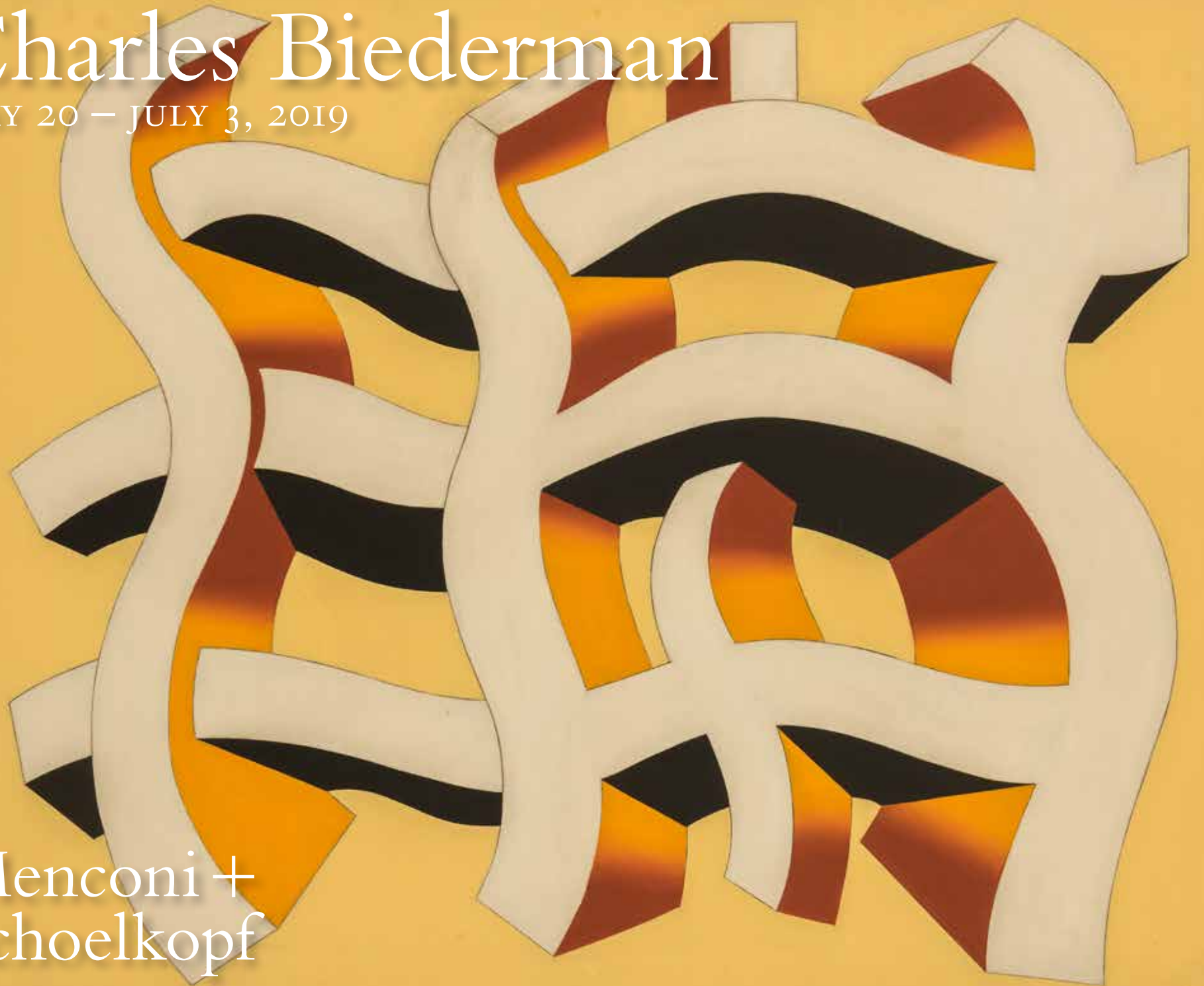


Charles Biederman

MAY 20 – JULY 3, 2019

Menconi +
Schoelkopf



Charles Biederman (1906–2004)



Born in Cleveland to Czech parents in 1906, Karel Josef Biederman, who would adopt the name Charles, knew a childhood of emotionally distant parents, hard labor, and few expressions of comfort. Although he was naturally interested in the arts and sciences, the young Biederman found that his gifts were ignored by his parents—they encouraged him to quit high school to find work to help support the family. After a few years of working on commercial advertisements, Biederman built up the independence to leave. At twenty years old, Biederman extricated himself from his Cleveland home, his sights set on the Art Institute of Chicago. He arrived at just the right moment. Helen Gardner's lasting and influential *Art Through the Ages* had been published in 1926, and all students at the Institute were required to take her vast survey course. No less important was the Institute's acquisition, in the same year, of the Helen Birch Bartlett collection. The collection included many of the masterworks of Post-Impressionism that today are synonymous with the Art Institute of Chicago: Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, van Gogh's *The Artist's Bedroom at Arles*, and, notably, Cézanne's *Basket of Apples*. Gardner's lectures contributed to Biederman's lifelong near-obsession with weaving the threads of art history into a single, coherent fabric—and the Bartlett collection, one of the finest assemblages of modern art in America, gave him an early view of the front lines of contemporary painting. Though he would not complete his schooling at the Institute, neither of these gifts was wasted on the young artist.

The influence of the Bartlett collection is hard to overstate. Though it raised the hackles of Chicago society and even of some of the Institute's faculty, the

impact on Biederman was profound and immediate. Cézanne's lessons for the art student began then, and continued for decades. Biederman had found a leading light.

Biederman's student work exemplifies the virtuosic and ravenous qualities of the young and restless; Picasso, Braque, and Cézanne are devoured and digested with an eagerness to find out what comes next. The palette, much higher-keyed than any of his European models, is certainly Biederman's own. It sizzles and borders on oversaturation. He had found a path, but not yet his own voice.

Following that path, he would make a number of personal revolts. The first of these was leaving the Art Institute, just a year shy of graduation. Susan Larsen notes that "he had neither a high school diploma nor a diploma from the Art Institute of Chicago. He had nothing on paper to show for more than three years of diligent study" [Susan C. Larsen, *Charles Biederman* (1999), p. 28]. After an abortive trip to Prague he entertained a brief dalliance with the Works Progress Administration: "I decided I couldn't stomach the business," he later recalled [Ibid., p. 37]. Given Biederman's penchant for bridge-burning, it is a testament to the persistence of his vision that any bridges remained. One such was to John and Eugenie Anderson, whom he met in 1930. They would remain friends and patrons for decades.



*Untitled, New York,
January 1935, 1935*

Oil on canvas
14⁵/₁₆ × 11¹/₄ inches
Signed and dated twice on verso across canvas:
Ch. Biederman / 1935 / 1935



*Untitled, New York,
May 1935, 1935*

Oil on canvas
14¹/₄ × 11³/₁₆ inches
Signed and dated on verso across canvas:
Ch. Biederman / 5.35
Dated and inscribed along stretcher: 1935 /
N.Y. / N.Y.



