



## **CHARLIE BROUWER: *KNOWN/UNKNOWN***

Moss Arts Center

Ruth C. Horton Gallery

December 3, 2015–February 7, 2016

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## CHARLIE BROUWER: KNOWN/UNKNOWN

*Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the  
dancing.*<sup>1</sup> -T. S. Eliot

Charlie Brouwer (Floyd, Virginia) is well known throughout Southwest Virginia as an artist and sculptor, as well as for his 21-year career as a professor at Radford University. Those who know his work can recognize it immediately, usually characterized by the use of wood, worked and composed in and alongside images and scenes that embody ideas of transcendence, reflection, and humility. Also emblematic of Brouwer's work is the ladder, which can be found in his sculptures, drawings, and, in its most monumental iteration, in his series of community projects called *Rise Up*. In these projects, completed in Chattanooga, Tennessee; Atlanta, Georgia; and Roanoke, Virginia, among other sites, hundreds of donated ladders were lashed together and piled into enormous heaps intended to represent unity, collaboration, and a collective rising above grief, conflict, and disconnection.

On view here is *Known/Unknown*, 2015, a new installation created for the Ruth C. Horton Gallery. Composed of old orchard ladders, some of which may be nearly 100 years old, the sculptural element of *Known/Unknown* is quintessential Charlie Brouwer, but the addition of sound and projected video marks an evolution in the artist's work. While he has used video before, this is the first use of the ladders as a projection surface. Read superficially, the installation speaks clearly of transcendence, aspiration, even hope through the metaphor of the ladder. The ladders that comprise the central structure of *Known/Unknown* were provided by a Virginia orchard owner in 2006. While stained white for use in Brouwer's installations, the age and use of the ladders remains apparent and this history—this life history—of decades of hands and feet climbing only underscores the metaphor. The timeless desire, even need, to reach higher, beyond our current circumstances and understanding—to touch the sky—is embodied in the jumble of old ladders; a heaping up of our collective yearning to break through the clouds. However, the quotes that pepper the walls and the video projections that bathe the ladders in images of a shifting sky, from clear to cloudy to clear again, hint at deeper meaning.

<sup>1</sup> "East Coker" (1940) by T. S. Eliot, quoted in Rissanen, Paavo. "The Prayer of Being in The Cloud of Unknowing." *Mystics Quarterly*. 13, no. 3 (1987): 140-145.



▲ *And Then One Day...It Happened*, 2007

Locust wood, preservative stain

12 x 3 x 3 feet

Image courtesy of the artist

On the wall are quotes taken from 14th century text titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work of Christian mysticism in which the author provides a guide to contemplative prayer and, ultimately, communion with God. A key concept within this text is that of the “cloud of unknowing,” or the mental and spiritual state of abandoning all thought of one’s conception of God and of himself or herself with the intent of attaining true “knowledge” of the Divine. The cloud of unknowing is the empty space that results, devoid of ego, assumption, even longing, that allows room for only God and love, and thus reveals true knowledge.

In an unexpected juxtaposition, the text on the wall also includes quotes from Andy Warhol. While many are familiar with Warhol’s larger-than-life public persona, Brouwer is acutely aware of Warhol’s deeply spiritual and intensely private personal life. Warhol was a practicing Byzantine Catholic, which seems to contrast sharply with his overt and unapologetic obsession with fame, the superficial, and the commercial. Brouwer draws a connection between Warhol and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*: “Only a few people knew it while he was alive, but it is well known now that Warhol was a devout Catholic who went to mass daily and he spent many evenings working at homeless shelters. He was both obsessed with fame and, at the same time, a very private person. A few people maybe knew who the anonymous author of *The*



▲ Charlie Brouwer in his studio in Floyd County, Virginia.

Image courtesy of the artist



*Cloud of Unknowing* was in the 14th century but no one knows him or her today—yet the book is very well known.”<sup>2</sup> This contrast between fame and anonymity, ego and humility, fullness and emptiness, echoes the dichotomous state of the human soul alluded to in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. To be truly fulfilled, one must first be empty, and therefore the superficial and the shallow, as evidenced in the majority of Warhol’s most well-known work, might not necessary imply an absence of the spiritual, but rather may have made room for it.

