

● Forum 91

Charles
Harlan

Carnegie
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of Art



Charles Harlan When you spend time hiking or camping in the woods, from time to time, you come across a freestanding chimney randomly. I remember encountering them a lot as a kid driving around rural areas in Georgia near where I grew up. They're hard to find if you go looking, so you just end up stumbling across them. There are a lot down there for some reason.

Eric Crosby And these encounters made you want to create *Chimney*?

Probably, but I didn't experience it that way. Something I come back to often in my work is the possibility of having an art experience with a non-art object out in the world. So, like encountering a freestanding chimney in the woods, approaching it as one might a sculpture, and having an experience that is poetic and beautiful. And then taking that experience and putting it back into an art context like the gallery. My work moves back and forth between the two.

Is it a matter of function? The freestanding chimney in the woods is no longer functional so it can become a kind of art?

Well, the thing is, it's completely functional. If you wanted to, you could build a fire right in it, and the chimney would work.

Is that part of its poetry then?

I don't know. I mean, to me, when it comes to the "readymade" as an art object, use value is an



Fig. 1: Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1945 replica of the 1915 lost original, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Katherine S. Dreier to the Collection Société Anonyme © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2025

integral consideration.

Like when Marcel Duchamp signed his snow shovel. He called it *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (fig. 1). You could no longer use the shovel as a shovel; it became art. And its title gives it a narrative context. I mean, you can't shovel snow with a broken arm, right?

That's pretty good. [Laughs]

Well, you know, it's Duchamp. He's pretty good. [Laughs]

But for me, taking something out of the real world and putting it into an art gallery is less a question of

use value, which is economic, and more a question of experience or perception as they relate to expectations.

And you're not just moving something between the spheres of art and non-art. Creating this piece has been a labor-intensive process, not a conceptual exercise. You have been giving form to an experience, not just a chimney.

For a long time, I've done this series of sculptures I call tree pieces where I use a section of fence or some other object that a tree has grown around and absorbed over time (fig. 2). And what's interesting about these sculptures to me is this question of whether the object is natural or man-made, and

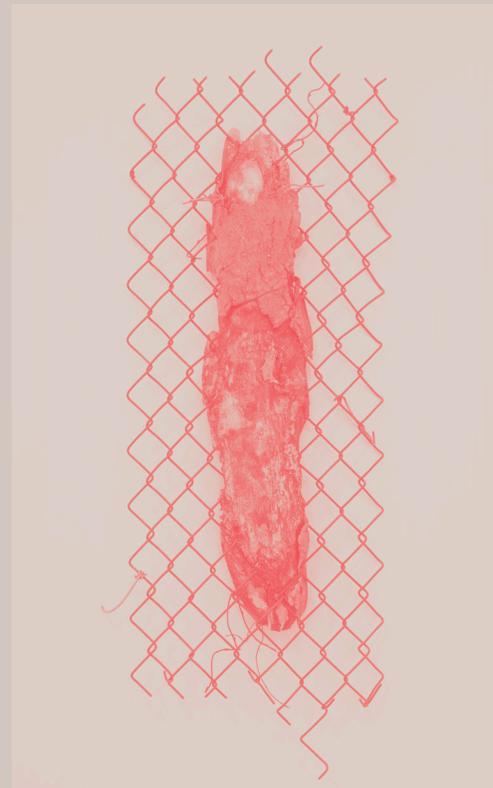


Fig. 2: Charles Harlan, *Tree*, 2014, Courtesy of the artist

then breaking down that distinction or rethinking it as a spectrum. *Chimney* is kind of similar: Is it a readymade? Is it a carefully crafted object? It's kind of blurry, somewhere in between.

Is that because *Chimney* is based on a real chimney?

Yeah, it's based on a very specific chimney I found in the middle of nowhere in a field in Georgia. I documented it and took measurements. And so creating the work opens a portal to that place and the experience of seeing it there.

Your tree pieces make me feel a sense of deep time. To consume a fence, a tree must grow very slowly. And the sculptures surface that history. *Chimney* also gives me that sense, like it's an ancient ruin.

I think of it in an archaeological way.

It's a reminder that fired clay bricks are not a modern invention. They are fundamental building blocks of human civilization.

And the hearth is a fundamental building block of human communities.

It's true. There has always been a hearth.

It's been the most important part of the home for thousands of years before central air and heating. It's a gathering place. Symbolically, a hearth can represent an individual's life but also a community's.

And maybe that symbolism only exists because the hearth is no longer the center of family life.

Yeah, it feels kind of nostalgic. There is a personal history to each one of the ruined chimneys you see. A freestanding chimney implies a tragedy since someone's house has burned down. The house is no longer there. Just the chimney remains. It becomes a sad, melancholy thing.

There's something violent about it too. A disaster has occurred.

I guess that's what's interesting about the hearth: It is a place that contains a destructive force that could destroy your home. But also, the potential for warmth or sustenance.

Which is what we saw again and again in the coverage of the Eaton Fire in Los Angeles. Freestanding chimneys everywhere.

It can become a tragic piece of architecture. You're trying to keep warm, but you accidentally burn down your house. And I feel like that's what we're doing as a species right now. We're trying to create a comfortable life on this planet, and in so doing, we're burning it down.

Chimney is a wet sculpture, and the fire is extinguished.