*Untitled, New York,
November 1935, 1935*

Oil on canvas
23 × 17¾ inches



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*Untitled, New York,
April 1935, 1935*

Gouache on paper
14 × 10³/₈ inches
Signed lower right: Biederman 4/35

*Untitled, New York,
December 1935, 1935*

Oil on board
12¹/₄ × 7¹/₄ inches
Signed and dated lower left: Ch. Biederman 12 1935



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*Untitled, New York,
May 23, 1936, 1936*

Oil on canvas

36 × 23 inches

Signed lower left: Ch. Biederman // May 23/36



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#40, 1/36, 1936

Oil on wood panel

17 × 14½ × 1¼ inches

Inscribed on verso: 40

Inscribed lower center: 36 Ch. Biederman



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1934–1937

At the Center of American Abstraction

Biederman's arrival in New York was just as fortuitous as his timing at the Art Institute. His studio at 77 Washington Place put him a stone's throw from Albert E. Gallatin's Museum of Living Art [Larsen p. 43]. Cubism, previously on his radar, began to captivate Biederman's imagination, and the germs of surrealist forms and abstract sculpture began to take root. The flat biomorphic forms of Miró and Arp, the high-polish steel finish of Léger, even the analytic cubist practices of Picasso and Braque all fell into Biederman's toolbox. His sudden and powerful growth did not go unnoticed. Gallatin himself had taken Biederman under his wing, and he soon also found representation with Pierre Matisse.

Eclipsing all of these developments was Alfred Barr's blockbuster show at the Museum of Modern Art, *Cubism and Abstract Art*. The vocabulary of abstract art was still open territory. If audiences found the artwork foreign, it was perhaps because only one American was included in the show—Alexander Calder.

This omission of Americans was grist for Gallatin's mill. One week later, on March 9, 1936, he opened his *Five American Concretionists* at Paul Reinhardt Galleries at 730 Fifth Avenue. The five Americans were Alexander Calder, the artist with the highest profile; John Ferren; George Morris; Charles Shaw; and Charles Biederman. The exhibition put American abstraction on the map, drawing praise from critics and elevating Biederman's profile [Gail Stavitsky, "A Landmark Exhibition: Five Contemporary American Concretionists," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1993), p. 8].

Biederman's output during these years was staggering. Not only did he produce a volume of finished canvases and sculptures, but also drawings, gouaches, lithographs, and wooden models for larger

sculptures. He experimented with string, found objects, various polychroming devices, stone, concrete, metals, and plexiglass.

In October of 1936, he turned his back on Gallatin and set off for Paris. There he met Kandinsky, Picasso, Miró and Léger; he encountered Gertrude Stein, wondered after Brancusi, and mooned over the work of Russian Constructivist Antoine Pevsner [Larsen p. 100]. He was included in a number of important exhibitions and his work discussed by prominent personalities.

These New York and Paris years proved his most prolific painting period. A brilliant series of large vertical canvases were begun in the United States and continued abroad. Brightly-colored anthropomorphic forms mingle with mechanical forms above fields of intense color. Many of these ideas were worked out in smaller studies in gouache first. Already in 1936, his work was becoming focused on objects of increasing solidity, with progressively distant, receding fields. Devoid of scale and identifiable imagery, the work was pushing towards sculpture, suggesting a direction in which Biederman would embark decisively in the following decade.

By June of 1937, Biederman had grown wary of the shifting political winds in Europe, noting with dread Hitler's rise. Aesthetically, politically, and financially, it was time for him to return to America. This period of great fecundity in painting drew to a close when he arrived back in New York. With a grand vision of the new art to come, Biederman gave up painting.

*Untitled, New York,
August 5, 1936, 1936*

Oil on canvas

59 × 41¼ inches

Signed, inscribed, and dated at upper left:

Ch. Biederman August 5/36 N.Y.



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Schoelkopf

*Untitled, New York,
August 1936, 1936*

Oil on canvas

40¼ × 29⅞ inches

Signed and dated at lower right:

Ch. Biederman 8/15/36



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*Untitled, New York,
August 1936, 1936*

Oil on canvas
40 × 28 inches
Signed and dated at lower left:
Ch. Biederman 8/27/36



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*Untitled, Paris,
January 1937, 1937*

Gouache and ink on paper
18 × 14 inches
Signed and dated at lower right: Biederman 1/37



*Untitled, Paris,
February 1937, 1937*

Gouache and ink on paper
18 × 14 inches
Signed at lower left: Ch. Biederman
Inscribed and dated at lower right: Paris 2/37



3/17/1937 Paris #37, 1937

Oil on canvas
38¼ × 51½ inches
Signed at lower right



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*Untitled, Paris,
May 12, 1937, 1937*

Oil on canvas

76 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 50 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches

Signed and dated at lower left: Paris 5/12/37

Biederman



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Cubist, Paris, January 1937, 1937

Pencil and gouache on paper

17 × 13¹³/₁₆ inches

Dated at lower left: P. 1/37



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1938–1948

Biederman and
*Art as the Evolution of
Visual Knowledge*

Biederman's break with painting may seem radical but it was in fact a development of ideas that he had been working out for years. During his early years at the Art Institute of Chicago, Biederman saw in Cézanne an idea about structure and form that would push him towards sculpture. "Painting is not sculpture," according to Cézanne [*The New Cézanne* (1958), p. 15]. Biederman's time in Europe only emphasized, for him, that the new generation of abstractionists had not grasped this simple concept. He felt Picasso—whose cubist pictures carved three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional planes—was ensnared in a trap that Cézanne warned against. So, too, had Léger lost the thread by embracing the cult of the 'machine' rather than keeping his eyes on nature. Just as bad were the Expressionist and Surrealist avenues, both of which closed their eyes to the analysis of the world for inner psychological reality.

These realizations came through Biederman's attempts to trace the same developments of these artists. His small gouaches of 1935–37 signaled his pursuit of the biomorphic forms of the Surrealists. He deployed the shine of polished steel that was suggested in some of Léger's works and mingled in Kandinsky-esque undulating forms. The work is radical for a person of any time period, and much of it remains stunningly contemporary.

The artist's return to the United States marked the beginning of a new philosophical stance. In addition to turning his back on painting, he began a number of attempts to simplify and redirect his energy into clarified forms. Once he had been called a Concretionist. Now, adopting thin planes and crisp lines, that term seemed unsuitable. He named his new work Constructionist.

