 1999
oil and gold leaf on panel, 12 x 12

All details are from predella panels (c. 1437, now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City) from Beato Angelico's Perugia altarpiece, depicting scenes from the life of St. Nicholas of Bari.

Vox Clandestina 1999
oil and gold leaf on panel, 7 x 7

Collection of Joan and Mark Bloom
vox clandestina (Latin): whisper

The drapery detail is from an *Annunciation* (ca.1450) by Benozzo Gozzoli, now in the Pinacoteca Comunale in Narni.



All works in the exhibition are exhibited courtesy of the artist and her galleries, unless otherwise noted. Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.



Anne Connell resides in Portland, Oregon. She lived in Rome from 1996 to 1997.

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