This show, in a way, is very similar to an exhibition I made at Pioneer Works in New York. I called it *Flood*,

and it came in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. I was thinking about the actual flood as it impacted the personal lives of people living in Red Hook. But I was also thinking about the flood in a mythological and biblical sense—both the dawn of time and the end of time.

There was a brick piece in that show, too.

When you entered the gallery from ground level, the sculpture appeared to be a giant brick cube. And when you stepped up onto the mezzanine around



Fig. 3: Installation view of Charles Harlan, *Flood*, 2016, Pioneer Works, Brooklyn. Photo: Andy Romer Photography

the exhibition space, the brick cube revealed itself to be a giant tank of water (fig. 3). The containment of the water created a sense of tension in the space. A tension one may have remained unaware of had

they skipped the mezzanine. I feel like these two exhibitions work in a similar way.

Both brick pieces have monumental scale, but *Chimney* has a different kind of effect. When did this become such an emotional sculpture?

I remember very specifically I was fishing in Connecticut once, and it started raining, so I diverted off the creek. And there was a big stone fireplace in the woods. And I remember it was dripping down the sides, and it was a beautiful experience. Maybe that was it. After the fire there is rain. And tears in the aftermath of a tragedy. But I didn't really remember that experience specifically until after plans for this sculpture were already underway. So it's hard to say.

You've carried that feeling into the work.

A sort of narrative is in it.

Yeah, *our* story. Human history is very present. And the work has a surreal quality too. The chimney is a part of the home that is both inside and out.

It's an interstitial zone.

What about water as a sculptural medium? It's a nontraditional material.

No, it's very traditional. Some of the earliest sculptures marked water sources. Think of early fountains in Rome. Before every home had plumbing piped to it, the place you went to get fresh water to drink or



Fig. 4: Installation view of Bill Bollinger, *Boston Common*, 1970 (2012), in *Bill Bollinger: The Retrospective*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2012. Courtesy of SculptureCenter, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella

bathe was a communal area in the center of town. So, I think it actually is a traditional sculptural material.

You're right, that makes sense. And oddly, it is uncommon in contemporary sculpture. I can think of Robert Grosvenor or Bill Bollinger (fig. 4) or even someone like Robert Gober (fig. 5), right? For some, it has symbolic associations, as with Gober, for others, it's more of a material experiment. And for you, it feels like your work moves along that full spectrum between the two.

That's a good way to describe it.

There are functions of water in our

society that are deeply rooted in belief systems. Water gives life but it also gives meaning. I'm thinking of baptismal cleansing or the ritual washing of hands.

I've made work about this, too. I did a show at the Atlanta Contemporary about baptism. And being a homecoming for me, it felt appropriate. I used a very traditional baptistery like you would find in a Baptist church where I grew up, but I juxtaposed it with a birdbath (fig. 6). So there was again this tension between personal history and social forces, and also this very specific cultural symbol next to something more irreligious, or prehistoric in a way. The birdbath seemed more pagan to me for some reason.

I think this is the most technically complex sculpture you have made, at least in terms of engineering.



Fig. 5: Installation view of Robert Gober, *Untitled* (detail), 1995–1997, Emanuel Hoffman Foundation, on permanent loan to Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel

Fig. 6: Charles Harlan, *Bird Bath*, 2018, Courtesy of the artist



I made a smaller version of *Chimney* in the studio to understand the materials and the mechanics. The technical aspect of making it into a fountain took the longest to reveal itself to me. From the beginning, after making the chimney itself, I felt vindicated that the image I had in mind could be a powerful sculpture. But testing the fountain mechanics, how the water circulates, and getting the right finish on the brick-work took a long time to perfect.

And making the sculpture has also been a process of making an exhibition because there is just a singular work in the show.

I feel like I was kind of resistant to the idea of a singular work at first, but it was your suggestion that the one piece could be the show. Obviously, I haven't seen the sculpture in the gallery yet, but judging from my

experience spending time with the prototype in my studio, I think it's going to be able to hold the space.

I think you're right. The object itself is so arresting, and then it's also alive with moving water. The sound of trickling water will bring the outdoors indoors.

And the work is going to be oriented toward the courtyard. We had talked originally about maybe doing a sculpture outside, but this piece ends up holding that within it. Inside and outside at once.

Catskill, NY

May 29, 2025

Exhibition Checklist

Charles Harlan

Born 1984, Smyrna, GA; based in Staatsburg, NY

Chimney, 2025

brick, mortar, stone, stainless steel, terracotta,
water, and pump

Courtesy of the artist

Programming

Opening Celebration

September 11, 6–8 p.m.

● Forum Gallery

Celebrate the opening of the exhibition with a toast to the artist. Remarks begin at 6:30 p.m.

Keeping Warm with Charles Harlan

October 25, 11 a.m.–1 p.m.

Join Charles Harlan for a chimney sightseeing date through Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History and the surrounding area.

Registration required, visit carnegieart.org.

This gallery brochure is published on the occasion of *Charles Harlan*, organized by Eric Crosby, Henry J. Heinz II Director, Carnegie Museum of Art, and Vice President, Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, September 12, 2025 through February 22, 2026.

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Forum Gallery presents the work of living artists in an ongoing series that invites them to expand their practice through a commission or new presentation of existing works. Initiated in 1990, and with 91 projects to date, the Forum series is an opportunity for artists to deepen their relationship to and understanding of the museum.

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