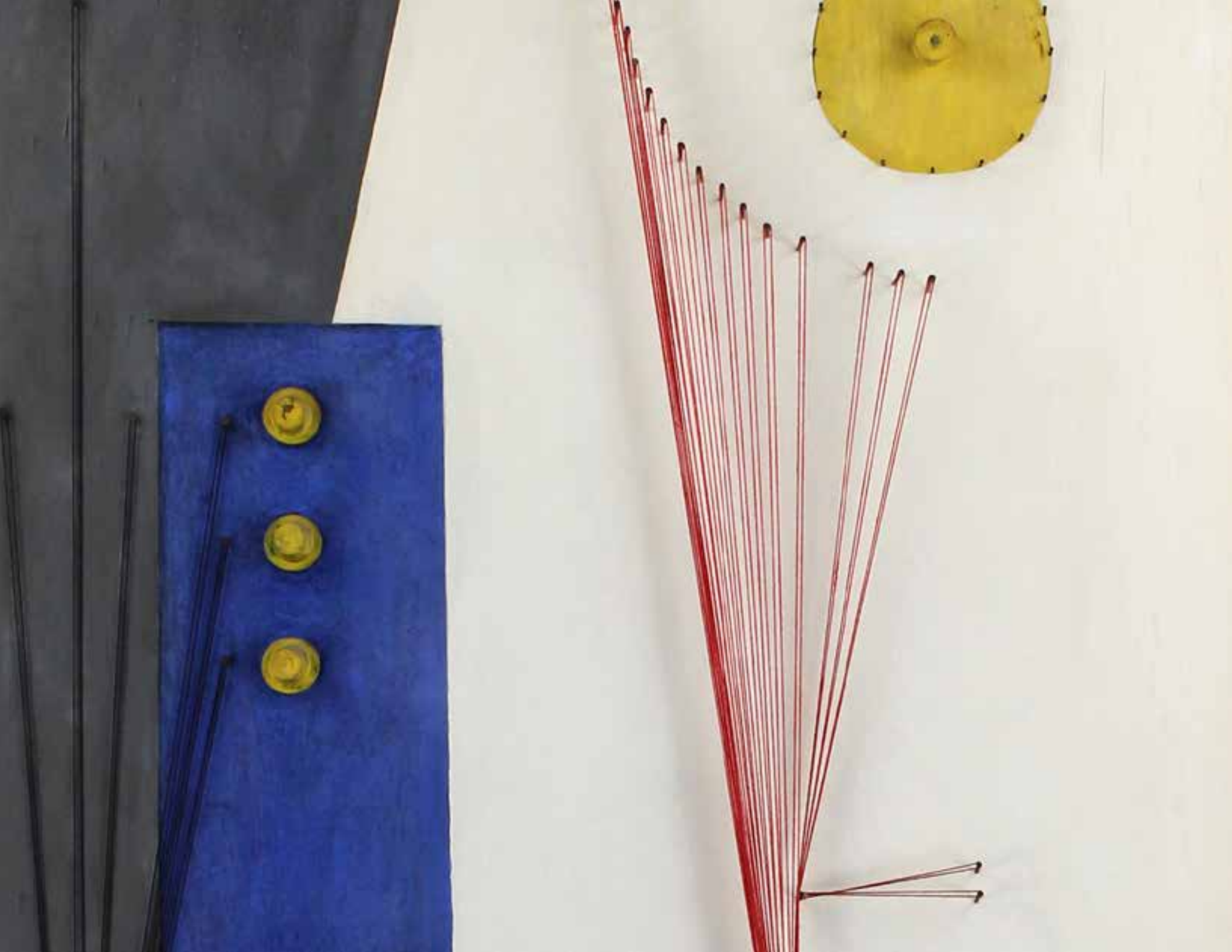
Biederman began to write, an endeavor that became perhaps as important as his work as an artist. Part of

clarifying his own work required that he analyze, carefully and methodically, the meaning and position of the trajectory of art history. And so for ten years he labored on a major theoretical survey, *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge*. For a final move of simplification and purification, this period witnessed his geographical relocation to Red Wing, Minnesota. He would live and work there for the rest of his life.

The experiments of the 1930s were behind him. He left subject matter entirely, becoming increasingly confident that art itself should exhibit parallel structures to nature. He rejected the mimetic art of the nineteenth century, as well as the inward-staring psychological art of Surrealism and the growing trend towards Abstract Expressionism. He felt there were lessons to be learned from nature applicable to a wholly abstract art that can only be discovered through analysis.

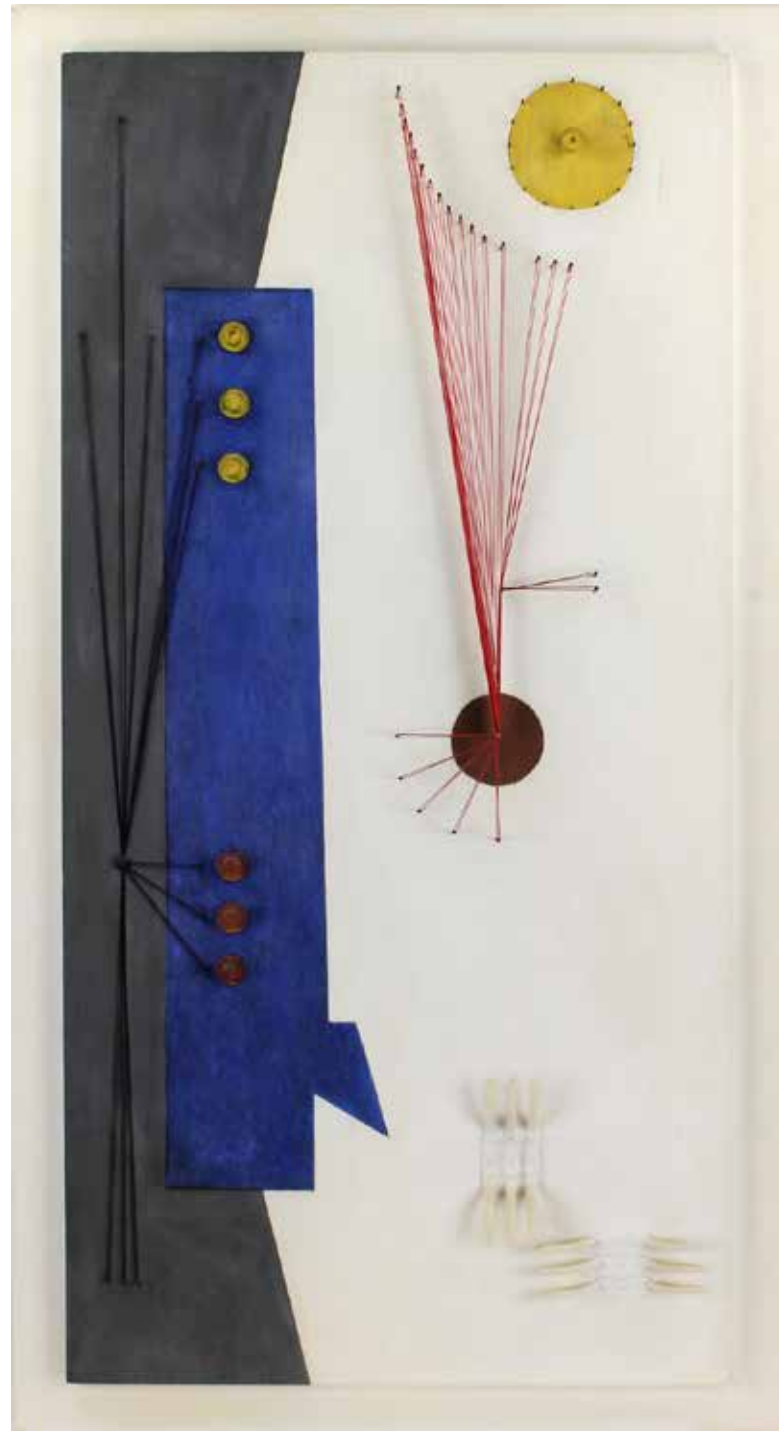
Ultimately, Biederman parted ways even with the Constructivists. "The Constructivists' interpretation of reality, with its emphasis on the time-space factor, was as uncongenial to Biederman as was Mondrian's elimination of nature [Jan van der Marck, *Charles Biederman: The Structurist Relief 1935–1964* (1965), pp. 11–12]. Biederman had, by the end of the 40s, worn out another name. "I called the new art *Constructionist*; its use by others eventually confused its original meanings. In 1952, I coined the label *Structurist*" [*Search for New Arts*, p. 67]. This, too, would eventually wear out, but it is the movement to which Biederman is most often attached.