The clouds, as with the ladders, carry near-universal symbolic meaning: obstruction, troubles and foul weather; or the hidden, the mysterious, the unknown. Here, for the artist, they refer directly to the cloud of unknowing and, as they repeatedly gather and then dissipate, the inverse relationship between knowing and unknowing, darkness and clarity. In many religions and philosophies the self must enter some sort of purgatory, or “cloud of unknowing,” to reach true knowledge of the self and the Divine. As in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, it is thought that through shredding the self, true awareness of and communion with a greater universal force becomes possible. Likewise, the surrender of the self and openness to the unknown, to accepting new knowledge, to questioning can be compared to the processes of creativity and art making.

There are many names for the seemingly innate drive to grasp the unknown, to transcend the mundane, with some embedded in complex theological systems and others centered solely upon the individual. Brouwer’s work speaks to those who question—spiritually, philosophically, artistically—and does so through a visual metaphor that can be understood across cultures, denominations, and ideologies. The installation *Known/Unknown* is deeply spiritual, yet it remains humble, curious, and embracing of its own naiveté. The installation, and the artist for that matter, do not offer any theological or metaphysical answers, but offer instead a symbol of our collective questioning in sculptural form. This installation is a materialization of Brouwer’s own spiritual journey, a quest for wisdom and “knowing” his God through the embracing unknowing. This is a journey that, regardless of our individual beliefs or ideas, we all as humans share in some way; a yearning for answers to questions nearly too big for our mouths to form.

Meggin Hicklin  
Exhibition Program Manager



▲ *Hope Remains Part 1*, 2009

Installation view

100 old ladders or ladder fragments, latex stain, screws, and canvas

Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, Boone, NC

Image courtesy of the artist

<sup>2</sup> Warhol is quoted in a passage written by Brouwer.



▲ Orchard ladders in storage in a barn owned by Frank Levering. Levering's used and broken ladders have become an integral and distinctive element of Brouwer's installations. Image courtesy of the artist

## About the Artist

Charlie Brouwer was born in Holland, Michigan, and received an MA in painting and an MFA in sculpture from Western Michigan University. In 1987, he moved to Virginia to begin a teaching career at Radford University, from which he retired in 2008. Brouwer's exhibition record is extensive, reaching from the New River Valley to as far as Austria, Hungary, and Poland, including numerous juried exhibitions, public art commissions, and outdoor sculpture installations; recent solo exhibitions include *Now I Lay Me...* (2012), whitespace, Atlanta, Georgia, and *Hope Remains* (2008), Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, Boone, North Carolina. Brouwer currently lives in Floyd on a nine-acre plot of land dotted with outdoor sculptures he calls "Out There." The property is occasionally open to the public and can be explored via a walking trail.

For more information, visit [charliebrouwer.com](http://charliebrouwer.com).

## For Your Reference

Brouwer, Charlie. *Now I Lay Me...* Lulu Press, Inc., 2013. Available at [lulu.com](http://lulu.com).

Johnston, William. *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*. [1st ed.]. Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1973.

# *Let's talk!*

## MY TAKE

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## New! ARTSPHERE

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An open forum and community space for working and emerging artists in the New River Valley to network, share ideas, critiques, and more. Email [megh79@vt.edu](mailto:megh79@vt.edu) for more information.

All gallery events are free and open to the public.

## Gallery Hours

Tuesday-Friday, 10 AM-6 PM

Saturday and Sunday, 10 AM-4 PM

For more information about exhibitions and events, visit [artscenter.vt.edu](http://artscenter.vt.edu).

On the cover:

*Sometimes...*, 2008

Installation view

Projects '08, Islip Art Museum, Islip, NY

60 ladders and ladder fragments, 19 drawings, slabwood, latex paint, and screws

Image courtesy of the artist



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