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String Relief,
New York, June 1936, 1936

Nails, string, metal rope cleats,
cork bottle tops and paint on panel
52 × 28 × 3 inches



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Model for #14, Paris, 1937

Painted wood
16¼ × 13¼ × 3½ inches



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Untitled, 1937 (Model), 1937

Painted wood

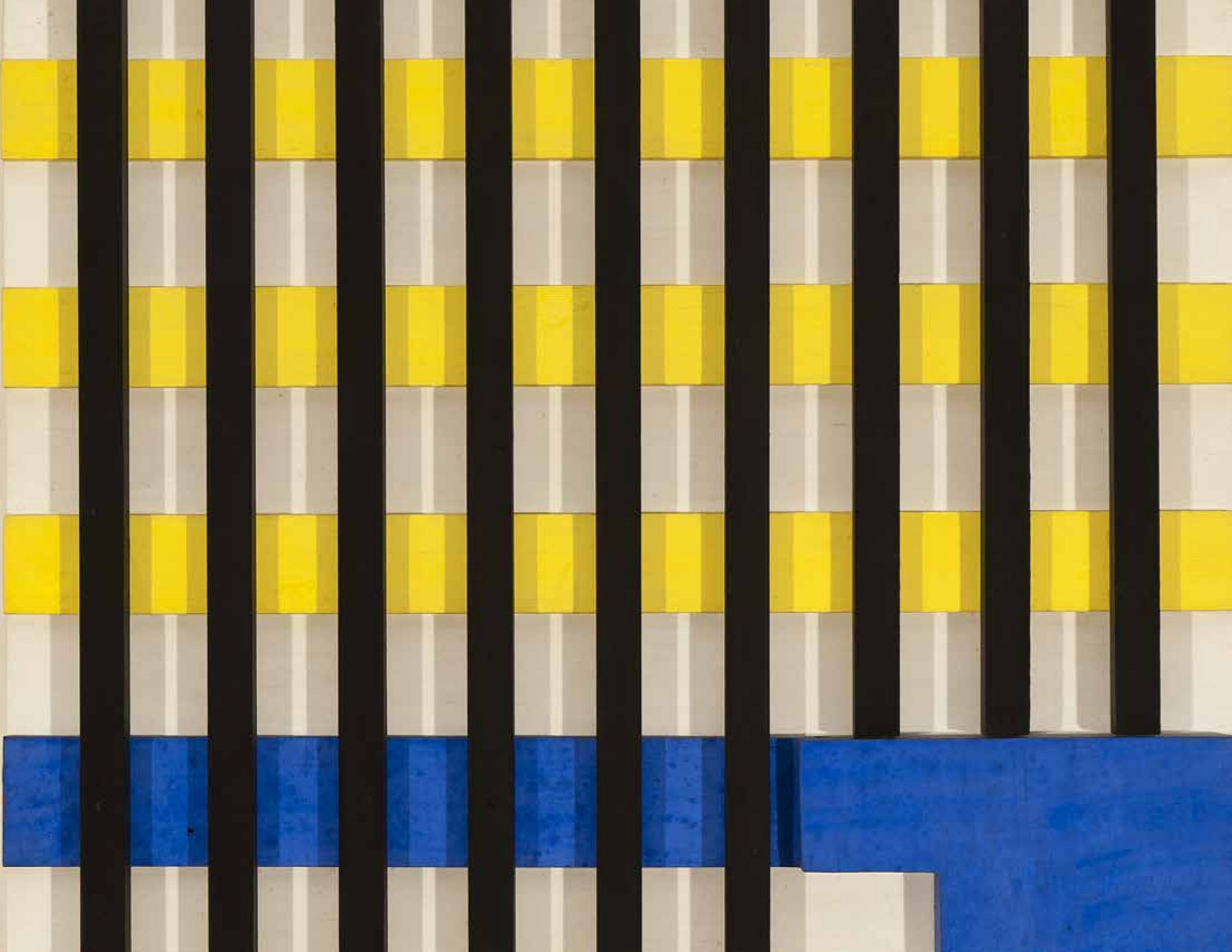
22³/₁₆ × 18¹/₄ inches

Signed, dated, and inscribed on verso:

1937 (Model) / Charles Biederman

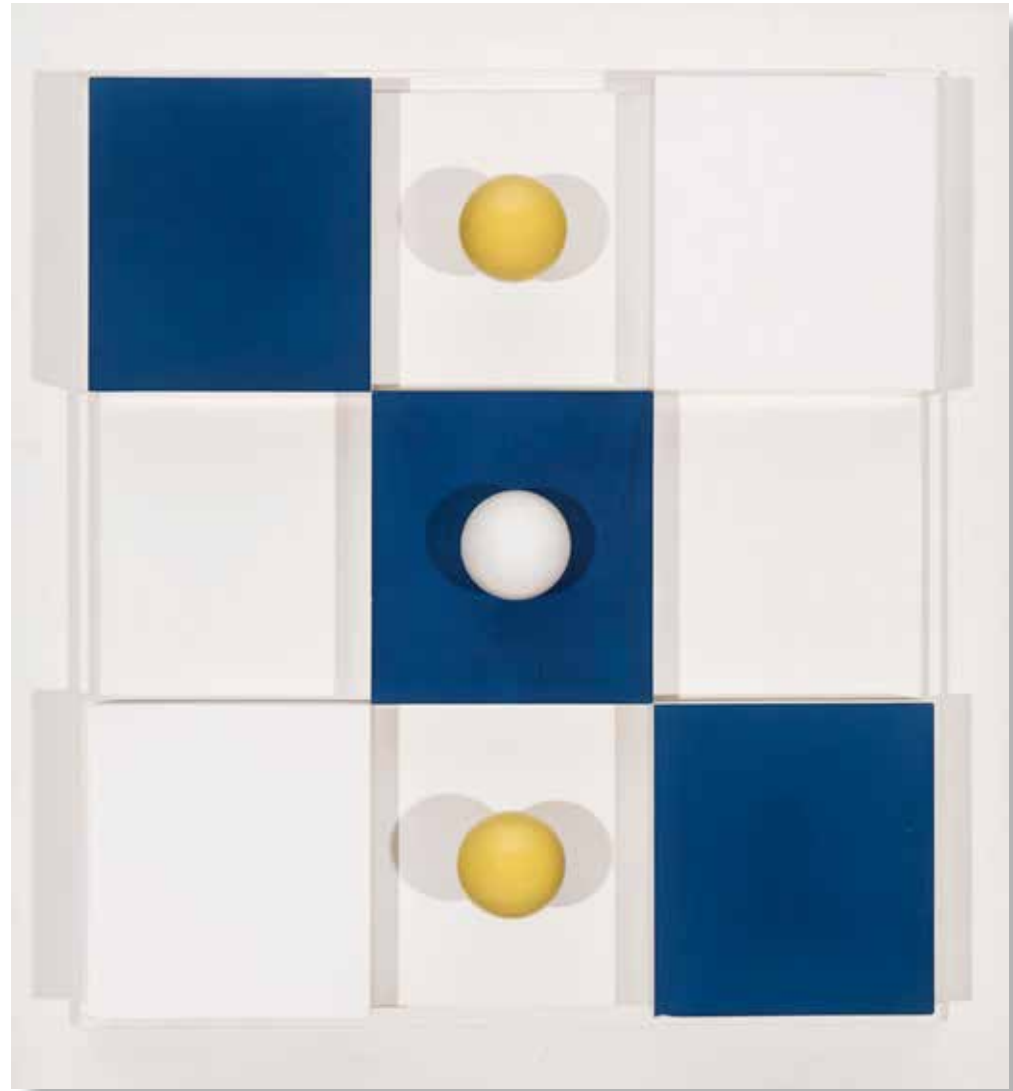


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Structural Relief,
New York #5, March 1938, 1938

Painted wood
22 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches



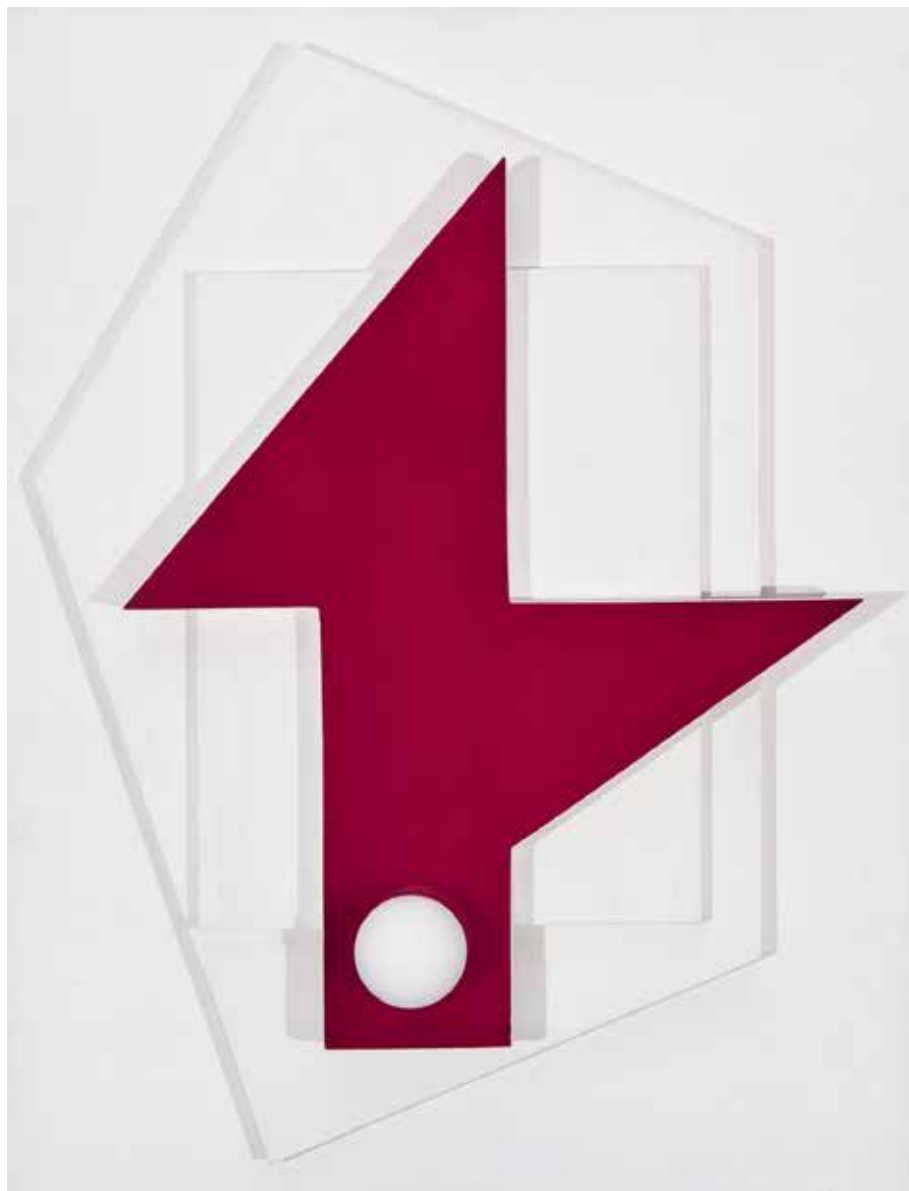
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Schoelkopf

#6, *New York*, 1938

Painted wood and colored plastic

22 × 17 × 5 inches

Inscribed on verso: 4/1938



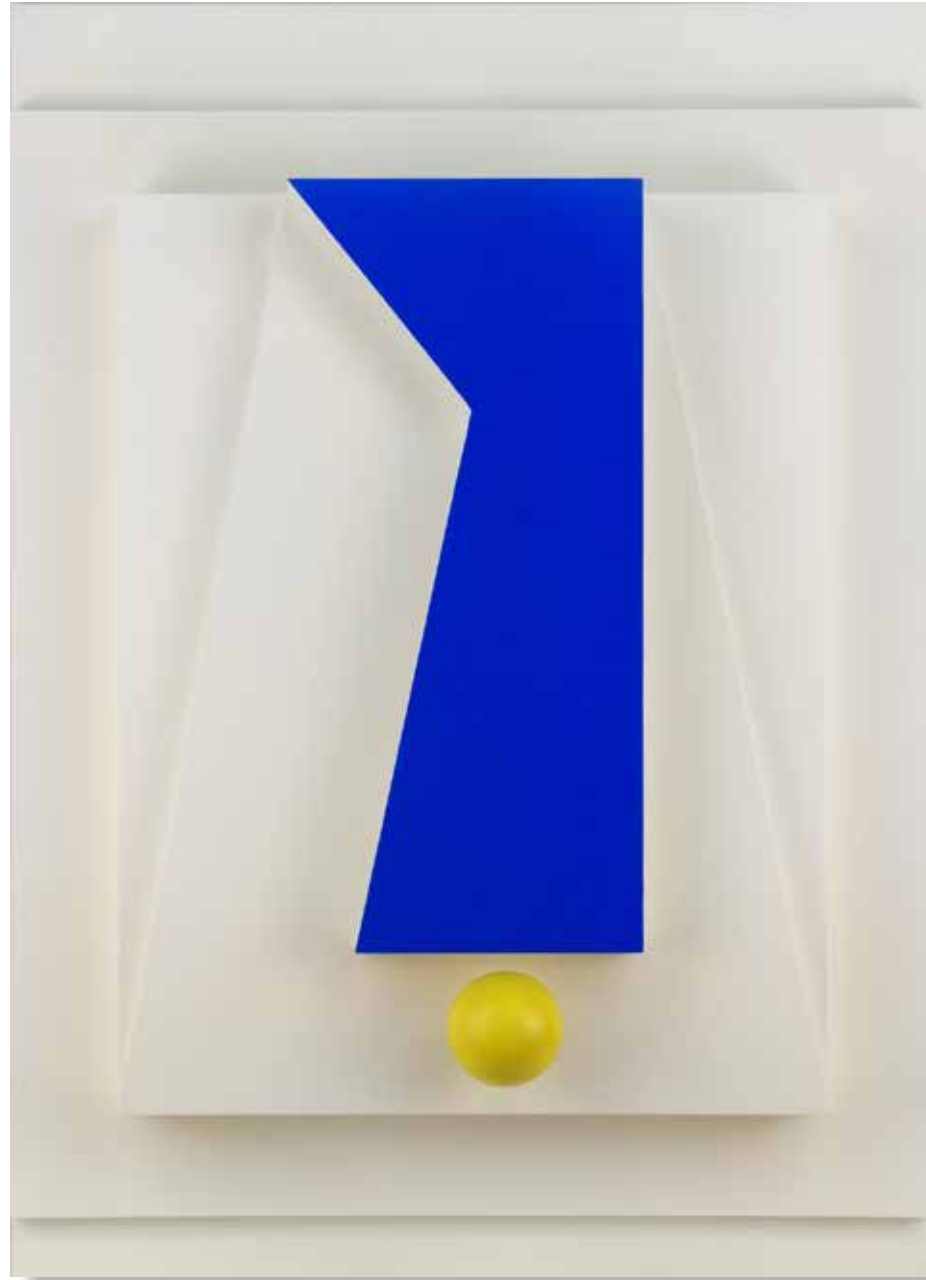
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Work No. 8,
New York, 1938, 1938–80

Painted wood

34¼ × 24⅝ × 8 inches

Signed and inscribed on the verso: *Work, No. 8,*
N.Y., 1938 Copyright Charles Biederman 1980



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1952–1958

Biederman and
The New Cézanne

Biederman's next book, *The New Cézanne* (1958), was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the painter's death. *The New Cézanne* was an attempt to demonstrate that Cézanne had been fundamentally misunderstood. Biederman pointed out that the painter's statements had largely been ignored in favor of his paintings, and that this led to some major misconceptions—not only of the fiber of Cézanne's work, but also of what the proper direction of art history ought to be.

From there, Biederman's narrative of the progression of abstract art took a very different course. He gave a position of much greater respect to Piet Mondrian, but even Mondrian, "is not completely satisfactory" as a successor [*The New Cézanne*, p. 42]. Whereas Cézanne's work was a constant mediation between nature and art, as two parallel paths, Mondrian, wrote Biederman, believed he had finally resolved the conflict between the two by purging nature from the equation altogether—a grave error from Biederman's perspective. Biederman felt the Constructivists had gotten it wrong as well. The social concerns of Russian and international constructivism were a distraction and even a disqualifier in Biederman's eyes. Nonetheless, "*The New Cézanne* played a crucial role in reinvigorating the constructive tradition in postwar Europe" [Stephen Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism* (1974), p. 224].

To digest *The New Cézanne* and 1948's *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* is to feel the whole of art history shifting, on an axis provided by Cézanne, a few degrees into a familiar but profoundly different trajectory. In 1952 Biederman considered as a thought experiment the notion of taking Cézanne's ideas to an extreme—covering an entire canvas with a single color, or with a perfect checker-board lattice—gesturing briefly

at the possibilities of Minimalism that would come to fruition in Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd. Biederman would expand later on this shifting view of art history in *Search for New Arts* (1979).

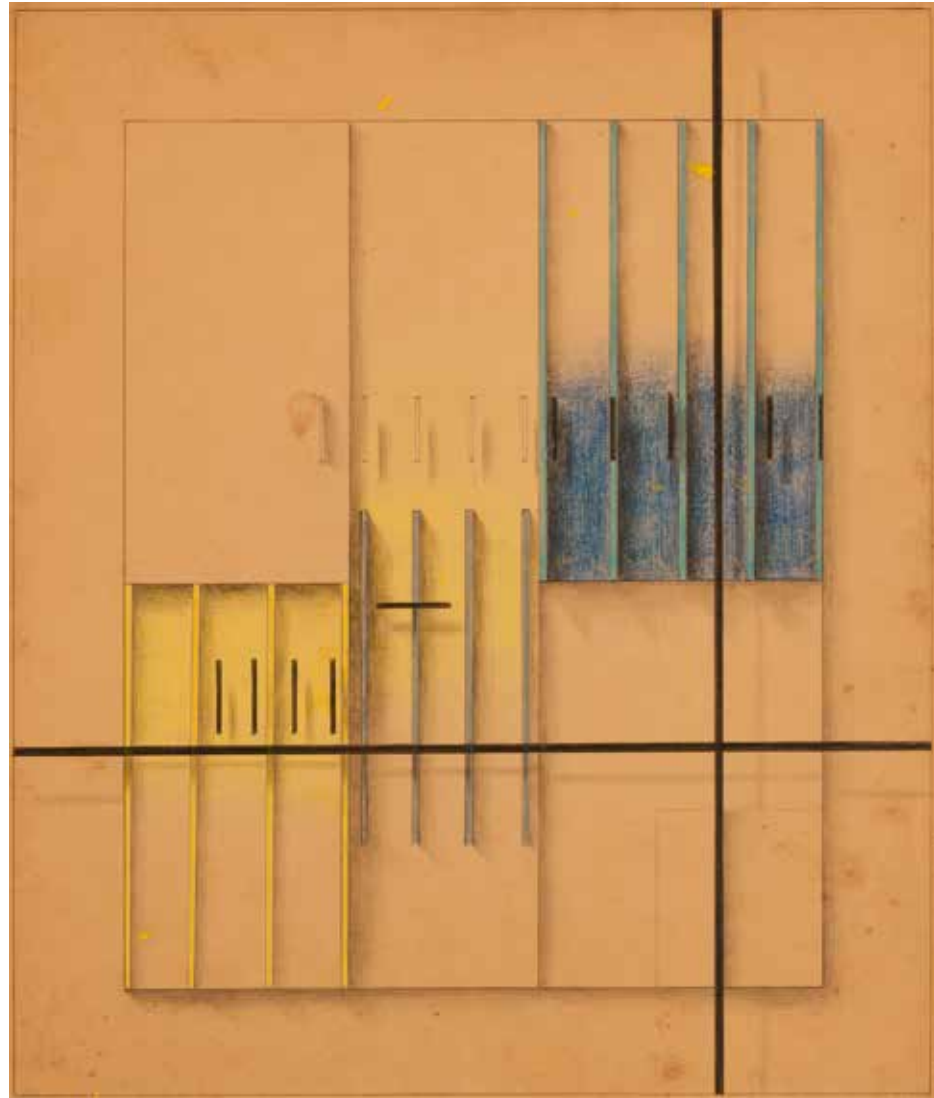
If *The New Cézanne* is not a perfectly enlightening comment on Cézanne, it is a clear statement about Biederman. In his reliefs of the second half of the twentieth century, Biederman began with an expansive plane of a single color as the staging ground for his three-dimensional elements. Biederman's elements were not placed out near the edges of this staging ground, but organized around central, concentric clusters. A corollary to Cézanne's rule that "Painting is not sculpture," was the notion that a painter does not have light as a tool. Painters only possess colors and the plane.

He observed that careful placement of sculptural elements allowed him to cast shadows across the plane, allowing his brilliant colorations to interact with shadows falling in all directions. Like baroque sundials, the reliefs cast shadows carefully orchestrated by the artist with that fact in mind [van der Mark, p. 13]. Biederman also related elsewhere that Cézanne "simplified" the circle into the cube. Though it may not be clear how a cube is simpler than a circle, that notion animated Biederman's thinking. There are many spheres and circles in his work in the 1930s and 1940s, none appear after about 1950. Indeed, a profound simplification had occurred. Biederman, by the mid-1950s, had simplified his palette, his vocabulary of forms, and his configuration of those forms. And he had so much left to say.

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Untitled, March 1947, 1947

Mixed media on paper
25 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches



Menconi +
Schoelkopf

#78, 1952

Painted aluminum

31½ × 27 × 5 inches

Signed on verso: all rights reserved, made in USA,
copyright Charles Biederman, 1978



Menconi +
Schoelkopf

No. 31, 1952-73 R22, 1952-73

Painted aluminum

41½ × 33½ × 6 inches

Signed on verso: Charles Biederman, made in
USA, all right reserved (etched)



Menconi +
Schoelkopf

#47A, *Red Wing*, 1952–82

Painted aluminum
31¾ × 26¾ × 4½ inches



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1960–1969

Bohm-Biederman: Creativity and Science

A few years after the publication of *The New Cézanne*, Biederman happened across a book on theoretical particle physics by David Bohm, a former collaborator of physicist Niels Bohr. Biederman struck up a dialogue with the author, and over thousands of pages, a correspondence of a full decade was born. Bohm was a generous and attentive correspondent, as interested in the arts as Biederman was in the sciences. They jointly believed that there were parallel problems in the sciences and in the arts, and Bohm's cheerful enthusiasm was a delightful counterpoint to Biederman's emphatically contrarian spirit.

Like all of Biederman's thinking, his notion of nature is at least nominally rooted in Cézanne. Following Cézanne's admonition to always return to nature, Biederman, like Cézanne, abandoned the city for a life surrounded by green. Nonetheless, that greenery is, of course, absent from Biederman's work. He seemed to think of Cézanne's depiction of landscapes as rather incidental to his work. Yet, if Biederman was observing nature but never drawing a tree or a mountaintop, what was it that he was observing?

Cézanne likely did have in mind areas of land untouched by human industry. For Biederman, however, a more sophisticated notion of nature was required. Interested in crystallography, he noted that ultimately nature never produces perfectly geometric forms. What mattered to Biederman were the processes of nature and its overarching structure [van der Marck, p. 11]. Hence, he lauded Mondrian's development past the depiction of trees and landscape [*The New Cézanne*, p. 47]. He wanted to "lift the veil" on nature: to see past the false abstractions, that attributed to nature these easy geometries and local colors, to see the subtle, asymmetric patterns that hummed along musically underneath it all.

David Bohm helped clarify this position. The two shared an underlying belief in the unity of all things—that humanity is not fundamentally separate from nature, that space and time are inexorably linked.

From this correspondence, Biederman gained a more sophisticated view of both physics and his own art. He left behind the naïve view of nature as a pristine Eden, and allowed himself to see the processes of nature everywhere—even in the courses of human industry. Biederman's work, which may have otherwise stalled on the idea of Man vs. Nature, gained renewed vigor with a mathematician's understanding of chaos and order, causality and chance, symmetry and asymmetry, and determinacy and ambiguity.

Though the correspondence fizzled out over the question of spirituality, the notion of a real and lasting bridge between science and art became a reality during that decade of the 1960s. "Science and art reflect different sides of man's perception of nature," Biederman would later reflect. "The scientist mechanizes nature, the artist humanizes it" [*Search for New Arts*, p. 74]. It is clear from this remark that "nature" finally encompassed to him everything that science can study, as well as everything that art can study. In that sense, it's impossible to ever really get away from nature, and so Biederman came to understand: "All artists, of whatever kind they may be, are involved in some inescapable form of abstracting from nature" [*Ibid.*, p. 52].

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#7, *Untitled*, 1937–82

Painted wood
30 × 25 inches × 4 inches



Menconi +
Schoelkopf

#14, *Paris 1937–1983*, 1937–83

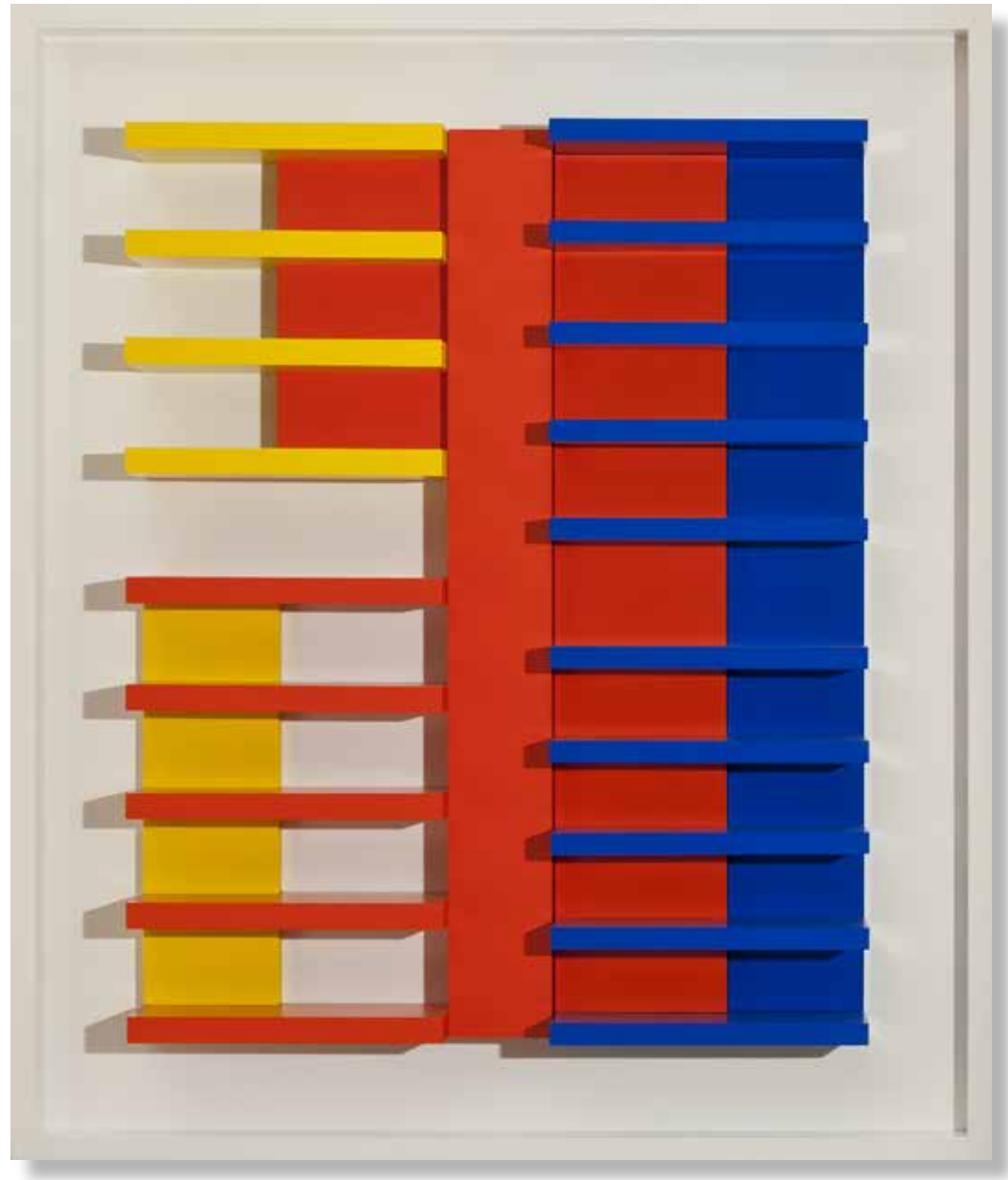
Painted wood
32¹/₆ × 27¹/₂ inches



Menconi +
Schoelkopf

#10, USA, 1937-83

Painted wood
33½ × 28½ × 3 inches



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1979–2004

The Later Years

Towards his later years, Biederman seemed to have grown more at peace with his work and his place in art history. The manifesto-driven art movements of the first half of the twentieth century and their use of art for political purposes had been replaced by the idea of the civic responsibility of the arts. Biederman recognized that photography, film, and architecture, with their popular and democratic use and consumption, were important to social wellbeing. While he remained committed to a harmony between art and nature, in embracing a sense of how the masses might use and consume art in a modern context, he seemed to finally be succeeding at that harmonious unification.

Biederman turned new attention to education, believing the creation of visual arts form an important element of human development, individually and socially. “A well-educated art public will remedy that interolerable system which prevails: art will become truly democratic” [*Search for New Arts*, p. 137].

It is interesting to note that, by the early 1980s, many of Biederman’s ideas were gaining traction. New Urbanism was beginning to look at the American city as a place that could be reworked so that architecture and urban design decisions reflected a human scale in harmony with nature.

As Biederman was working photography into his ever-evolving narrative of art history, the medium was enjoying new attention with the rise of the “Pictures Generation” and the coinciding theories of Roland Barthes and Marshall MacLuhan. His work, too, reflected a deepening confidence that he had found a voice that resonated with the times.

His last few books were increasingly aphoristic and increasingly inclusive. He ruminated on Beethoven, the

meaning of the piano, and the rise of New Music in *Art as the Humanization of Science* (1997). His last writings are analogous to his late reliefs: having spread the vast plane of rigorously-tuned system, he scattered upon it some charming and insightful pearls of wisdom and simple observation, multi-colored and easily digested. A few characteristic selections:

Each generation rejects the junk art of the previous generation in order to make its own junk art [*The End of Modernism, Figurative or Abstract*, (1994) p. 87].

Nature will prevail, and nothing anyone can do will alter that fact [*Ibid.*, p. 90].

Biederman enjoyed several notable museum and gallery shows over his career and continued to work on both his writing and his constructions until the very end of his life. He died in Red Wing, Minnesota in 2004, at the age of 98.

Biederman’s legacy, like the man himself, is full of contradictions. He had a voracious appetite for new ideas, and his impact as an interpreter and ambassador of abstract art in the 1930s can not be overstated. Nonetheless, much of his lasting impact stems from his serious study of the nature of art and his work in construction. His influence can be seen in the work of Donald Judd and throughout minimalist art. Indeed, only from the longview is it clear how radically Biederman’s work diverges from the work it superficially resembled. Biederman blazed a trail, and while that trail crossed at several points with important developments on both sides of the Atlantic, it remained distinctly his own.

*Work No. 5,
New York, 1937–83, 1983*

Stainless Steel

26¼ × 16 × 3½ inches

Sculptural base:

22¼ × 13¾ × 2½ inches

Inscribed beneath base: (c) Charles Biederman /
Work No. 5, New York, 1937–1983 / Charles
Biederman



Menconi +
Schoelkopf

Untitled Steel Abstraction, 1983

Stainless Steel

24 × 11½ × 3½ inches

Sculptural base:

10¼ × 10¼ × 2¾ inches

Inscribed beneath base: (c) Charles Biederman 1983

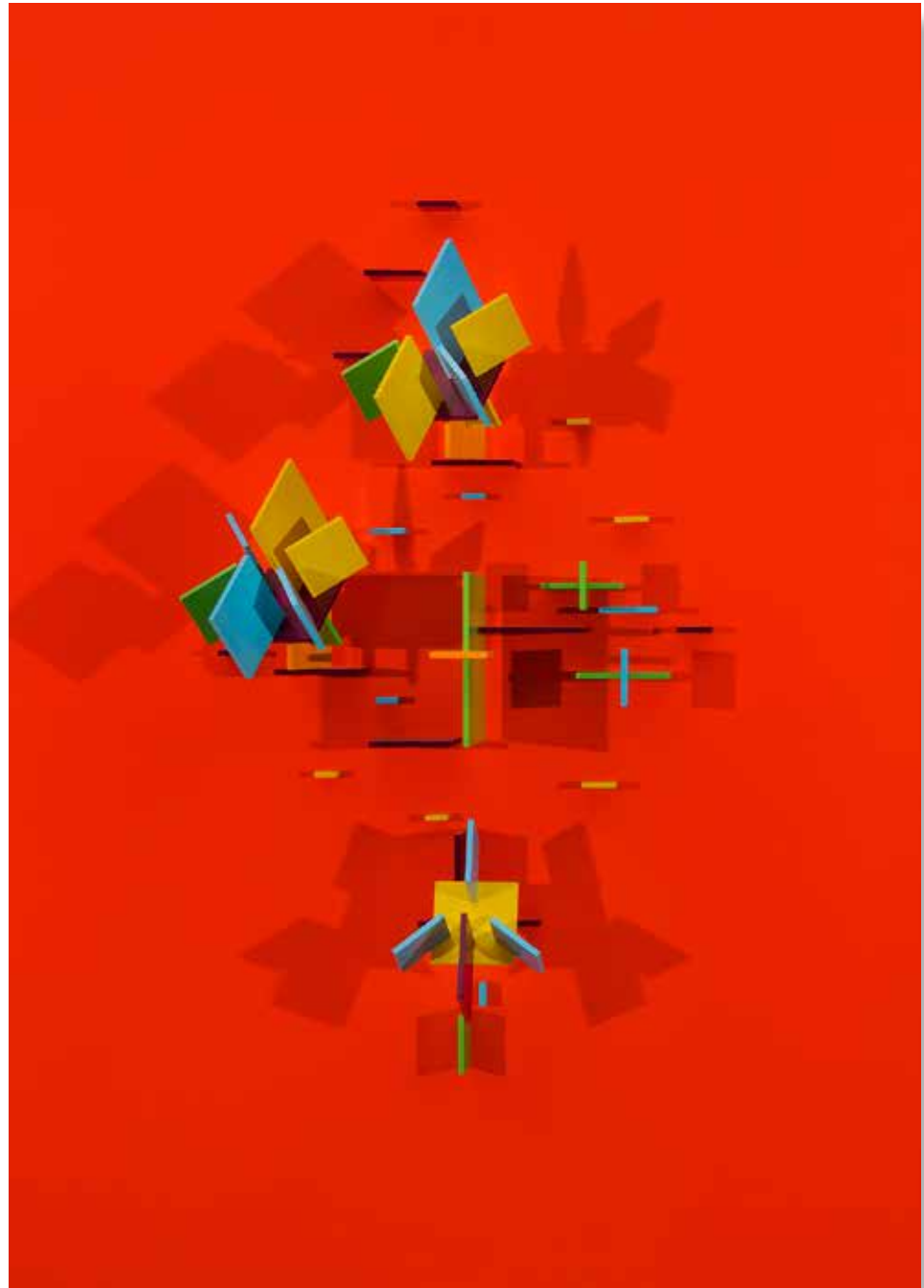


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#3, *Untitled*, 1982–84

Painted aluminum
42 × 32 × 9 inches

Menconi +
Schoelkopf



Charles Biederman

MAY 20 – JULY 3, 2019

For a full list of prices and works available, click on the link below:

<https://privateviews.artlogic.net/2/e585b92d5431f5ff1c43dc>

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